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"Remembering Poetry: Figures of Scale in the Postwar Anglophone Lyric"

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"Remembering Poetry: Figures of Scale in the Postwar Anglophone Lyric"

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Abstract

"Remembering Poetry: Figures of Scale in the Postwar Anglophone Lyric"
By Emily Leithauser

This dissertation examines how mid-twentieth-century and contemporary Anglophone verse employs poetry's techniques of measurement and its contrasting figurations of scale to record shifts in consciousness, to chronicle the failures of memory, and to document minute changes in perception. Poetry is rooted in ideas of measurement and scale. We perceive this initially in a technical sense: meter, line, and stanza. Poetry's figurative devices, such as metaphor, similarly involve questions of measurement. I argue that poetry offers genre-specific means of preserving information. Very little contemporary theoretical work has explicitly combined memory and metaphor studies. Poetry and memory have historically been intertwined, as have poetry and metaphor, but I interrogate how poetry, memory, and metaphor intersect. I contend that contrasts of scale and figures of measurement are a defining feature of post-1945 Anglophone poetry, and of an increasingly globalized community of poets.

With the intersections of metaphor and memory in mind, I examine how four Anglophone poets—Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Agha Shahid Ali— accommodate the pressures of a world that is changing rapidly, and which has accelerated the rate and scale of change. These four poets have at once positioned themselves as outsiders to, and members of, the Anglo-American poetry establishment. This conscious outsider status attunes these poets to ways in which poetry both bridges and fails to bridge geographic, national, and cultural divides through figuration. Recording not just experiences, but the experience of writing poetry as global poets, these writers question how poetic form will adapt, as it documents and remembers our increasingly interconnected world.

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Remembering Poetry: Figures of Scale in the Postwar Anglophone Lyric

Introduction

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour…

—William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.

—Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas"

"Sometimes it seems to me as if metaphor were the advance guard of the mind,"[1] contemporary American poet Mark Doty writes in "Souls on Ice," an essay on how images become metaphors in poems. Doty writes that a display of mackerel in a grocery store comes to represent for him the question of what it means to be a single individual within a collective, and more broadly, what it means to contemplate the infinite. He also demonstrates how our comparisons reveal as much about us as they do about the objects under scrutiny: "Another day, another time in my life, the mackerel might have been metaphor for something else; they might have served as the crux for an entirely different examination."[2] Poetry, like memory, does not only record the world as we experience it in a particular moment or series of moments; it can also employ its devices to more meta-literary ends by recording itself. It teaches us to remember it, by being highly selective, but also comparative, and by singing in measures that, however nuanced or quiet,

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[1] Mark Doty, "Souls on Ice" (1997), in *Introspections: Contemporary American Poets on One of Their Own Poems*, eds. Robert Pack and Jay Parini, posted July 18, 2000, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/souls-ice.
[2] Doty, "Souls on Ice."

however suggestive of all the other songs we have ever heard, drown out for a moment whatever is *not* the poem, just as the mackerel drown out the rest of the images in the grocery store in Doty's essay.

Poetry has always contended with the finite in the presence of the infinite; it has always been about measurement and scale. We perceive this first in a purely prosodic sense: meter, as the measure of utterance, involves our paying attention to length of syllable or foot, but also of line, stanza, and poem itself. Poetry's figurative devices, too, are much more about scale than we tend to acknowledge. Metaphor and its related figures, like synecdoche, metonymy, and simile, are themselves indicators of scale: the fact that "this" is compared to "that" signals the importance of "this" for the poet—a "this" which, momentarily, sets every other possibility aside. Crudely speaking, metaphor might be described as x = y. A third kind of measure is implied by the relative scale of "this" and "that": as Blake memorably shows us, poetry can enable us "to see the world in a grain of sand." Making equations is what we do, even if these are imbalanced: in Stevens's words, "Let be be finale of seem."[3]

Why do we remember that phrase of Blake's? Memory itself is at the heart of the poetic enterprise. And memory often is particularly hospitable to striking oppositions of scale. We remember patterns, and patterns are necessarily rooted in oppositions—in contrast. The process of remembering, whether conscious or unconscious, involves similar comparisons to more deliberate metaphor-making. Some memories will eclipse others, just as some figures will loom larger in a literary text. But our memories are not

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[3] Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice Cream," in *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 79.

just comparative; they are dynamic. Our perception of what is important to remember and to record will change given the exigencies of the current moment.

Poetry and memory have historically been intertwined, as have poetry and metaphor, and that fact begs us to interrogate how poetry, memory, and metaphor intersect. Yet very little contemporary theoretical work, with the exception of Douwe Draaisma's *Metaphors of Memory* (2001), has explicitly combined memory and metaphor studies. In this dissertation, I will argue that contrasts of scale and metaphors of measurement and record-keeping are defining features of post-1945 Anglophone poetry, and of an increasingly international community of poets who see themselves both as outsiders to, and members of, the British literary tradition. This conscious ambivalence attunes these poets to how poetry both bridges and fails to bridge geographic, national, and cultural divides through figuration. Specifically, I examine the work of four contemporary, formalist poets—Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Agha Shahid Ali—to explore some of the means by which Anglophone poetry today taps into poetry's techniques of measurement and scale to remember the past and to record the present.

How do these poets accommodate the pressures of a world that has changed rapidly, and which has accelerated the rate—the scale—of change? How do these poets use scale, measurement, and record-keeping both to elegize the past and to contemplate the processes of memory itself? Recording not just life experiences, but the experience of writing poetry today, these writers question how poetic forms will adapt, as they document our increasingly interconnected world. Using W.H. Auden's elegy for W.B. Yeats as a launching point, I contend that my poets, all descendants in Auden's lineage,

demonstrate that poetry, specifically the lyric sequence or multi-part poem, enables memorability. Poetry does this, these writers suggest, not only by registering changes but also by registering changes in how we conceive of memory itself. These four poets are interested in recording, and in showing the limitations of recording, subtle shifts in consciousness and perception; in chronicling the distortions and failures of memory; in elegizing loss on both a personal and a national scale; and in re-imagining how poetry might compensate for the limitations of its record-keeping with the scope of its imaginative potential. The four writers here show how metaphor helps us to figure the past and the present while also implying a future. Metaphor generates memorability not only through resemblance or estrangement, but through recording what is imagined.

This dissertation places itself at the crossroads of three contemporary intellectual movements. Since the 1990s, theories of memory have proliferated. Concurrent with the growing interest in memory is the upsurge of theories of metaphor across disciplines. Finally, recent developments in the study of the lyric (most notably Virginia Jackson's) suggest that "lyric" is a way of reading rather than a genre. The "lyric poem" is now regarded by some critics as a relatively recent invention. I propose, however, that the lyric, specifically the lyric sequence, is still a useful category of analysis for contemporary poetry, and particularly for formal verse written by poets who consider themselves part of a lyric genealogy.

All four of the poets I focus on employ what many critics would still consider traditional lyric elements. Needless to say, these elements are historical products of the Western literary tradition: one in which we see a relationship between the "I" and "you"; a sense of a performed, spoken, or overheard utterance; an interest in subjectivity and

consciousness; and the structural features of meter, rhyme, and refrain. But Heaney, Walcott, Schnackenberg, and Ali also deviate from traditional Western conceptions of the lyric. These poets imagine how Western lyric forms, such as the elegy and the sonnet, and non-Western forms can employ metaphors of measurement and figures of scale to record and to animate the experiences of the modern subject. I examine some longer works by each of these poets, partly because each of them favors the sectioned poem or poetic sequence. Usefully for this study, too, questions of scale in poetry become even more pronounced when we examine the ratio of parts to the whole, i.e., of a lyric to a lyric sequence. Heaney, Walcott, Schnackenberg, and Ali all illustrate the comparative features of lyric poetry, even when it intersects with and borrows from other modes, such as the narrative, song, prayer, or epic.

Scale is a difficult concept to define in poetry, as it has both quantifiable and qualifiable manifestations. In this dissertation, I use the term "scale" or "contrasts of scale" to designate different kinds of comparisons and figures. Scale indicates relative size, but I often use it to convey the importance or weightiness of a concept for a poet. Scale involves measurement and ratio, especially the ratio of part to whole. Many of the figures I refer to—synecdoche and metonymy in particular—are brands of metaphor that are dependent on a relative contrast of size: the part represents something larger than itself, the whole. In addition to its use of metaphor, poetry is scalar at the micro-level of prosody, as we have seen. But poetry is also concerned with scale on a much broader, thematic level: as a condensed utterance, poetry often conveys a vast amount of information in a relatively small container. There is often a sense, especially for lyric poets, that there is a victory in the small.

The power of a lyric poem is often inversely proportional to the amount of figures, words, details, and even lines it contains. Poetry is frugal, in that it often aims to be representative as opposed to comprehensive (an exception to this would be the epic mode). For example, a realist novel, not to mention a computer or a human brain, can record vast amounts of data. Lyric poetry is less concerned with recording huge swaths of information; rather, its aim is often to allude to, to represent, or to mimic immensity. Or even infinity. If the novel is a paragraph, poetry is a hieroglyph. That is not to disparage the novel, as poetry has many limitations. Poetry prides itself on its relative minimalism compared to other literary genres and other forms of remembering. But this presents a problem when poets want to remember a maximal amount of information or to record a plethora of events, memories, experiences, and losses. I would argue that poetry is more concerned in general with representing the illusion of the infinite than it is in trying to recreate it. The old adage "less is more" is a long-standing tradition in poetry, even when individual poems or poets create an atmosphere of expansiveness.

It is a truism, but an important one, to remark on (in celebration or distress) the explosion of data in our world, and the speed at which we experience it. Some of the new (or heretofore unavailable) metaphors connected to memory that have surfaced in modern and contemporary poetry are metaphors of machines and industry, of neuroscience and medicine, of computing and the dissemination of information, and of travel and transportation. Although we cannot say that Heaney, Walcott, Schnackenberg, and Ali employ all of these new metaphors, in these poets we become aware that we are no longer limited to traditional, pre-industrial metaphors for memory—for instance, the public monument or the book. We have the radio, the hospital, the telephone, the

interstate highway, the motel room, and the airplane—some of the loci in which modern, sped-up life is seen as it is. Yet a poetry mimicking data overload and the hurtling, accelerating speed of technology is only one technique at our command. Even powerful techniques have their limits. The mimetic fallacy—to write a poem about overload by writing too long and too fast—may fool us into thinking that traditional poetic techniques such as finely-tuned meter or well-chosen metaphor cannot address our wishes to record, interpret, and remember the contemporary world. Yet poetry's oldest gifts to us—its dilations of a single moment, its reminders of the steady beat against which one moment dilates, its ways of making a single feature of the world enlarge in scale and thus slow us down enough to record a memory—may well be more necessary than ever.

The rise of memory studies is the result of a confluence of interrelated and complex factors, as Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead argue in their *Theories of Memory*. Some of these factors include the emergence of trauma studies in the wake of the two world wars, the Holocaust, Vietnam, apartheid, etc.; the emergence of postcolonialism; and the continuing influence of postmodernism, which popularized the idea that "it was no longer possible for the historical past to be retrieved."[4] The most significant factor is the most obvious: the rise of the information age and its enabling technological innovations, which "led to a sophisticated engagement with and theorisation of virtual memory" while facilitating the digitization and electronic "storage"[5] of archives.

As we continue to finesse technologies of documentation and data dissemination, constantly developing finer calibrations of measurement, we have become (not

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[4] Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead, introduction to *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, ed. Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 5.
[5] Rossington and Whitehead, *Theories of Memory*, p. 5.

coincidentally) increasingly skeptical of our measurements; the subjectivity of perception has become ever more axiomatic, at least in academic circles. The idea that objectivity is chimerical precedes these post-1945 intellectual developments, which, as we know, have been linked to everything from the Industrial Revolution, to Freudian psychoanalysis and Einstein's theories of relativity, to the Great War, to Saussurian linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and structuralism. The idea of measuring truth—if indeed it exists—has become problematic in almost every scientific and humanistic discipline. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison go a step further, arguing that objectivity as an idea has its own history deeply rooted in historical and cultural constructions. For Daston and Galison, the point is less that we increasingly devalue objectivity than that objectivity and subjectivity have always been mutually constitutive and constructed ideas, both of which propose notions about the self. Objectivity is often figured, though, as an escape from selfhood:

> epistemology and ethos are intertwined: mechanical objectivity, for example, is a way of being as well as a way of knowing. Specific forms of image-making sculpt and steady particular, historical forms of the scientific self […] But the self that scientific objectivity seeks to transcend is of a very specific kind, one in which the faculty of the will (as opposed to reason or judgment or imagination) is paramount, and never more so when, as in the case of scientific objectivity, the will turns on itself: the will to will-lessness to which proponents of objectivity aspired. Subjectivity is as historically located as objectivity; they emerge together as mutually defining complements.[6]

These points are well-taken, particularly the observation that the paradox of willing oneself to achieve "will-lessness" is at the heart of what makes objectivity elusive. I might add that the implication behind the constructed and mutually constitutive nature of subjectivity and objectivity would appear to grant subjectivity—in all of its relativism—a

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[6] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, "Preface to the Paperback Edition," in *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), pp. 4-5.

privileged place. To historicize the way we approach objectivity by implication seems to undermine its proposed aims.

Much of modern and contemporary poetry is acutely aware of these questions, and poets have become more epistemologically self-conscious in their roles. This self-consciousness entails an understanding of poetry's losses as much as an imaginative re-conception of what poetry can offer in the future. Although poetry is certainly not "objective," it may have a unique purchase on other kinds of truth. But with "truth" of any kind increasingly under scrutiny, it is unsurprising that many poets have written works that are either directly self-elegizing or elegiac about poetry itself.

Theories of metaphor, which like theories of memory have been with us since Aristotle at least, have acquired increasing cachet. The twentieth century witnessed an increase in theoretic output. In psychology, and later in neuroscience, as Douwe Draaisma argues, Freud's "Mystic Writing Pad" paved the way for new theories of metaphor, which would proliferate in the 1970s:

> Important contributions have been made by such fields as linguistic and memory psychology. In developmental psychology, studies have been carried out into competence in the use of metaphors as a function of cognitive maturation [….] In educational psychology experimental studies have been carried out into the value of metaphors as didactic tools. A slightly unexpected approach is that of neuro-psychology: the productions and interpreting of metaphors has, like all psychological processes, a substratum in brain processes.[7]

That metaphors can be "didactic tools" underscores their power. And efforts to characterize memory and remembering are themselves likely to generate metaphors, at least in part, because memory, like metaphor, is comparative and selective. I would speculate that precisely because memory is a concept that we imperfectly understand, we

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[7] Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory: A History of Ideas about the Mind*, trans. Paul Vincent (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 13-14.

often approach it obliquely, through figuration. By comparing memory to other objects, models, or concepts, we expand the reach of what can signify what. We also raise the probability of understanding how we currently conceptualize memory when we draw from a range of metaphors, with their respective fields of association, from across disciplines. Where these disciplines overlap proves revealing. Describing his methodology for approaching the question of how notions of time and space evolved in Western thought from the *fin de siècle* through World War I, Stephen Kern writes:

> I use a working principle of *conceptual distance*. Thus, there is greater conceptual distance between the thinking of an architect and that of a philosopher on a given subject than there is between the thinking of two philosophers, and I assume that any generalization about the thinking of an age is the more persuasive the greater the conceptual distance between the sources on which it is based. However the distance must not be too great or the juxtaposition becomes forced.[8]

Interestingly, Kern's idea of conceptual distance is intimately bound up with ideas of scale. He contends that the distance between disciplines is often directly proportional to the truth value of what is discovered. The more "conceptually distant" the fields, with their different epistemological paradigms, reach a similar conclusion, the greater the chance we have of accessing truth. Kern is a believer in historical contingency, but also in universals. For him, there are historical and cultural truths to be discovered if we mobilize a diverse array of knowledge systems.

One of the seminal approaches to metaphor studies that bridged the gap between literary and scientific examinations was the cognitive linguistic work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argued in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) that metaphors are fundamental cognitive mechanisms that structure and ground our experience. Because so

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[8] Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1983, 2003), p.7.

many of our thought processes are influenced by ingrained metaphors that are often imperceptible or unconscious, Lakoff and Johnson contend, we should look closely at *how* the way we speak about the world influences our consciousness. Lakoff and Johnson make a convincing argument that all of us—not just poets or cognitive linguists or neuroscientists—have a stake in exploring metaphorical processes. Metaphors reveal to us the form and content of our thoughts and paradigms, even values and worldviews.

In philosophy and literary theory, William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge have often been cited as some of the first architects of modern theories of metaphor. Others trace the origins of metaphor theory to the New Critics, specifically to I.A. Richards, with his coining of the now ubiquitous terms “tenor” and “vehicle” in *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936). Building on Richards’s ideas, Max Black proposed an interaction theory of metaphor in the 1960s in which the tenor and the vehicle acquire meaning through their interdependence. Black’s ideas are still highly influential. Some of his detractors come from a Kantian, continental philosophical tradition enhanced by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Paul Ricoeur, who, to varying degrees, are more interested in deconstructing the dualistic thinking inherent to some theories of metaphor than in the interactions between two compared terms.

Jacques Derrida makes compelling arguments as to how metaphor is at the root of all Western thought, beginning with Aristotle. In “White Mythology” (*Margins of Philosophy*, 1982) Derrida contends that any definition of metaphor is implicated in philosophy, just as the latter is unavoidably reliant on metaphor. Thus, the history of metaphor consists in part of the history of metaphorical representations of metaphor. Derrida’s critique is that philosophers (in the classical and Enlightenment traditions,

particularly) have not been sufficiently aware of how different concepts of metaphor are themselves metaphorical, and moreover, of how we cannot speak about metaphor (or speak at all) without recourse to representation. Derrida's deconstruction of the long-standing opposition between the literal and the figurative is both useful and limiting. Derrida asks, "What is white mythology? It is a metaphysics which has effaced in itself that fabulous scene which brought it into being?"[9] There is no way, for Derrida, for objectivity to emerge from "fabulous" foundations. As Robert Rehder puts it, "The most suggestive idea in Derrida's essay is that of the title: white mythology, that the language we use every day is haunted by metaphor and that the very process of our thinking is perhaps metaphoric."[10]

Another influential deconstructionist, Paul de Man, argues in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (from *Blindness and Insight*, 1983) for the important distinction between two terms that may get conflated under the umbrella of metaphor. For de Man, "allegory" is more useful than "symbol" as a way to approach figuration because it embraces the constructed-ness and the temporality of human experience—in other words, the finitude. Insofar as "symbol" suggests embodiment, it implies a kind of transcendence or atemporality that is, for de Man, fanciful. In the simplest terms, meaning is necessarily indeterminate, and any theory of literature that proposes figuration as a conduit to a transcendent truth is fundamentally misguided.

Up until Denis Donoghue's recent illuminating study, *Metaphor* (2014), there had not been much in the way of new, post-deconstruction literary conceptualizations of

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[9] Jacques Derrida and F.C.T. Moore, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): p.11.
[10] Robert Rehder, *Stevens, Williams, Crane and the Motive for Metaphor* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.192.

metaphor, and the cognitive approach is still in its early stages. In my analysis of metaphor, I am more aligned with Donoghue's theory, which borrows much from Max Black, than with the deconstructive approach. Equally critical are the theories of metaphor my four poets either explicitly express or indirectly suggest in their prose, interviews, and poetry. The metaphorical intentions of the poets themselves—what they have to say about their figurations, in other words—matter, although of course poets do not always have, or wish to have, access to their full rationality in the actual course of the creative process. I do think, however, that de Man and Derrida raise essential questions about figuration, as does Donoghue, who surveys deconstructionist theories of metaphor, among others, in great depth. That language is inherently metaphorical, a reality which Derrida repeatedly demonstrates, places real limitations on what we can use metaphor to express and profoundly challenges the possibility of escaping the metaphorical mode long enough to see it with any clarity.

So what exactly does Donoghue propose? Because he builds his argument by making one meticulous and nuanced point after another, it is easy to miss the radical nature of some his ideas—or at least, of their implications. Donoghue walks us through Western theories, beginning with Aristotle and ending with Wallace Stevens, and draws distinctions between metaphor, which he sees as a kind of ur-figure, and its related but, to him, less powerful iterations: simile, synecdoche, metonymy, and catachresis. His working definition of metaphor is relatively simple:

> A metaphor, according to I.A. Richards, is a "shift, a carrying over of a word from its normal use to a new use." That definition is good enough: the root meaning is to transfer a word from one place to another: μεταφερειη. It supposes that there is an ordinary word that could have

> been used but hasn't been: instead, another word is used that drives the statement in an unexpected direction.[11]

Despite the simplicity and traditionalism here—Donoghue mostly accepts Richards's definition of metaphor (as do I), with its distinct categories of "tenor" and "vehicle"—his ambition for metaphor is lofty: "The force of a good metaphor is to give something a different life, a new life. A metaphor is all the better the more the vehicle differs from the tenor: it would be a simile if it consorted with the tenor in a local degree of likeness; it would be a conceit if the unlikeness were wild, bizarre, too much of a good thing."[12]

Finding some of Donoghue's distinctions among figures related to metaphor (simile, conceit) more useful than others, I tend to use *figure* or *figuration* interchangeably in this dissertation, although I do make distinctions among kinds of figures and kinds of metaphors as they seem relevant to the particular poetry and poets in question. In this dissertation, I treat metaphor as encompassing simile, synecdoche, metonymy, conceit, and even analogy. Catachresis, for me, is the farthest from metaphor. Donoghue describes figures (of speech and thought) as "acts of the mind by which we pay attention to parts of the world; we call the capacity of those acts imagination when they are not limited to reference or allusion to what is already there."[13] This strikes me as a capacious enough definition.

Donoghue's fundamental contribution to metaphor theory is the idea that metaphors not only transform our experiences but, when deployed skillfully in poetry, help us to fulfill our desire to "escape from the world," to inhabit a different world, to imagine an alternate way of seeing and being. This is particularly relevant to the poets in

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[11] Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[12] Donoghue, *Metaphor*, p. 2.
[13] Ibid., p. 48.

this dissertation, who often see themselves as either exiles or expatriates, whether literally or figuratively, from their native countries. Donoghue evidently believes that metaphor, at its most potent, helps us to break out of our present reality (or at least furnishes us with a delightful illusion of escape), effectively providing us a new scale by which to measure our experiences. Metaphor, for him, can greatly expand our understanding of ourselves as subjects in the world:

> The impulse in metaphor to escape from the world, and especially from the importunity of objects, things, and faces, is best fulfilled by putting another form of discourse in place of reference. The strongest such form is prophecy…'To prophesy': to speak as by divine inspiration and therefore to claim access to the future…More generally, it is to speak without any producible authority, scorning mere designation, to speak by *fiat*. Likewise, metaphor acknowledges no authority.[14]

A caveat is in order: just because Donoghue believes that "metaphor acknowledges no authority" does not mean that he believes that any particular metaphor should not be evaluated. Donoghue analyzes at great length the difference between good and bad metaphors, and to construct the former requires, for him, an imaginativeness that is always rivaled by precision.

Donoghue's emphasis on the prophetic nature of metaphor introduces a temporal dimension, which is helpful for thinking about memory, particularly in a Western literary context. Citing Eric Auerbach, Donoghue writes that "[f]igural interpretation […] 'establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first,'" while conceding that "[t]he trouble is that the 'second' by definition has the last word: to encompass is to win."[15] This conundrum gets to the heart of issues of scale. If meaning is

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[14] Donoghue, *Metaphor*, p. 204.
[15] Ibid., p. 37.

transferred from the tenor to the vehicle, is the tenor, the original object, diminished? Does it lose its stature relative to the vehicle? One answer to these questions is yes. I, like many other critics, often use "figure" and "metaphor" to convey what, in a more technical sense, might constitute "vehicle." For example, I might say that Seamus Heaney uses a bucket of water as a metaphor for the self. More precisely, I could call the bucket a "vehicle." But because of the primacy of metaphorical thought in poetry, the "original," I tend to believe, is permanently transformed, or even "fulfill[ed]" by a subsequent comparison. Is the sum more than its parts, or does the "fulfill[ing]" tenor risk eclipsing, or even erasing, the original referent?

These are open questions, but it is fair to say that if poetry is one avenue for remembering, and if memory inherently compares the present to the past, there is always a risk of losing the original. Despite this, because I agree with Donoghue that metaphors imply a kind of futurity, the frame of reference can also be expanded in the hands of an apt metaphor-maker, one who imagines the unknown. But how do elegiac poets, poets particularly concerned with recording the past, make sure that their metaphors do not subsume their fields of reference? This question is especially relevant for poets who are interested in recording loss. How can poetry both document and imagine? Is there a not a conflict of interest?

In an attempt to address such questions about scale, metaphor, and memory, I take the guidance of a landmark poem of the modern era, W.H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." The elegy is, of course, one of the more important means of poetry's larger task to remember, but elegy will be only one of my concerns. That Auden's poem remembers a poet will be significant, too, but I am most interested in what Auden means, in the first

stanza, by the phrase "what instruments we have," and even what it might mean, in poetry, for those instruments to "agree."[16] What weighs heavily in our memory? What falls away?

Auden's elegy helps to frame my understanding of how Heaney, Walcott, Schnackenberg, and Ali use poetry's formal and generic resources to remember through metaphor. (I use the term "formal" liberally to describe any technique by which a poem is made.) Critics who have analyzed Auden's canonical poem have observed in it different kinds of modernity. For Edward Mendelson, Auden's elegies are cautionary and didactic. For Jerome Mazzaro, Auden inadvertently (and somewhat ironically) became the symbol for American writers of the 1930s and 40s of the "genesis of postmodernism"; these writers saw in Auden the opportunity to "reestablish" for poetry "a tendency to turn away from what is known toward what may be conjectured and tested by personal experience."[17] Auden's elegy is partly didactic, partly a flight from the "known" toward the "conjectured," but his elegy also functions as a catalogue of modern ways of remembering in poetry, and will be of relevance particularly in reading my chosen poets.

Auden's poem divides into three parts, doubtless in tribute to the traditional form of the Ancient Greek elegy. The three sections differ greatly in tone but are alike in interpreting not just the loss of the deceased, but more public losses, measured over time. Embedded in Auden's elegy are modern ways of conceptualizing *how* metaphors—specifically metaphors of measurement and record-keeping, of scale, of the finite and the infinite, of science and technology—function in long poems. In addition to paying tribute

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[16] W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in *W.H. Auden: Collected* Poems (1976), ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage: reprint ed., 1991), pp. 247-49.
[17] Jerome Mazzaro, *Postmodern American Poetry* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 3.

to Yeats, Auden's elegy is a self-conscious, self-aware work that speaks of its own methods and designs.

The problem of what poetry does and can do pervades Auden's elegy for Yeats. The poem opens with a narrative of Yeats's death. We quickly discover, however, how absent Yeats is—Yeats, who is known as one of the first modern elegists. Jahan Ramazani, in *The Poetry of Mournin*g, provides an insightful—if somewhat reductive—analysis of this elegy, praising Auden for "Praising the dead [Yeats] without suppressing his skeptical intelligence."[18] For Ramazani, Auden's achievement is that he "refashioned commemorative poetry for an anti-heroic age."[19] Ramazani's central thesis is that pre-twentieth-century elegy tends toward the "consolatory," and modernist and modern poetry toward the "anti-consolatory."[20] For me, Auden's poem centers rather on poetry's potential in the second half of the twentieth century while providing us with ways to approach poems in the twenty-first and beyond.

The first section of Auden's elegy is as much an introduction to an imperiled Europe on the brink of war as a reflection on what Yeats's death means for poetry. Yet it is also an ahistorical work that collapses time—with modern airports on the one hand and peasant rivers on the other. Auden's tone here is flat and factual, or pseudo-factual. He creates the illusion of objectivity, thus parodying the idea of objectivity itself. He imitates the clichés and the sensationalism of journalistic rhetoric with hackneyed phrases like "the dead of winter" and "brokers roaring like beasts." These unimaginative metaphors are ideal for describing an unimaginative and bureaucratized world. Recounting the

[18] Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 176.
[19] Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning*, p. 176.
[20] Ibid., p. 2.

meteorological conditions on the day of Yeats's death, Auden adopts a pseudoscientific tone, reporting that "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day."

While satirizing the traditional pastoral elegy's use of pathetic fallacy ("the dying day" and the "the peasant river was untempted") Auden suggests that behind our seeming objectivity we lack accurate instruments of measurement. Death is always a brutal reminder of the failures of our instruments to control life, but Auden's mimicking of scientific rhetoric makes that fact particularly glaring. The implication is that, try as we might to circumvent death with technology, we will always confront our limitations, rendered all the more conspicuous by increased confidence in science. Revising his original version of the poem, where he writes in the manner of early Yeats, "O all the instruments agree," Auden says that it is only what instruments *we have* agree. What kind of consensus is this? Is all we remember of the day—and by extension, of Yeats—captured in the overlapping measurements of a limited amount of limited instruments?

In the second stanza, Auden introduces the language of fairytales, referring to "wolves run[ning] on through the evergreen forests." The proverbial Big Bad Wolf comes to mind, evoking a world threatened by predatory forces. But the wolves on the loose are also an apt metaphor for a world in constant movement, a world that will not pause for the parochial elegy with its "peasant river." The third stanza moves from the land of Grimm's fairytales to military metaphors. In his 1993 book *The Hidden Law,* Anthony Hecht reminds us that the body/body politic analogy—in this case, Yeats's body as it struggles with disease—is figured as a political uprising. This is an ancient comparison, but Hecht notes that "When [Yeats] dies, the metaphor of the human body/

body politic fails at the same time: he becomes his admirers."[21] Certainly, Auden's military language here takes on a special ominousness in 1939. (With frightening prescience, the military metaphors evolve into images of emptiness and silence, of a Europe without people.) We return to the previous river image with the word "current," only to discover we are back in invocations of phenomena that can be measured scientifically. Yeats has become a mechanized body with an electric "current" that malfunctions. Auden's phrase "the current of his feeling failed" implies that human feeling is quantifiable. But to undermine this implication, Auden assigns a kind of straw-man causality to what cannot be understood causally: Yeats's "feeling." After Yeats is "scattered," evoking at once simultaneous meanings—literal cremation, the notion of identity as diffuse or fragmented, and the uncontrolled dissemination of information—we cycle back to the literal human anatomy, where Yeats "is modified in the guts of the living." The end of this first section leaves us with the primal and corporeal—guts—while continuing to satirize the insidious vapidity of political and journalistic discourse.

The couplet refrain, "What instruments we have agree / The day of his death…" serves many functions, but one is—and here I will borrow Ramazani's term "anti-consolatory"—to give the illusion of consolation to the inconsolable. This elegy is striking in its sense of how quickly things move: the reputation of the living is transformed speedily after death. As if to fix Yeats's legacy, Auden eulogizes him, all the while acknowledging Yeats's limitations, the constraints of elegy, and the power of fast-moving information and news of current events whose reception we are less and less able to control. While he seeks to control how Yeats is remembered, Auden paradoxically

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[21] Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 142.

acknowledges the impossibility of doing so. In a world of dissension and war, at least the "instruments" agree. This repetition gives the section the illusion of resolution, a pattern in a section featuring losses of control. Auden was a tireless formalist, and in later years he would speak, often in a curmudgeonly manner, of the horrors of writing free verse. But this first section—all but rhyme-less, all but meter-less—embodies a kind of formal liberality. And, as we will see, the elegy will move toward a strict formalism in its final section, in which Auden imitates Yeats's ballad stanza.

In this first section, Auden has been employing figures that, for the most part, have been absent from pre-twentieth-century poetry: deserted airports, mercury in a thermometer, suburbs, electric currents, and brokers on the floor of the Bourse. We have also seen more traditional figurations, such as pathetic fallacy and the body/body politic analogy. Following Auden's lead, the poets I will look at in my dissertation create jarring contrasts between traditional and contemporary metaphors, often connected to ideas of scale and measurement.

Turning to Auden's second section, consisting only of one ten-line, slant-rhymed, loose hexameter stanza, we see the familiar device of apostrophe. Yet Auden addresses Yeats in the second person casually, even provocatively. Obviously, this elegy—or this part of it—does not lionize the dead; rather, this middle section articulates through metaphor a poetic philosophy, a vision for modern poetry's future. The question of whom Auden is addressing throughout the elegy is a complex one; in his use of pseudo-scientific rhetoric in the first section, he creates the illusion that he is addressing no one and everyone, that he is pronouncing truth from an omniscient position. As the poem progresses, however, Auden apostrophizes Yeats directly, and by extension, the reader.

Although Auden's tone is personal, he presents the self as, in a sense, an obstacle to poetry. With subtle enjambments, Auden teases Yeats with qualified praise, remarking that "your gift survived it all" from "physical decay" to "Yourself," a pronoun separated from the preceding line's list of obstacles. Auden celebrates Yeats for the tenacity of his genius rather than for his ability to uphold an Eliotic separation between personality and poetry. Paradoxically, however, Yeats also "survives" as a self in the infinitesimally small universe of Auden's enjambment. "Yourself" is on its own line, independent of its obstacles. This type of tiny paradox is especially conspicuous in poetry. In this genre, it matters where the line ends. Here is an example of how a seemingly small question of scale in poetry acquires much larger dimensions and meanings, accruing significance through its relationship to the whole.

The middle section also contains Auden's famous (or infamous) declaration that "Poetry makes nothing happen," which initially sounds both nihilistic and lazy. But immediately after this statement, Auden adds "it survives." "[S]urvives," rather than "nothing happen," is the end of the line. Read alone, this line offers no qualifications to survival. But how often do people quote the full line as its own unit of measurement? Perhaps the question is how survival can matter if it is the only thing that "happens." Auden says—in a part, not *all*, of a line—that poetry makes nothing happen. Is "happening" necessarily a good thing, given what was happening in 1939? Poetry "survives," but on a diminutive scale, circumscribed by "the valley of its making." Executives—not unlike those same beasts roaring on the floor of the Bourse—will not "tamper" with poetry, which makes it sound like a dangerous weapon that could explode in the wrong hands. The executives are frightened of poetry, and their fear of its power

aids its survival. Poetry, Auden now clarifies, is "A way of happening" instead of something that happens. More of an atmosphere or presence than an event or an action, poetry is for Auden a mode of being. It surrounds us, like noise, but is quieter.

Auden's final section imitates some of Yeats's later work, importing many of his predecessor's actual words, and mimicking the meter and syntactical patterns of some of Yeats's stanzas. Auden is literally making Yeats—or Yeats's poetry—survive within his own poem. The final three stanzas are addressed to Yeats and resemble more of a prayer than a command. In a concluding paradox, Auden enjoins Yeats and future Irish poets (and by implication, perhaps, all poets) to "teach the free man how to praise," but the free man is also a captive of time, "in the prison of his days." Auden's final metaphor *is* the paradox of imprisoned freedom. Our imprisonment may be an inability to apprehend our freedom. Certainly, prisons were a literal horror of 1939. But I think Auden may be suggesting that Yeats—insofar as he is "silly like us"—lacks the necessary "instruments" to understand the world and the self accurately. We see our distortions projected outward, just as the snow in the first stanza "disfigure[s] the public statues." Subjectivity, as I mentioned earlier, has become our prevailing modern (for lack of a better word) limitation, but also the source of our freedom. As statues have always served a memorial function, to show them "disfigured" implies disfigurements of memory. Thus, through a series of interlocking metaphors across this three-part poem, Auden raises the question of what we really *do* remember and whether poetry can help us to remember more richly.

Turning to one of Yeats's main successors, I look in Chapter One at the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney, whose work is profoundly interested in memory and memorialization. Often characterized as a nostalgic pastoralist or a political ideologue,

Heaney is a philosophically oriented poet, I argue, who is rarely seen as a postmodernist, but who is, like all of my poets, a product of our particular, postmodern cultural moment. I argue that his early volume *Field Work* (1979) marks the first example of his sustained use of measurement metaphors to record, to simulate, and even to memorialize dynamic aspects of consciousness, including perception and memory. Turning to Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets," a ten-part sequence at the heart of *Field Work*, I present these lyrics as mindscapes dramatizing the contending forces within Heaney's consciousness. On the one hand, Heaney sets out to record the smallest and most imperceptible of phenomena. But on the other, Heaney wants to inscribe his failed attempts at record-keeping, to concede that poetry is not a flawless documenter but the product of a necessarily limited subjectivity. Remembering minute shifts in consciousness seems impossible, but the effort these lyrics make to resolve this results in a partial and paradoxical victory: a dilation of a transient experience. Heaney amplifies moments in time so as to retroactively convey their importance. The constraints of the sonnet and the resources of metaphor allow Heaney to suggest the immeasurable significance for him of a particular place, Glanmore, as locus of memory, perception, and personal transformation.

Next I look at Caribbean poet Derek Walcott who, like Heaney, is a both a regional writer and an international figure. In Chapter Two I argue that Walcott plays with contrasts of scale, both in literal, geographical terms and on the micro-level of poetic form, to record his shifting allegiances to America, to his native St. Lucia, and to the overlapping and porous categories of European and Caribbean literatures. Highlighting juxtapositions of scale, which themselves imply dynamism and movement, Walcott turns to metaphors of travel and transportation, figures that also travel across his poetic

sequences. With these figures he documents what America, as both historical place and artistic abstraction, comes to represent for him as an expatriate. Moreover, he chronicles his decision *not* to become an American citizen. Often read through a postcolonial lens, one he has resisted not entirely convincingly, Walcott asks how it might be possible to be a global citizen in what he calls the "ironic republic" of poetry. Caught in the self-proclaimed paradox of insider and outsider, traveler and potential citizen, local writer and global figure, Walcott complicates these binaries using the mobility of metaphor to ask whether he can belong—or wants to belong—to a global South.

In my third chapter, I turn to Gjertrud Schnackenberg, an American poet whose peripatetic imagination draws her beyond the Western tradition and beyond even the discipline of literature. Though much of her work takes place outside the United States—either in Europe or in the imagined world of Greek myth—her most recent book is no less far-reaching. *Heavenly Questions* (2010) combines ancient forms of measurement with contemporary microbiology, epidemiology, subatomic physics, geology, and astronomy to challenge, and to allow us to reimagine, the conventions of the traditional Western elegy. Schnackenberg offers a new elegiac model for the twenty-first-century. Her elegy for her husband, a philosopher, derives its force and novelty from the collision of lyric, narrative, and epic modes; from her integration of scientific discourses; and from her reliance on non-Western texts, such as the *Mahabharata*. Borrowing from different disciplinary models of scale, her book-length poem realizes itself as a kind of meta-elegy, concerned not only with remembering the dead but also with the limits and survival of elegy itself.

I conclude my dissertation with the work of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, who is known primarily for his reimagination of the ancient Persian ghazal form in English. His work is as various as his background, in which Muslim, Hindu, and Western traditions are interwoven. Though he is a profoundly elegiac writer, one who becomes more invested in the possibilities of poetic formalism and in the boundaries of the lyric as his career progresses, what links Ali to the other poets in my dissertation is his use of figuration to imaginatively reconstruct the past—a past that is not always his own—through lyric sequences and to cross national, temporal, and formal boundaries. But lyric, for Ali, is an elastic term. Adapting the ghazal, Ali uses it as his lyric signature across his *oeuvre*, particularly in his later elegies and elegiac sequences "From Amherst to Kashmir," "Lenox Hill," "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World" (*Rooms Are Never Finished*, 2001), and in his posthumously published volume, *Call Me Ishmael*. I argue that Ali capitalizes on the repetitions and formal constraints of the ghazal, including its built-in contrasts of scale and its resulting tensions between the finite and the expansive to generate what I term *imaginary elegy*: a kind of lyric that seeks to memorialize the loss of human beings, or even of states of being, that are imperfectly and partially imagined because they were never fully present. Finally, I argue that Ali invents his own form of self-elegy as a way of imagining a future beyond himself. In his attempt to capture what is always beyond apprehension and perception, Ali continues Heaney's work of measuring in poetry the successes and limitations of remembering.

There are many Anglophone poets working today who would be excellent candidates for inclusion in this dissertation. In making a general claim—that poetry has always been entwined with scale—I run a risk. I can understand how a reader might ask

two questions: if poetry has always been concerned with measurement and scale, what has changed? And second, what makes these particular poets exemplars or emblems? My answer lies, in part, in Auden's elegy. All four of my poets have written in free verse, but see themselves (and have been categorized) primarily as formalists. Although the free verse/formalist dichotomy is far more unproductively politicized in the United States, it is fair to say that these four poets work within received forms, even as they change them and experiment with abandoning them altogether. This is also true for Auden, who, though lauded for his free verse ("The Musée des Beaux Arts") is remembered as a poet interested in rhyme, meter, and traditional Western forms—in short, as a formalist.

Why does it matter that these four poets are formalists? There is an excellent argument to be made that all serious poets are formalists, whether or not they write in traditional forms; poetry is always concerned with form in a capacious sense. But it is also true that so-called traditional forms have a lineage and a history of their own, and that poetry—as a record-keeping device—remembers its past, remembers other kinds of poetry. Poetry is haunted by its formal past, no matter how experimental it becomes. It is not a coincidence that the poets I have chosen are particularly interested, like Auden, in what it means for poetry to record the past, because no matter how far they deviate from traditional poetic forms they are always attuned to how the medium in which they work has a life of its own.

Auden marks the beginning, I believe, of an era in which poetry feels its profound limitations in a way it never did before. An excellent argument could be made that this crisis of confidence occurs in the wake of World War I, that Eliot and Pound are the architects of a new vision for poetry. How is poetry in 1939 different than in 1918? For

one, we have seen the effects of two world wars on a massive scale. We have seen the rise of fascism and of bureaucratized, totalitarian systems of thought. We have seen war industrialized and commodified as it never was before. We have seen communist movements rise and fall. And we have seen how technology leads to a sense of simultaneity, or at least to a sense of accelerated speed. The telephone appeared in 1876; by the year Yeats died, in 1939, we had the first helicopter and the invention of the electron microscope. How can poetry compete with such technologies? Today, in the wake of the digital revolution, we have myriad ways of recording and remembering information, technologies that far exceed human ability. So what can poetry offer us?

Seamus Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets" and *Field Work* (1979): Recording and Remembering through Figures of Scale

> *I saw the Aleph from every point and angle, and in the Aleph I saw the earth and in the earth the Aleph and in the Aleph the earth; I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face, and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon—the unimaginable universe.*
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph"

From Belfast to Glanmore

In 1972, when Seamus Heaney moved from Belfast to Glanmore Cottage in rural County Wicklow, Ireland, it was both to escape the turbulence of the Troubles and to find a peaceful refuge to write. "At the same time," Heaney admits in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, "there was an element of anxiety because I knew that living there couldn't be a permanent arrangement."[22] This was literally the case: the house, leant to the Heaneys by their friend Ann Saddlemyer, was to become the latter's place of retirement. This anxiety over Glanmore as a transitory refuge suffuses several of the "Glanmore Sonnets." Perhaps the reason Heaney was so keen to memorialize Glanmore—to record its microscopic changes along with the vicissitudes of his own consciousness—was because he was all-too-conscious of its impermanence as a home to him and his family. Not surprisingly, Heaney described Glanmore as "the first place my immediate experience got into my work."[23] Heaney's preoccupation with a temporary home is linked, also, to his status as a self-consciously displaced writer in an increasingly globalized Anglophone tradition. My argument takes as its starting point the idea that

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[22] Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 197.
[23] O'Driscoll, p. 198.

Heaney is neither a nostalgic pastoralist nor a political poet; rather, he is a poet primarily interested in philosophical questions as they relate to memory and place.

Glanmore's impermanence was not Heaney's only worry. There was also Heaney's concern over what his departure might signal to the Northern Irish community. In the O'Driscoll interviews, Heaney concedes that although "Belfast in the early seventies was a pretty unpleasant place to be," it was his experience of freedom in Berkeley ("I'd breathed and walked free in California") that gave him the confidence to relocate to Glanmore.[24] There was also a sense, according to Heaney, that he had to act on the serendipitous invitation to stay at Glanmore Cottage if he wanted to preserve something of his aesthetic and political freedoms during the Troubles. Significantly, the "Glanmore Sonnets" are preceded in *Field Work* by Troubles elegies, including Heaney's well-known poem "Casualty," suggesting, if not guilt over leaving Belfast, a determination not to leave it behind. Heaney insists that his primary motive for the move was artistic rather than political: a desire for poetic change as opposed to a retreat from turmoil. Notwithstanding, the source of his artistic constraint was, by his own admission, catalyzed by the political situation and by Heaney's identification with a politicized Northern Irish poetic movement:

> I was counting myself out of an 'Ulster poets' team that Bernard Miles was trying to assemble for a night at the Mermaid Theatre, diving for cover, really, withdrawing from the Ulster propaganda effort as much as anything else, uneasy about teaming up to bolster the good-news factor. There was a political reluctance in that particular stand-off, but the overall imperative was artistic. I said years ago that within our poetry collective we were writing almost out of a common mind, a too settled and circumscribed aesthetic.[25]

[24] O'Driscoll, p. 148.
[25] Ibid., p.150.

External pressures were encroaching upon Heaney's consciousness as a writer and thinker in a way that did not allow for a fluid relationship between his artistic independence and his political orientation.

While Heaney's rootedness in his native Northern Irish landscape is inarguable, scholars have too often read Heaney as a self-appointed spokesperson for Northern Ireland, a self-reflexive artist, or a sentimental pastoralist. Much has been written about Heaney's reliance on the pastoral, particularly his use of land and bog metaphors to dramatize Irish history, to mimic the process of artistic composition, and to record a rural way of life. And although there is excellent scholarship on Heaney's myriad approaches to landscape and homeland, the sheer volume of criticism along these lines has necessarily eclipsed other sides of Heaney. Helen Vendler's characterization of a later Heaney poem as a "mindscape," however, is evocative and useful. Discussing "Settings xxiv" from the "Squarings" sequence in *Seeing Things* (1991), Vendler writes: "Such a poem is not an argument, but a mindscape, representing a mind in the act of withdrawing from temporality into a stasis of the seen, the known, and the perfected. This is a familiar mental act, perhaps, but one not often represented in lyric."[26] Vendler's reference to "temporality" is critical for understanding the "Glanmore Sonnets" as both inside and outside of time; they are memories as well moments of recorded immediacy and ephemerality. It reveals the durability of Heaney's image as a pastoralist, however, that Vendler uses a geographic metaphor to characterize his poetics rather than a more dynamic one, such as Heaney's own figuration of poetry as concentric ripples in water, or his related, circular metaphor, in his Nobel address, for one of poetry's main tasks: to

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[26] Helen Vendler, "Seamus Heaney's Invisibles," in *Harvard Review*, no. 10 (1996): p. 44.

enable “a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind’s centre and its circumference.”[27]

In his Nobel address, Heaney imports one of the most unforgettable images from the “Glanmore Sonnets”: a vision from Sonnet IV of the water in a scullery bucket vibrating from the passage of a nearby train. This figure suggests the permeability of inside and outside, along with the interrelatedness of comparatively large and small physical phenomena. The sensitivity of the water to the train’s vibrations is a phenomenological metaphor for the sensitivity of the self to sensation and to remembered sensation. Here we have the intersection of the macrocosmic, in this case a moving train (a metaphor for memory moving through the poet’s “heart”), with the barely perceptible ripples:

> Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
> Silently across our drinking water
> (As they are shaking now across my heart)
> And vanished into where they seemed to start.

The ripples are small but measurable vibrations in the physical world that are recorded and amplified in the poet’s memory. The poet enlarges the metaphorical significance of the scullery bucket by choosing, paradoxically, a small object as a figure for expansiveness. The hypersensitivity of what is comparatively small to larger, external stimuli functions as a figuration of the fluid relationships between internal and external, literal and metaphorical, self and world. Heaney describes this liminal state in his Nobel speech as well: “in suspension between the archaic and the modern, we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to

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[27] Seamus Heaney, “Crediting Poetry,” in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 417.

ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence." [28] The contrast between the wide-ranging concentric circles and the "utter silence" of their movement is an elegant figure for how some of the most expansive occurrences are barely perceptible to us. The implication is that poetry is uniquely calibrated to remember the nearly immeasurable through its metaphorical resources.

The "Glanmore Sonnets" often seem atemporal, even as they feel elegiac. Heaney's comment about Wordsworth's work is revealing in its applicability to Heaney's own poetics: "A strange thing happens. A spot of time becomes a spot of the timeless."[29] Borrowing Vendler's term "mindscape," I hypothesize that the earlier poems of *Field Work* (1979), particularly the "Glanmore Sonnets," are atemporal mindscapes "representing a mind," but that the mind in question is in perpetual flux as opposed to Vendler's "stasis." My reading of "mindscape," rather than a static landscape, returns us to Heaney's metaphor of rippling concentric circles in water and their dynamic relationships between center and circumference. The mind's center and circumference are in porous exchange, and the distance between them is variable. Furthermore, Heaney is not as interested in Vendler's "stasis" of the "seen" as he is in the limits of perception, the outer circumference of consciousness. My sense is that Heaney wants to record how his particular mind works and, by extension, to say something about the poetic process. But Heaney is also a classic humanist who often extrapolates universals from particulars, so I think these sonnets make larger claims about consciousness and how we as human subjects experience—and re-experience—sensation and memory.

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[28] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," p. 415.
[29] Seamus Heaney, "'Apt Admonishment': Wordsworth as an Example," in *The Hudson Review* 61, no. 1 (2008): p. 21.

I look at Heaney, particularly the Heaney in *Field Work* and in the "Glanmore Sonnets," as a poet of paradoxical and multifaceted mindscapes. I am indebted to Vendler, who offers powerful insights into this more philosophical Heaney, emphasizing that as he moves away from the political poems of *North* (1975) he increasingly draws "very close to the edge of perception, intuition, and abstraction" which "relatively few poets" try "as theoretical subjects."[30] This claim is true, but Vendler's trajectory from the political to the theoretical is too linear; Heaney is a far more recursive poet, far more circular. That the "Glanmore Sonnets" were originally slated to appear in *North* and relocated to *Field Work* (1979) further complicates Vendler's trajectory, as they were composed before Heaney's famously political Bog Poems. Vendler's characterization of mid-to-late Heaney as a more metaphysically oriented poet has been true of Heaney, I argue, from the very start, coming into prominence in the "Glanmore Sonnets." Moreover, Heaney's metaphysical concerns are conspicuous even in his début volume, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

The critical consensus beyond Vendler's is that Heaney's metaphysical leanings represent a mid-to-late career development. For all of the nuanced and expert critical readings of *Field Work*, what is lacking is a reading of Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets" as early testaments to a philosophical poet concerned with metaphysical and phenomenological questions of consciousness, perception, and memory. In *Crediting Poetry*, Heaney states that one of the chief goals of poetry is to create an "order" that is "as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of a poet's being as the ripples […] in the scullery bucket fifty years ago."[31] Using poems as

[30] Vendler, "Seamus Heaney's Invisibles," p. 47.
[31] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," p. 417.

mindscapes, Heaney gives an "order" to the "inner laws" of consciousness in the "Glanmore Sonnets," *Field Work*, and in the later sequence of *Seeing Things*, "Glanmore Revisited." And although Heaney concedes "the destabilizing nature of [the mind's] own operations and enquiries," acknowledging that "consciousness quickly realizes that it is the site of variously contending discourses,"[32] poetry nonetheless affords him a freedom from this brand of truth. What poetry grants Heaney, he argues, is "not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism."[33] Heaney's formulation recalls Donoghue's definition of metaphor as offering an "escape from the word"[34] and, by extension, a new vision of reality, a new kind of order.

That the "Glanmore Sonnets" are mindscapes presenting and representing flux and mutability is indicated by figures suggesting the intersections between internal consciousness and the perceived exterior world. Heaney often conceives this inside/outside dichotomy in juxtapositions of scale: the singularity and smallness of the self are in dialogue with the vastness of what is beyond the reaches of perception or recollection. In fact, metaphors of scale do more than represent the mind in its present state; they record and memorialize the endurance of the past, down to the most infinitesimal or fugitive memory.

All memories are not equal, even to themselves: they loom large or vanish, depending on the exigencies of the present and the consciousness of the mind that "order[s]" them. Although Heaney's interest in recording states of consciousness, changes or failures in perception, and the shifting relationship of the writer to the external world as it is perceived, remembered, and imagined, first makes a notable appearance in

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[32] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," p. 418.
[33] Ibid., p. 419.
[34] Donoghue, *Metaphor*, p. 204.

the "Glanmore Sonnets" and *Field Work*, I add the caveat that Heaney was never un-philosophical. Like his contemporaries Derek Walcott, Gjertud Schnackenberg, and Agha Shahid Ali (all of whom I discuss in subsequent chapters), Heaney turns to literal and figurative ideas of measurement, including the measurements intrinsic to poetic form, to record the rapidly shifting relationship between self and world. Heaney also uses juxtapositions of scale, spatio-temporal metaphors, and metonymy and synecdoche to record and to remember (and thus to preserve) fleeting moments when the intersections between his interior consciousness and his perception of exteriority are thrown into relief. These moments, for Heaney, find their origins in childhood, when the boundaries of subjectivity are first tested due to our "need […] to learn the relationship between what is self and what is non-self."[35] In the "Glanmore Sonnets," the "boundaries of subjectivity" are sometimes apprehended explicitly, but more often they are vaguely sensed because they are barely perceptible. On a scale, they are sometimes so small as to flirt with invisibility. They "test," as Vendler describes the later poems of *Seeing Things*, "the borders of the unsayable."[36]

While Heaney is fascinated by the power of language to potentially express reality, or at least access some kind of truth, it is always with a sense of mystery and humility in the face of what he calls the "marvellous" that Heaney celebrates the power of language and of poetry:

> But there is another kind of adequacy which is specific to lyric poetry […] It has as much to do with the energy released by linguistic fission and fusion, with the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza, as it has to do with the poem's concerns or the poet's truthfulness.

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[35] Seamus Heaney, "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," in *Salmagundi*, no. 68/69 (1985-1986): pp. 31-32.

[36] Vendler, "Seamus Heaney's Invisibles," p. 47.

> In fact, in lyric poetry, truthfulness becomes recognizable as a ring of truth within the medium itself.[37]

For Heaney, there is an ineffable element of poetic truth that is simply beyond verbal articulation. The metaphors he uses to describe it range in scale (fission vs. fusion) and are, interestingly, scientific. Is this meant to lend some empirical weight to his observations? Ultimately, for Heaney, you know it when you hear it. Poetry's musical properties are irreducible to paraphrase and create effects of their own. For him, there is a kind of leap of faith in trusting oneself to recognize it when one hears it.

The "Glanmore Sonnets": Critical Reception

The "Glanmore Sonnets" have often been read as representations of contradictory poles. Some critics have characterized *Field Work*, and the "Glanmore Sonnets" in particular, as ethically questionable abdications of political responsibility. In his interviews with O'Driscoll, the latter asks Heaney about his famously critical lines in "Casualty," in which he ironizes the assumption of some of his fellow Northerners "that a transgression of the curfew"[38] might represent a betrayal of Northern Irish solidarity. Heaney's neighbor Louis O'Neill, elegized in "Casualty," was in fact killed in a bombed pub when he decided to go out past curfew. O'Neill, for Heaney, thus "broke / Our tribe's complicity" since "he would not be held / At home by his own crowd."[39] The exchange with O'Driscoll demonstrates Heaney's complex stance *vis à vis* the demands of his Northern Irish community, demands which, paradoxically, did not lead to wariness, but which Heaney nonetheless felt "acutely":

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[37] Heaney, "Crediting Poetry," p. 429.
[38] O'Driscoll, p. 215.
[39] Seamus Heaney, "Casualty," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), pp. 148-9.

> *Were you wary, because of the misreadings of "Punishment" by some reviewers of* North*, of exploring aspects of 'our tribe's complicity'?*
>
> There was no such wariness, and I cannot at this stage remember why it took so long to get the thing right […] I did have one big uncertainty to explore, a dilemma that many people in the North were then experiencing very acutely, stretched as they often were between the impulse to maintain political solidarity and their experience of a spiritual condition of complete solitude.[40]

The "solitude" Heaney mentions here represents a kind of psychological alienation resulting from communal conventions and pressures. It was precisely because Heaney sought a different kind of solitude—a writerly seclusion—that Glanmore proved an antidote to his politico-social alienation. This artistic solitude is perhaps that mentioned in Glanmore Sonnet III, where he vows to his wife that he will not "'relapse / From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.'"

Other critics defend *Field Work* as evidence of Heaney's belief in art for art's sake. Discussing the opening poem in the volume, "Oysters," Blake Morrison writes that "Heaney announces his determination to be determined by history no longer: his mind darting freely wherever it will, he will be leant on only by the poetic imagination."[41] In his reading of "Casualty," Morrison claims "the poet is seen as someone whose pursuit of art places him above and beyond the demands of the tribe."[42] In an otherwise complicated reading of how *Field Work* deals with internal conflict, as Heaney can never fully escape the politics of his community, George Cusack writes that being "above and beyond the

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[40] O'Driscoll, p. 215.
[41] Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London and New York: Meuthen, 1982), p. 75.
[42] Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 79.

demands of the tribe" is "certainly the way the speaker [of 'Casualty'] wishes to see himself."[43]

The "Glanmore Sonnets" are not, as Cusack implies, misguided attempts to sublimate political guilt. Nor is Heaney, as Cusack describes him, "run[ning] the risk of turning all of history and nature into a narcissistic fantasy in which he is the sole producer of meaning."[44] The "Glanmore Sonnets" fantasize about different kinds of escape (not all of them political), but they are not escapist fantasies; they are foundational to Heaney's thought, to philosophical concerns that flower in *Station Island* (1984) and persist in his final volume, *Human Chain* (2010). As Jon Stallworthy puts it, "*Field Work* celebrates a respite, but it would be wrong to characterize it as a piece of pastoral escapism. If the murderous themes of *North* are not at the heart of the new book, they are painfully present in [the elegies]…that follow 'Oysters.'"[45]

There is clearly a wide range of responses to *Field Work* and to the "Glanmore Sonnets," and both extremes—Heaney as artistic purist and Heaney as political truant—are troubling, whether they are invoked in praise or in censure. Extolling or chastising Heaney for his putative aestheticism implies both a necessary division between politics and art *and* that Heaney's response to this timeless tension is clear-cut and discernible. The other extreme, that Heaney is ethically questionable for leaving Northern Ireland during the Troubles, is reductive, and neglects the self-critical elements present from the beginning in Heaney's poetry, prose, and interviews. Critical attempts to pigeonhole Heaney, whatever their motivations, are belied by the ambivalence, introspection, and

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[43] George Cusack, "'A Cold Eye Cast Inward': Seamus Heaney's *Field Work*," in *New Hibernia Review* 3, vol. 6 (2002): p. 62.
[44] Cusack, "'A Cold Eye Cast Inward,'" p. 65.
[45] Jon Stallworthy, "The Poet as Archeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney," in *The Review of English Studies* 33, no. 130 1982): p.172.

seriousness present in Heaney's work, from "Personal Helicon" in *Death of a Naturalist*, to the Bog Poems of *North*, to his later meditations on 9/11 and terrorism in *District and Circle* (2006).

Some critics *do* approach Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets"—nestled among overtly political Troubles poems, six elegies, several self-critical pieces on poetry's role, and complex depictions of marriage—as the hybrid and irreducible works they are, uneasily perched between peace and violence, philosophical transcendence and historical contingency, artistic independence and civic solidarity, rebellion and guilt, intuition and cognition, and past and present. Heaney's philosophical orientation across his *oeuvre* helps us understand his interest in the relationship of the individual to the world, whether that world is politics, memory, or consciousness. For Heaney this is always an ongoing, dynamic process—at times frustratingly so.

Refreshingly, Peggy O'Brien reads Heaney as a deeply philosophical poet. She sees Heaney's work as "purgatorial," though her main focus, like Vendler's, is on Heaney's "later numinous poetry" in *Seeing Things* (1991), which contains the sequence "Squarings," which she calls Heaney's "most modernist, most metaphysically searching and deliberately destabilizing effort to date."[46] For O'Brien, the poetry of "Squarings" is catalyzed by *Station Island* (1984) but prefigured by the "Glanmore Sonnets." O'Brien's emphasis on the metaphysical centers on Heaney's richly ambivalent relationship to his Catholic upbringing. Her reading of Heaney as a Dantesque pilgrim journeying simultaneously through several purgatorial spaces—poetry, faith, metaphysics, aesthetics, etc.—is useful for thinking about a philosophical journey within his work. We do not

[46] Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg: From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 158-59.

have to focus on Heaney's evolving relationship to Catholicism *per se* to find O'Brien's timeline of his increasingly metaphysically engaged poetry helpful:

> [The "Glanmore Sonnets"], though perhaps the most grounded of his poetry, still allows for sudden, lightening illuminations, which anticipate later moments […] Jumping ahead to "Clearances"…these poems, though imbued with the balance of strict truthfulness, their fair share of the physical and the diurnal—peeling potatoes, folding sheets—are nonetheless much more centered on the metaphysical […] The critical fact, however, is that the poet's consciousness is completely inundated by mystery, flooded by an emptiness, and perhaps some private intuition, which in not yielding to language preserves its oceanic fluency and the poet's privacy.[47]

O'Brien's phrase "flooded by an emptiness" is a lucid way to capture a philosophical paradox in Heaney: in an attempt to record the fluid intersections between the center and its external circumferences, Heaney is also drawn to spaces of emptiness and perceived emptiness.

The continuum between emptiness and the barely perceptible is at heart a question of subjectivity and scale, both of which are relative and changeable. As I mentioned in my introduction, it is a truism that the relativity of perception is a philosophical question deeply embedded in modern and postmodern thought. In his panel remarks at Emory University's opening of the Seamus Heaney exhibition, "The Music of What Happens," Fintan O'Toole proposed that in the aftermath of Heaney's death we should aim for a more nuanced view of his poetics as opposed to embracing a hagiographic characterization with its sentimental emphasis on Heaney as a retrospective, pre-industrial, pre-modern regional poet. While O'Toole acknowledged that Heaney "may be the last great poet who had access to a pre-electric world," he described him as an "utterly contemporary writer in that absence becomes a presence," a writer whose

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[47] O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg*, pp. 158-59.

sensibility is "modern" in that there is "no fixed self in Heaney."[48] Thus, Heaney is not just a philosophical poet for O'Toole, but a modern, even postmodern, one. O'Toole's concept of presence in "absence" recalls O'Brien's idea of a flooding "emptiness." O'Toole sees Heaney as a poet who describes the "darkness of the lived-in moment because we're living in a philosophical darkness." Heaney is typically not associated with "philosophical darkness," and O'Toole's claim that there is an especial temptation to canonize him as an uplifting nostalgic is a well-founded cautionary stance.

Time itself is a philosophical question of great import for Heaney, and it has an adjustable scale, which he manipulates skillfully across his *oeuvre*. In the "Glanmore Sonnets," Heaney undertakes the paradoxical task of memorializing moments of acutely felt immediacy, moments which transpired in the past but which often read like events in the present. In his remarks, O'Toole coined a phrase that captures this temporal paradox perfectly: "valedictory realism."[49] Heaney, O'Toole remarked, is not a Romantic poet, despite Wordsworth's influence; instead, he is a modern one, not just because "there is no fixed self," but because his poems represent "sensation recollected in motion."[50]

I agree with O'Toole's assessment and show, in the readings that follow, how the "Glanmore Sonnets" recollect instants of transient, often ineffable attentiveness in order to mimic aspects of consciousness, such as perception and memory. The self is alert to its own porousness and changeability. These poems record—and at times memorialize with an emotional urgency—an ecstatic susceptibility, both rapturous and disorienting, to one's environment. This disarming alertness, as sensitive to beauty as it is to danger,

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[48] Fintan O'Toole, "Feeling into Words: A Conversation about Seamus Heaney" (lecture, "Seamus Heaney: The Music of What Happens," Atlanta, GA, February 22, 2014).
[49] O'Toole, "Feeling Into Words."
[50] Ibid.

makes memorable for us a mind and circumference in exchange. Recording in these sonnets his own susceptibility to outside influences and his quest to register infinitesimally small internal and external vicissitudes, Heaney suggests that to test “the boundaries of subjectivity” and the limits of perception, to find what is hidden from view, requires extreme concentration and vigilance. In these sonnets and in the title poem “Field Work,” Heaney heightens our ability as human beings to be finely calibrated to sensation and highlights the very transience of that sensation (not to mention the transience of our perception of it). Small movements are both recorded and erased. Present moments are so fleeting as to already be, or appear to be, memories.

The “Glanmore Sonnets”: Sensing, Recording, Remembering

The question of how these sonnets generate meaning through their formal attributes, organization, and order is an essential one. Looking at the sonnets as emblematic of Heaney's economies of scale—for sonnets are, by nature, miniatures hinting at vaster things—I show how this sequence is a profoundly philosophical series of lyrics that seeks to engage in questions of perception and subjectivity. Specifically, these sonnets, and *Field Work* as a whole, rely on the resources of metaphor (most often through synecdoche, metonymy, and simile) to mimic how memory and perception amplify the real into the marvelous and to document those moments of immediacy so fleeting they elude us once we perceive them.

Of course, because Heaney is a recursive poet, the sonnets are not a self-contained unity to be treated in isolation. The first and second of the ten “Glanmore Sonnets” use the phrase “opened ground,” which first appears in Heaney’s double sonnet “Act of

Union" in *North* and will become the title, and even the governing metaphor, of Heaney's selected poems. "Act of Union," one of Heaney's most explicitly political works, allegorizes England's conquest of Ireland through the metaphor of rape. Northern Ireland is figured as the resulting child:

> His parasitical
> And ignorant little fists already
> Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
> At me across the water.[51]

Ireland, figured archetypically as a woman raped by a male imperial England, is described in grisly detail:

> No treaty
> I foresee will salve completely your tracked
> And stretchmarked body, the big pain
> That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.

The title of Heaney's selected works is thus the controversial "opened ground" of a ravished Ireland. In the first two "Glanmore Sonnets," however, the "opened ground" is both the literal landscape of Glanmore and the seat of artistic creation. As Constance Jackson and Nicholas Birns observe, Sonnet I recalls the violence of "Act of Union" while transforming the metaphor of "opened ground" into a figure for the poetic enterprise, "us[ing] the poetic language of England to plough into the metaphorical land, to study it."[52] Ironically, the sonnet, unlike some of the other English sonnets in the sequence, is Petrarchan, and Jackson and Birns imply Heaney employs the Italian form to establish the distance between his Irish use of the English language and the language of the colonial oppressor.

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[51] Seamus Heaney, "Act of Union," in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 108.
[52] Constance Jackson and Nicholas Birns, "Technique Informing Craft in Seamus Heaney's Early Sonnets," in *Pennsylvania Literary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2012): p. 28.

Many critics have read Sonnets I and II (and often the entire sequence) as evidence that the "Glanmore Sonnets" are primarily self-reflexive poems about language, composition, and the role of poetry. This is one valid reading, given Heaney's emphasis on the act of writing and his explicit references to poetry as a medium (in Sonnet IX, for example, he asks "What is my apology for poetry?") and to Wordsworth's poetics. Moreover, Heaney has a long history—inaugurated in his *ars poetica* "Digging"—of employing land metaphors to characterize the poetic process. For Heaney, poetry is always as much about discovering what is hidden—about unearthing—as it is about creating. In Glanmore Sonnet I, Heaney opens with the following lines:

> Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground.
> The mildest February for twenty years
> Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound
> Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors.
> Our road is steaming, the turned-up acres breathe.
> Now the good life could be to cross a field
> And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe
> Of ploughs. My lea is deeply tilled.

It is certainly hard to argue that this poem is *not* about poetry when Heaney explicitly figures art as "a paradigm of earth new from the lathe." In the second half of Sonnet II, Heaney returns to the image of plowing his verse:

> Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore
> And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
> A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
> That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:
> Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
> Each verse returning like the plough turned round.

Heaney has literalized the "vowel," one of the smallest components of language, and magnified it to convey a much larger concept: the artistic process. Here, in addition to the farming analogy, we have a juxtaposition of scale (vowel and field) along with a

revealing synecdoche, which by its nature (part for whole) implies a contrast of scale: the vowel, as a part of poetry, stands in for all of poetry. Thus, a seemingly small unit of language is imbued with greater significance. Heaney uses formal mimesis, particularly in his enjambments and rhymes, to mimic the movement of poetry; like a plough, the words move across the lines, turning corners and returning to their starting positions.

Thus, language and composition are inarguably central to the "Glanmore Sonnets," but these poems are more than self-reflexive artistic and linguistic meditations. John Hildebidle argues that the sonnets both "pronounce the relief to be sought and found in words" and also cause "alienation."[53] Where does this alienation originate? As we have seen, Heaney had reservations—both practical and political—about his move to Glanmore. But these poems are also about a philosophical alienation, the kind that Heaney describes in Wordsworth and that O'Toole, O'Brien, and Vendler allude to in their different ways. These are poems that chronicle an alienated self that is susceptible to internal and external threats. As Robert Pinsky notes in his discussion of Sonnet I: "The poems are pastoral […] But it is a disturbed, in fact a haunted pastoral."[54] As the sonnets darken across the sequence, what Heaney continues to highlight is his own vulnerability to outside influences and his frequent inability either to decipher or to resist them.

In Glanmore Sonnet III, Heaney listens to "the cuckoo and the corncrake" as they call to one another and describes the sensation of a "twig-combing breeze," but even though he recasts these phenomena in poetic figures (the birds are "iambic" and the wind

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[53] John Hildbidle, "A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry," in *The Massachusetts Review* 28, no. 3 (1987): p. 398.
[54] Robert Pinsky, "Review of *Field Work*," in *New Republic* 18, no. 3389 (1979): 31-33. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. ed. Carol T. Gaffke (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997) in *Literature Resource Center*, last modified April 2014, Web.

possesses “cadences”), we sense his struggle to decode a potentially ominous external world, one whose legibility is resistant to his watchfulness. In a revealing parenthetical, Heaney describes the birds’ interaction as “(So much, too much).” When Heaney observes a baby rabbit and some deer, it is a humbling experience: these animals, less perceptive in many ways than the poet, are nonetheless endowed with more understanding of their shared world:

> Out on the field a baby rabbit
> Took his bearings, and I knew the deer
> (I’ve seen them too from the window of the house,
> Like connoisseurs, inquisitive of air.

The deer are “connoisseurs” and the rabbit has no trouble orienting himself in this landscape, but the poet is a confused observer trying to convince himself of the value of moving to Glanmore:

> I had said earlier, “I won’t relapse
> From this strange loneliness I’ve brought us to.
> Dorothy and William—” She interrupts:
> “You’re not going to compare us two. . .?”

Here, the poet’s wife teases Heaney for his artistic pretensions, for his attempt to compare himself to Wordsworth. This gentle undercutting reinforces Heaney’s comparable smallness in its loving mockery of the fantasy of artistic grandeur. Perhaps the wife is also gently mocking the analogy Heaney draws between man and wife and brother and sister (William and Dorothy). Is part of the “strange loneliness” the estrangement between two spouses who are alienated from one another? Heaney’s confident metaphor that art is a “paradigm of earth” is thus complicated by his acknowledgement that his sense of scale was off: he had inflated his own importance. Reading Sonnet III, it is hard to understand how any critic could interpret the “Glanmore

Sonnets" as proud, uncomplicated defenses of the poet's role. But given the gentleness and affection of his wife's mockery, it is equally simplistic to read the poems as the guilt-stricken lamentations of a poet questioning his politics and ethics.

Sonnet IV, as we have seen, offers a figure and a pivotal moment—for Heaney, and for his readers—for his exploration of poetic consciousness. The poem closes, we remember, with the scullery bucket that enables Heaney's self-portrayal as a person and a poet permeable to outside influences, as a consciousness that seeks to discern and record the smallest and most imperceptible of phenomena. The poem opens with a memory of being a child listening hard for an oncoming train, and contains, of course, a pun ("ear to the line") on the receptivity required of poetic composition:

> I used to lie with an ear to the line
> For that way, they said, there should come a sound
> Escaping ahead, an iron tune
> Of flange and piston pitched along the ground,
> But I never heard that.

Here Heaney remembers his own failed attempts to perceive what he wanted to perceive, implying that the poet is not a flawless recorder of phenomena but a limited subjectivity that falls short of apprehending reality. That "sound" rhymes with "ground" is particularly evocative. First, we hear the repetition of the sounds within the word "sound" through the echo of rhyme, but it is an ironic echo because of the poet's failure to hear ("But I never heard that"). Second, "ground" recalls the "opened ground" of Sonnets I and II, which in turn recall the "opened ground" of "Act of Union." Heaney demonstrates on the minutest level of form—a single rhyme choice—how poetry functions as a vast echo chamber that remembers itself, just as the adult remembers his childhood self. Finally, since we know that "ground" for Heaney is often a figure both for memory and

the artistic process, his failure to discern a “sound” within the “ground” is an admission not just of perceptual limitations, but of artistic ones.

If the poem ended with the failure to hear, one could argue that Heaney’s self-reflexivity here is rooted in a deep-seated fear that he is unequal to the task of poetry. But with characteristic subtlety, Heaney informs us that he did, in fact, always hear *something*; it was just never *quite* what he intended to hear:

> But I never heard that. Always, instead,
> Struck couplings and shuntings two miles away
> Lifted over the woods. The head
> Of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey
> Turnover of haunch and mane, and I’d look
> Up to the cutting where she’d soon appear.
> Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
> Silently across our drinking water
> (As they are shaking now across my heart)
> And vanished into where they seemed to start.

Instead of hearing the “iron tune / Of flange and piston” of an oncoming train, the child hears “the shuntings” (in American English we say “switchings”) of the railway cars. And rather than hearing the shuntings in the ground, he perceives them from “two miles away / Lifted over the woods.” Instead of seeing a train materialize, the poet knows that a horse will appear instead, perhaps because she is startled by the train’s sounds. The “Glanmore Sonnets” are full of these transient moments that register as elusive, and the horse, just like the baby rabbit and deer of Sonnet III, is presumably easily startled. This is a fleeting moment in time while also a palimpsest, a composite of many memories (“I used to” implies repetition) collapsed into the smaller scale of a single poem.

This sonnet also takes the liberty of collapsing distances and perspectives, as Heaney is simultaneously outside with the horse and “Two fields back, in the house.” The poet can be omnipresent because poetry can collapse time and space through figuration

but also because he has experienced both points of view many times: that of the outside observer and that of the boy inside, who does a better job of perceiving the oncoming train through the "ripples" in his drinking water than listening attentively outside for its arrival. The poem is synchronic even as it records a finite experience. Heaney's expert "look/shook" rhyme emphasizes the different forms perception can take; he wants to hear the train, but he perceives it and its resultant phenomena instead through sight and vibration. The glaring off rhyme of "appear/water" is so faint as to be barely perceptible, which is mimetic of the silent, subtle ripples. The experience is so muted and delicate that it seems illusory in addition to elusive. The sonnet's Shakespearean heroic couplet resounds more audibly than the last lines of a Petrarchan sonnet. The "heart/start" rhyme is thus more perceptible by contrast and is amplified, in turn, by the faint off rhyme before it. And although we hear the "heart/start" rhyme clearly, the heart is an internal organ, mostly imperceptible to us, and thus fittingly placed in parentheses. The experience of simultaneous appearance and vanishing captures the precariousness of the moment, along with the preservations and erasures intrinsic to memory.

As we move to Sonnet V we remain in Heaney's remembered childhood landscape, but this time the child is on the verge of adolescence, just as the tree in the poem is starting to bloom. The poem takes a boortree (also known as an elderberry tree) as its organizing figure. What the boortree represents is not entirely clear, but among other possibilities it is certainly a figure for language and its origins, a hiding place for Heaney, who is an "etymologist of roots and graftings." Of more interest, however, is how Heaney paints a miniaturist portrait of the tree that simultaneously conveys the expansiveness of memory. Heaney telescopically describes the "Soft corrugations" of the

boortree's trunk, the "green young shoots," "the rods like freckled solder," "its blooms like saucers brimmed with meal," "Its berries" with their "swart caviar of shot" like "Buoyant spawn," and its "small buds" that "shoot and flourish in the hush." What was a comforting "bower" to him as a child has become "a greenish, dank / And snapping memory as I get older." The adjective "snapping" suggests something of the brittleness of age along with the fragility of memory. It is also suggests a potential animal presence, perhaps a dangerous creature in the wild. Seeing the tree (it is not the same from his childhood, but a similar tree, presumably, since Heaney grew up in Mossbawn instead of Glanmore) in bloom transports Heaney back to one of his earliest sexual experiences: "Boortree is bower tree, where I played 'touching tongues' / And felt another's texture quick on mine." What is striking is how Heaney uses contrasts of scale—the tiny elderberries are overflowing with "swart caviar" and the blooms are "like saucers brimmed with meal"—to record both a memory and his changing perception of that memory, and to gesture much more expansively at how the external word, with its "small buds," takes on greater significance in the present and in the present's retrospective representation of the past.

The sixth Glanmore sonnet, with its elliptical tone, features, according to Michael Parker, "the memory of an anonymous, local act of heroism from the winter of 1947, when a man 'dared the ice / And raced his bike across the Moyola River.'"[55] Parker suggests that Heaney's retelling of this memory implies a desire to commit a commensurately courageous act, although, of course, a poetic act as opposed to a physical feat. Heaney's use of this analogy relies on a contrast of scale—the huge act of

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[55] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), pp. 169-70.

bravery required of a man bicycling over ice versus the less daring (or at least less conspicuously daring) act of poetic composition. Using the 1947 anecdote as a metaphor for his own artistic struggle demonstrates how Heaney employs contrasting figurations of scale both to create his art and to criticize that same process of creation. Moreover, the interlocking associations—remembered acts of heroism, identification with said acts, and remembered retellings of the memory in Sonnet VII—demonstrate how memory is preserved, even regenerated, through these same contrasting figurations of scale, as

> This tale of bravery, retold 'after dark' generates another childhood recollection in the next sonnet. Just before 'Midnight and closedown', he [Heaney as a child] would listen to the litany of names from the BBC shipping forecast—'Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre'—and picture awesome, mysterious regions, inhabited solely by keening winds.[56]

Heaney's memory of the anonymous man's heroic act is as much a memory of telling and retelling that memory, turning it into a kind of meta-memory, a recollection which serves to unite Sonnet VI and VII, child-like Heaney with the adult Heaney, and the heroic cyclist with the more circumspect poet, who both craves the grandeur of heroism and understands that feats of physical bravery are acts of nobility on a different—and possibly greater—scale from explorations on the page. This does not stop him for wanting to be as "Sudden and sure as the man who dared the ice" (Sonnet VI). The lure of the large persists in the form of aural seduction ("Sirens of the tundra"), and is figured in terms of sweeping geographic scope, of names of far-off places arriving through the small object of a radio: "Green, swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux / Conjured by that strong, gale-warning voice" (Sonnet VII). But the North Atlantic cannot be contained within the vessel of the radio, and, just like the small ripples shaking the drinking water

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[56] Parker, *Seamus Heaney,* pp. 169-70.

in Sonnet IV that "vanished into where they seemed to start," the radio sounds "Collapse into a sibilant penumbra" (Sonnet VII). Here, again, we see the poet as alert witness to—and imperfect recorder of—the hardly discernible, "the unsayable" (Sonnet VI).

The simile Heaney employs to describe the winter of 1947, "when the snow / Kept the country bright as a studio" (Sonnet VI), condenses the larger, external world into the smaller, more artificial space of a studio, which one could read as either a film or a radio studio. The comparison underscores the artificiality of memory, which constructs the past based on comparisons that are meaningful to the poet—the comparisons of poet to biker, of radio to world, of inside to outside. The final lines of Sonnet VI are peculiar, as they seem to imply a metaphor but preclude any direct comparisons through the use of coordinated clauses and the omission of any conjunctions or linking words: "His story quickened us, a wild white goose / Heard after dark above the drifted house." Is the story like the "wild white goose," and if so, how? The story, as a memory, is perhaps as elusive as a wild bird, or maybe the bird is meant as a phantasmal figure for the anonymous hero. But given the age-old links between bards and birds, perhaps the goose is a figure for the poet—both inside and outside Glanmore, both earthbound and fugitive, both "marvellous / And actual" (VII). Perhaps freedom for the poet lies in his ability to escape through self-metaphorization. There is a juxtaposition, again, between the relative immensity of "green fields greying on the windswept heights" and the permeable but small world of "the drifted house," above which the "wild white goose" is "Heard after dark," if not directly seen (VI).

When Heaney mentions the "haven" in Sonnet VII, we are not sure whether it is the sounds of the place-names on the radio, the places themselves, or the resources of

language that are the refuge. Or is Glanmore the haven? Or is the memory of the heard names the haven? The word "haven" suggests both protection and a kind of enclosure, like that provided by the boortree of Sonnet V, "our bower as children," the poet's remembered "treehouse" where he "would crouch." But the world of Sonnet VII does not appear to offer the same protection, instead harkening to a larger outside world, one that is more alluring and threatening. With one simile, Heaney shows how the minuteness of a single uttered or overheard word takes on titanic proportions, expanding beyond his control:

> It was marvellous
> And actual, I said out loud, "A haven,"
> The word deepening, clearing, like the sky
> Elsewhere on Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes.

Haven, a mere five-letter word which itself designates a small, protective space, has opened up to encompass the vastness of "Elsewhere." Additionally, Heaney has shown us how words loom large in his memory; words and language for him are as colossal as oceans, tundras, and skies: "Sirens of the tundra, / Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road, raise / Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize." Heaney's amplifying metaphors about words, etymologies, and language have always been present in his poetry, but they are particularly critical to *Field Work*: recall how Heaney wants to be reduced to "verb, pure verb" in "Oysters"; how in "The Skunk" he describes

> broaching the word "wife"
> Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel
> Had mutated into the night earth and air
>
> Of California[57]

[57] Heaney, "The Skunk," in *Opened Ground*, p. 168.

and how in the "Glanmore Sonnets" he describes "vowels" enlarged enough to be "ploughed into one another."

As the "Glanmore Sonnets" progress, becoming more explicitly threatening, we see the darker side of the hermetic "haven" represented in disparities of scale. In Sonnet VIII, the oxymoronic "big raindrops" are "lush with omen." This landscape is both animate and legible, even if in very fine print. The exterior world (even the secluded haven of Glanmore) is of such enormous scale as to threaten the singularity of self, but there is a kind of paradoxical delight in flirting with self-obliteration, with vanishing, insofar as it may offer a kind of transcendence. In his article on *Field Work* and *Station Island*, Arthur E. McGuinness refers to a kind of encroaching "terror"[58] in Sonnet VIII. This terror is certainly real, as the rain "Spattering dark on the hatchet iron" seems to suggest blood on a weapon waiting to be seized at any moment. Potential danger is all the more dangerous because it is unknowable: "I thought of dew on armour and carrion…What welters through this dark hush on the crops?" The "dark hush" of a thunderstorm recalls again the "tree-house" in the boortree, "Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush." But the "hush" of Sonnet VIII is the proverbial calm-before-the-storm, a disingenuous stillness before the onset of violence.

The *volta* of Sonnet VIII appears in the tenth line, when the poet's anxious series of unanswerable questions about a world "lush with omen" yields to a direct question to

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[58] Arthur E. McGuinness, "Seamus Heaney: The Forging Pilgrim," in *Essays in Literature* 18 (1991): p. 52.

the "you" (presumably his wife) about whether she recalls an event they witnessed together in France:

> Do you remember that *pension* in Les Landes
> Where the old one rocked and rocked and rocked
> A mongol in her lap, to little songs?
> Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking.
> My all of you birchwood in lightening.

Since a traditional sonnet establishes a question or idea in the octave to be resolved or addressed in the sestet, it is worthwhile to ask if Heaney is turning to this convention here, particularly as the first part of the poem poses a litany of questions. If the "answer" to the questions is to ask his loved one if she shares one of his memories, what is the relationship between the two parts of the poem?

Memory, as in the preceding sonnets, has inserted itself into the present, but what appears at first to be a peaceful image of a mother rocking a baby is rendered grotesque by Heaney's pejorative term "mongol," suggesting that there is something strange or disturbing about the child in question. But because a sonnet always establishes a relationship between its two parts, the reader wonders if the "mongol" is in fact the poet himself, infantilized by his own terror and in need of the maternal comforts, the "little songs" of his wife: "Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking." Pertinently, it is no longer the ripples shaking across the drinking water, or the remembered ripples shaking across the poet's heart, but the poet who is seized by a kind of terror; he has become the recording agent not only of his own environment and its threats but also of his own uncontainable fear. Furthermore, his terror precludes him from going outdoors, as he ensconces himself within the "haven" of "upstairs." The final line of the sonnet is mysteriously and suggestively ungrammatical: "My all of you birchwood in lightening."

Loosely rhyming with "shaking," "lightening" draws a connection between the thunderstorm outdoors and the poet's internal distress.

The sonnets continue to darken as we sense the post-Edenic outside world (*et in Arcadia ego*), endangering the safety and sanctity of the self: "Outside the kitchen window a black rat / Sways on the briar like infected fruit" (Sonnet IX). Heaney returns to his litany of unanswerable questions when he contemplates the rat and asks: "Did we come to the wilderness for this?" Everywhere are signs of possible violence, of rot, decay, and destruction. Along with "the reek of silage," we have "Blood on a pitchfork, blood on chaff and hay, / Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing," all of which propel the poet to his *volta* in line 11: "What is my apology for poetry?" The answer to this question is never articulated, but the alienation the poet now feels both from himself and from his wife is overpowering. His environment, which has been teeming with presences, is now an "empty briar…swishing / When I come down." He is literally barred from his wife, who stares at him from the other side of "the kitchen window": "and beyond, inside, your face / Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass." The strange prepositional phrase "beyond, inside" suggests how the "haven" of Glanmore has expanded "beyond" Heaney's reach, almost as if it is one of those far-off locations relayed by the radio ("Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Irish Sea" (VII)), places which, ironically, seemed closer to Heaney, despite great geographic and temporal distances, than the kitchen window does by the end of this sequence. The simile of "your face / Haunts like a new moon" only reifies the sense of growing distance felt by the poet, who can reach the rat with his pitchfork in the tree but cannot ford the astronomical distance between earth and moon, man and wife. Finally, the simile casts doubt on Heaney's sense of his own

credibility. The moon, as a perennial symbol for poetry, haunts him by its inaccessibility, and his perception of it is further corrupted by the mediating agent of the window, the “tangled glass.” The “I” of the penultimate line is syntactically separated from “your face,” which is an off rhyme (itself a kind of distortion) with the window’s “glass.” While McGuinness’s interpretation of Sonnet IX contains some simplistic assumptions about gender and marriage, his basic point that these later “Glanmore Sonnets” document and record moments of burgeoning alienation is well-taken:

> Rather than encountering bogs and megaliths with their archeological secrets, Heaney now seems to be seeking mysteries, experiences he cannot fully understand. His landscapes in these most recent volumes seem unfamiliar, landscapes without clear paths or destinations. Familiar places are now "made strange," disorienting him. The security of his domestic life has become problematic.[59]

The idea of “making strange” is central to Heaney’s poetics and criticism, something he admires in writers like Wordsworth and Kavanagh. Writing about Heaney’s sense of the strange, Adam Kirsch argues that for Heaney “the poet can only be true to such exhilarating moments by respecting their strangeness. That is why the word ‘epiphany,’ which Joyce famously used, does not quite fit Heaney’s conception.”[60] Kirsch’s apt remark might be qualified by adding that the adjective “exhilarating” is not capacious enough; moments of terror are equally sources of strangeness and inspiration for Heaney. This “strangeness” is “why the language of Heaney’s epiphanies is consistently negative, a matter of warding off conclusions and explanations.”[61] Finally, Heaney’s “negative epiphanies” (for lack of a better term) evince, as we have seen and as Kirsch has observed, an interest in nothingness and in absence.

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[59] McGuinness, “Seamus Heaney: The Forging Pilgrim,” p. 66.
[60] Adam Kirsch, “The Taste of Silence,” in *Poetry* 191, no. 4 (2008): p. 345.
[61] Kirsch, “The Taste of Silence,” p. 345.

Alluring and terrifying strangeness dominates the last sonnet in the sequence, in which the poet tenderly remembers his wedding night (what could be less strange, more familiar?), but then states cryptically that he and his wife are “waiting to be found” (much like the hidden words in their “dark hutch”), or perhaps exhumed like the earlier bog bodies from *North* (1975): “we were laid out / Like breathing effigies on a raised ground.” The “opened ground” of language—of vowels being ploughed—in the first sonnet has become in the tenth at once sanctuary, marriage bed, and graveyard. Imagining himself and his wife as other lovers in literature and folklore, the poet enters into a dream state that brings him to the strange and “marvellous” threshold of perception and perceptibility.

The mind in this sonnet roves from dream, to dream within a dream, to memory, and all of these lines blur, even as the lovers are stationary. Of course, their “dewy dreaming faces” suggest the consummation of their marriage, the post-coital rest of their wedding night. But the actual scene—the sexual act—is omitted. Inaugurated by a “deliberate kiss,” the rest of the scene is protected in a deliberate vagueness, a privacy that is also a kind of modesty. The act is described as “lovely and painful,” but the focus is on the respite—the temporary stasis—following the “Covenants of flesh.” Heaney’s allusion to Wyatt beautifully expands the reaches of the poem. Heaney’s poem is stained by its Renaissance precedent, so much so that the Wyatt poem serves as a comparison, a kind of signified to Heaney’s signifier. But Wyatt, interestingly, is insistent that his visions and recollections are *not* oneiric:

> It was no dream: I lay broad waking.
> But all is turned through my gentleness
> Into a strange fashion of forsaking;
> And I have leave to go of her goodness,

And she also, to use newfangleness.[62]

Importantly, Wyatt's poem recounts the alchemy of an act being "turned" or transformed "Into a strange fashion of forsaking." The strangeness, for Wyatt, is that the memory—which is vivid and real ("no dream")—is made strange and impermanent; he will lose the woman literally and the experience figuratively through some form of estrangement. Wyatt's poem is a meditation on the inevitability of separateness, and his "strangeness" is more melancholy than Heaney's.

Before leaving the "Glanmore Sonnets" to look at several of Heaney's poems from *Glanmore Revisited* in *Seeing Things* (1991), a reading of the four-part title poem, "Field Work," is in order. As I have shown, the poems of *Field Work* in particular depend upon contrasting figurations of scale to record changing states of consciousness, to remember moments of permeability between inside and outside, to sound out what is hard to perceive, to use the resources of metaphor to mimic how memory amplifies the "actual" into the "marvellous," and to document those moments of immediacy so fleeting they appear gone once we perceive them. Heaney depicts this ephemerality in "Song" (also in *Field Work*) as "that moment when the bird sings very close / To the music of what happens."[63] The present, turning constantly into the past, is as slippery as the swimmer—a figure for his wife, critics have argued—Heaney describes in "The Otter":

You are my palpable, lithe
Otter of memory
In the pool of the moment,

Turning to swim on your back,
Each silent, thigh-shaking kick
Retilting the light,

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[62] Thomas Wyatt, "They Flee from Me," in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, eds. Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (New York and London: Norton, 2000), pp.142-43.
[63] Heaney, "Song," in *Opened Ground*, p. 173.

Heaving the cool at your neck.[64]

Here, as with the scullery bucket, Heaney describes a remembered moment using water imagery. That memory, figured as an otter, "Retilt[s] the light" and suggests that it offers us a different angle on both the past and the present, acting as a shaping mediatory force for experience, just as the "tangled glass" of the kitchen window does in Sonnet IX.

"Field Work": The Limitations of Memory and Perception

At a literal level, "Field Work" marks a return to the world of agricultural labor inaugurated by "Digging." Field work, also, of course, suggests the labor of the anthropologist, researching foreign customs in the place of their origin. The anthropological denotation is suggestive, as one of the main aims of the "Glanmore Sonnets" is to record the strangeness of experience, even if that experience occurs in a nominally familiar place. At first glance, "Field Work" is a series of four interlocked pastoral meditations that comprise a love poem. In the first, the poet watches his wife do chores as a train of cattle passes; the second describes the wife's vaccination mark in rural terms, as "an O that's healed into the bark," imagining the woman as tree (recalling the boortree of Sonnet V), and as "a wounded dryad // in a mothering smell of wet / and ring-wormed chestnuts."[65] Section three, perhaps the most elliptical, leaves the wife behind to concentrate all consciousness in a sunflower, represented as an animate and watchful presence "in a still corner, / braced to its pebble-dashed wall, / heavy, earth-drawn, all mouth and eye…dreaming umber." The dreamt-of umber is in fact the color of

[64] Heaney, "The Otter," in *Opened Ground*, p. 167.
[65] All citations from "Field Work" are taken from Seamus Heaney, "Field Work," from *Field Work* (1979), in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), pp. 170-72.

the currant leaf stain the poet will leave on his wife's palm (a new vaccination mark, of sorts) in the poem's final section, when he "anoint[s]" her:

> Mould
> blooms and pigments
> the back of your hand
> like a birthmark—
> my umber one,
> you are stained, stained
> to perfection.

The idea of staining his wife also, of course, has a sexual connotation, implying that the act of anointment is an intimate retelling of a loss of virginity.

What to make of this strange, seemingly incoherent four-part poem in no discernible form, with three sections of observation and one sacramental act at its close? We can begin by answering that "Field Work" is a poem about the limitations of memory and perception. Using the central figure of the "vaccination mark," a tiny, partially-erased sign of something that occurred in the far past and left an indelible but nearly imperceptible scar, Heaney uses a contrast of scale—the smallness of the "O" versus the amount of time that has elapsed since both the wife's literal birth and the birth of the poet's relationship with her—to comment on the limitations of memory and of subjectivity. Although he "anoint[s]" the wife with his "stain," there is an unbridgeable gulf between them in addition to the gap between the past and the present. The metaphor for this gulf is the cattle train in the first section (recalling the train causing ripples in the scullery bucket in "Glanmore Sonnet IV") that literalizes the distance between husband and wife, as does the final stanza break. Significantly, the train dwarfs the vaccination mark:

> I could see the tiny vaccination mark
> stretched on your upper arm, and smell the coal smell

> of the train that comes between us, a slow goods,
> waggon after waggon of big-eyed cattle.

The staring cattle help to create an atmosphere of tense watchfulness similar to that of the "Glanmore Sonnets," and their "big-eyed" gaze is a shorthand for the "big-ness" of what they are observing: the complexity of the relationship between spouses.

With the second section comes Heaney's explicit admission of the faultiness of his own memory, as he corrects his mistake. It turns out, in fact, that he does not know or remember his wife's body as well as he thought: "But your vaccination mark is on your thigh, / an O that's healed into the bark." Remarking on the distance between perception and reality, Heaney uses a metaphor that shows the falsifications inherent to apprehension, again through two images of contrasting scale: the moon and a coin:

> Our moon was small and far,
> was a coin long gazed at
> brilliant on the *Pequod's* mast
> across Atlantic and Pacific waters.

What could convey a vastness, a distance, more dramatically than the phrase "across Atlantic and Pacific waters"? Heaney has expanded his scope to the planetary.

Telescoping back in, Heaney returns to the small but richly animate world of the Glanmore countryside with its "cow parsley" and its "tart green shade of summer / thick with butterflies." The phrase "thick with butterflies" conveys the density in even the smallest of habitats, as do the "pockmarked leaves" and the "pebble-dashed wall" against which the sunflower, as watchful as the "big-eyed cattle," observes the scene, "all mouth and eye." The sunflower, "dreaming umber," seems to anticipate the poem's final turn, in which the husband will metaphorically re-vaccinate his wife. What he may be inoculating his wife against is left open, but given how his failures of memory and perception are

correlates of the distance husband and wife experience, it seems likely that Heaney is aiming to vaccinate the marriage against the threat of further estrangement or disunity.

Neither husband nor wife is portrayed in particularly flattering terms, as the final section opens with a rancid sexuality:

> Catspiss smell,
> the pink bloom open:
> I press a leaf
> of the flowering currant
> on the back of your hand
> for the tight slow burn
> of its sticky juice
> to prime your skin.

Moreover, the leaf-stain is described as "Mould" and a "birthmark," one a sign of rot, the other a minor blemish. Ultimately, however, the stain results in the wife's "perfection" in the poet's eyes. His perception of her has evolved from a misremembered entity, to a fictionalized "wounded dryad," to a flawed woman anointed by the small blemishes of the leaf, the husband, even the marriage, perhaps. The vaccination mark, as a figure for memory, underscores the latter's constructedness and its possibility for revision. The relative tininess of the mark only highlights the magnitude of human error as well as the huge potential for positive human intervention. As a record, the mark is both erased and present. Of course, the wife would not remember her first literal vaccination, so only the fading mark attests to the reality of that experience. The husband forgets the placement of the mark, a sign of his inability to perceive his wife accurately or clearly. He makes a mark of his own, so as to wrest control and literalize their reunion. The irony, of course, is that however dark and durable the "umber" stain of the currant leaf, it will fade in time, ultimately disappearing altogether, just as baptismal water evaporates. The birthmark,

really, is the memory of the birthmark between husband and wife. And the birthmark is the poem itself.

Glanmore Revisited: "The Rooms Where We Come to Consciousness"

Memory is doubly removed in *Glanmore Revisited*, a sonnet-sequence which appears in *Seeing Things* (1991), in which Heaney returns to Glanmore. The book contains what is now one of Heaney's most well-known poems, "The Skylight," in which the largeness of the "extravagant / Sky" coming through Heaney's office skylight is juxtaposed against the "claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof / Effect" of the "trunk-lid fit" room.[66] The sequence also contains "The Cot," a poem that represents memory and large expanses of time in the small and humble vessel of a child's bed. Remembering, this time, not his own childhood but his children's childhoods, Heaney hears "the shriek / Of the gate the children used to swing on":

> The old activity starts up again
> But starts up differently. We're on our own
> Years later in the same *locus amoenus*,
> Tenants no longer, but in full possession
> Of an emptied house and whatever keeps between us.

Again, here we have husband and wife, both together and apart, captured literally by the grammar of the phrase "We're on our own." Heaney's ironic use of the expression "*locus amoenus*" undermines any pretensions at Arcadian innocence. Though husband and wife have the comfort of being "Tenants no longer," what they are "in full possession / Of" is not so much the literal environs of Glanmore but a site haunted by memory, "an emptied house and whatever keeps between us." The verb "keeps" is a provocative choice, as it

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[66] All citations from *Glanmore Revisited* are taken from Seamus Heaney, *Glanmore Revisited*, from *Seeing Things* (1991), in *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), pp. 322-25.

suggests both preservation and an intermediary presence that "keeps" the poet and his wife apart, much like the cattle train in "Field Work" or the "tangled glass" in the "Glanmore Sonnets."

With the sestet comes a turn in which Heaney wonders what, in fact, it is that "keeps." As if to reassure himself, he begins the second stanza with a fragment, suggestive of an afterthought. What "keeps" is something

> Which must be more than keepsakes, even though
> The child's cot's back in place where Catherine
> Woke in the dawn and answered "doodle doo"
> To the rooster in the farm across the road—
> And it is the same cot I myself slept in
> When the whole world was a farm that eked and crowed.

Keepsakes appear to be insufficient, but then Heaney appears to change his mind, suggesting that the cot is full of emotional magnitude. The small object, in fact, is a figure for two childhoods—the poet's and his daughter's—and therefore looms large in the mind. Hearing his daughter's voice in his memory, Heaney then travels even further back to his own early years, "When the whole world was a farm that eked and crowed." In this final line, Heaney captures in a simple metaphor the way that the landscape of childhood—and by extension the landscape of memory—is amplified in the child's mind, and Heaney memorializes this amplification by mimicking it in the world of the poem. Children have a different sense of scale, in part due to their relative smallness, in part because the first world we know takes on titanic proportions by virtue of being first. But the task of remembering and recreating a child's sense of scale in poetry is no small matter. Nor is the task of trying to regain, as Wordsworth and Robert Frost tried to do, something of the child's "primary relish of the phenomena."[67] As we saw in his

[67] Heaney, "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," p. 31.

comments on testing the limits of subjectivity, Heaney describes the child's development as an analogue for artistic evolution. Discussing how a child-like perception of scale is foundational to his development as a human being and an artist, Heaney writes:

> The rooms where we come to consciousness, the cupboards we open as toddlers, the shelves we climb up to…the spots we discover for ourselves in those first solitudes out of doors, the haunts of those explorations at the verge of our security—in such places and at such moments "the reality of the world" [Heaney quotes from Neruda] first wakens in us. It is also at such moments that we have our first inkling of pastness and find our physical surroundings invested with a wider and deeper dimension than we can, just then, account for.[68]

Describing his first conscious experience as a child of how memory and "pastness" become "invested with a wider and deeper dimension," Heaney remembers his backyard discovery of the brick remains of an old house foundation from "a living but obliterated past."[69] Asking his father about the remains, he learns how little the people around him remember about the past: "Then I heard him [his father] questioning a neighbor about whose place it might have been…and the hole for the goal-post began to open down and back to a visionary field, a phantom whitewashed cottage with its yard and puddles and hens."[70] The experience of learning about "pastness"—particularly how elusive it is despite its omnipresence—was for Heaney a formative experience in expanding his sense of scale: "The world had been amplified; looking and seeing began to take on aspects of imagining and remembering."[71]

Recounting his experience staring at archaic objects at the National Museum of Dublin, Heaney writes that this encounter with history has the effect of blurring the distinctions between present and past, self and other: "For the moment, the gazer is

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[68] Heaney, "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," p. 31.
[69] Ibid. p. 32.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

carried out of himself, is transported into a redemptive mood of openness and readiness. He has, in fact, crossed the line that divides instinctive apprehension from artistic experience."[72] It is striking how similar this idea is to Heaney's notion of center and circumference in his Nobel speech and to his writings about Wordsworth. But lest we draw the conclusion that Heaney is complacent about this "redemptive mood," believing it to be permanent and permanently transcendent, his fundamental philosophical skepticism keeps his "apprehension[s]" of reality from sounding like epiphanic revelations:

> It is tempting to slip from this personal experience and inflate it by analogy, recalling Keats's rapt vigils in the British Museum and the way his entrancement with the Elgin Marbles supplied some of the dream-charge for his "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Yet in that poem Keats's gaze emanated not from any desire to savour the local and domestic world but from a thoroughly self-aware literary imagination…For all poets, Neruda included, pastness is to a great or later extent enabling. The word poetry itself is an orb on the horizon of time, simultaneously rising and setting, imbued with the sunset blaze of master-works from the tradition yet dawning on every poet like hope or challenge.[73]

Here we have another paradoxical gesture in Heaney. On the one hand, he guards himself against the seduction of "entrancement" with his own art, offering an artistic "self-aware[ness]" as the ultimate safeguard against grandiosity and self-mythologizing. On the other, he freely indulges in the most flamboyant and "inflate[d]" of literary analogies, a metaphor in which he compares the word "poetry" to "an orb on the horizon of time," something like a sun or star that dictates behavior on an astronomical scale: the universe. Although Heaney's move signals a contradiction, it is a contradiction sustained and embraced throughout his work: the poet both has the possibility for grandeur, for transcendence, for the "apprehension" of the marvelous, of the "extravagant / Sky"

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[72] Heaney, "Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," p. 37.
[73] Ibid., pp. 37-8.

coming through the skylight in *Glanmore Revisited*, and also admits his own tendency to amplify the smallness and particularity of experience. The world shrinks down to the miniature, with all of its density and meaning—the "opened ground" of vowel sounds, the vaccination mark, "a farm that eked and crowed"—becoming a "whole world."

Heaney praises Wordsworth for chronicling in *Lyrical Ballads* scenes between poet and world that "record crucial events in the growth or reorientation of the poet's mind" and that "lead the writer out of himself or herself, provide an experience of estrangement, and then resituate him or her in the usual life."[74] Of course, the implication is that one never returns to "the usual life" untransformed by such strange or estranging encounters. Through figures of scale, most often using simile or synecdoche, Heaney preserves in the "Glanmore Sonnets," "Field Work," and *Glanmore Revisited* these moments of strangeness, reorienting moments of simultaneous containment and infinity, where the strangeness of the exterior world always changes the self, the center of perception.

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[74] Heaney, "'Apt Admonishment': Wordsworth as an Example," p. 32.

Derek Walcott's "The Arkansas Testament" and His Quarrel with America: Recording a Dilemma through Traveling Figures and Figures of Travel

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.

—W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B Yeats"

We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.

—W.B. Yeats, "Anima Hominis"

Introduction

In his Nobel Prize speech, "Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" (1992), St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott claimed the following of Antillean cities: "Ours are not cities in the accepted sense, but no one wants them to be. They dictate their own proportions."[75] Much has been written about Walcott's emphasis, in his poetry and prose, on the importance for the Caribbean of determining its own "proportions"—be they literary, historical, or cultural—despite how colonial powers have sought to diminish the scope and scale of the region's influence and autonomy. What has not received as much attention, however, is Walcott's expatriate poetry, particularly his encounter with the American South in his title poem from *The Arkansas Testament* (1987), a poetic sequence in which he debates the immense question of becoming an American citizen against the backdrop of a one-night motel stay in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

[75] Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 72.

Like Heaney, Walcott has spent a good part of his career as an expatriate. Both an insider and an outsider to the British and American literary establishment, Walcott has divided most of his time between Boston, New York, and his native St. Lucia, but he is a world traveler. Also like Heaney, he is conscious of the contrast of scale—both geographic and in terms of international influence—between his native country and the United States, with its disproportionate global power. Walcott sees himself, along with Heaney and their mutual friend Joseph Brodsky, "on the perimeter of the American literary scene," a position that he, in fact, celebrates:

> The three of us are outside of the American experience. Seamus is Irish, Joseph is Russian, I'm West Indian. We don't get embroiled in the controversies about who's a soft poet, who's a hard poet, who's a free-verse poet, who's not a poet, and all of that. It's good to be on the rim of that quarreling. We're on the perimeter of the American literary scene. We can float out here happily not really committed to any kind of particular school or body of enthusiasm or criticism.[76]

A participant "on the rim," Walcott characterizes his, Heaney's, and Brodsky's affiliations as relatively free from literary and academic politics in the United States.

As we saw in Chapter One, Heaney is a philosophical poet who employs contrasting figurations of scale, along with other measurement metaphors, to simulate and to record fleeting experiences as well as the limitations of perception and memory over time. Walcott is also interested in using contrasts of scale to dramatize the minutiae and the changeability of experience, but in his case the aim is more to document shifts in thought and feeling, particularly shifts in allegiances between his regional identity and his role as a global figure (itself a contrast of scale). If Heaney is more concerned in the "Glanmore Sonnets" with measuring his internal perception of external or past events,

[76] Derek Walcott, interview by Edward Hirsch, "Walcott, The Art of Poetry No. 37," in *Paris Review* (1985), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2719/the-art-of-poetry-no-37-derek-walcott.

Walcott focuses on how an internal, moral conflict can express and complicate itself over a lyric sequence.

In this chapter, I will argue that "The Arkansas Testament" is emblematic of how Walcott plays with contrasts of scale—both geographically and on the micro-level of poetic forms and figures—to record his complex loyalties to America, to St. Lucia, to both European and Caribbean literary traditions, and to the idea of a Global South. In addition to contrasts of scale, which I will show imply dynamism and movement in and of themselves, Walcott turns to metaphors of travel and transportation, figures which also travel across his poetic sequence. He uses these dynamic figures, with frequent recourse to paradox, to document what America, as both historical place and artistic abstraction, comes to represent for him as an expatriate. Moreover, through these figures he chronicles his decision *not* to become an American citizen.

Recording his quarrel with himself over citizenship, Walcott uses the language of poetry, with its paradoxes and contrasting figures of scale, to weigh the relative sizes of his conflicting concerns: can he, in good conscience as a black man, become an American given the racial history of the American South? Regardless of America's potential for racial progress, is citizenship always a betrayal, or diminution, of his Antillean origins? Often read through a postcolonial lens, a lens he has resisted, Walcott also asks how it is—or is not—possible to become a global citizen in what he calls the "ironic republic" of poetry. Caught in the self-proclaimed paradox of existing both as insider and outsider, traveler and potential citizen, local writer and global figure, Walcott demonstrates how poetry can combat the reductive nature of binaries. He does so using the intrinsic

mobility of metaphor and dramatic juxtapositions of scale to ask whether he can belong—or want to belong—to an American literary and historical tradition.

In weighing these questions, Walcott draws not from a strictly American poet but from W.H. Auden, a particularly mobile and transnational member of the "ironic republic" of poetry. As we saw in the introduction, the postwar world prefigured in Auden's 1939 elegy for Yeats is one in constant movement and flux, a world that does not pause for the elegist and his subject or for the poet and his poetry. This modern world is also one of dissemination of information and dispersal of people. After Yeats is "scattered" in Auden's elegy, Yeats progresses to an afterlife "in the guts of the living."[77] Auden creates a dynamic model not just for poetic legacy or for literary memory, but for the individual modern subject. The elegy is steeped in paradoxes: Yeats is at once ubiquitous and locatable, alive and dead, preserved and changed.

The link between Auden's elegy for Yeats and Walcott's title poem in *The Arkansas Testament*, a twenty-four part sequence that closes the volume, is striking. First, *The Arkansas Testament* contains an elegy written in Auden-like quatrains, "Eulogy to W.H. Auden," which is an homage not only to Auden but also to his gesture of imitating Yeats's poetics in the final section of "In Memory of W.B Yeats." Second, "The Arkansas Testament," like "Eulogy to W.H Auden," borrows some of Auden's signature idioms and stanzaic structures. Furthermore, Walcott's emphasis on internal conflict and contradiction, on "the quarrel with ourselves," is reminiscent of both Auden and Yeats. Finally, though "The Arkansas Testament" is not an elegy, it contains elegiac attributes. In the most capacious sense of elegy, Walcott's poetic sequence, like Auden's tribute to Yeats, mourns loss on both an individual and a historical scale.

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[77] Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," p. 247.

Turning to metaphors of travel and dispersion, paradox (perhaps the most quarrelsome of literary figures), and contrasts of scale that weight the relative sizes of his warring selves, Walcott's "The Arkansas Testament" records the dynamic process of quarreling with oneself and of articulating the contradictions those quarrels expose. Edward Baugh has argued compellingly how "contradiction and paradoxes are characteristic features of Walcott's thought" and poetics, remarking that "While some of the contradictions in Walcott's thought may indeed be a matter of straightforward inconsistency, or change of mind, or perhaps even confusion, it is also true that with Walcott paradox and contradiction are rhetorical features, indicating a way of seeing and view of life and of 'truth.'"[78] Fittingly, Baugh puts "truth" in quotation marks: Walcott's poem wrestles with what "truth" and authenticity mean for himself as poet and person, and by extension, for the modern expatriate subject.

"The Arkansas Testament" is an early- to mid-career travelogue poem, written before Walcott's better-known *Omeros* (1990) and his Nobel Prize in Literature. Like all of Walcott's longer poems, it has received some critical attention, although much less than his well-known St. Lucian travelogue, "The Schooner *Flight*," from *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979), in which he chronicles a journey from the point of view of his sailor-alias, Shabine, who famously declares: "I'm either a nobody, or I'm a nation."[79] While *The Arkansas Testament* and its title poem draw from many concerns we see in earlier Walcott volumes, including the questions of what it means to hail from a "nation," what nationality consists of, and how travel throws questions of identity and authenticity into

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[78] Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 4-5.
[79] Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*," in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) p. 13.

relief, I will show how "The Arkansas Testament" marks a shift in Walcott's *oeuvre*, in that it is the first time he explicitly contends with the idea of what America is or can be and whether he, as a Caribbean of mixed heritage, should acquire American citizenship. If Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets" mark the beginning of a sustained engagement with philosophical and phenomenological questions, "The Arkansas Testament" is Walcott's most explicit encounter with his inherently paradoxical global identity. If Heaney is concerned with philosophical alienation, Walcott is preoccupied with national, civic, and racial alienation. In a 1992 interview with Carl Phillips, five years after the publication of *The Arkansas Testament*, Walcott stands by his decision *not* to acquire American citizenship:

> *The Arkansas Testament* was the result of my crisis over choosing a passport. The crisis has come up again […] I think small islanders may have a sense that if they have the opportunity and take it, they're betraying the people who can't. It sounds opportunistic, it sounds exploitative, to get a passport. But I think it's deeper than that. It's a physical act of severance to become a citizen of another country. You can't have dual citizenship, really. If I become an American by a change of passport, I become something that I'm not prepared to become. I'm not prepared to become a second-class citizen in this country, to be defined the way blacks here are defined. Not because I feel superior, but because I resent that definition.[80]

Here the problem with citizenship is ontological and political. Later in the interview with Phillips, Walcott confides, "The luckiest thing I've ever had in my life, is to feel that St. Lucia is home."[81]

"The Arkansas Testament" takes place in a world that is most certainly *not* "home." Set almost entirely in a motel room and a cafeteria in Fayetteville, Arkansas over a period of two days, the poem records the alienation Walcott experiences in the

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[80] Derek Walcott, interview by Carl Phillips, "Artists in Conversation," in *BOMB* 40 (1992): http://bombmagazine.org/article/1565/derek-walcott.
[81] Ibid.

American South of the 1980s. From a narrative point of view, almost nothing happens, which makes the use of the word "testament" seem incongruous, even grandiose. We associate the word "testament" with matters on a grand scale, matters of great religious or legal import. That Walcott compares his own poetic sequence to a testament, as we will see in detail later in the chapter, indicates the sweeping moral and literary ambitions of this poem. Furthermore, it suggests that "lyric" is not quite the right term to describe this sequence, even though it possesses many traditional, lyrical elements. In addition to his use of meter and rhyme, Walcott's lines of iambic tetrameter create a ballad-like feeling, one associated with song, not with testaments. One of Walcott's goals, here, may be to rework the genre of "testament" into lyric, yoking two dissimilar styles of writing so as to bear witness to the contradictory impulses within himself as well as to the incongruities within American democracy.

What is the poet testifying to, or witnessing? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of "testament" is derived as follows:

> *testāmentum* a will; also, in early Christian Latin, used to render Greek *διαθήκη* covenant (see II.), < *testārī* to be a witness, attest, make a will, etc.: see -ment *suffix*. With the form *teste-*, *testment*, compare Old French *testement*, beside the more usual *testament*.[82]

In addition to a signifying a "will," a testament also refers in the scriptural sense to "a covenant between God and man."[83] To what covenant, or agreement, is Walcott referring? I would propose that "The Arkansas Testament" represents more of a covenant within a self. The covenant, in the end, is the decision to forego citizenship. By elevating his personal choices to the level of religious covenants, Walcott conveys to us the huge scale, for him, of questions of citizenship and national allegiance. It is worthwhile to

[82] *OED* n. "testament" I.1.a
[83] *OED* n. "testament" II.4.

consider how Walcott's Methodist upbringing may be a factor in his decision to use the word "testament" and in his frequent invocation of the apostle Paul across the poetic sequence. In his interview with Hirsch, Walcott elaborates on how his Methodism influenced his identity:

> Coming from a Methodist minority in a French Catholic island, we also felt a little beleaguered. The Catholicism propounded by the French provincial priests in St. Lucia was a very hidebound, prejudiced, medieval, almost hounding kind of Catholicism. The doctrine that was taught assigned all Protestants to limbo. So we felt defensive about our position [...] It was good for me, too, to be able to ask questions as a Protestant, to question large authority [...]. Even into sixth form, my school friends and I used to have some terrific arguments about religious doctrine. It was a good thing. I think young writers ought to be heretical.[84]

Is there something "heretical" about comparing one's personal struggle to a biblical testament? Walcott's poem is an exercise in moral self-determination. Is it fair to say that this kind of private analysis, without the intermediary of a church or a priest, represents Walcott's belief in a Protestantism where individual believers challenge established doctrine? Walcott admits: "It was good for me [...] to be able to ask questions as a Protestant, to question large authority."[85] What is the "authority," or doctrine, that is being questioned? It may be, by analogy, that the "doctrine" under scrutiny is the American dream.

While the Biblical connotation of "testament" is consistent with Walcott's tendency toward the meta-literary, the poem's title suggests an importance that seems belied, at least at first, by a lack of narrative action. Walcott checks into the motel, wanders the streets of Fayetteville, and eats at a cafeteria. The poem ends with the poet contemplating leaving the motel while watching television. The reason for Walcott's trip

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[84] Derek Walcott, interview by Edward Hirsch, "Walcott, The Art of Poetry No. 37."
[85] Ibid.

to Arkansas is never specified, nor is the outcome of his journey. Instead, what is dramatized is a quarrel with the self. At stake is how, in a poem that is at once lyric and not-lyric, to chronicle the vicissitudes, shifts, and paradoxes intrinsic to this internal debate.

Like Auden, Walcott employs figures that are both ancient and jarringly new. Also like Auden, Walcott oscillates between more traditional and more modern conceptions of poetry. One could even say that formally and thematically he is suspended in a poetic paradox. "The Arkansas Testament" is indicative of Walcott's abiding interest, across his *oeuvre*, in kinetic processes of movement and travel, at once literal and literary, geographical and psychological, cultural and temporal. And although the poem is a travelogue, it represents a real as well as a figurative, even a spiritual, journey. Other critics have remarked on Walcott's interest in journeys. Gordon Rohlehr proposes that "'the poem as travelogue' or 'the travelogue as poem' might be the title of a study of Walcott's poetry from the early 1980s into the twenty-first century."[86] Different sections of "The Arkansas Testament" testify to internal journeys in consciousness, thought, and feeling. These sections, like the different selves of their speaker, contradict, revise, and quarrel with one another.

In "The Arkansas Testament," Walcott plays with figures of travel and movement, figures which themselves travel and change across the poem, to record the dynamic and recursive process of agonizing over a choice that triggers ambivalence. One of the contrasts of scale, here, is how Walcott contemplates travel and even national identity in grand terms but does so, paradoxically, by representing these abstractions on a

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[86] Gordon Rohlehr, "The Man Who Loved Islands: Derek Walcott's Literary Caretakership of the Archipelago," in *Interlocking Basins of a Globe: Essays on Derek Walcott*, ed. Jean Antoine-Dunne (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, 2013), p. 39.

much smaller stage: a motel room in one small city in America. The most pervasive figures and devices Walcott employs in this poem are metaphors of travel or transportation (I include under that umbrella metonymy, synecdoche, and simile); paradox and contradiction; and contrasts or juxtapositions of scale, often with recourse to irony.

With three closely related poetic devices—metaphor, paradox, and ironic contrast—Walcott records small moments in time and how they evolve. In this way, his poem represents a modern form of remembering in poetry. If one of Heaney's figures for poetry is silent ripples in a bucket, Walcott might pick a more diffuse figure like light, which, as we will see later in this chapter, alters the appearance of everything else as it travels. We tend to think of poetry as preserving in amber those moments we wish to record, fixing them in time. Walcott's "The Arkansas Testament," however, is a prime example of how his work shows that poetry, as genre and mode of inquiry, is ideally suited to the modern subject, who is always in movement, oscillation, and contradiction.

Walcott, like Heaney, suggests that in our experiences and in our memories of them, disparate and differently weighted ideas change shape and size, enabling us a metaphorical freedom of movement and the ability to recalibrate elements of our past. But if Heaney once characterized poetry as a "republic of conscience," the country of poetry for Walcott is an "ironic republic," since "Caribbean genius is condemned to contradict itself."[87] One of the ironies of "The Arkansas Testament" is how poetry can use metaphor and other figures, such as paradox, to facilitate a freedom of movement by collapsing times and distances while Walcott, as a black expatriate, feels literally unable to move through the landscape of Fayetteville. Under constant social surveillance as well

[87] Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," p. 78.

as self-scrutiny, Walcott experiences an amplified sense of conspicuousness and invisibility in a state that has only recently eliminated curfew for African Americans. When he ventures out of his motel room, he describes the horror of feeling like a criminal for the simple act of walking outside:

> I waited for a while by the grass
> of a urinous wall to let
> the revolving red eye on top
> of a cruising police car pass.
> In an all-night garage I saw
> the gums of a toothless sybil
> in garage tires, and she said:
> STAY BLACK AND INVISIBLE
> TO THE SIRENS OF ARKANSAS.[88]

These are the only capitalized lines in the entire poem (except for those designating place names), perhaps to emphasize the power of the oracle's message. By casting Fayetteville in Greek mythological terms, Walcott continues to broaden the scope of his particular experience, this time enlarging it to the epic as opposed to the biblical. Here, and elsewhere in "The Arkansas Testament," America's expansiveness becomes paradoxically claustrophobic. But despite the real dangers and realities of prejudice, the claustrophobia and wariness are also internal. For, as Walcott states in Section XV, "wherever the heart hesitates / that is its true frontier."

Recording shifts in his own consciousness, Walcott also asks large, practical, and concrete questions. Can he become an American citizen? And what would that mean? In Section XX of the poem, Walcott asks:

> Can I bring a palm to my heart
> and sing, with eyes on the pole
> whose manuscript banner boasts
> of the Union with thirteen stars

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[88] All citations from this poem are taken from Derek Walcott, "The Arkansas Testament," in *The Arkansas Testament* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), pp. 104-117.

> crossed out, but is borne by the ghosts
> of sheeted hunters who ride
> to the fire-white cross of the South?

There is a dramatic contrast of scale in this one passage alone: an individual "palm" and one American flag are juxtaposed against the enormity of the Ku Klux Klan's crimes. Walcott uses an extensive repertoire of poetic techniques and tropes across "The Arkansas Testament" to animate and crystallize his central conflicts.

Metaphors, Paradoxes, and Other Traveling Figures

Metaphor and paradox are both figures that intrinsically involve movement and travel, so it is no accident that they are the most illuminating and pervasive tropes in "The Arkansas Testament." As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, "metaphor" literally comes from the Greek, μεταφορά (*metaphorá*), "transfer," from μεταφέρω (*metapherō*), "to carry over," "to transfer," and that from μετά (*meta*), "after, with, across" + φέρω (*pherō*), "to bear," "to carry." Though "paradox" does not imply the same movement or "transfer" as metaphor, it holds two statements or ideas which contradict one another in simultaneous suspension, thus allowing movement between contradictory poles. To hold two statements in simultaneity implies that they are both true and yet incompatible. If two statements are both true and yet dissonant, there is necessarily an implied vacillation between opposite positions. In short, metaphor and paradox are more closely related than it would first appear. If metaphor is an equation (x = y), paradox is also one, but one that can never be balanced. If one concept is transferred to another in metaphor, both concepts exist in a kind of stand-off in paradox, where transfer cannot happen, but where the cohabitation of opposites leads us from one idea, to the other, and back again *ad*

infinitum, as each contradicts the other in perpetuity. We are moving, but not forward: we are in endless vacillation.

As we saw in the introductory chapter, Donoghue traces the history of metaphor—of its own movement as a figure throughout Western history—and remarks that its distinguishing characteristics are fundamental slipperiness, dynamism, and ultimately, independence:

> Metaphor, more than simile or metonymy, expresses one's desire to be free, and to replace the given world by an imagined world of one's devising […] The minimal requirement in a metaphor is that the tenor is changed by the vehicle; not replaced by it or superseded but changed in quality or character by the new company it is made to keep. In extreme cases the change is revolutionary; it issues in a possible world, proclaimed by the audacity of the metaphor. The metaphor declares its independence.[89]

Donoghue's argument that metaphor can, in its meanderings and freedom of movement, catalyze enormous and even "revolutionary" changes is compelling. It is also a point, I think, with which Walcott would agree, although he puts more stock in the ability of younger poets to be transported by metaphor. Despite this, figuration can still become, for a middle-aged Walcott, transformative and transcendent: "The body feels it is melting into what it has seen. This continues in the poet. It may be repressed in some way, but I think we continue in all our lives to have that sense of melting, of the 'I' not being important. That is the ecstasy."[90]

Metaphor, paradox, and other figures *themselves* travel and "melt" into one another across the many sections of "The Arkansas Testament," thus "declar[ing]" their "independence." In this way, Walcott's poem is symphonic (to use a metaphor) in its recurrences, variations, and echoes. While I do not believe Walcott tries to evoke music

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[89] Donoghue, *Metaphor*, pp. 86-91.
[90] Walcott, interview by Edward Hirsch, "Walcott, The Art of Poetry No. 37."

per se, his work is often dominated by a complex musicality that develops over multiple sections and that features refrains, much as symphonies feature motifs. The three dominant figures in the poem are the motel, the highway, and light. The cafeteria, a bathroom mirror, the forest and its evergreens, and a faulty television set are smaller but significant figures. The figure of light in is perhaps the most unwieldy. To begin with, it is difficult to determine whether it *is* a metaphor, really, as opposed to a different brand of figure eluding categorization. That figures *themselves* evolve in Walcott's poetry, sometimes past recognition, is evident. Take, for example, the white cross or the motel room: they are characterized differently in the sequence depending on the poetic mood. This is a phenomenon observed by other critics, including Paul Breslin and Daniel Cross Turner, who remarks:

> Derek Walcott's metaphors of metamorphosis are themselves shape-shifting, as tenor and vehicle change place or become otherwise indistinguishable; they present a wealth of transferences that, in Paul Breslin's terms, seek "the imperceptible shading of one thing into another."[91]

Turner's point is apt, but I would quibble with the term "metamorphosis," for it implies that one thing becomes another rather than that figures are constantly mutating, often to return to their original states. Take, for example, the motel room, which begins as a refuge, then becomes a prison, and then a refuge of sorts again. In my view, Walcott's metaphors operate both as metamorphoses (the cafeteria becomes a segregated 1960s-era diner in Walcott's imagination and then a fancy dining room in Walcott's memory) and as recursive transformations.

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[91] Daniel Cross Turner, "Modern Metamorphoses and the Primal Sublime: The Southern/Caribbean Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa and Derek Walcott," in *Southern Quartlerly* 48, no. 3 (2011): p. 52.

Writing in *The New York Times* about Walcott's use of metaphor in his review of *The Poetry of Derek Walcott*, Teju Cole observes that "Walcott pays indefatigable attention to the look of things, and writes with a spendthrift approach to the word-hoard."[92] The obvious allusion to Seamus Heaney's "word-hoard" and its Anglo-Saxon underpinnings is revealing here, as it draws an explicit connection between the poetics of two different, but allied, poets. Cole's description of Walcott as a "spendthrift" seems affectionate rather than pejorative, even though it does imply that Walcott may at times verge on excess, may use more words or metaphors than are necessary and that distract in their abundance. For Cole, Walcott's use of metaphor is still masterful:

> Walcott has few equals in the use of metaphor. In his imagination, each thing seems to be linked to another by a special bond, unapparent until he points it out, permanently fresh once he does. Most of these metaphors he uses just once, brilliantly, discarding them in the onrush of description.

That Walcott discards these metaphors "in the onrush of description" is accurate and inaccurate. Certainly, the lushness of much of Walcott's poetry, its sensory density, is partly due to his "spendthrift" approach to description. He often invokes different senses simultaneously through synesthesia or in rapid succession, giving his readers very little time to linger with one description or sensation. This can also lead to mixed metaphor, where, because of the abundance of comparisons, one is not clear on the distinctions among figures. His tendency toward abundance sometimes comes at the expense of precision, but it also creates an atmosphere of inviting plenty: readers are inducted into

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[92] Teju Cole, "Poet of the Caribbean: 'The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013,'" in the *Sunday Book Review*, *The New York Times* (Feb 21, 2014). http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/books/review/the-poetry-of-derek-walcott-1948-2013.html?r=0.

the rich and propulsive world of his onrushing description. Take, for example, this passage from "Thanksgiving," in Walcott's later, aptly titled volume, *The Bounty* (1997):

> Miraculous as when a small cloud of cabbage-whites
> circles a bush, the first flakes of the season
> spun over Brookline, on Beacon […]
> the old metaphor whispered to everyone's mouth
> about age, white hair, the Arctic virginity of death,
> that the flakes spun like ashes; but before my heart fled south,
> my farewell confirmed by the signature of your breath,
> whose butterflies circling, settling in your hair, that could soothe
> your closed eyelids trembling like cabbage-whites
> on my island road, the sea's scales stuttering in the sun.[93]

Breathing life into "old metaphor[s]" for snowflakes, Walcott compares them, in rapid succession, to cabbage-white butterflies; white hair, aging, and death; ashes; the breath and eyelids of a loved one; and again to "cabbage-whites" in St. Lucia, which are then implicitly compared, in an impossibly sibilant phrase, to "the sea's scales stuttering in the sun." If this does not illustrate Donoghue's notion of metaphor as freedom, what would? By the end of the poem, Walcott has compared snowflakes falling in Boston to butterflies in St. Lucia through a series of metaphoric transfers, all the while drawing attention to his decision to reinvigorate stock metaphors for snow. The alternative would be to choose his metaphors carefully and to deploy them economically. And while that would lend more power to individual comparisons, it would not create the same propulsive overall effect, the same sweeping scale, a mimesis of the mind darting among myriad associations.

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[93] Derek Walcott, "Thanksgiving," in *The Bounty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 25.

As Cole notes, however, despite Walcott's "spendthrift" withdrawals from the "word-hoard," he is also, paradoxically, a poet who puts his individual stamp on certain metaphors, making them into a kind of signature:

> Other metaphors he repeats with Homeric confidence through the years, and they are like irregular watermarks that place a subtle proprietary brand on his work: the night sky's similarity to a perforated roof, the coin-like glimmer of rivers or seas, the way city blocks bring paragraphs or stanzas to mind.[94]

Strikingly, it is impossible to discuss Walcott's use of metaphor without lapsing into simile, as when Cole beautifully likens Walcott's metaphors to "irregular watermarks." The "irregular watermarks" to which Cole refers are also present in "The Arkansas Testament," where Walcott recycles some of the meta-literary metaphors that have always been present in his work, such as comparing his physical environs to aspects of writing or poetry-making. A perfect example of this meta-literary "watermark" is in Walcott's description of walking the streets of Fayetteville in "The Arkansas Testament":

> On front porches every weak lamp
> went out; on the frame windows
> day broadened into the prose
> of an average mid-American town.
> My metre dropped its limp.
> Sunlight flooded Arkansas. (XVI)

If this description sounds prosaic, the ordinariness of the scene is punctured a few lines later by anguish and anger. Walking down the street with its "Cold sunshine," an oxymoron demonstrating the inhospitality of Fayetteville, the poet describes how "hairs /

[94] Cole, "Poet of the Caribbean: 'The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013.'"

fall on my collar as I write this / in shorter days, darker years / more hatred, more racial rage."

Teju Cole is right to observe a paradox in Walcott: that he is *both* a spendthrift *and* a resourceful saver, recycling figures as they fit his current artistic needs. And Walcott is certainly a poet who invests many of his images, metaphors, and other figures with his "proprietary brand," as they travel with him from poem to poem and from volume to volume. But Walcott also uses metaphor symphonically, as I have mentioned, with metaphors turning into motifs, which is not the same thing as discarding metaphors, or clinging to them with proprietary "confidence." At what point, for example, does the white cross of the church reflected on the motel room wall transform beyond recognition? Is its light still evoked in the light of the television set, or has the cross been discarded for the rest of the poem? It is an open question. As we have seen in "The Arkansas Testament," figures travel through the poem, mutating slightly (sometimes greatly), but also returning to their starting positions. We saw this in the passage from "Thanksgiving" with the "cabbage-white" metaphor that bookends the poem, even as it mutates from snow in Boston to butterflies in St. Lucia.

Just as paradox holds two ideas in simultaneous suspension, Walcott's metaphors are both drifting from—and returning to—their origins: the mutated metaphor is both changed and the same, all at once. Often, one could make the argument that Walcott's metaphors even verge on catachresis, which Donoghue defines as a

> "figure of abuse" in histories of rhetoric, normally considered a vice of style […] It is usually found where the resources of more decorous

> metaphors are not thought to be enough, and the poet sweeps aside any expected objection to its excess […] Keats's urn bears no resemblance to a bride, a foster child, or a historian. It is fair to call these figures metaphors only if we call them, more accurately, catachreses, allowing them to be scandalous to resemblance, however loose or tight the resemblance.[95]

In much of Walcott's poetry, we sense that one figure or metaphor will not suffice, will not be equal to the task at hand. One often gets the sense that Walcott records the process of searching for the right metaphor, and in doing so, figures accrue along the way. But Walcott does not seem to want to hide this extensive and expansive process from us. It is an exercise both in showing his imaginative scope and, paradoxically, in acknowledging the limits of figuration. Hypothetically, wouldn't the right metaphor obviate all other competing figures? And Walcott certainly indulges in metaphor of the loosest "resemblance," even as he also turns to metaphors as agents of the greatest precision. But if a metaphor itself evolves, becoming a motif of sorts, it will necessarily become more loosely tethered to its original iteration. If anything, the evolving metaphor, always flirting with catachresis, serves a different function than illuminating a resemblance: it becomes both an instance of movement and an imitation of it, a mimetic and mobile figuration of how consciousness travels from association to association.

Although much of "The Arkansas Testament" takes place in a cheap motel off Highway 71 in Fayetteville, it also is situated in the world of Walcott's mind, in the world of his associations. Fayetteville for Walcott becomes a kind of mindscape analogous to Glanmore for Heaney. Practically speaking, this means that the poem, like "Glanmore Sonnets," takes place in different locations and time periods. But Walcott

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[95] Donoghue, *Metaphor,* p. 111.

expands the scale to include broader historical eras. Not only is he transported to the St. Lucia of his past; he travels back in time to the Underground Railroad, to the Trail of Tears, to the Civil War of nineteenth-century America, and to South Africa of the 1980s, which was still under apartheid when *The Arkansas Testament* was published. In Section XI, Walcott imagines a lion on the traffic island of Highway 71 and is transported to a different world, an "island" of sorts (perhaps St. Lucia) with palm trees:

> and I prayed that all could be blest
> down Highway 71, the grey calm
> of the lanes where a lion
> lies down on its traffic island,
> a post chevroning into a palm.

This vision of a "lion" recurs in Section XIV, but this time we are in the South Africa of apartheid, and the "lion" is just invoked by a color and a strategic line break:

> Liberty turns its face; the doctrine
> of Aryan light is upheld
> as sunrise stirs the lion-
> coloured grasses of the veld.
> Its seam glints in the mind
> of the golden Witwatersrand,
> whose clouds froth like a beer stein
> in the Boer's sunburnt hand;
> the world is flushed with fever.

The traveling figure of the "lion," arguably a catachresis, is used here not as a way to imagine "that all could be blest / down Highway 71" with "grey calm," but instead as a visible reminder of how color has been used to justify a denial of "Liberty," offending it so much that it "turns its face." The line break after the hyphen in "lion- / coloured" underscores not just the independence of the lion as a figure, but how the "coloured grasses," which may call to mind "people of color," are linked in places as different and as far from one another as South Africa and the American South. The "sunburnt hand"

and the "fever," which are part of a larger network of color imagery in the poem, imply that the "world is flushed" with the sickness of racism and inequality. This world is as much the world of South Africa as it is the one Walcott observes "without end as / one highway with signs" (XV). This world is Fayetteville, which Walcott describes as "a neat, evangelical town […] with its simple, God-fearing folks," but a place he also characterizes with scathing explicitness: "Evil was as ordinary / here as good[96]" (XV).

Imagined and re-imagined experiences and memories, with their distortions of size and value, can work as correctives to the constraints of lived experience, as Walcott demonstrates in his extended meditations on the forgotten or underrepresented aspects of American and global history. Metaphor does not just articulate, but it simulates or enacts, the way that we move among memories and ideas. Metaphor, in other words, provides us with a figurative scale that can be truer to our subjective experience: the lion can be in Arkansas, St. Lucia, and South Africa all at once. Un-crossable boundaries of space, time, earth, water, and nationality can be crossed with metaphor, thus laying out the network of connections that we make unconsciously, or that poets consciously recreate.

Walcott: Literal Wanderer and Figurative Exile

As many critics have noted, Walcott's poems of the 1980s, in particular, often dramatize his status as a literal wanderer and a figurative exile. More specifically, many

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[96] These lines are deeply reminiscent of many lines of Auden's about the ordinariness of evil, not just in his elegy for Yeats, but in "Musée des Beaux Arts," where he describes "suffering" occurring "While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along" (179) and in "Shield of Achilles" where "A crowd of ordinary decent folk / Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke / As three pale figures were led forth and bound / To three posts driven upright in the ground" (Auden, *Collected Poems*, 597). Perhaps the best example of this is in "September, 1939," when Auden laments: "Faces along the bar / Cling to their average day: / The lights must never go out, / The music must always play […] Lest we should see where we are, / Lost in a haunted wood, / Children afraid of the night / Who have never been happy or good."

of his poems emerge from the aerial perspective of an airplane. The opening lines of the first poem in Walcott's *Midsummer* (1984), the volume which precedes *The Arkansas Testament*, use the vantage point of an airplane to position the poet as a modern subject, always in transit: "The jet bores like a silverfish through volumes of cloud— / clouds that will keep no record of where we have passed."[97] Whether the poet is literally in an airplane gazing out on Fayetteville in the beginning of "The Arkansas Testament" is unclear, but the effect of being suspended above the scene, observing it from both an ocular and a critical distance, reminds us of many of Walcott's poems. This critical distance is also an emotional one, however, separating the traveling poet from his destination. The poem opens with a surveying of the scene:

> Over Fayetteville, Arkansas,
> a slope of memorial pines
> guards the stone slabs of forces
> fallen for the Confederacy
> at some point in the Civil War.

Here, in the poem's opening lines, we learn that we are in the realm of memory and memorialization, with "memorial pines" and the "stone slabs" of a Confederate graveyard. Given this funereal atmosphere, it is ironic that Walcott uses present tense here, as opposed to the past tense he uses in the majority of the poem. The past tense, throughout the sequence, signals a distant, retrospective point of view, even as the perspective also feels painfully and pressingly immediate. Although the place (Fayetteville) is highly specific, time in these opening lines is indeterminate, both because of the present tense and because of the phrase "at some point," which suggests temporal vagueness, even unknowability. This contrast of specificity and abstraction, grounded-ness and indeterminacy, establishes an atmosphere of contradiction and

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[97] Derek Walcott, "I," in *Midsummer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

paradox right from the start of the poem. Where are we? Who is the speaker? Is he omniscient?

Like many of Walcott's volumes, *The Arkansas Testament*, with its division into two sections, "Here" and "Elsewhere," is structured on a macroscopic level around oppositions between home and abroad and contrasts of scale ("here" pales in comparison to the hypothetical stature of "elsewhere"). This dichotomy is continually qualified and deconstructed, as the boundaries between whatever is "here" and what is "elsewhere" (both vast and nebulous terms) are porous. In his reading of *The Arkansas Testament*, Baugh remarks that

> Curiously enough, both 'here' and 'elsewhere' are negotiated from the point of view of the transient. In the accounts of both 'countries,' we are likely to find the poet-persona *travelling through*, working out of a hotel room (sometimes a beach house), which is at one and the same time an emblem of his precarious, 'floating' condition and a protection or refuge, a mask of anonymity."[98]

This "*travelling through*" is, as I have mentioned, a state of literal itinerancy and a figurative journeying, often in the form of a vacillation between two poles or two seemingly opposed positions. And although Baugh has argued persuasively that "The Arkansas Testament" is a revealing example of the primacy of both travel and contradiction to Walcott's thought, writing that, despite its "uneventful plot," it represents "the occasion for a harrowing mind-journey into the racial nightmare of America,"[99] he does not show in detail how Walcott does this on the level of both figure and form: through traveling figures and figures of travel.

In his prose as well as in his poetry, Walcott is keenly sensitive to the flexible binary of stasis versus motion and to the fact that every literal journey is necessarily a

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[98] Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, pp. 178-9.
[99] Ibid., p. 182.

"mind-journey," as well as an emotional journey: "What is hidden cannot be loved. The traveller cannot love, since love is stasis and travel is motion. If he returns to what he loved in a landscape and stays there, he is no longer a traveller but in stasis and concentration, the lover of that particular part of earth, a native."[100] On the one hand, this passage is congruent with much of "The Arkansas Testament." Certainly, Walcott "cannot love" the United States, in large part due to the enormity of its racial wrongs and cultural hypocrisies. This is not to say that Walcott believes that St. Lucia, or the Caribbean more broadly, is a place where race relations do not urgently require enormous improvement, as he often articulates in his essays in *What the Twilight Says* and in his interviews. But Walcott objects to how the United States, as a superpower, has conveniently erased much of its past, all the while touting the clichéd promise of expansive possibility.

The other reason Walcott "cannot love" America, if we take him at his word in this excerpt, is that love is not endemic to the traveller, "since love is stasis and travel is motion." This statement implies that, *regardless* of what Walcott were to experience in Arkansas, there is a fundamental, existential obstacle, beyond any historical or cultural contingencies, to an authentic acquisition of citizenship. But is this not also a contradiction? If Walcott is constitutionally unable to "love" a new homeland, why entertain the process of citizenship at all? Is citizenship solely pragmatic? And is not Walcott's distance from St. Lucia a way for him to see it and love it more clearly as a "native"? Moreover, don't his travels to America enable him to discover and to write about the parts of American history that are "hidden"?

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[100] Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," p.77.

In "The Arkansas Testament," Walcott writes about much of what America would hide of its history, from the Trail of Tears to the Ku Klux Klan, but that does not make him "love" or "accept" America; rather, it overwhelms him with feelings of hypocrisy and self-disgust for even considering citizenship as a black man in a country where black people, along with other minority groups, are systematically oppressed:

> this, Sir, is my Office,
> my Arkansas Testament,
> my two cupfuls of Cowardice,
> my sure, unshaven Salvation,
> my people's predicament.
> Bless the increasing bliss
> of truck tires over asphalt,
> and these stains I cannot remove
> from the self-soiled heart. This
> noon, some broad-backed maid,
> half-Indian perhaps, will smooth
> this wheat-coloured double bed,
> and afternoon sun will reprint
> the bars of a flag whose cloth—
> over motel, steeple, and precinct—
> must heal the stripes and the scars. (XXXIII)

Walcott asks for a benediction, but it is not clear what kind of blessing he wants. Is it a blessing of whatever decision he makes about citizenship? Is it a blessing despite the "self-soil[ing]" fact of contemplating citizenship in the first place, knowing what he knows? On the one hand, he implies that salvation is impossible, that there is nothing to be done. On the other hand, there is an injunction to heal, both on a personal and a national level, when he implores that "the bars of a flag," the prison of American democracy, "must heal the stripes and the scars," the wounds of slavery.

At the poem's close, the poet imagines leaving the motel—fleeing the scene of Fayetteville like a criminal—and having his room cleaned in preparation for the next guest by another overlooked member of American democracy, whom he imagines as an

underpaid Native American woman, "a half-Indian" maid who has, he intimates, the degrading task of cleaning up after a man full of cowardice and hypocrisy: himself. That Walcott imagines the motel after he has left underlines the impermanence of his stay in the United States, implying that he has chosen not, in fact, to acquire citizenship, without directly stating that verdict. As I remarked earlier, from the beginning of "The Arkansas Testament," the motel is a figure of travel, but it is also a traveling figure, a synecdoche representing both America and Walcott's evolving attitude to democracy. It undergoes metamorphoses of its own as the poem progresses.

Observing that the hotel is a frequent setting for Walcott's work, particularly in the poems of the 1980s, Baugh finds it a critical figure, as well, in "The Arkansas Testament": "The hotel-room metaphor and point of view are not particular to poems about St. Lucia and the Caribbean. It is also a crucial locus of speaking in poems about 'elsewhere', as for example in 'The Arkansas Testament.'"[101] Discussing poems from an earlier volume, *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), Baugh writes that in "The Hotel Normandie Pool," which takes place in Port of Spain,

> the particular depression of divorce is not so much the main focus of the poem as it is an integral part of a more general, more various and far-reaching sense of alienation in the midst of the loved and the familiar. The idea of exile at home is figured poignantly in the fact that here, as in 'Store Bay', the poet is staying in a hotel, a transient so to speak, in his surrogate homeland.[102]

This "far-reaching sense of alienation" is certainly present in "The Arkansas Testament" as well, even though we are not "in the midst of the loved and the familiar" as we were in the "Glanmore Sonnets." And Walcott paints a self-portrait as a "transient," if not in "his surrogate homeland" than in a potential, future homeland. This "far-reaching-sense of

[101] Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, p. 160.
[102] Ibid.

alienation" and transiency also appear in another earlier poem, "*Tropic Zone viii*" of *Midsummer* (1984): "If you were here, in this white room, in this hotel / whose hinges stay hot, even in the wind off the sea, / you wouldn't sprawl."[103] The poet's small detail, the "hinges stay hot," speaks volumes: the door is always opening and closing as hotel patrons come and go.

The transiency and alienation the poet inhabits are present in every description of the "$17.50 motel" (II) in Fayetteville, where he has been assigned to "room 16" (III), both a specific and vague location, as his temporary home. Compounding Walcott's sense of alienation, symbolized perfectly in his synecdochic gesture of lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, with his "coat still on" as he lets his room key "warm" in his hand (III), is the lack of expected objects. As standard and as paltry as cheap hotel amenities are, one expects them even in the most basic of lodgings:

> the without-a-calendar wall
> now hung with the neon's sign,
> no thin-lipped Gideon Bible,
> no bed lamp, no magazine […]
> nothing on a shelf, no shelves;
> just a smudge on a wall, the mark
> left by two uncoiling selves. (V)

Here is what one might call a negative catalogue, a list of objects in a poem that, paradoxically, do not actually exist in the world of the poem. But of course, by mentioning what *is* absent, the poet ensures the presence of these same objects, or at least the consciousness of their absence in the reader's imagination. The "without-a-calendar-wall" is an eloquent metonym for the eerie timelessness of the poem, which we saw earlier in Walcott's description of the Confederate graveyard from an aerial, suspended perspective. The lack of a Bible may connote the evils of racism and prejudice Walcott

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[103]Walcott, "XLIII: *Tropic zone viii*," in *Midsummer*.

describes later in the poem, and is consistent with the poem as a testament of sorts; but interestingly, both the Old and New Testaments are missing. The lack of objects on shelves is a figure not just for the emptiness Walcott perceives at the heart of the American dream, but for the psychic emptiness he experiences in the motel room. The objects, which are not present except in the poem, are free-floating in Walcott's imagination and are transferred to the reader's: they are moving, unmoored, and unsettled objects, with no material reality outside of language and its connotations. They exist and travel only through the lines of the poem.

Most interesting in this description of the motel room is the "smudge" on the wall, presumably the trace of another person passing through before the poet rented room 16. This "smudge," another suggestive synecdoche, is evidence of "two uncoiling selves." Perhaps this image of "uncoiling selves" is the literal mark of two lovers who used the room. But figuratively, this image is salient to the idea of quarreling with oneself, of being doubled or split in some way. This is, perhaps, the central paradox and question of the poem, whether or not the two "selves" in Walcott can reach a decision regarding American citizenship. It is worth mentioning that here, in an early part of the poem (Section V), the reader does not yet know of Walcott's ultimate dilemma and its ensuing deliberations. Those questions are not explicitly introduced until Section XIX, when Walcott writes

> My shadow's scribbled question
> on the margin of the street
> asks, Will I be a citizen
> or an afterthought of the state?

And even here it is the “shadow,” a part of the self, not the entire self, which poses this question. The “two uncoiling selves” in the motel foreshadow a contradiction expressed later in the poem and dramatize Walcott’s bifurcated identity.

This bifurcation happens on what seems like a very small scale. Throughout the poem, we see recurring motifs of signatures and names—again, examples of economical synecdoches—that conjure the genre of “testament,” something which one associates with signatures, the expression of identity, and the hope of permanence. However, these names and signatures signify anything but permanence and stability; rather, they are evidence of an inconstant, evolving world and self. Staring at the same wall where the “smudge” and the “neon’s sign appeared,” Walcott describes how he “studied again how glare / dies on a wall, till a complex / neon scribbled its signature” (III). As the room changes with the light and the time of day, ambient neon from outside the motel leaves its mark on the wall, but we know when daylight returns that mark will be erased, despite the fact that it is a “signature.” This writing and erasing symbolizes the vacillations we will see in the poet, who is quarreling with himself over whether to sign his name, to give his “oath of allegiance” and “bend / to the state” (XIX).

Walcott underplays the anxiety his bifurcated identity and his internal debate are causing him, even as he dramatizes his quarrel with himself in Section IV of the poem, when he goes to pay in advance for his stay at the motel:

> At the desk, crouched over Mr. ______,
> I had felt like changing my name
> for one beat at the register.
> Instead, I’d kept up the game
> of pretending whoever I was,
> or am, or will be, are the same.

The contrast of scale between the small, routine act of signing one's name to pay for a bill and swearing to remain constant to oneself (let alone swearing an oath of allegiance) highlights the magnitude of this transaction. This exchange occurs between the poet, who renames himself "Mr. _______," and the cashier, who asks him, "'How'll you pay for this, sir? / Cash or charge?'" and to whom he replies "American Express" (IV). The litotic line, "for one beat at the register," is a playful contrast of scale as well. While Walcott may only have thought about changing his name on the motel bill "for one beat," his ultimate question of who he is and what his allegiances are will occupy him for the rest of the poem (not to mention his career), not just "for one beat," but for all of the beats of a sequence written in relatively strict lines of iambic trimeter and tetrameter. Finally, the rhyme of "name / game" is also litotic in its implication that identity is just a game, as opposed to a struggle of the highest stakes.

If Walcott is minimizing or diminishing the scale of his internal struggle through litotic phrases and seemingly minute metonyms and synecdoches (what's in a name, anyway?), he is also elevating his internal conflict through metaphors that convey the magnitude of his anxiety. If the motel is a microcosmic allegory for America, reducing the latter to capitalist transactions ("American Express") and soulless, history-less vapidity (empty, cheap rooms with smudges from previous inhabitants), it is also the site of a self-reckoning of large proportions, as I mentioned in my discussion of the etymology and connotations of "testament." For instance, when he first lies on his grungy motel bed, the poet compares himself to a Biblical figure:

> Jet-lagged and travel-gritty,
> I fell back on the double bed
> like Saul under neighing horses
> on the highway to Damascus,

> and lay still, as Saul does,
> till my name re-entered me,
> and felt through the chained door,
> dark entering Arkansas. (II)

Here, Walcott compares himself to Saul, later Paul, whose conversion to Christianity is described in the New Testament as occurring *en route* to Damascus. Up until then, Saul had been taking Jesus's disciples as prisoners in Jerusalem. In the passage from Acts 9, Saul was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," but

> Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."[104]

The poet's comparison of his tired, jet-lagged collapse onto a motel bed with Saul's conversion, where the latter "fell to the ground" and heard the voice of Jesus, is a hyperbolic simile, deliberately inflated so as to convey the huge scale, for Walcott, of this journey to Fayetteville. Of course, "the highway to Damascus" that Walcott mentions here recalls Highway 71, just outside the motel. The figure of a "highway" suggests not just transportation, but transformation. Saul experiences a figurative journey on his literal one, and Walcott implies that an analogous set of journeys are underway for him. The conversion, however, seems to be a renewal of faith in something as opposed to the first-time faith experience of Paul. What is Walcott suggesting he is being converted to, if what is entering him, or in this case re-entering him, is his name, the name that we saw him thinking about changing at the motel register? Walcott, like Paul, must wait to be instructed on what to "do," on how to proceed in a new city. He waits for a kind of inspiration, even as he has what appears to be an experience of temporary faith in his

[104] Acts 9:1-6 Revised Standard Version.

"name" and identity. This faith will be questioned, however, further on in the poem. This faith may also be false, as it is compared not to illumination, but to "dark enter[ing] Arkansas" that he senses "through the chained door" of room 16, making his temporary refuge into a prison, a place of stasis instead of travel.

Paul reappears in a later part of "The Arkansas Testament," when "Dawn was fading the houses / to an even Confederate grey." Sensing that Fayetteville will not soon be converted to ideas of equality, and implying that the question of *how* to have faith in America is still a haunting concern for him, Walcott returns to the highway—another beautiful example of a traveling figure and a figure of travel:

> On the far side of the highway,
> a breeze turned the leaves of an aspen
> to the First Epistle of Paul's
> to the Corinthians. (VIII)

Although it is unclear to which passage from Corinthians Walcott alludes, what is important is that he seeks to read the signs of his environment (even the "aspen" seems as legible as a Bible) for an answer to his internal conflict. Perhaps the part of the First Epistle to the Corinthians that most resonates with this section of the poem are the famous lines: "And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."[105] Walcott's horror at being reduced to nothingness is most pronounced in Section XII, when he encounters prejudice in a cafeteria and sees himself in the infinitesimally small bubbles of a coffee maker:

> I looked for my own area.
> The muttering black decanter
> had all I needed; it could sigh for
> Sherman's smoking march to Atlanta

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[105] 1 Cor. 13:2 Revised Standard Version.

> or the march to Montgomery.
> I was still nothing. A cipher
> in its bubbling black zeros, here.

Walcott has been reduced from the scale of an apostle to a “black zero.” Through the diminutive, mundane figure of the “black decanter,” Walcott transports us through an immense swath of time in American history, from the Civil War through the Civil Rights movement, to describe his own sense of diminishment, as he is transformed by that history into a “cipher” with its “zeros.”

A connection between the figure of the “zero” and the figure of the “name” or “signature” is made obliquely in the only flashback of the poem, a different dining scene Walcott puts into ironic contrast with the cafeteria scene in Fayetteville, where he was “reminded of [his] race” (XII). Recalling what seems to be an elite, literary dinner party, possibly in Walcott’s honor, in an unspecified but glamorous location with a “lacquered mahogany” table, Walcott captures his disgust at his complicity in another kind of racism, the racism, as he sees it, of being celebrated for one’s race: “The self-contempt that it takes / to find my place card […] comes easily now” (XIII). The place card, a metonym for the self, should, Walcott implies, be difficult to find, just as authenticity is difficult to achieve. In other words, it should be harder for him to accept the hypocritical luxury of being celebrated for the wrong reasons, of being “fed” the “offal / of flattery”:

> Every candle-struck face stares into
> the ethnic abyss. In the oval
> of a silver spoon, the window
> bent in a wineglass, the offal
> of flattery fed to my craft,
> I watch the bright clatter resume.

The slant rhyme of “oval/offal” only underscores the awfulness of the scene, where the tiny oval of a spoon takes on the titanic proportions of the “ethnic abyss” between

Walcott and his presumably white colleagues. The “self-contempt” widens the gulf between the poet and the public role he sees himself playing:

> I have laughed
> loudest until silence kills
> the shoptalk. A fork clicks
> on its plate; a cough’s rifle shot
> shivers the chandeliered room.
> A bright arm shakes its manacles.

The scene has been reduced to a petty scale, distorted “in a wineglass,” signifying the greater distortions and belittling that are occurring. It has also become a different kind of prison from room 16, with its manacles.

Back in the world of the Fayetteville cafeteria, Walcott considers the idea of what becoming a “zero” or “an afterthought of the state” (XIX) would entail in America, were he to acquire citizenship. The degradation of becoming a “zero” is echoed in the most explicitly anguished scene in the motel (VI), in which the poet, playing with the Biblical imagery that infuses the entire sequence, characterizes himself, through the metonym of his coat, as “crucified” by proxy. The section deserves full quotation here:

> I crucified my coat on one wire
> hanger, undressed for bathing,
> then saw that other, full-length,
> alarmed in the glass coffin
> of the bathroom door. Right there,
> I decided to stay unshaven,
> unsaved, if I found the strength.
> Oh, for a day’s dirt, unshowered,
> no plug for my grovelling razor
> to reek of the natural coward
> I am, to make this a place for
> disposable shavers as well
> as my own disposable people!
> On a ridge over Fayetteville,
> higher than any steeple,
> is a white-hot electric cross.

In this scene, the crucifixion is displaced and externalized from the self onto the poet's metonymic "coat on one wire / hanger," suggesting a psychological fissure. But is it a split in the self, or a doubling of the self, or both? We then see the uncanny image of a doppelganger, another self which the poet designates with chilling remove as "that other, full-length, / alarmed in the glass coffin / of the bathroom door." The "other," figured first as a coat and now as the reflection in a mirror, is at once Walcott, another Walcott, and part of Walcott. How different this mirror apparition is from the mirror scene Walcott paints in his Nobel speech as "that moment of self-conviction when an actor, made-up and costumed, nods to his mirror before stopping on stage in the belief that he is a reality entering an illusion."[106] What is so jarring is how "that other" in the Fayetteville motel appears to be evolving, from the a coat into "a full-length" reflection who exists as both part of the poet and separate, an autonomous entity who has enough of his own emotional life to be "alarmed in the glass coffin / of the bathroom door." The bathroom door, like the door of the motel mentioned in the comparison to Paul's Damascene conversion, is a figure for the liminal state of the poet: between selves, allegiances, and countries, a person both "here" in the motel and "elsewhere," wherever "elsewhere" is.

Some of the unanswered mysteries in this passage are why the coat, specifically, is being "crucified," why Walcott needs "strength" to remain "unsaved," and lastly, what salvation would entail. He seems to imply, paradoxically, that he needs "the strength" *not* to follow his conscience, the strength to succumb to his "natural coward" condition. Given that we encounter the word "Cowardice" at the end of the poem in the context of Walcott's self-criticism for contemplating citizenship, are we to understand that the "natural coward" in Walcott is contemplating what he sees as his easiest move? For him,

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[106] Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," pp. 66-67.

is the easier choice the facile and practical damnation of becoming an American? Certainly the stakes are high for Walcott, if he is comparing citizenship to crucifixion or damnation. Or is the poet crucified, metaphorically, by his own self-doubt and anxiety; has he become a martyr to his own poetry? He insinuates as much in one of the final sections of the poem when he asks,

> Can I swear to uphold my art
> that I share with them too, or worse,
> pretend all is past and curse
> from the picket lines of my verse
> the concept of Apartheid?

As if to answer his own question, to justify his decision *not* to "curse / from the picket lines" of poetry, Walcott concludes the section with the very Audenesque line: "What we know of evil / is that it will never end" (XX).

We have seen the hotel mirror figure before in Walcott, in *Midsummer*. In its section XI, Walcott describes his disconnection from himself and his resultant shame, which seems to have no specific source: "My double, tired of morning, closes the door / of the motel bathroom; then, wiping the steamed mirror, / refuses to acknowledge me staring back at him."[107] Here we have the self that is ashamed of the self: the self that refuses to stare back at its reflection, or the reflection that refuses to stare back at its source. At what appears to be a more reputable and expensive hotel in *Midsummer*'s Section III, Walcott sets a different but disarmingly similar scene:

> At the Queen's Park Hotel, with its white, high-ceilinged rooms,
> I re-enter my first local mirror. A skidding roach
> in the porcelain basin slides from its path to Parnassus.
> Every word I have written took the wrong approach.
> I cannot connect these lines with the lines in my face.[108]

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[107] Walcott, XI," in *Midsummer.*
[108] Walcott, "III", in *Midsummer*.

The roach, a tiny traveling figure, wanders into the "The Arkansas Testament," too, when Walcott describes, in a brilliant contrast of scale, how

> A roach crossed its oceanic
> carpet with scurrying oars
> to a South that it knew, calm
> shallows of crystalline green. (III)

What is so effective about this contrast of scale is how much it demonstrates about the poet's emotional state in this particular moment in time. First, the poet's only companion in the motel is a cockroach, which suggests that Walcott views himself as diminished and cheapened by his surroundings. To become a cockroach is arguably more dehumanizing, as the case of Gregor Samsa illustrates, than becoming a "zero," for a cockroach is a living thing that is typically despised. Displacing himself onto the creature, Walcott implies that he, too, longs for a different South than that of Arkansas, as he is "homesick / for islands with fringed shores / like the mustard-gold coverlet." (III) The idea of a global South seems more elusive than ever, as Arkansas only serves to remind Walcott of what he risks losing, both in St. Lucia and as a potential American citizen. The juxtaposition of the drab cheapness of the motel coverlet and the vibrancy of the "mustard-gold" of a Caribbean beach is bridged (and traversed) by the smallest and lowliest of figures.

The most disturbing and revealing part of the motel-mirror scene in "The Arkansas Testament," which already represents a wrenching dramatization of the self reckoning with the self, is that room 16 is "a place for / disposable shavers as well as people." The United States, Walcott makes clear, houses "disposable" people, people who are "afterthought[s] of the state" (XIX) or "black zeros" (XII). The poet's characterization of the "disposable" people as "my own" draws a direct connection between black Caribbean peoples and African Americans in the South, while also playing

with the motel as a space where all people are, in the most innocent sense, “disposable.” Although the color “black” does not appear in this scene, its absence is implied by the ever-presence of the ominous “white-hot electric cross,” a neon sign from a church outside the motel. It, of course, recalls the burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan, the “fire white cross of the South” (XX) that appears later in the poem. Walcott invokes this cross as an argument against citizenship when he asks if he can swear allegiance to a flag in the presence of “the ghosts / of sheeted hunters.” The bathroom scene in the motel has morphed from a crucifixion on a hanger to the “white-hot electric cross” of a church, an image that Walcott cannot escape in the next section of the poem:

> It burns the back of my mind.
> It scorches the skin of night;
> as a candle repeats the moment
> of being blown out, it remained
> when I switched off the light. (VII)

What has “remained”—the idea of remaining aptly punctuated by the line break here—are the series of questions, the inextinguishable anxieties, and the pain that “burns the back” of the poet’s mind.

Perhaps the best example of a traveling figure and a figure of travel is the recurring image of Highway 71, which, as I discussed in my reading of the comparison between Walcott’s journey to Paul’s conversion, is a kind of spiritual thoroughfare. Running from Krotz Springs, Louisiana through Arkansas and Texas to the Canadian border, this highway may be, for Walcott, a reminder of the Underground Railroad and of the escape routes of many slaves, which ran from the South to the North. But in addition to Highway 71, multiple thoroughfares, passages, and literal traveling paths crisscross the poem, whether they are the streets of Fayetteville or more abstract journeys and journey-

ways removed in time or buried in history, such as Sherman's march on Atlanta, the Montgomery march, and the Trail of Tears. Additionally, Walcott describes more abstract concepts, such as racial hatred, as traveling through the landscape, as if the world outside were a network of circuits through which ideas and histories, as well as people, are conducted. This move of Walcott's recalls Auden's formulation in his elegy for Yeats of the latter becoming a current, a force, who travels even after death. Travel is not always positive; often it is a figure for a loss of control and agency. Meditating on the ineradicable crimes of American history, Walcott focuses on the evergreen trees outside the hotel, which are both a metaphor for permanence ("evergreen") and visual icons of a North American landscape:

> Perhaps in these same pines runs,
> with cross ties of bleeding thorns,
> the track of the Underground Rail-
> road up to Canada,
> and what links the Appalachians
> is the tinkle of ankle chains
> running north, where history is harder
> to bear: the hypocrisy
> of clouds with Puritan collars. (XVIII)

It appears the North does not escape Walcott's censure, either, particularly as it often (hypocritically) touts itself as the progressive beacon of the United States. Biblical imagery returns here with the "bleeding thorns," an image which works to personify the pines and to make them the martyrs, as well as the carriers, of history. Apostrophizing "these same pines" later in the poem, Walcott makes them the confidantes of his dilemma:

> O lakes of pines and still water,
> where the wincing muzzles of deer
> make rings that widen the idea
> of the state past the calendar!

> Does this aging Democracy
> remember its log-cabin dream? (XIX)

Walcott returns to the evergreens, and to trees more broadly, many times throughout the poem as a means of showing how evil needs a conduit, a vehicle, in order to travel and spread:

> The original sin is our seed,
> and that acorn fans into an oak;
> the umbrella of Africa's shade,
> despite this democracy's mandates,
> still sprouts from a Southern street. (XXI)

These lines are followed by an inventory of seemingly small gestures that are symptomatic of the enormity of racism in the United States. Walcott concludes with one example that is particularly insidious:

> the excessively polite remark
> that turns an idea to acid
> in the gut, and here I felt its
> poison infecting the hill pines,
> all the way to the top.

Interestingly, the traveling figures of a highway and of ideas moving through other conduits such as the evergreen pines recall I.A. Richards's formulation of metaphor as composed of two parts, a vehicle and a tenor. The highway, itself a figure of travel which literal vehicles traverse, is also a vehicle for the idea (or tenor) of transportation in "The Arkansas Testament." As we saw in the introductory chapter, Richards defines metaphor as a "double unit," and complains that in common parlance we use "metaphor" as a sloppy shorthand for what he calls the "vehicle," which is one half of the metaphor, the other being the "tenor," or "underlying idea or principal subject":

> We need the word 'metaphor' for the whole double unit, and to use it sometimes for one of the two components in separation from the other is as injudicious as that other trick by which we use "the meaning" here

> sometimes for the work that the whole double unit does and sometimes for the other component—the tenor, as I am calling it—the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means.[109]

Though in the strictest rhetorical sense I agree with Richards's distinction, I often do use metaphor as a shorthand for vehicle in this chapter, in part because, as I remarked earlier, the vehicles mutate so quickly in Walcott's poetry. The self, for example, is figured as signature, mirror, name-tag, and cockroach, all within a few pages. Or a vehicle represents more than one tenor, just as light represents, among other ideas, both spiritual illumination and dangerous surveillance (even exposure) in a world that is not colorblind.

Seeing the Light: A Kind of Conversion

One of the most complex and illegible figures in "The Arkansas Testament," light, finds its way into every part of the poem. When it enters the motel from outside, we see how it alters Walcott's perceptions of room 16 and the "elsewhere" beyond it. Whether the light takes the form of "neon scribbl[ing] its signature" on the wall, or the "hot electric cross" of the church that "burns the back of [the poet's] mind," or the burning crosses of the KKK, it cannot be kept out of "the chained door" of the motel, or out of the poet's consciousness. Even when the artificial lights are extinguished on the street ("On front porches every weak lamp / went out"), the "Cold sunshine" persists, and "massage[s] / the needles in the hill's shoulder / with its balsam" (XVI).

Of course, light—or illumination—is both a literal and a metaphorical feature of most conversion stories, including Paul's. In "The Arkansas Testament," Walcott may

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[109] I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 96.

too be having an inverse conversion experience as he loses his faith in America. Of course, the light and dark imagery that permeates the poem is also an explicit literalization of the problem of race relations in the United States. But what is less obvious and more unusual is how light becomes a figure for freedom of movement. After closing Section XVI with the admission that, more than ever, he feels "more hatred, more racial rage," Walcott opens Section XVII with an image of light traveling freely through Fayetteville:

> The light, being amber, ignored
> the red and green traffic stops,
> and, since it had never met me,
> went past me without a nod.
> It sauntered past the shops,
> peered into AUTOMOBILE SALES,
> where a serenely revolving Saab
> sneered at it […]
> […] Its shafts,
> like the lasers of angels, went
> through the pines guarding each slab
> of the Confederate Cemetery,
> piercing the dead with the quick.

The light can ignore the colors of "traffic stops," moving unencumbered through the town, even if a "Saab / sneer[s] at it." And the light is also free to ignore the burdens of racial profiling, granting Walcott the refreshing anonymity of passing him "without a nod." Elsewhere in this section, the light travels through the town, spreading what appears to be beneficence: "At INDIAN CRAFTS / it regilded the Southern Gothic / sign." The word "regilded" is a charged verb, given that the light will soon mutate into "lasers of angels." But these angels seem less beneficent as they enter the Confederate

graveyard, returning us to the opening setting of "The Arkansas Testament," where they are "piercing the dead with the quick." Are they smiting the Confederate dead? Are the angels judging humanity's crimes from on high?

The poem closes with the image of a different kind of light: the light from the television set in the motel. It is morning, and the poet is preparing to leave Arkansas. He has never explicitly given us his verdict on citizenship. Turning on the television to watch the news, Walcott stares at the screen, where

> A light, without any noise,
> in amber successive stills,
> stirred the waves off Narragansett
> and the wheat-islanded towns. (XXIV)

Here we have a peaceful, pastoral image of the United States, an idyllic portrait of prosperity and calm. But the peace is broken as Walcott continues to watch the screen:

> I watched its gold bars explode
> on the wagon axles of Mormons,
> their brows and hunched shoulders set
> toward Zion, their wide oxen road
> raising dust in the gopher's nostrils;
> then a gravelly announcer's voice
> was embalming the Black Hills—
> it bade the Mojave rejoice,
> it switched off the neon rose
> of Vegas, and its shafts came to
> the huge organ pipes of sequoias,
> the Pacific, and *Today's* news.

The light, which was first the calm "amber" we saw earlier in the poem, "explode[s]" as it follows the Mormons on their pilgrimage "toward Zion." Here we see a literalization of manifest destiny, as the television program charts the journey of one minority group in search of their version of the American dream. The "shafts" of light, which had "pierc[ed] the dead" in the Confederate Cemetery, are now traveling to the "huge organ

pipes of sequoias," suggesting an image of religious celebration and temporarily redeeming the infected pine trees we saw elsewhere. Then the light travels outward to the immensity of "the Pacific," and, in a brilliant contrast of scale, back to the small specificity of "*Today's* news," grounding us, for the first time in the poem, firmly in the present.

What are we to conclude from this somewhat triumphant and majestic ending to an otherwise anguished poem? Is it an ironic mockery of the grandiosity of certain representations of the American Dream? What are we to make of the light, which has been a wily figure throughout the poem, and which is now concentrated in one location, on a television screen, even as it travels through the "amber successive stills" of the program's footage? If we look closer at this passage, we learn that the "announcer's voice" is commanding a certain interpretation of the scene: "it bade the Mojave rejoice." Walcott suggests, with the verb "bade," that the program is designed to produce an effect of joyful celebration but is, in fact, just a cinematic manipulation of the viewer. On a first reading of this final passage, we might conclude that Walcott's poem is ending on the possibility of redemption and hope, as figured by the largeness of America's geography, and while we cannot exclude that reading, it does not seem the most plausible. Given how Walcott describes our experience of this hope as mediated through cinematography and sound, I think we are to come away from the poem with a deep skepticism, both about what America represents and about how it continues to be represented, whether in film footage or in a poetic sequence.

One of the last poems in Walcott's most recent book, *White Egrets* (2010), is dedicated to Barack Obama. The poem, "Forty Acres," is a sequence like "The Arkansas

Testament." Obama, in fact, makes very few direct appearances in the poem, but its title, "Forty Acres," is highly provocative. Using the deliberately antiquated and offensive term "Negro" to mimic the way Obama may be seen by some people, Walcott opens the poem with an allusion to Moses parting the Red Sea, a contrast of scale that suggests the magnitude of Obama's promise:

> Out of the turmoil emerges one emblem, an engraving—
> A young Negro at dawn in straw hat and overalls,
> an emblem of impossible prophecy: a crowd
> dividing like the furrow which a mule has ploughed,
> parting for their president.[110]

It is difficult to parse Walcott's tone in these opening lines. Is he suggesting that the "impossible prophecy" (this oxymoronic phrase being so characteristic of Walcott) is that an African American, with "Forty Acres and a Mule," could inherit the American Dream? Has the American Dream now found its prophesied fulfillment in the United States electing its first black president? And if the prophecy *has* been fulfilled, or at least if a partial step has been made toward progress, how does Walcott see this progress in the broader context of American history? How does he see this progress in the context of a global South? Does the election alter some of his reservations about American citizenship? None of this is answered, explicitly, but there is the suggestion that Obama may represent, like Moses, some kind of light for his people. Comparing his verse to a plough, like Heaney often does, Walcott sees himself, I think, in the "young ploughman" (A fellow poet? A fellow black person? A non-descript American?): "and the young ploughman feels the change in his veins, heart, muscles, tendons, / till the field lies open like a flag as dawn's sure / light streaks the field and furrows wait for the sower." Here,

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[110] All citations from "Forty Acres" from Derek Walcott, "Forty Acres," in *White Egrets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), pp. 77-80.

as in the end of "The Arkansas Testament," we have an image of light that transforms the scene—into what exactly, we cannot be sure. But at least in this poem, there seems to be the possibility of moving "beyond the moaning ground, the lynching tree."

In true Walcott fashion, however, this suggestion of "beyond" is contradicted and undercut by the realities of the here and now. In the second section of "Forty Acres," Walcott is in a barbershop, where his barber, Polo, says, "'So the world is waiting for Obama.'" As Polo utters these words, Walcott describes the landscape outside transforming. But its transformation seems world-weary, not full of possibility: "and the old fences in the village street and the flowers / brimming over the rusted zinc fences all acquired / a sheen like a visible sigh." What is this "sigh" in the landscape? Is it the "sigh" of Walcott's skepticism regarding the potential of American democracy, externalized onto his environment? But if there is no hope, why, after Polo wishes Obama "luck," does Walcott then see luck reflected in the external world? "Luck," Walcott writes, "waits in each / gable-shadowed street that leads to the beach." Leaving the barbershop, Walcott describes feeling "changed, like an election promise that is kept." This negative simile implies that what would constitute a change ("change," of course, being Obama's campaign buzzword) would be, for Walcott, for a politician to keep a promise.

Will the promise be kept? Just as we never hear a definitive verdict on American citizenship in "The Arkansas Testament," Walcott offers no prophecy for American democracy or for Obama's legacy. Impugning Joseph Conrad for his characterization of the "emptiness" at the heart of Africa in the final section of "Forty Acres," Walcott offers neither a solution nor an answer, but a blessing. What he leaves the poem with is a

paradox: "This verse / is part of the emptiness, as is the valley of Santa Cruz, / a genuine benediction as his is a genuine curse." One cannot help but think of those famous and famously misunderstood lines I discussed in my introductory chapter, where Auden characterizes in his elegy for Yeats poetry as something that both "makes nothing happen" and "survives / In the valley of its making."[111] Poetry, for Walcott, cannot keep a promise, cannot effect political change "from the picket lines" of its verse. But poetry can perhaps make the world we live in more survivable, by helping to account for its paradoxes, its limitations, and its moments of ecstatic hope. It seems for Walcott that the "ironic republic" of poetry, however flawed, may prove a hospitable "valley" from which to resist colonial portrayals of a global South. Poetry may be a place that refuses emptiness, welcomes contradiction, and determines its own proportions.

[111] Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," p. 248.

Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions*: Elegy Materialized and Dematerialized

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and oh,
The difference to me!

—William Wordsworth, "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways"

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun…

—W.H. Auden, "Funeral Blues"

Introduction

In contemporary American poet Gjertrud Schnackenberg's latest volume, *Heavenly Questions* (2010), a book-length elegy for her husband, the poet at once affirms and disorients our sense of elegy while offering us a new, contemporary conceptualization of the genre. Elegy is often connected to ideas of scale; when we imagine one particular death, it is frequently in the context of many, if not all other, deaths. In the elegiac tradition in Western poetry, poets often weigh the meaning of one life against the scale of the planet or universe. By setting the individual—in this case her husband—against a cosmic scale, Schnackenberg, like many elegists before her, puts the minuteness of human experience in perspective. But her poem also helps us reimagine the elegy for the twenty-first century, offering us a kind of meta-elegy that is not only concerned with remembering the dead but also with the limits and survival of elegy itself. She does this, in part, by comparing the microscopic to the macroscopic and by playing with the ratio of narrative to lyric elements; these techniques enable her to convey something of the immensity of her grief.

Schnackenberg's work has always arisen from elegiac impulses. Her first volume, *Portraits and Elegies* (1982), contains *Laughing with One Eye* (1977), a sequence of twelve lyrics for her father, who died in 1973. The effort to grasp after the departed subject, if not in life then in the world of the poem, permeates much of Schnackenberg's early work, including the poems in her sequence "19 Hadley Street," imaginative elegies for 18th and 19th century New Englanders, for the men and women she pictures in her house and neighborhood before her time. Even when she is not writing elegies in the strictest sense, many of her sequences are elegiac portraits of real people, most often men: "Kremlin of Smoke" for Chopin, "A Gilded Lapse of Time" for Dante, "A Monument in Utopia" for Mandelstam.

In the previous chapter, we saw how Walcott employs contrasts of scale and traveling figures to animate and record an internal moral debate over acquiring American citizenship. Schnackenberg also uses contrasts of scale to record, but her aim is instead to pay homage to another human being and to document the process of grief. Her approach in *Heavenly Questions* is closer to Heaney's in the "Glanmore Sonnets," in that she engages with metaphysical concerns as a means of understanding her subjectivity. Her interest lies less in recording limitations in memory and perception, but in documenting through elegy the limitations of being a human subject more broadly, of being a mortal in a world where matter is constantly recycled. She is equally fascinated by the fantasy and the inability of the individual to forestall the inevitable. Finally, she explores the limits of what poetry—specifically elegy—can do in the face of loss. She seems less confident than Heaney or Walcott in poetry's ability to preserve. Poetry, for Schnackenberg, is a contested site of unanswered (and unanswerable) questions, but it is the ideal medium for

dramatizing the constraints of human power. And ironically, these constraints can also represent a form of liberation, a humble acknowledgement of ignorance in the face of enormous and awe-inspiring unknowns.

Written for her husband, the philosopher Robert Nozick who died in 2002, Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions* is a work of skillful hybridity, at once playfully idiosyncratic and rooted in an older, more impersonal elegiac tradition, the pre-twentieth-century Western elegy Ramazani characterizes as steeped in "abstract ideals," and in "the categorical and universal," more than "the intimate and particular."[112] While Ramazani's distinction is a useful one, Schnackenberg's elegy is an outlier in several ways. Filled with abstraction and with ideas of the universal, *Heavenly Questions* is also deeply, if infrequently, personal and "intimate." Equally intrigued by universality and by the "particular," Schnackenberg invites us implicitly to return again and again to postmodern questions of indeterminacy and subjectivity. Finally, Schnackenberg's book is an exception to a trend Ramazani notes: that of pre-twentieth-century elegy tending toward the "consolatory," and modernist and modern poetry toward the "anti-consolatory."[113] Schnackenberg's elegy both refuses and offers consolation, and it is often its moments of impersonality that become—paradoxically—consolatory.

What lends *Heavenly Questions* its elegiac novelty and power, however, is its unique collision between narrative and lyric conventions, even though they are not equally represented. *Heavenly Questions*, like Schnackenberg's earlier elegies, dramatizes her abiding interest in the question of how poetry can function as an agent of record-keeping and memorialization and how the elegy, specifically, can play with the

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[112] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 18.
[113] Ibid., p. 9.

ratio of narrative to lyric to this end. Specifically, Schnackenberg often uses narrative instead of what we might expect for an elegy: the lyric mode. This question of mode within genre raises issues of relative scale: why is there so much more narrative? Does it threaten to drown out the lyric? Are there places where the distinctions between lyric and narrative modes collapse? *Heavenly Questions* is an extension of Schnackenberg's earlier work, in that it represents a culmination of her use of elegy as a means of raising epistemological concerns, of demarcating the limits and possibilities of poetic and human knowledge. In this obsession with knowledge and its obstacles, Schnackenberg and Heaney are united.

This philosophical bent is both endemic to Schnackenberg and a function of her tendency to recreate the perspectives of other people in her verse; in the case of *Heavenly Questions*, she enters into the realm of philosophical abstraction her husband inhabited, in part as a means of paying him tribute. Notwithstanding, Schnackenberg expresses her frustration with the limited comforts of such abstractions in the second section of the book, "Sublimaze" (the strange title is the name of an opioid analgesic administered by a nurse to the poet's husband):

> Philosophers, who weigh hallucinations,
> Are questioning students of medicine:
> *What is the largest object in Creation?*
> *The Whole of wholes,* Ein Sof, *Totality?*
> *What can't be stood outside of, looking on?*
> *What is the all in all in all in All?*[114]

But just as there is a sense of frustration and despair, there is a persistent wonder, and even awe, present throughout the elegy. These questions, which Schnackenberg gently mocks as "hallucinations," haunt the poem, but hallucinations are in fact a kind of

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[114] Gjertrud Schnackenberg, *Heavenly Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2010), p. 21. All further citations will be given in the body of the text.

"Creation" (as her rhyme gently suggests), a generative force. In many of Schnackenberg's elegies and poems, she seeks to enter into the world and lexicon of her subject, a tendency which some critics have conflated with impersonality but which is rather evidence of what Christina Davis, in the *Boston Review*, calls Schnackenberg's "resistance to the confessional and all its trappings."[115] This mimetic lexical device resembles what Ramazani observes as a modern phenomenon, a kind of imitative elegy in which the poet mimics formal or rhetorical aspects of another literary or historical figure. Auden is one of the forefathers of this trend with his imitative elegies for Freud, James, and Yeats: "In his astonishing interfusions with the dead, Auden incorporates the men he mourns within the body of his texts."[116]

A prime example of Schnackenberg's take on the imitative elegy is her much-anthologized early poem, "Darwin in 1881" (1978), in which she attempts to recreate the perspective of an ailing Darwin at the end of his life, imagining not only the things he would notice but how he would notice them:

> He lies down on the quilt,
> He lies down like a fabulous-headed
> Fossil in a vanished riverbed,
> In ocean drifts, in canyon floors, in silt,
> In lime, in deepening blue ice,
> In cliffs obscured as clouds gather and float;
> He lies down in his boots and overcoat,
> And shuts his eyes.[117]

Here we have Darwin, on the edge of death but still alive, frozen in time. As he experiences his own deterioration against the backdrop of his theory of evolution, he

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[115] Christina Davis, "Review: Gjertrud Schnackenberg," in *Boston Review*, January 1. 2001, http://bostonreview.net/poetry/christina-davis-review-gjertrud-schnackenberg>
[116] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 177.
[117] Gjertrud Schnackenberg, "Darwin in 1881," in *Supernatural Love: Poems 1976-1992* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), p.31.

imagines himself preserved like the organisms he studied, slowly becoming a "Fossil in a vanished riverbed" as he falls asleep. Here is a moment of recursiveness, in which the fossil image highlights how Darwin, as one individual organism himself, is subsumed by the enormous scale of what he undertook: studying the origins of life. Throughout her work, most notably in "Imaginary Prisons" (*The Lamplit Answer*, 1985), Schnackenberg uses sleep as a metaphor (or a euphemism) for death, but also as a way of fixing her elegiac subject, suspending him or her between death and life, in a dream-like trance.

The category of the imitative elegy raises the question of how to write a modern, personal, and intimate elegy of a person, such as Schnackenberg's husband, who loved the abstractions of philosophy. If a poet incorporates this kind of philosophical discourse, is she necessarily returning to the pre-twentieth-century model of elegy that Ramazani describes, one dominated by "abstract ideals"? An attempt to mimic the thought process of the deceased is a profoundly intimate act, though it does ask us to redefine what intimacy looks like in poetry. If *not* a confession of personal feeling, can the imitation of another's feelings or thoughts provide a means of imaginative and empathic connection? And is there not some consolation in trying to commemorate mimetically, through re-creation of the point of view of the deceased, as opposed to the speaker's point of view?

If *Heavenly Questions* is the inheritor of an Audenesque trend of elegy-as-imitation in twentieth-century poetry, it departs from both traditional and modern elegy in its proportions. Simply put, for an elegy, there is very little direct elegizing. Take, for example, section 119 of "In Memoriam," in which Tennyson lovingly apostrophizes the dead:

> I hear a chirp of birds; I see
> Betwixt the black fronts long withdrawn

A light-blue lane of early dawn,
And think of early days and thee,

And bless thee, for thy lips are bland,
And bright the friendship of thine eye;
And in my thoughts with scarce a sigh
I take the pressure of thine hand.[118]

The departed is so present here that we sense his touch, "the pressure" of a "hand." We rarely get that close—if at all—to the beloved in *Heavenly Questions*. There is a way in which he is kept private, even when Schnackenberg enumerates his virtues, the specific characteristics she will miss. Despite rare moments of direct elegizing, the book is rampant with meta-literary suggestions about what the purpose and function of elegy might be. Although there are moments when we get the kind of elegies we recognize, Schnackenberg suggests the enormity of her loss not primarily by exploring her emotional response, but by eclipsing her private grief with contemplations of unanswerable philosophical questions and evocations of the universe's vastness, mutability, and strange cyclicality. *Heavenly Questions* borrows its title from a translation of the ancient Chinese minister and poet Qu Yuan's *Tianwen*, which Schnackenberg describes as "a series of unanswerable cosmological, philosophical, and mythological questions" ("Note" *HQ*). These are precisely the kinds of questions she and her husband would have contemplated together, so there is an implied intimacy. We, as readers, are privy to a very particular set of conversations and questions exchanged between the "I" and the "you."

Heavenly Questions is also unusual as an elegy in its reliance on non-Western texts. Comprised of six interlocking sections, the poem presents kaleidoscopic

[118] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H.," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry, Fifth Edition*, eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York and London: Norton, 2005), p. 1003.

combinations and re-combinations of literary genres and cultural traditions, as well as lyric refrains and riskily obsessive repetitions. Fusing *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita* excerpts and allusions with fragments of Buddhist parables, Turkish legend, and Greek myth, Schnackenberg expands the reach and relevance of the Western elegy. Her poem is grounded in modernist techniques as well, such as Eliot's symphonic use of motifs in *Four Quartets* and Yeats's use of questions, particularly in his later work, as cornerstones of poetic structure. A protean book, Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions* is as disorienting, with its labyrinthine allusions and shifting formal techniques, as the grief-stricken state from which it springs.

Heavenly Questions's disorientations are also interdisciplinary, as Schnackenberg yokes mathematics, physics, geology, and cell biology to religion, philosophy, and history. This interplay of disciplines, as well as the tension between lyric and narrative modes, makes us wonder what Schnackenberg thinks elegy can and should do, and how she balances the traditionally song-like and meditative aspects of lyric with the chronological progression implied by narrative. Lyric and narrative are, of course, porous and contested categories, and elegy is a form classified typically under lyric. Schnackenberg's poem refuses any airtight definitions of lyric or narrative, and other modes (such as the epic) and discourses (those of medicine and sub-atomic physics, to name a couple) comfortably inhabit the poem, forcing us to wonder whether terms as conventional as "lyric" and "narrative" are even useful. I see a distinction between these two modes, however slippery and elusive they may be, as critical to how Schnackenberg reimagines the modern elegy.

Jonathan Culler's flexible formulation of lyric as a mode of address, often between an "I" and a "you," marked by frequent apostrophe, and which constitutes its own "event" with its own sense of time and of "the present," proves especially helpful for understanding *Heavenly Questions*. Culler writes: "Perhaps there is always a *you* in the lyric, whether expressed or not, whatever its variations, as lyrics strive to be an event in the special temporality of the lyric present. Often that *you* is expressed—the you of the beloved, or the wind, a flower, a yearning. But the lyric 'you' is also a bit of language, a trope."[119] I would add that Schnackenberg's elegy could be seen as a lyric poem were we to use the much popularized, Romantic sense of lyric penned by John Stuart Mill, the (in)famous "utterance that is overheard," which, according to Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, persists today, even as it is increasingly challenged.[120] This strand of lyric thought, for Jackson and Prins, was "a project modern literary criticism took from the nineteenth century and made its own."[121] Whether or not we agree with Jackson and Prins that "lyric" is a relatively recent invention—a twentieth-century appropriation of nineteenth-century thought—that has been retroactively applied to pre-Romantic poetry, *Heavenly Questions* possesses what many critics would still consider numerous traditional lyric elements. And needless to say, these elements are historically contingent products of the Western literary tradition, as we saw in the introductory chapter: a relationship between the "I" and "you"; the sense of a performed, spoken, or overheard utterance; an interest in subjectivity and consciousness; and perhaps most importantly for Schnackenberg, the structural features of meter, rhyme, song, and refrain.

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[119] Jonathan Culler, "Lyric, History, and Genre" (2009), in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 75.
[120] Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, "General Introduction," in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 3.
[121] Jackson and Prins, "General Introduction," in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, p. 2.

Even so, *Heavenly Questions* is full of narratives. The hope that storytelling, or in Schnackenberg's case, poetic narrative, could forestall the inevitable is as ancient as Scheherazade, who makes an appearance in *Heavenly Questions*. While the narrative mode satisfies some of the reader's curiosity—how did the deceased die? What were his final moments like?—its lyric interruptions frustrate the reader's desire to organize the tragic events into a coherent whole, let alone a linear chronology. The disorientation Schnackenberg creates by switching poetic modes also enables us to empathize with her two competing impulses: to narrate the events of her husband's death so as to understand them, and to suspend her husband in a comfortingly repetitive (and, in some sense, timeless) world, a world of lyrical refrain and repetition where loss and change are imminent, but never actualized. One such refrain is "Materialize, and dematerialize," which is fitting, given that it re-materializes everywhere. In one of its more oblique manifestations, Schnackenberg employs the refrain to animate the ceaseless recycling of matter:

> And all the waves at the beginning-end
> Of all that comes and goes and takes and gives
> And all in play and all that dies and lives
> Materializes; dematerializes. (41)

The oxymoronic "beginning-end" is a fitting neologism for the poem's occasion. The poet, who tends to her hospitalized spouse throughout most of *Heavenly Questions*, writes herself into a contradiction. She wants both to soothe her husband to sleep and, like Scheherazade, to forestall sleep (death) through storytelling.

As readers, we are also overhearing the poet's stories and lullabies. The main story, although told in sparing fragments, is that of her husband's last days. The lullabies, with their lyrical musicality and refrains, interrupt and arrest the poem's plot, which

chronicles an agonizing vigil punctuated by nurses' visits and surgeons' prognoses, so as to lull us into a trance-like grief. The poet's lullabies are songs she sings to her husband, but songs that are also stories. These stories tell of the endless processes of creation and destruction (figured through Archimedes and Krishna, and through repeated oceanic, tectonic, and subatomic imagery). But they are also the songs she sings to us that her husband cannot hear: the lyric interruptions in her narrative of his already-achieved death. Thus, lyric and narrative elements collide, like two tectonic plates, to create elegiac energy. Elegy is the lullaby the dying husband cannot hear, because it is a lullaby not in the poem's lyric present, but from the vantage point of future loss.

Schnackenberg: A Poet of Lyric Sequences

Most of Schnackenberg's poems across her four-decade career are arranged in sequences or are long, narrative pieces (with lyric elements) divided into sections, as opposed to stand-alone lyrics. Asked why she infrequently composes short lyrics, she concedes that she has an "aspiration to write short lyric poems," since they are "the most intense form of poetry," but her compositions are "more like a seashell,"[122] folding in on themselves, circling around an idea. She compares her composition to "polishing gravel," an interesting simile given her literal interest in describing the endless evolution of matter in *Heavenly Questions*, particularly in its opening section, "Archimedes Lullaby":

> Distant ocean-engines pulverize
> Their underwater mountains, course to fine,
> In granite-crumbs and flakes of mica gold
> And particles of ancient olivine;
> And water waves sweep back and forth again,

[122] Gjertrud Schnackenberg (lecture, The Writing Seminars, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, April 24, 2014).

Materialize, and dematerialize (3)

Like her description of oceans that "pulverize / Their underwater mountains" into "granite-crumbs," Schnackenberg's description of her writing process is of a repetitive and recursive, if not endless, act of sifting and reassembling material. Self-referentiality is closely connected to scale, as it suggests that the poet need look no further in a particular moment than the boundaries of the self. Does this diminish the import of what a poet is saying, or does it, instead, demonstrate how even self-referentiality has enormous expanses and complexities to explore? Recursiveness is likewise connected to scale, as it implies a finite number of things worth returning to in a particular poem; rather than reaching for new words, images, or figures, the poet recycles them. Is this a limitation of imagination, or does it illustrate how dense and rich the original sources are? Schnackenberg admits that she "never set out to write a longer poem"[123] but that the activity of crafting poetry is not fully under her control.

What is ironic, here, is that Schnackenberg is a surpassingly controlled craftsperson with an attention to form and technique few contemporary poets possess. Earlier in her *oeuvre*, Schnackenberg was heavily reliant on strictly metered stanzas, many of equal length. If anything, she was criticized at times for being *too* metrically regular, too formally stringent. In his review of *Heavenly Questions* in *Slate*, Karl Kirchwey gently critiques Schnackenberg's first volume, *Portraits and Elegies*, writing, "there is a sense in which prosody and learning are insulating the poet from an uncontrollable emotional content."[124] Whether or not this is the case, it is certainly true

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[123] Schnackenberg (lecture, The Writing Seminars, The Johns Hopkins University).
[124] Karl Kirchwey, "The God of Writers Broke His Pen: Gjertrud Schnackenberg's Angry, Tender Heavenly Questions," in *Slate*, January 17, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2011/01/the_god_of_writers_broke_his_pen.html

that Schnackenberg becomes formally looser and more experimental as her career progresses, particularly in the book-length poem preceding *Heavenly Questions*, *The Throne of Labdacus* (2000), her imaginative retelling of the Oedipus story, written in what Kirchwey describes as "stark unrhymed couplets." There is an austerity to *Labdacus*, despite its richness of imagery and sonic texture, that is complemented by the minimalism of the couplets, which both give a sense of order and design and, in their rhyme-less irregularity, convey one of the driving forces of the poem, the seeming arbitrariness of circumstance:

> *What is*: a leaking-through of events
> From beyond the bourn of right and wrong;
>
> *What is*: a sequence of accidents
> Without a cause,
>
> Or from which the cause
> Is long-lost, like a ruthless jewel
>
> Missing from an archaic setting's
> Empty, bent, but still aggressive prongs.[125]

Even as Schnackenberg meditates on accidents, on a lack of causality and morality (or at least on a lack of access to them), her verse is still quietly, persistently formal. The aggressive archaism of form survives, even if it feels at times deliberately empty: the lines are iambic if irregular, anaphora is an organizing device, and there are far-off echoes of rhymes ("wrong" and "prongs") that a reader might only see on the page, as opposed to experiencing aurally. Finally, the last line in this passage is near-perfect iambic pentameter, with the small variation of a headless iamb.

Schnackenberg returns to a stricter formalism in *Heavenly Questions*, which is written almost entirely in blank verse and peppered by rhymes and repetitions that do not

[125] Gjertrud Schnackenberg, *The Throne of Labdacus* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), p. 8.

follow a discernible pattern. Asked by her editor why she chose the traditional iambic pentameter line for her book-length elegy, Schnackenberg answers that, for her, iambic pentameter represents a kind of universalism within the Western poetic tradition, a universalism she wants to invoke:

> I know that poetry isn't music, and that the rhythm-sound of a poem is secondary—by which I mean that poetry is not primarily a soundscape. But we can't gainsay the emotional meaning—sometimes corroborative, sometimes opposing—of its rhythm-sounds. Many of our contemporaries believe that the five-beat line is an invention rather than a discovery, but I believe that the iambic pentameter, which your assistant Jesse Coleman once described to me in conversation as "propulsive," is innate to English poetry (it won't always be innate, as the language continues to change and evolve—but so far it hasn't loosened its six-hundred-year-old grip).[126]

Not only is pentameter "innate" for Schnackenberg; it conveys a sense of joy one might not typically associate with the elegiac mode. For Schnackenberg, iambic pentameter contains "the underlying buoyancy, the intimated joy, of the unsinkable four-beat line, ever present and truly cheerful, beneath the graver and heavier pentameter." Perhaps there is something consoling about pentameter in addition to the "unsinkable" tetrameter it includes: its dogged survival across centuries of verse in English is a metrical complement to what the elegy has traditionally sought to do: to preserve the elegiac subject, to ensure its continued survival in some form.

Despite her ease and affinity with form, Schnackenberg's avowed lack of formal control is consonant with the dominant themes of much of her work, particularly *Heavenly Questions*, which is consumed with what evades the poet's—and arguably human—comprehension. As I have noted, elegy for Schnackenberg has always been tied

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[126] Gjertrud Schnackenberg, interview by Jonathan Galassi, "Editor& Author: Jonathan Galassi and Gjertrud Schnackenberg," FSG Work in Progress, January 2011, http://www.fsgworkinprogress.com/2011/01/jonathan-galassi-and-gjertrud-schnackenberg/.

up with epistemology. In her interview with her Galassi, Schnackenberg argues "we have a responsibility to seek, know, and tell the truth, if we are able to do so," but also that "poetry can give us only something which we *feel* to be true." This moral obligation to discover a truth—a truth which she admits is also a subjective creation—is both a curse and a source of consolation in *Heavenly Questions*, where she repeatedly laments the results of our frustrated, tortured, and compulsive attempts to understand. She expresses this best in a refrain which first appears at the end of "Archimedes Lullaby": "It never ends, this dire need to know" (5). But this "dire need" for knowledge is also what suspends the elegiac subject in time. For, as long as there is the need (quixotic or not) to understand, death is on hold, at least within the confines of the poem. Asked by Galassi to comment on *Heavenly Questions* as elegy, a volume Galassi describes as "a great book of grief—with great dignity, openness, and still a certain impersonality," Schnackenberg responds:

> First, as for the coming-and-going presence of impersonality in *Heavenly Questions*: probably I consider these things—the personal and the impersonal—to be facets rather than paradoxes […] Poetry […] has to alternate between, to interweave, the personal and the impersonal, subjective and objective—partly out of respect for sheer common sense; and partly because in most of us there is an inner necessity to seek perspective, connection, objectivity in tragic circumstances; and partly because it's when passion has hurt us most that we learn the meaning of dispassion, and learn to pray for detachment.[127]

Schnackenberg achieves this "detachment" through her amplification of the elegy, not primarily as a consoling recourse for "when passion has hurt us," but as a multifaceted form capable of finding some "objectivity in tragic circumstances." Moreover, she expands the elegy by choosing expansive metaphors. And as a multifaceted form, elegy

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[127] Schnackenberg, interview by Jonathan Galassi, "Editor& Author: Jonathan Galassi and Gjertrud Schnackenberg."

for Schnackenberg exists at the crossroads of many literary modes, particularly the narrative and lyric.

Portraits and Elegies and *Heavenly Questions*, the two volumes bookending Schnackenberg's career thus far, reveal a constancy of temperament as well as an evolution of methods. Linda Gregerson's reading of *Portraits and Elegies* is, in fact, true of all of Schnackenberg's work, to varying degrees: "Elegy and portraiture do not distinguish the separate groupings of poems in the book but are rather the reciprocal aspects of its single, retrospective posture."[128] This notion of "reciprocal aspects" is quite similar to Schnackenberg's idea that "the personal and the impersonal" are "facets rather than paradoxes." The same could be said of lyric and narrative as "reciprocal" aspects or facets in *Heavenly Questions*, except that they form multiple "retrospective posture[s]."

***Heavenly Questions:* A New Take on the Elegy**

Schnackenberg's poem opens with a lullaby and closes with a story, "Bedtime *Mahabharata*," in which she reimagines parts of the ancient Sanskrit epic as a means of soothing her husband and of understanding her experience of his death. Thus, in the macro-structure of *Heavenly Questions* we have the presence of lullaby, traditionally associated with lyric; story, with narrative; and epic, with both. Moreover, this framing structure creates a nocturnal atmosphere, a hazy, dream-like world suspended in time between consciousness and sleep, a world where distinctions among genres and modes too are fluid. If Schnackenberg's elegy derives its power from the interplay of narrative and lyric modes, what are some of the stories she tells, even lyricizes? The main story, as

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[128] Linda Gregerson, *Negative Capability: Contemporary American Poetry* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p 41.

we have seen, is the one she makes the least accessible: her husband's death. But the poem is so full of reappearing narratives that some of the allusions and stories are transformed into lyric refrains of their own. One story she tells over and over is that of the natural world's innumerable components:

> A bleaching coral reef with pockmarked walls
> And shining heaps of gouged-out tesserae—
> Like seashell litter, slowly ground to sand,
> In violet-blue, in white, in basalt green,
> Vermilion, mica leaf, along the floors
> Like ex-mosaics chiseled from the walls
> Of future pictures still to be installed
> With drops of Sublimaze…(14)

Here, in section two, "Sublimaze," Schnackenberg mimics the tension between an individual's finite life ("seashell litter, slowly ground to sand") and the infinite recreation of new forms of matter, elegantly suggested by the return of the end word "walls" and by the idea of "future pictures," new coral "mosaics." She achieves this mimesis throughout *Heavenly Questions* by repeating and recombining, with small mutations, words, phrases, and whole stanzas across sections. The refrain of "Materialize, dematerialize" is unspoken but present here, as she animates the slow de-materialization of the coral reef. The narrative, a chronological movement through finite geological changes, is broken by lyric echoes ("pockmarked coral reef" (14)), which create an illusion of suspended time. The whole elegy is predicated on such illusory suspensions, which in turn create illusions of permanence and of non-narrative stasis, even as they luxuriate in destruction.

We do not begin to learn the central story, that of the husband's gradual death, until "Sublimaze," but even here the progression of the husband's disease is interrupted by descriptions of other kinds of destruction in the natural world. We could interpret this gesture as hailing from a more traditional, abstract elegiac tradition. Instead of calling

upon the traditional pastoral elegy, Schnackenberg often seems to do something equivalent with geography and astronomy, as natural and physical phenomena complement, offset, respond to, and sometimes even overwhelm the person being elegized. Like many pastoral elegists, Schnackenberg often uses the older trope of pathetic fallacy as a form of consolation. The very comparison of the death of one person to the destruction of a coral reef or the creation and destruction of planets *also* and *simultaneously* elevates the individual by way of indirect simile, enlarging one person's death (and the elegist's experience of that death) to a cosmic significance and scale.

In "Sublimaze," we are transplanted from the classical world of Archimedes and the beaches of Syracuse to the narcotic trance of a hospital room. This new world, however, is suspended in time, just as a patient on painkillers hovers in a twilight state. We do not yet know the specific nature of the husband's illness (cancer) or his prognosis; the plot consists only of entering and disappearing medical staff: "A nurse / Materialized, and dematerialized" (9). The story of the surgery—which we learn is the fifth in a row—is told obliquely, impressionistically, with phrases like "Enchanted knife that didn't even hurt" and "The speechless needle buried in the vein" (11). The only real action *per se* is the poet's moistening of her husband's lips with "an ice-soaked sponge" (15); the only answer to the heavenly questions, inspired (in a blend of traditions) by the archer's metaphysical queries addressed to Krishna in *The Bhagavad Gita*, is a nurse's "wave of reassurances" (15). Imitating the form of Arjuna's questions, Schnackenberg poses her own: "*The universe is self-created where? The universe is self-created why?*" (11).

Compare this to Arjuna, who inquires of Krishna: "What is the self? What is action? / What undergirds all creation?"[129]

We are not quite in the world of elegy yet, as the husband is still alive, but we are not really in the world of narrative or lyric poetry, either. Here, Schnackenberg imitates the rhetorical structures of a religious text, including anaphora and repeated questions. Notwithstanding, Schnackenberg foreshadows the elegy to come in her descriptions of her husband as statuesque, almost embalmed: "Beloved body's beauty, lying still" (15). Interestingly, one of the few clear-cut narratives in "Sublimaze" is the story of the husband's disease, told circuitously and yet painstakingly, narrated from what seems like another voice ventriloquized by the poet, a kind of disembodied, omniscient speaker. This voice speaks in both a scientific and a vatic register:

> The demiurge that forged the nucleus
> Had set an injured molecule aside
> That broke away midstream, autonomous,
> And copied out its secret injury […]
> And no one knew. And no one could have known.
> Something smaller than a grain of sand. (13)

It is unclear whether the nucleus refers to that of a cell or an atom, but my guess is the former. If this is true, we have a detailed account of one particular cell of her husband's turning cancerous. This voice, which Schnackenberg uses often in *Heavenly Questions*, is that of a narrator who speaks, impossibly, from a place of omniscience (recall Walcott's oracular voice in the opening lines of "The Arkansas Testament"), even as she insists that such knowledge is not accessible, is "secret," and that "no one could have known." And while this voice often relies on scientific terminology and jargon, it sounds equally

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[129] *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*, trans. Gavin Flood and Charles Martin (New York: Norton, 2012), p. 65.

mystical, even god-like, in its visionary authority: "The demiurge that forged the nucleus / Had set an injured molecule aside." Not only does the speaker understand the actions of the "demiurge," but she is also able to see—or imagine—the subatomic story with eerie, greater-than-X-ray precision. Schnackenberg uses scientific and oracular diction to narrate how the origins of the disease, the origins of the story she elegizes, are both invisible and unknown and, within the context of the poem and from the vantage point of elegiac hindsight, strangely apprehensible, even narratable.

How does the scientific register intersect with the elegiac genre, specifically within the context of interwoven lyric and narrative modes in the poem? Can scientific description and discourse deepen our sense of what the elegiac is? In her use of scientific rhetoric, Schnackenberg is perhaps the truest heir to Auden and his elegy for Yeats. Heaney is interested in questions of phenomenology and perception, but not on a technical level, and Walcott's engagement with the natural world seems deliberately unscientific. Schnackenberg plays with scientific language in such a way as to create the illusion of controlling a narrative, a narrative which of course eludes control and which tells the story of the very impossibility of full understanding. She suggests that the idea of origins, of a cause, is always hauntingly elusive (especially with disease), and often so infinitesimal ("smaller than a grain of sand") as to refuse comprehension. Narrating scientific events becomes a way to meditate on epistemological and philosophical limits, even as these events are presented as the most objective literalizations of the deterioration and death of the elegiac subject. Science becomes its own elegiac discourse, a kind of "impersonal" displacement of the emotional into clinical terms, a mimesis of how

dissociative and depersonalizing the process of illness can become as a person is reduced to the problems with his/her body. The husband is flattened into body scans:

> Beloved body, lit in blacks and grays,
> Black-soaked, and streaming in eternity,
> The resurrected cavity of Galen,
> In anti-particles. In gamma rays. (20)

Here the Romantic, lyric apostrophe, "Beloved body," is combined with scientific language and the history of anatomy, and is shot through with mystical, visionary diction, with words like "eternity" and "resurrected." She treats her subject both clinically and sacramentally. Portrayed as almost Christ-like in this passage, the husband is elevated from the particular to the transcendent, a gesture largely absent in the modern elegy with its turn to the "anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic."[130] Here, Schnackenberg's Christian upbringing enters the elegy explicitly. But in elegizing her husband, who was Jewish, she most often turns to Buddhism and Hinduism when she invokes religion directly at all. Although Schnackenberg often describes the surgeons and the hospital in almost god-like terms, she does so with a profound and bereft irony, as no surgery or knowledge can fix the problem: her husband's death is inevitable. Critical of our modern, cultural sacralization of science, Schnackenberg plays with the notion of scientists (or doctors), in an increasingly secular world, as gods. Like gods, they see what is invisible to the naked human eye. And like gods, they intervene in matters of life and death, but they are the addressees of unanswerable questions. Lamenting the futility of her husband's (fifth) surgery, the poet explicitly compares one of the surgeons, with his "blue mask and gown," to Krishna:

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[130] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, p. 2.

> A blue god standing by, blue mask and gown,
> Blue gloves, and dazzling waterlights and darks;
> A buried memory-surge: a god's blue hand
> Gestured above the opened body's rim:
>
> All that could be done has now been done.
> *I am the same to all*, Lord Krishna said. ("Sublimaze," 13)

She already knows that "All that could be done has now been done," and does not need a scientist or a god to tell her so. The "answer" the poet receives is not really an answer, or is the answer to a different question: "*I am the same to all*."

Schnackenberg does not approach the real limitations of science with cynicism or even with frustration; rather, there is the sense that all branches and disciplines of knowledge are partial and incomplete. For Schnackenberg, science is one manmade discourse among many. But that is not to say that manmade discourses do not inspire a kind of awed meditation on the limited powers they do possess to illuminate human experience, the world around us, and the nature of reality. The point for Schnackenberg is that both art and science are attempts to understand which fail necessarily but are partly consoling in their dogged persistence and in how intrinsic they are to being human. Disciplines of humanistic and scientific knowledge offer some consolation, not because of what they say definitively, but because they survive. And for Schnackenberg, scientists can be just as fanciful and imaginative as poets:

> [Scientists] describe a very different relationship to what may be true, and in so doing provide poets with a crucial missing piece: an agreed-upon, although provisional, objectivity. Although scientific truths are tentative, contingent, ever open to modification and sometimes drastic revision […] In truth, the scientists are presenting the rest of us with descriptions of the material of reality which far exceed the images recorded in even the wildest, most far-out tracts of historical religious visions, poetries, fabulations, and prophecies.[131]

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[131] Schnackenberg, interview by Jonathan Galassi, "Editor& Author: Jonathan Galassi and Gjertrud Schnackenberg."

And although science is riddled with mysteries, with what we cannot know or see, its examination of the ways in which bodies "Materialize, and dematerialize" is, in its recursive predictability and incessancy, strangely comforting to Schnackenberg: "I know nothing about an afterlife, but the thought that we have come from *this* and that we return to *this*—this thought, in the face of our pressing, one-by-one mortality, is to me indescribably consoling."[132]

At the close of "Sublimaze," we learn that the expected surgeon will be delayed. The suspension in time continues. The poet's only response is to twist her wedding ring, which catches the sunlight, causing "weightless prisms" to "spill / Across the ceiling" (24). This small action, magnified on the wall, recalls Plato's Allegory of the Cave and suggests, perhaps, that the marriage bond—as symbolized by the ring—can only generate illusions of permanent union. Again and again, Schnackenberg emphasizes the fact that everything is made up of constituent parts (i.e. that every form, including that of her husband, is temporary) and that every form will eventually turn back into a heap of those constituent parts. The prisms cast by her wedding ring serve as a reminder that even something as seemingly elemental as light is built of more basic components, and is, in a sense, infinitely divisible. Alternately, the prisms on the wall are a striking dramatization of one of Schnackenberg's central themes: the small, the finite, and the seemingly inconsequential are magnified by human experience. No action, no event, no detail is too small, as smallness itself possesses a kind of inverse infinity. Recall Heaney's image,

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[132] Schnackenberg, interview by Jonathan Galassi, "Editor& Author: Jonathan Galassi and Gjertrud Schnackenberg."

from Chapter One, of the “small ripples” in the scullery bucket that were barely perceptible, as they “shook / Silently” and “vanished into where they seemed to start.”

We see human experience magnified again in the third and most overtly elegiac section of *Heavenly Questions*, “Venus Velvet No. 2,” which takes place somewhere in the hospital—probably in the surgeon’s office. The title, a meta-literary reference to the pencil Schnackenberg uses to take medical notes and to compose her elegy, fittingly recalls the Greek goddess of love. It is in this middle section of the poem that Schnackenberg explicitly confronts the inevitability of her husband’s death. Curiously, this part of the poem is both the most traditionally elegiac and the most experimentally meta-elegiac. Punctuated by the fleeting manifestations of a more conventional elegy, one in which she enumerates her husband’s virtues, this section is the most openly eulogistic: “And the integrity I idolized: / Another’s mystery never trifled with. / No one was belittled in those eyes” (30). In a poem that relies so heavily on juxtapositions of scale, it is important to note that one of the husband’s virtues is that he ensured that “No one was belittled,” that he made an effort to do justice to those around him, just as the poet seeks to pay homage to how important her husband was to her life. In this scene, we are present with the poet during her conversation with the doctor, but we never hear his words; instead, we enter into a prolonged contemplation on the act of writing as Schnackenberg, in a gesture of poignant superfluity, writes down the prognosis she already knows.

Concentrating on her dictation, and suspending the story of death through lyric meditations on writing, becomes a way of distancing herself from an unwelcome

narrative in addition to a means of mimicking her own powerlessness; she is but the stenographer, the receiver of news:

> As graphite self-destructs in shearing off
> Abraded words and microcrystals break
> In microscopic heaps of graphite dust:
> My pencil, scribbling, giving up on us. (27)

Here, the pencil, like the coral reefs and other massive natural phenomena, is undergoing the same democratizing process of dematerialization. In its "microscopic" self-destruction it gives us a sense of the small scale of human tragedy. Conversely, the sheer fact of focusing on the "microscopic," of describing it in such comprehensive and intricate detail, in a way analogous to her descriptions of the movement of tectonic plates and the recombinations of planetary matter, is a way for Schnackenberg to expand the elegy and its subject. What makes Schnackenberg's elegy curiously timeless is a lack of current references to other real tragedies occurring in the world at the time she is writing. Instead, when she references other tragedies, such as the losses of life in the battles recorded in the *Mahabharata*, they are far-removed and abstracted from her present moment..

The elegy is being penned, but the instrument of its authorship is deconstructing in the process. In this way, Schnackenberg is an heir of the postmodern tradition, particularly in its focus on the idea of erasure being intrinsic to creation. Both Heaney and Agha Shahid Ali (the subject of the next chapter) are preoccupied with the concept of erasure as the seat of creation. As we saw in "Field Work," Heaney's wife's birthmark, which has been erased from his memory, becomes a new (temporary) stain when he anoints her in a strangely erotic pastoral scene. Despite the postmodernity of Schnackenberg's elegy, the poet, the singer of lullabies, the story-teller, and the

"sentinel" keeping "vigil" (9) is now transforming into a traditional elegist via her new role as scribe recording the prognosis from on high, much as poets from an early tradition invoked the muse. But as the act of recording medical facts suggests, she will not be able to permanently suspend the elegiac subject,,even as she seeks to immortalize her husband's virtues. Moreover, to scribble the elegy at all requires giving up the illusion of preventing death. To write the elegy, she has to destroy—to "dematerialize"—a fantasy of temporal suspension. The pencil, like the poet, has to self-destruct to record the truth.[133] Interestingly, pencil marks are easier to erase than ink; Schnackenberg may be representing her ambivalence at recording her husband's death. Does it seem, superstitiously, more inevitable if it is recorded in pen? In a postmodern twist that recalls the opening of *Heavenly Questions*, to write is to destroy the instrument of writing (and by extension, its author and its subject), much as to be Archimedes is to witness "wonder-works dismantled on the sand" ("Archimedes Lullaby" 4).

The implied narrative of "Venus Velvet No.2"—the conversation between surgeon and bereaved wife—is interrupted by a psychological epiphany (the beloved will die) that quickly mutates into a more traditional lyric elegy. The turn to a more traditional, direct elegy occurs when the poet starts asking questions. These questions are very Yeatsian, in that they are rhetorical and thus unanswerable. They are not, as one might expect, directed at the surgeon or at the universe; rather they are "heavenly questions" the poet asks herself about the process of elegizing. As she faces her husband's death, the poet's scribbling pad takes on the appearance of a corpse, with its

[133] We have seen the figure of the "pencil" earlier in Schnackenberg's work, most notably in "Paper Cities" (*The Lamplit Answer*), an extended meditation on the curious and unnerving powers of reading, writing, and storytelling.

"graphite's faded gray" (28). Staring at her paper's "bluish gray and beige" (29), Schnackenberg gives herself over to an elegy of questions without question marks:

> How could I turn and say: but this is him.
> How could I say: he bounded when he walked.
> How could I say: when he came home at night,
> A gust of snowy air around his coat,
> I drew him closer, holding his lapels;
> He caught me by the wrists and closed his eyes. (29)

Finally, the poet gives us the elegiac details we have longed for, the specifics of who the husband was—a passionate, energetic, playful person—and yet ours is an illusory satisfaction and a fleeting intimacy. We get to know him, enough to whet our curiosity, only to lose him for the rest of the poem. There are a few notable exceptions, including a love-making scene in "Venus" in which she compares sex to the rhythms of creation and destruction, of materialization and de-materialization, evoking erotic desire as both obliterating force and source of ongoing renewal:

> And nothing lost, but found and found again;
> And not conquest, but everything in play
> Given, not taken; taken anyway,
> And not to keep in any case; but kept;
> Possessed but not in order to possess
> […]
> And all in play. But conquered nonetheless. (33)

There are some lovely passing references to the poet's husband in the fifth section, "The Light-Gray Soil," poignant scenes on his deathbed, when he "summoned all his strength to move his gaze / To look out at the night, a final time" (45); and a scene at the beginning of the last section, "Bedtime *Mahabharata*," when he asks the poet to narrate her version of the ancient Sanskrit epic: "He squeezed my hand [….] A smile, in such a night, with weeks to live. / Pajamas fever-soaked, trying to stave / Annihilation off another night" (52). But the word "gust," which we just saw in a description of an idyllic

winter memory, the husband coming home to the poet with "A gust of snowy air around his coat," returns several times in the poem's close as a material description of the inexorable force of oblivion, perhaps most powerfully in the penultimate line of the book: "Annihilation gusting nearer, *here*—" (64). In these later sections, we never see the husband as we do in "Venus": alive, loving, out in world's "snowy air," strong enough to catch the poet "by the wrists" (29), to "close his eyes" in passion, instead of illness.

Despite the fact the "Venus Velvet No. 2" is both the most traditionally elegiac—and in that sense, we might say lyric—and the most explicitly meta-elegiac and modern section of the poem, it is also, ironically, the climax of the poem's narrative. Having avoided traditional elegiac gestures elsewhere in the poem, such as honoring the dead with encomia, or more modern elegiac gestures, such as describing the nature of the elegist's emotional response, Schnackenberg's employment of both in the third section makes it an emotional climax to a narrative we already know. In this way, the lyric is set into relief against the rest of the poem, so much so that this mode seems like a main, or the main, event.

Despite the outpouring in "Venus," this section, like the rest of the poem, is marked by great restraint (one might even say "impersonality," in a non-pejorative sense). Because of Schnackenberg's restraint at the poem's climax (the scene where she records the surgeon's words), every gesture, every characteristic, every small act of kindness on the part of her husband becomes metonymic of the soul we barely know, the whole we can only infer. The paucity of details enriches the power of the details she chooses. Like the wedding ring, minutiae take on a totemic majesty, as the poet eroticizes her beloved in memories of sensualized detail:

> And gathering my hair in gentle fists,
> Persuasion's force with no one to persuade,
> Only persuading hairpins from my hair,
> Their falling on the floor, a plunder-gift. (33)

In their smallness, the hairpins, like the grains of sand, the granite-crumbs, and the shavings of graphite expand the elegy's scope. Of course, the pins also emphasize Schnackenberg's fascination with entropy, with "falling on the floor." (Recall the "weightless prisms" of light from the poet's wedding ring "spill"[ing] onto the hospital walls.) Like the geological formations that endlessly "materialize and dematerialize," the act of making a poem that portrays lovemaking is a form of unmaking, particularly since one of the lovers has been "dematerialized" forever.

Although the lyric elegy that crisscrosses "Venus" would doubtless be powerful in isolation, the melding of narrative and lyric lends this particular part of the poem a climactic narrative force. Lyric becomes plot. Traditional elegy, because Schnackenberg has largely eschewed it, becomes an original and arresting choice, functioning as a kind of narrative release. That the beloved disappears halfway through the poem, just as we have begun to know him, allies us with the poet. We, too, have lost him. In our frustration at his conspicuous absence, we are transported into a state of mourning that enables us to experience partly—if never, of course, to share fully—the poet's grief. The seams of the poem pull apart to reveal "Annihilation gusting nearer; *here*—" (64). If the poet can no longer tell the story—even if she knows its horrible end—she is no longer Scheherazade. She can only lyricize what has happened; there is no narrative suspense, no sense of *next*, no bedtime story tomorrow. The lyric elegy marks her submission to the interrupted narrative of her husband's life.

The tenuousness of the husband's life, always at the edge of elegy, is masterfully represented by the closing scene of "Venus," in which Schnackenberg escapes her vigil temporarily to "bawl unheard" in the hospital "phone booth," where she finds a "phone book hanging from a broken chain" in which she discovers "his name, still listed with the living" (34-35). This is arguably the most meta-literary, if not meta-elegiac, moment in the poem. Confronted with a list of names and numbers, Schnackenberg is struck by the transience of all they represent and by the vastness of such a book, which she describes as both "unreadable and authorless," and as ghostly, made "Of ashen paper, faintly blue and gray," even as it houses the names of the living. The phone book is described as if it has died a violent death: it hangs on a noose, on its "broken chain," and is made "Of paper pulp from long-forgotten trees" (34). Like the pencil, it inventories and erases even as it records. It is a "changing version of the Book of Life" (34) with "stories [that] vanish, leaving only names / Recycled and reused" (35). Here, we see Schnackenberg's emblem of the timeless and the ancient ("The Book of Life") and the jarringly modern: a phone book. Faced with these two ultimate books—not with her particular elegy—she confronts the fact that some stories will, if not vanish, not continue: "A page that can't be turned. He can't survive. / But let him live." The jussive "But let him live," a kind of prayer, demonstrates that there is a part of the elegy that refuses to strike the husband's name from the living, that makes a space for the impossible: his survival. Interestingly, even as she apostrophizes him repeatedly, Schnackenberg never writes her husband's name—Robert—in the book. His namelessness is emblematic of death's anonymity, and enacts a kind of dematerialization within the poem. But Schnackenberg's choice never to directly

name him also preserves an intimacy, a privacy, between poet and subject. There are certain utterances, as it turns out, that we cannot overhear.

The fourth section of the book, "*Fusiturricula* Lullaby," is the most unusual and elliptical movement in the elegy. Like "Archimedes Lullaby," it is presented as if meant to soothe someone to sleep. But unlike what we have come to associate with the Romantic idea of lyric—that it is a personal utterance to a "you"—this lullaby does not seem addressed to anyone and is the most impersonal section of the poem. It is also a story. At once a wild tangent, it is also a logical continuation of the poem: although it tells the story of the birth of a particular snail (*Fusiturricula*) in the disembodied, vatic voice we have seen earlier, the narrative is really about the origins of life and creation; it functions as a kind of Darwinian dream of omniscience, a primordial drama which interrupts the story of one death to tell the story of one life. An *entr'acte* between the climax of "Venus" and the fifth section, "The Light-Gray Soil," which is set three months after her husband's death, "*Fusiturricula* Lullaby" is a restrained and complementary narrative, a way of maintaining the husband's privacy as he dies, by telling us not *his* story, but an alternate one.

This alternate story represents the other side of entropy, the miraculous origin of a life, as Schnackenberg describes the snail building its shell from the ever-dematerializing ocean she has evoked throughout *Heavenly Questions*. What causes life to start—or what causes the husband's cancer—is unknowable. She imagines life, or cause, or origins, before the idea of origin itself. But the snail is not self-materializing in a vacuum; it uses recycled materials for its own genesis, as it "sets in motion moving veils / Of sands that long ago and far away / Were magma rocks with twisted veins of ore." (39). The snail,

with its shell, is no accident or coincidence, but a meta-literary nod: Schackenberg has explicitly compared her recursive and spiraling composition process to the formation of a seashell.[134] Using the idioms of fairy tales and the oracular language of one who knows the answers to heavenly questions she will only partially reveal, and only in riddles, Schnackenberg also lyricizes using scientific rhetoric, as we have seen earlier in her description of the minute processes of her husband's cancer. Using an analogous combination of registers in her voice, Schnackenberg both makes her vision tangible through the materiality of science, as she describes the "logarithmic spiral" of the shell, the "chain of atoms" that "interlocks / And manifests in blurry pink and green" (38), and unreal or elusive. The snail and its shell take on a kind of religious unknowability, becoming a book we can never read, a Christian symbol of immaculate conception, of the Word coming to life:

> Itself the writing, and itself the scroll
> The writing's written on; and self-aware
> With never-to-be-verbalized
> Awareness of awareness of awareness
> […]
> Immaculate example of itself. (40).

Here, we sense not Schnackenberg's omniscience, but her awe at what we cannot know, her dizzy submission to boundless mystery that often gives way to resignation, even consolation, as she address the "you" of her lullaby: "It doesn't matter, really, how it's done, / The how of it; the why […] And all is well now, hush now, close your eyes—" (37-38). This awed acceptance, at times mournful and at times celebratory, of the limitations of human knowledge is also pervasive in *The Throne of Labdacus*, which

[134] Recall that Schnackenberg compares her own writing process to a "seashell." It is reasonable to assume that this section of the poem is as much about the origins of life, in the form of a snail and its shell, as it is a meta-literary meditation on the origins of the artistic process.

contemplates ignorance through the story of Oedipus, “The meaning of which nobody knows, / Or whose meaning *is* that nobody knows” (4).

“*Fusiturricula* Lullaby” concludes with an image of the snail shell, now amplified into some kind of cosmic apparition, a “spiral” turning in “heaven,” to segue into the post-death section of the book, “The Light-Gray Soil,” a section rooted in the dirt of earthly burial as opposed to visions of the heavens. This section alternates between a description of the poet sitting alone on a park bench, mourning life without her husband, and fanciful, italicized descriptions of the cosmos—of moons, craters, meteors, and comets, always in movement, always in transition. The description of the heavens does not so much suggest an afterlife as an alternative life, as Schnackenberg describes how the world no longer feels like a world without the person she loved: “Another earth. Give me another earth” (44). Thus, the italicized descriptions of the heavens function, in part, as fantasies of escaping earth, escaping grief, escaping human time and consequence, and escaping her husband’s death, “The night of January twenty-third—” (46).

But these italicized sections are also *our* escape from a narration of her husband’s final moments, a jarring contrast between her sense of appreciative wonder at the universe and her abject despair in the human world, the world where such things are possible: “A nurse, touching my shoulder: he passed away” (47). After he dies, still holding her hand, she imagines he is still conscious in some way, even though she knows that is impossible: “And when I drew my hand away from his, / His hand lay open, certain I was there. / Let nothing evermore be dear to me” (47). This final imperative—a prayer for eternal sadness—represents one of the most devastatingly anti-consolatory

moments of the book. The only consolation, it seems for the elegist, is to keep whatever she can of the husband alive through stoking her grief.

This gesture of renunciation recalls Auden's famous elegy for a lover, "IX" in his sequence "Twelve Songs," otherwise known as "Funeral Blues," which begins with the imperative, "Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone" (141), suggesting that the world itself should cease. Schnackenberg certainly echoes this sentiment in her plea, "Give me another earth," while continuing to revel in the cosmic. This provides an interesting contrast with Auden, who does not stop at earthly things like clocks and telephones, but expands his denunciation to the heavens:

> The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
> Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
> Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
> For nothing now can ever come to any good.[135]

For Schnackenberg, the fact that the moon and the ocean continue to exist, that matter continues to "Materialize, and dematerialize" is both a source of grief in its highlighting of her husband's nonexistence and the very antidote, the very consolation, for the inconsolability of her sorrow. Although the section ends with the poet asking again for someone or something to give her another earth, and with an abstraction of her husband's death ("Untouched, the immaterial knot unties"), the elegy is not over. In the next and final section, "Bedtime *Mahabharata*," we will move back in time to before the husband's death. In this last section, the husband is still on his deathbed, as the poet tells him a story.

"Bedtime *Mahabharata*," which Kirchwey aptly calls "a fantasia incorporating details from the Hindu epic and from the invention of chess,"[136] is dominated by the

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[135] Auden, "IX," in "Twelve Songs," in *Collected Poems*, p. 141.

recurring images of pens, writing, and record-keeping. This impulse is not new to Schnackenberg, whose *The Throne of Labdacus* is in many ways a meditation on the physical act of writing itself, filled with tablets, texts, scrolls, lists, and scribes. In one passage she contemplates the origins of the Greek alphabet against the background of the Oedipus myth, making the alphabet as material a reality as the landscape of Thebes:

> Then *Delta* appeared silently
> In the midst of words, Δ,
>
> Like the indelible mountain
> With an infant king abandoned on it.[137]

In both *The Throne of Labdacus* and *Heavenly Questions*, there is the sense both of the precariousness of writing—the threat that stories could materially disappear if records are destroyed or incomplete—and the almost fatalistic survival of writing, its inevitability. This inevitability is both a source of consolation and a reminder of human powerlessness, as stories go on with or without us.

One of the stories Schnackenberg retells in "Bedtime *Mahabharata*" is that of Vyasa, the author traditionally associated with the *Mahabharata*, who is said to have dictated the epic to his scribe, Ganesha, often represented with an elephant-head. In the story, Ganesha devises a resourceful solution when his pen fails: he breaks off one of his tusks to continue his transcription without interruption. Schnackenberg's phrase, "Here the god of writers broke his pen," recurs throughout this section and ultimately serves as the book's final line. As Kirchwey notes, the effect of closing the elegy on this final refrain (if it is a refrain, can it ever be final?) is a powerful concession to death: "White space follows on that last page. For this poem has been produced by a mortal, albeit a

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[136] Kirchwey, "The God of Writers Broke His Pen: Gjertrud Schnackenberg's Angry, Tender Heavenly Questions."
[137] Schnackenberg, *The Throne of Labdacus*, p. 49.

supremely talented one, and the mortal realizes, past the power of all human learning, that the story will have no miraculous sequel."

But the ending is ambiguous because we know that Ganesha *does*, in fact, find a solution and that the *Mahabharata* continues. Does Schnackenberg's ending, then, imply, or at least leave open, the possibility that she will find another instrument, another Venus Velvet No. 2, to record the story of her husband's final days, or to forestall his death through elegy? Moreover, there is an ambiguity in the verb "broke." In Ganesha's case, the pen-breaking was an accident, a problem to be fixed so that he could continue "to record / The names of each and everyone who died" (51) on the battlefield. But breaking can be an intentional, active choice. Given Schnackenberg's recurrent allusion throughout this section to a line in *The Merchant of Venice*—the phrase "in such a night"[138] that Jessica and Lorenzo repeatedly use to evoke the particular pain of romantic loss—and to *Antony and Cleopatra* in "Sublimaze," it does not seem contrived to turn to *The Tempest* for an analogy between pen-breaking and Prospero's renunciation of his staff at the end of the play:

> But this rough magic
> I here abjure, and when I have required
> Some heavenly music, which even now I do,
> [*Prospero gestures with his staff*.]
> To work mine end upon their senses that
> This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
> And deeper than did ever plummet sound
> I'll drown my book.[139]

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[138] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, eds. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York: The Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2010) p. 84.
[139] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1994) p. 149.

Prospero's vows, "I'll break my staff" and "I'll drown my book," are concessions to the limits of his power, his "rough magic." One way to read the final lines of Schnackenberg's book is as a kind of conscious and deliberate surrender to the limits of elegy, an acceptance of what writing cannot do:

> And here—mid-tale, mid-war, mid-labyrinth,
> Mid-birth and –death, mid-once upon a time,
> And midway through the names of all who died
> In wars we can't say where, we can't say when,
> Their stories broken off, the fragments fused
> Mid-genealogy, mid-epitaph,
> Annihilation gusting nearer; *here*—
> Here the god of writers broke his pen. (63-4)

No storytelling, no Scheherazade, can prevent what is inevitable: "The thousand nights blow out like candle flames" (57).

And if storytelling and record-keeping break down at the conclusion of *Heavenly Questions*, whether by choice or by accident, lyric cannot prevent the foregone narrative conclusion, the "Annihilation gusting nearer," either. The return of blue-gloved Krishna from "Sublimaze," the surgeon's double with his mysterious lyric refrain, only reinforces the poet's powerlessness and our sense as readers—as those who overhear—that all heavenly questions may be, if not futile, unresolvable: "*All that could be done has now been done*. / *I am the same to all*, Lord Krishna said. / *To all beings my love is ever one*." The elegy does not end on death, but on its imminence, a testament to the poem's constant vacillation, or at least suspension, between resignation and survival, between despair and consolation. We are not left in a postmortem state, but suspended in a kind of timeless vigil, spellbound as we hover between lyric and narrative, always on the brink of elegy.

The Traveling Ghazal: Agha Shahid Ali Reimagines Loss and the Scale of Elegy

The night rose from the rocks of the canyon.

I drove away from your door. And the night,
it left the earth the way a broken man,

his lover's door closing behind him, leaves
that street in silence for the rest of his life.

—Agha Shahid Ali, "A Rehearsal of Loss"

"*one definition of the world ghazal: It is the cry of the gazelle*
when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die."

—Agha Shahid Ali

Agha Shahid Ali, the Ghazalist

"I love forms," Agha Shahid Ali writes in his introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, "but I do not wish to come across as some kind of rheumatic formalist."[140] His humorous caveat is supported by his artistic record: throughout his nearly three-decade career, the Kashmiri-American poet demonstrated an abiding love of poetic forms from across the world and a distaste for the frequent dogmatism of the Neo-formalist movement espoused by some late-twentieth-century poets and critics in the United States. With his signature humility and mischievousness, Ali makes a case for the ghazal—a strict, traditional Persian form whose origins he locates in seventh-century Arabia—in English, all the while protesting: "I am not, certainly not the neo-kind who wishes to save Western civilization—with meters and

[140] Agha Shahid Ali, "Introduction," in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English,* ed. Agha Shahid Ali (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 12.

rhymes!"[141] One of Ali's greatest legacies is his exportation of the ghazal, which he loved in both its Persian (Farsi) and Urdu iterations, to American literature. As Amitav Ghosh remarks: "the formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid's most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry."[142]

Ali conceded that his contribution to the ghazal in English was both an act of love for a form he had cherished since childhood and an aesthetic call-to-arms; he believed that American poets, who were beginning to experiment with the ghazal, had gotten it wrong, both in spirit and in execution: "A free-verse ghazal is a contradiction in terms."[143] Agha Shahid Ali was himself the inheritor of various, often complementary—and sometimes contradictory—cultural forces. He was born in 1949 in New Delhi, but his family relocated to Srinigar, Kashmir, where he spent the majority of his childhood (the family spent a few years in Indiana). Raised in a literary and polyglot household "under the *active* influence of three major cultures—Western, Hindu, Muslim,"[144] Ali's history is as kaleidoscopic as the ghazal's, whose "descendants are found not only in Arabic but in […] Farsi, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Pashto, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu—and English."[145]

Although Ali deserves the critical acclaim he has received as a ghazalist and as an ambassador of the form, it is important not to narrow his poetic and editorial achievements to the sphere of the ghazal. Even so, the ghazal, with its network of formal and thematic conventions, offers a revealing framework for looking at Ali's artistic output as a whole. Ali's poetry is inflected with thematic, stylistic, and structural

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[141] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 12.
[142] Amitav Ghosh, "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," in *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 3 (2002), p. 315.
[143] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 12.
[144] Agha Shahid Ali, interview by Lawrence Needham, summer 1999, in *The Verse Book of Interviews: 27 Poets on Language, Craft & Culture*, eds. Brian Henry and Andrew Zawacki (Amherst: Verse Press, 2005), p. 133.
[145] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 12.

characteristics that dominate the ghazal, among them ideas of movement, travel, exile, and return; figures and formal structures of scale and measurement; references to memory and record-keeping; and the lyric intersections between elegy and love poetry. Despite his fidelity to the ghazal's formal parameters, Ali also makes the form his own, using aspects of it liberally in many of his poems written in free verse or in traditional Western forms, so as to accomplish something new: not just to remember and to record the past— however imperfectly— but to imagine memories *not* in one's possession.

In this chapter, I argue that Ali's greatest contribution as an Anglophone poet is to show us, through his ghazal-inflected poetry, the way that verse can provide a means not only of remembering and of elegizing but also of imagining and of recording what one imagines: a past that is elusive and often unknowable and a future that is tantalizingly inconceivable. Like Heaney's, Walcott's, and Schnackenberg's, Ali's work is inflected by a sense of how formal aspects of poetry, with their intrinsic evocations of scale, can intersect with metaphors of measurement and traveling figures to preserve fleeting experiences.

Ali is the most overtly and expansively elegiac of the poets we have seen, both in the literal sense of elegy as homage to the dead and in a more capacious, figurative sense of elegy as an act of mourning loss more broadly. Ali is the first to remark on his investment in the elegiac mode: "I have clung to my loss, to my losses, even to my loss of losses."[146] Ali expands the scope of the elegy to further to include not only real loss but also hypothetical loss, imagined loss, and future loss. And although the elegiac

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[146] Agha Shahid Ali, "A Darkly Defense of Dead White Males," in *Poet's Work, Poet's Play: Essays on the Practice and the Art*, eds. Daniel Tobin and Pimone Triplett (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 148.

temperament is consistent across his *oeuvre*, it reaches a crescendo in his later work. After locating the elegiac strain in his earlier volumes, I will focus on several lyrics and lyric sequences from his final volume, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), which exemplify how he broadens our sense of the possibilities for the contemporary elegy in English. I intend to show how Ali goes a step further, imagining himself as the elegiac subject of many of his poems. He imagines, in other words, the world after his death, widening the scope of the lyric voice to include a kind of self-elegy, in an illusion of speaking from beyond the grave. Finally, I will turn to Ali's greatest elegiac achievement, his poem "Lenox Hill," written about his mother's death. In it, Ali fuses the form of the Italian *canzone* with the ghazal, bridging the distance between two forms from different parts of the world. It is this formal synthesis that allows Ali to record his grief and to elegize not just his mother, but his homeland and himself.

Ali brings together many of the characteristics and concerns of the poets we have seen in earlier chapters. I do not mean to suggest that he represents a kind of *telos* or culmination; rather he is a rich case study, a kind of distillation, both biographically and formally. Moreover, one could make a strong case that because issues of scale, measurement, metaphor, travel, and memory are so interwoven in modern and contemporary Anglophone verse, any of these poets could be read through several of these prisms at once. But in Ali, the three threads I have looked at in contemporary poetic lyric sequences—scale, metaphor, and memory—are particularly inseparable, as entangled as the many cultural influences Ali inherited.

Ali grew up speaking both Urdu and English fluently. Fellow poet and friend Daniel Hall remembers that Ali "often said that English was his first language and Urdu

his mother tongue."[147] Ali describes a "Shiite Muslim home" (though his mother was Sunni) where "Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, and Hardy were quoted."[148] Most of Ali's childhood friends were Hindus, and he was surrounded by "Hindu rituals, temples, festivals, [and] music."[149] And although Ali was deeply influenced by his Shia Islam, he "could hardly be said to be an orthodox Muslim."[150] While his poems are full of references to "Shia prayers and rituals," one of his well-known elegies for his mother, "From Amherst to Kashmir," which I return to later in this chapter, includes "Hindu devotional song" and "prayers to Krishna."[151] Ali is like Schnackenberg in his liberal use of allusions to religious, mythological, and folkloric traditions from around the world. There is a purposeful, as well as unavoidable, hybridity to Ali's work. It is fair to say that however conflicted Ali felt about spending the majority of his adult life as an expatriate in the United States, however nostalgically he remembered Kashmir, and however acutely he felt the desire to return home (even when return was complicated by violence in the 1990s), he was also a voluntary exile, another contradiction in terms. In interviews, Ali repeatedly insists: "No one kicked me out of anywhere."[152] So while critics have often read Ali as a dislocated, alienated, diasporic subject, he asserts himself that his position was a choice, the product of growing up with a joyful and privileged multiculturalism. It was one he would embrace throughout his life: "All these traditions

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[147] Daniel Hall, "Foreword," in *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), p. 15.
[148] Ali, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, pp. 133-4.
[149] Ibid., p. 134.
[150] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 175.
[151] Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, pp. 177-8.
[152] Ali, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, p. 134.

were there, not in any self-conscious way, and they mingled and overlapped in marvelous ways. I carry this baggage lightly. It is not baggage."[153]

Ali's conscious multiculturalism was certainly a factor in his Westernization of the ghazal. At first glance, the ghazal may seem hospitable to some English and American poetic conventions with its "finesse, epigrammatic compression, elliptical thinking, literary and cultural allusiveness, wordplay, [and] wit."[154] Written in couplets, the ghazal can recall the pithiness of Pope, the metaphysical acrobatics of Dickinson, the allusiveness of Eliot and Pound, and the urbanity of Merrill and Wilbur. And because the ghazal is both elegy and love poem, it contains "'melancholic and amorous'"[155] elements legible to a reader of traditional English and American lyric, particularly of the verse we associate with the Romantic tradition. But, Ali warns, the form could not be more foreign to American readers, as the "ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself: One couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another political."[156] Even more radical to an American ear, for Ali, is the independence of couplets: they can stand alone and move from one ghazal to another. Furthermore, the ghazalist benefits from great organizational flexibility: one can excise or reorder couplets. To a modern Western reader accustomed to enjambed and interconnected stanzas, this freedom of movement can prove disorienting and, as Ali and others have argued, present a frustrating diffuseness, even a sense of "arbitrariness:"[157]

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[153] Ali, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, p.137.
[154] Malcolm Woodland, "Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal," in *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (2005), p. 259.
[155] Ali lifts this phrase in *Ravishing DisUnities* (p. 4) from Ahmed Ali, *The Golden Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 2-22.
[156] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 2.
[157] Ibid. p. 3.

> The thirst for unity haunts the 'Westerner,' even in these fussingly nonlinear days. So to repeat the question: Is there no unity? The answer: Well, no. However, there is a cultural unity—created by the audience's shared assumptions and expectations. There is a contrapuntal air.[158]

For Ali, the ghazal's seeming "arbitrariness" is obviated by "the breathless excitement the original form generates"; suspense builds as "The audience (the ghazal is recited a lot) waits to see what the poet will do with the scheme established in the opening couplet."[159] This is an essential feature of the ghazal: in the opening stanza, or *matla*, the poet establishes a scheme to which he will subsequently return. The first stanza is a compressed promise of what will be elaborated in subsequent couplets. In this way, the poem foreshadows itself. What is established (and compressed) in the *matla* is both the ghazal's rhyme (*qafia*) and its refrain (*radif*). The scheme occurs in both lines of the *matla* and only in the second line of each subsequent couplet. Take, for example, the opening couplets of Ali's "From the Start" from his posthumously published collection of ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003):

> The Belovéd will leave you behind from the start.
> Light is difficult: one must be blind from the start.
>
> You begin to feel better when the clocks are set back?
> *Children of northern darkness*—so defined from the start.
>
> Between two snow-heavy boughs, perhaps a bright star?
> Or in one sparkling many stars combined from the start?
>
> Ontological episode? God doesn't care.
> "That is why he exists," you divined from the start.[160]

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[158] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 5.
[159] Ibid., p. 8.
[160] Agha Shahid Ali, "From The Start," in *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), p. 339. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Ali's poetry are taken from *The Veiled Suite*.

As we can see, the refrain (*radif*),"from the start," and the rhyme (*qafia*), "behind/blind," occur in both lines of the opening couplet (*matla*). In subsequent stanzas, they occur only in the second line of each couplet. The listener knows she will always return, fittingly I would add, to "from the start," but does not know what rhyme word ending in "-ind" the poet will choose. Thus, there is both a fatality and a suspense built into the form itself. It is both infinitely expansive (there is no limit to how long a ghazal can run, hypothetically) and folded in on itself, perpetually recursive. The only way a reader knows for sure that a ghazal is drawing to its close, if he or she is hearing it as opposed to reading it on the page, is because of the convention of the ghazalist invoking his or her name—sometimes directly, often obliquely—in the last stanza. Although Ali does not follow this rule religiously, more often than not he ends his ghazals with an apostrophic address in third person, which functions as a kind of signature. For example, his most well-known ghazal concludes: "And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee — / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight."[161] As we will see later in this chapter, the convention of including one's name at the end of a ghazal will profoundly affect the way Ali self-elegizes. But just as the ghazal is foreign to the Westerner, so is its particular poetic convention of third-person self-apostrophe:

> It would be a gross misunderstanding of the form to correlate this name with a vague gesture towards a nom de plume. Instead, the formal reversion in the final lines of the poem from the first to the third person is an invocation of tragedy that certainly exceeds what may be called a signature. And end is not in sight. The very structure of the poem disallows closure.[162]

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[161] This ghazal first appears as "Ghazal" in *The Country Without a Post Office* and is republished as "Tonight," the final poem in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (*The Veiled Suite*, p. 193 and pp. 374-5).

[162] Sara Suleri Goodyear, "Ideas of Order in an Afterword," in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English,* ed. Agha Shahid Ali (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), p. 179.

Thus, the ghazal "disallows closure" just as it does the concept of unity. And while the poet's name may operate as an artistic signature of sorts, it also marks a splitting of the speaker's voice between what we might understand as a lyric "I" and a third-person dramatic persona. The "I" is addressing a lyric "you" that is, in fact, itself.

The ghazal's potential endlessness and its refusal to provide closure, even at its technical conclusion, highlight questions of measurement. The contrast of scale inherent to the ghazal has been remarked on by several critics, including David Ward, who puts the matter succinctly: "In the bones of the ghazal are two dialectics of the miniature and the vast: one where the brevity of each couplet belies its depth and one between the autonomous couplet[163] and the endless poem."[164] Because *qafia* and *radif* appear in both lines of the first stanza, the essence of the poem is distilled from the outset. This precludes any strict linear progression from one stanza to the next, as we always know *that* we will return and *to what* (at least in some version) we will return.

The juxtaposition of scales intrinsic to the ghazal form—the smallest of stanzaic units (the couplet) can, hypothetically, accrue into an immeasurably large poem—is an ideal shape for a poet concerned with collapsing distances in time and space, with exile and return, and with the expanses and limits of memory. Without making a facile one-to-one correspondence between poetic trajectory and poetic form, I propose that the ghazal

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[163] Interestingly, although Ali stipulates in *Ravishing DisUnities* that couplets should be able to function autonomously, he clarifies that the typical ghazal will possess "five couplets at least" (3). But Ali breaks his own rule flagrantly in some of his own ghazal experiments, reducing the form to the point of arguable formal extinction in two-line poems that are never expanded. Take, for example, the two-line "ghazal" (a contradiction in terms?) that opens *Call Me Ishmael*: "I must go back briefly to a place I have loved / to tell you those you will efface I have loved" (326).

[164] David Ward, "The Space of Poetry: Inhabiting Form in the Ghazal," in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2013), p. 68.

as a set of conventions might be a useful figure for understanding Ali's journey as a poet: it returns to the past, all while lamenting his inability to ever return fully or to recuperate what is lost; it preserves even as it registers infinitesimally small changes; and it projects itself toward the future, traveling indefinitely as the reader imagines what rhyme—foreshadowed from the start—will come next.

Agha Shahid Ali: Returning to an Imagined Past

Whether we use the term "elegy" strictly or loosely, Ali is one of our most elegiac contemporary poets. Many of his volume titles attest to his perpetual—and perpetually thwarted—desire to bridge geographical and temporal distances, to return to a previous place, state of mind, or self: *In Memory of Begum Aktar and Other Poems* (1979), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), and a collection of elegies for his mother and for himself, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). After Ali died of brain cancer in December of 2001, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003), a selection of poems he had written over the course of his career, was published. Although the ghazals were published posthumously, the influence of the form, particularly its use of refrain and its elegiac emphasis on loss and longing, had permeated Ali's work from its inception. In "Postcard from Kashmir," the opening poem of his first full-length volume, *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), the concerns and themes that will haunt his work are already crystallized into a small lyric. Though "Postcard" is not a ghazal but a sonnet, it has the compression—both thematically and imagistically—of a ghazal stanza.

In "Postcard from Kashmir," Ali describes receiving a piece of mail—letters, envelopes, post offices, and phone calls are recurring figures across his *oeuvre*—from back home. In 1975, Ali emigrated from Srinagar to attend Pennsylvania State University. Many of his early poems, those of his youth, reflect the profound homesickness that resulted from his relocation to the United States, a move that he also welcomed (he would reside in America for most of his life, teaching at various universities and colleges across the country). This opening poem could be described as ekphrastic, as the occasion of the postcard from (and of) Kashmir inspires Ali's small, post-card sized sonnet. Knowing that aesthetic representation often fails to capture the scale and complexity of lived experience, Ali describes a world in miniature, flattened and domesticated:

> Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
> My home a neat four by six inches.
>
> I always loved neatness. Now I hold
> the half-inch Himalayas in my hand. (29)

The beauty of these couplets springs from paradox: the poet is at once in possession of experience—capable of the god-like feat of holding mountains in his hand—and knowledgeable of the magnitude of what he has lost. The simulacrum of grandeur troubles him, as it becomes metonymic of the enormity of loss:

> This is home. And this is the closest
> I'll ever be to home. When I return,
> the colors won't be so brilliant,
> the Jhelum's waters so clean,
> so ultramarine. My love
> so overexposed.
>
> And my memory will be a little
> out of focus, in it
> a giant negative, black

and white, still undeveloped.

Distance between Kashmir and the poet in America has been collapsed through the postcard, but it has also been reinforced. The idea that representation, in a postcard or a poem, is both an approximation of home and a home in and of itself is consonant with Ali's poetics, which constantly seeks refuge in the structures, however limited, of art and artifice. What makes this sonnet more than a poignant meditation on homesickness, however, is its eerie invocation of the future. The nostalgic poet is most interested *not* in the past, *per se*, but in how his future self will perceive the past. The occasion of the poem itself, the lyric present as we understand it, will soon be folded into the past, as the poet implies by projecting himself imaginatively into the future and its memories-to-be.

But what will the future look like? It is a truism that the past fades. But Ali plays with this cliché by suggesting that in the future, when he will return to the landscape of his past, to Kashmir, it will have faded in comparison to its two-dimensional, romanticized representations: the postcard, the poem, and the memory in the present, which are "brilliant" to the point of blindingly "overexposed." There is a contradiction here: the postcard is a shoddy approximation of "home," but it will take on the proportions of home in the interim, and the mind, returning to the original source, will not compare it to itself, but to its stylized representation, to the Jhelum's "ultramarine" on the postcard. One version of "home" will have replaced another. It does not seem like a coincidence that Ali breaks the first line of his last stanza after "little," suggesting that memory has a way of shrinking our perception of the past, and furthermore, of dulling our awareness that such a process has occurred. The poem concludes in the future, with the poet back in Kashmir. But rather than describe what that place will look and feel like,

Ali imagines a future that will always be mediated by the shortcomings, distortions, and aggrandizements of memory. A reader might hear in this poem the confident voice of an omniscient narrator, a speaker who can predict how he will perceive the past in the future. But even as the poem seems to know itself, and even as the poet seems to know with some certainty that his memory and perception will fail him, there is also a profound note of humility, even of tragedy. What is tragic, perhaps, is that knowledge is ineffectual: the poet cannot prevent the process of forgetting even as he has full knowledge of how it will transpire.

Many of the poems in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* grapple with this question of how to balance one's hope for return with one's knowledge of inevitable loss. What lends Ali's expatriate poetry its particular distinction, however, is that he invents many of the losses that he laments, imagining them both in the past and in the future. Perhaps this imaginative tendency accounts for the prevalence of the word "dream" in many of Ali's titles; his poems assume from the start that memory and fantasy are inextricable. In early poems about his family and ancestry, such as "Snowmen," "Cracked Portraits," "Prayer Rug," and "The Dacca Gauzes," Ali imagines his own distant and particular genealogy, much as Heaney imagined through the figures of the Bog People the genealogy of Northern Europe. But the best example of Ali's recollection of an imagined memory in his early work is "A Lost Memory of Delhi," a poem that imagines, and impossibly recalls, his parents' life as newlyweds in vivid detail. (It strikes me as significant that we could replace "lost" in the poem's title with "invented.") Using physical objects (anklet bells, a house, an oil lamp) as markers of time, as poetic heirlooms, Ali creates a palimpsest of the world before and after his birth, collapsing distances in time to return to

a composite memory of his own creation, one that is imagined in a kind of lyric timelessness.

"A Lost Memory of Delhi" is hazy and atmospheric, opening with the voice of a bodiless, vatic speaker. Ali positions himself as both unborn and born, both latent and ghost, both in the present as the poet and in the present of his parents' lives a year before his birth:

> I am not born
> it is 1948 and the bus turns
> onto a road without a name
>
> There on his bicycle
> my father
> He is younger than I
>
> At Okhla where I get off
> I pass my parents
> strolling by the Jamuna River
>
> My mother is a recent bride
> […]
> She doesn't see me. (30-31)

This scene, which the poet himself could never have seen, has all of the vividness of a cherished moment—he describes his mother's sari as "a blaze of brocade"—and the characteristic erasures of memory, with a "road without a name." This memory is cast as distantly perceptible, and the distance between adult poet and child is collapsed by figures of sonic and visual perception, much as we saw in Heaney's "Glanmore Sonnets." Just as Heaney recreates the ripples of the train shaking the water in the scullery bucket in "Glanmore Sonnet IV," Ali records the small movements of his mother as she walks:

> The bells of her anklets are distant
> like the sound of china from
>
> teashops being lit up with lanterns

> and the stars are coming out
> ringing with tongues of glass.

The difference between Heaney and Ali, however, is that Ali could not have experienced the very thing he describes.

The ghost-like poet and his parents continue to travel along parallel paths where they are simultaneously together and frustratingly separate. Following his parents

> into the house
> always faded in photographs
> in the family album
>
> but lit up now
> with the oil lamp
> I saw broken in the attic,

the poet longs for a world where communication between past and present is conceivable, where the broken lamp in the present can shed light on the past. The desire not to be excluded, even from the world before one existed, is acute: "I want to tell them I am their son / older much older than they are / I knock keep knocking." Why is such communication impossible? Is it because some distances cannot be crossed, even in the world of poetry? Or is it, as the poet suggests, possible that he is experiencing a rejection, a kind of exile from his parents' love? The poem ends on this ambiguity—asking the question of whether the past eludes us indifferently or willfully:

> I knock keep knocking
>
> but for them the night is quiet
> this the night of my being
> They don't they won't
>
> Hear me they won't hear
> my knocking drowning out
> the tongues of stars

If one of Heaney's main interests is the limits of perception, Ali, who is also fascinated by what we can and cannot apprehend, often compensates for those limits by inventing the very memories and scenes he wants to perceive and record. His poetry, in some ways, is analogous to historical fiction. But that does not mean that the characters who inhabit his imagination are always under his full jurisdiction: if anything, they seem, in this poem and in many others, like willful actors who fail to perceive, or do not want to perceive, the poet's presence. They remain, like the ghazal's couplets, mobile but frustratingly independent.

For Ali, poetic imagination is both a means of figuring loss and a countermeasure to loss. And yet, for all of his imaginative breadth, there is also a consciousness of the limitations of art's antidotal power. If metaphor yokes *two unlike* things, bringing them together, it refuses to link *too unlike* things. Also, metaphor often entails an act of substitution that replaces one field of reference for another, upstaging or eclipsing the former, at least temporarily. The representation of Kashmir—the postcard, say—in its comparison to the place it figures always risks diminishing the original. So, while figuration is an act of bridging and collapsing distance—the mail the poet receives enables him to imaginatively leap across geographical and temporal boundaries—it is also a reminder that representation always entails loss. If metaphor is an exchange, an equation of sorts (x = y), then Ali's world is one where the transfer of meaning is often impossible, or if it occurs, destructive. The failures intrinsic to reciprocal communication (where x doesn't equal y) haunt Ali's work from the start. We see this in early poems from *Half-Inch Himilayas* like "Leaving Your City," where the poet's attempt to communicate with people back home results in an immense and frightening silence ("My

finger, your phone number / at its tip dials the night."[165]); or in "Stationery," where he laments the lack of response he receives ("The world is full of paper. // Write to me"[166]); or, most poignantly, in "A Call," where the poet, in the United States, is haunted by the idea that the same moon that "breaks / into [his] house" is "the cold, full moon of Kashmir"[167] visible to his parents, even as his the lines of communication between himself and them are compromised:

> "When will you come home?"
> Father asks, then asks again.
>
> The ocean moves into the wires.
>
> I shout, "Are you all happy?"
> The line goes dead.
>
> The waters leave the wires.

Conveying the immensity of what is lost, either by omission or by accident, Ali chooses appropriately vast, cosmic metaphors: the moon and the ocean.

Ali's interest in failures of exchange, in the breakdown of meaning, is the premise of his second volume, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, which contains some of his most mournful but wry poems. Ali's aesthetic in this volume is almost surrealist, as he crafts a series of lyrics in which phone calls are interrupted, thwarted, or unanswered. But the recipients of these calls are no longer just those he left behind in Kashmir. He places calls to imaginary places: "Necropolis, U.S.A," "Information Desk, Heaven," and "The Underground Line Locating Service," which is how one might "dial the sea."[168] What distinguishes Ali as a poet, again, is how he uses invention—in this case, imaginary

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[165] Ali, "Leaving Your City," pp. 65-66.
[166] Ali, "Stationery," p. 71.
[167] Ali, "A Call," p. 76.
[168] Ali, "Bell Telephone Hours," pp 85-89.

locations—to represent loss. One might say that *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* functions as a book-length elegy to communication even at its humblest and most mundane, as in "Poets on Bathroom Walls," where the poet's friend sees a graffiti exchange between two people whose encounter is preserved on a public bathroom wall, but who will presumably never encounter one another in the flesh:

> Having returned with nothing from the Men's Room,
> I tell you I want those two women to meet.
> I want them to meet,
> despite all the world."[169]

Of course, it is unsurprising that an expatriate would be interested in the possibilities and impossibilities of human correspondence and exchange, regardless of whether he or she were a poet; it strikes me, however, that Ali's training in the ghazal is of particular relevance to these questions of communication and miscommunication. It is easy to forget that the ghazal, like so many lyric forms were intended to be, is often sung or recited to an audience who participates in the performance. Many of the best-known ghazals have been sung by famous singers, like Ali's beloved Begum Akhtar (1914-1974) whom he elegizes in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, and form part of South Asian cultural memory. But even if the audience were not familiar with individual lyrics, the ghazal form, as we have seen, lends itself to participation by establishing a scheme—its qafia and radif—in the opening matla. Thus, the ghazal invites an interactive form of verse-making, with "its everyday publicity, the call-and-response interaction between author and audience."[170] The dialogic nature of the ghazal highlights the communicative power between audience and poet. If there is not a unity among the ghazal's couplets,

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[169] Ali, "Poets on Bathroom Walls," p. 95.
[170] Ward, "The Space of Poetry: Inhabiting Form in the Ghazal," p. 66.

there is nonetheless a profound "cultural unity"[171] to be found in the collaboration between a ghazalist and his audience:

> At a *mushaira*—the traditional poetry gathering to which sometimes thousands of people come to hear the most cherished poets of the country—when the poet recites the first line of a couplet, the audience recites it back to him, and then the poet repeats it, and the audience again follows suit. This back and forth creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the suspense will be resolved […] the second line amplifies, surprises, explodes.[172]

The "seductive tension" of "suspense" becomes a more poignant brand of waiting in Ali's poems in *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, as he often hopes for a response he will not receive, sometimes imagining an alternative answer in its absence. It is precisely this absence that opens up the possibility for re-creation (and sometimes invention) of what has been lost in transit and translation, providing the space where his poetry grows and evolves: "Exile offers [Ali] unconfined and unpeopled space into which, one at a time, he introduces human figures […] Just as exile provides each memory with its own space, absence gives high definition to what is absent, be it landscape, lover, or self."[173]

The absence of answers threatens to overwhelm the poems in Ali's next volume, *The Nostalgist's Map of America*, where he adopts the background of the American Southwest, much as Walcott uses the landscape of the South in *The Arkansas Testament*, to dramatize questions of identity and belonging through travel. But it is in the following and most explicitly political volume, *The Country Without a Post Office*, a tribute to a war-torn Kashmir, where Ali grapples with both personal and cultural loss, and where gaps in communication and absences of answers are dramatized the most forcefully (and

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[171] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, p. 5.
[172] Ibid., p. 8.
[173] Arvind Krishna Mehrota, ed., *The Oxford India Anthology of Twelve Modern Indian Poets* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 139.

literally) and on the grandest of scales. Although Ali uses the idea of a country without a post office as a central metaphor, it is also an allusion to real historical circumstance: when Kashmiris rebelled against Indian rule in 1990, there was a seventh-month period of unrest when mail was not delivered to Kashmir. Thus began a period of repression and atrocity that would transform Ali's homeland from afar and would inject a more mournful strain into his already elegiac poetry:

> Let me cry out in that void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Cašmir. Or *Cauchemar* in a sea of stories? Or Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere?[174]

Nostalgia has become nightmarish (*cauchemardesque*), as Ali's poetic voice, particularly in his use of repetition, reaches a nearly apocalyptic register.

One of Ali's most unusual characteristics as a contemporary poet writing in English is his embrace of diction in less skillful hands would flirt with bathos and melodrama. Although he has some of the ironic wryness we see in much twentieth- and twenty-first-century verse (he was, after all, a protégé of Merrill's), his poetry, as Ghosh has remarked, can be unapologetically plaintive:

> His voice was like none I had ever heard before, at once lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward. Not for him the mock-casual almost-prose of so much contemporary poetry: his was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register."[175]

It is precisely because Ali was "not ashamed" of a more theatrical, "bardic register" that his elegies are so interesting: they eschew much of the emotional restraint of modern and contemporary verse, even as his poems become increasingly formally dexterous and constrained as his career progresses. Much like the ghazal, Ali's later work is both

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[174] Ali, "The Blesséd Word: A Prologue," p. 171.
[175] Ghosh, "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," p. 312.

unabashedly mournful and highly patterned. We sense that his audience—often the elegiac subject he is apostrophizing—is less and less accessible to him, less able to respond to his poetic invocation than the audience of a ghazal. While he continues to use imagination as a counterweight to loss, we sense that it is less of counterweight to tragedy and more of a replication, a formal mimesis of the repeated injuries intrinsic to loss. The desperation to communicate—to bridge the gap between not just the living, but the living and the dead—makes his lyric voice, which was more quietly rueful in his earlier nostalgic poems, louder and more disconsolate.

Agha Shahid Ali: Living in an Elegiac Present

Agha Shahid Ali would return to Kashmir, but it would not be the place he remembered, not only because memory alters but because the region had witnessed large-scale destruction. In poem after poem in *The Country Without a Post Office*, Ali describes harrowing scenes of national, cultural, and communal loss. It is not a stretch to say that Ali, who had voluntarily chosen exile, felt newly estranged from his homeland in the 1990s. And although he never does so self-importantly, he draws an implicit parallel between his personal fate and Kashmir's political one: "Kashmir became a vortex of images circling around a single point of stillness: the idea of death […] he [Ali] himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness […] his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir's, each prefigured by the other."[176]As his homeland becomes a wasteland after "large-scale atrocities and the death, by some

[176] Ghosh, "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," p. 319.

accounts, of 70,000 people,"[177] his alienation from his own past is compounded. His origins—which were always at once present and elusive to him—become harder to locate within the context of Kashmir's turmoil. But there is also another, more personal loss, a bereavement that occurs against the backdrop of broader historical tragedy: the death of Ali's mother, who had come to the United States for cancer treatment in 1996 and was too ill to return to Kashmir, even though she, like her son, was deeply homesick. She died in 1997 in Northampton, Massachusetts, and after her death, Ali and his family transported her body back to Kashmir for burial.

Ali chronicles this pilgrimage, that of his mother's final homecoming in a coffin, in his elegiac sequence in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, "From Amherst to Kashmir," in which he entwines prose narrations of "the defining trauma of Shia Islam, the martyrdom of Hussain, grandson of the prophet Muhammad," with lyric reflections on his personal loss, "interweav[ing] the lamentations of Zainab, Hussain's sister, with [his] mourning for his mother,"[178] much as Schnackenberg sets her husband's death against the epic scale of the *Mahabharata* in the final section of *Heavenly Questions*, or Walcott juxtaposes his journey to Fayetteville with the magnitude of Paul's Damascene conversion. Ali, like these poets, elevates personal loss through analogy to the stature of historical and religious events of enormous significance. As Ramazani notes, Ali accentuates the horror of his mother's death, particularly how martyred he felt by it, by pairing it with the story of Hussain and Zainab:

> The identification is curiously doubled, since Ali writes that his mother, ever since girlhood, "had felt Zainab's grief as her own" (26): both Ali and his mother occupy the dual roles of martyr and mourner, Hussain and Zainab. In a dramatic monologue, Zainab cries out, praying to multiple

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[177] Ali, introductory note, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in *The Veiled Suite*, p. 245.
[178] Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, p. 177.

> addressees to join her in mourning, her prayerful voice accentuated by virtue of its being unhitched from any single potential auditor […] The sequence of poems, enacting geographic movement from Amherst to Delhi to Srinigar, recalls the Ashura processions in which Ali had witnessed mourners crying, praying, even wounding themselves in grief.[179]

Drawing from Shia ritual in this sequence, Ali creates a community of mourners in solidarity, much as the ghazal creates one of listeners awaiting the resolution of the couplet. Through the analogy with Hussain's story, Ali conveys to his readers the expansive nature of sorrow that does not respect temporal or spatial boundaries; that draws its inspiration and sustenance from sources in the distant past; that blurs the distinction between personal memory and collective history.

One of Ali's particular strengths as an elegist is his recreation of the incredulity of grief, particularly in its beginning stages. For the bereaved, the loss is experienced repeatedly as he or she has to relearn the unbelievable. Ali dramatizes this incredulity, which often transforms into rage, by stressing both its repetitive nature and the physical disorientation it causes:

> Doomsday's very
> first breath—which was but your departure—that I
> learn by heart again and again. I'm piling
> Doomsday on Doomsday
>
> over oceans, continents, deserts, cities.[180]

Ali's invocation of geography here underscores how the process of mourning can flatten and homogenize experience, irrespective of where one is. In this case, distances collapse not because there is communication, but because location ceases to matter:

> Still it's
> easy to write your

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[179] Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, p. 177.
[180] All citations from "From Amherst to Kashmir" are taken from Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, pp. 250-278.

> story—you are even in lines in which you
> can't be found. It's easy to write your story.
> For whatever city I fly to, even
> that of my birth, you
>
> aren't there to welcome me.

To measure and record moments of repeated, incredulous shock, Ali uses all of the resources of poetic repetition at his disposal—from anaphora, to rhyme, to refrain, to rephrased questions. It is not a coincidence that Ali, who wrote so much in free verse early in his career, reconnects lovingly with order, forms, the ghazal, when he confronts his mother's death and later—by extension—his own. It was his parents who introduced him to the world of ghazals, and so it is only fitting that the tenth section of "From Amherst to Kashmir" is adapted from the work of Urdu poet Ghalib: "Grief crushed me so / again and again it became / the pain that pain erases."

Although Ali has often turned to geographical expanses to figure emotional or psychological disorientation, he always makes Kashmir at least partially accessible to the reader (and to himself) through imaginative acts of poetic recuperation and recreation. But in the wake of his mother's death, even Kashmir's landscape strikes him as alien. His homeland becomes inhospitable to anything but an acute sense of loss and absence. The sad irony, of course, is that when Kashmir becomes physically accessible to the poet again, it is even further away in figurative terms. And no amount of imagining seems capable of erasing or softening the fact of his mother's conspicuous absence, a reality, repeated over and over, which seems more present than his physical surroundings. The material world has been made ethereal through sorrow:

> And we speed through streets that
> follow *Farewell Farewell* and then at each turn

> go into hiding—
>
> for each turn's a world that recalls her, every
> turn her world unable to say Goodbye, though
> she, from every corner, is waving with such
> pity we melt, melt
>
> past the world she loved, past each corner she is
> waving from, just waving herself goodbye.

Nothing about the "the world she loved" is described aside from the fact that she loved it. We do not need any physical details of the "streets that / follow *Farewell Farewell*" because the physical world is "melt[ing]" away. Gone is Ali's concern about whether he will remember the specific blue of "the Jhelum's waters," as the landscape has shrunk, not to the size of a postcard, but to that of one absent person, a singular individual whose loss is enormously present, "for each turn's a world that recalls her." The image of the mother "waving herself goodbye" foreshadows the self-elegiac turn Ali will take later in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, particularly in "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World."

Ali animates the physical disorientation of pain through geographical figures, but he also does so on an even grander scale: with juxtapositions of mundane and cosmic images. And while his early poems often invoke the moon, the stars, and the ocean as figures for measuring distances across space and time, "From Amherst to Kashmir" marks a turn to more astronomical metaphors. Ali does not approach the cosmic with Schnackenberg's sense of awe, but rather with rage and anguish. His sequence shares with Schnackenberg's, however, moments of incredulity that the same world in which we live and perceive cosmic phenomena from afar is a world without the beloved. In the twelfth and final section of the poem, "By the Waters of the Sind," the poet observes,

"wine-glass / in hand," the sun setting, and asks himself: "So this / is separation?" The question goes unanswered as Ali contemplates how "the moon must rise now from behind / that one pine-topped mountain to find / us without you." The contrast here between a quotidian human scene—people gathered outside drinking—and that of the far-off moon underscores the degree of separation, of alienation, Ali feels. The "wine-glass," a mundane object by comparison, shares the stage with the moon, the stars, and the immensity of loss. With a world-weary tone, Ali mocks one of the guests "who is asking Father to fill them / in on—what else?—the future." For a poet who so often locates himself imaginatively in a future he cannot see, Ali's fatigue with how future-oriented others are ("what else?") in the wake of his bereavement is revealing.

The poet's fatigue and suffering are alchemized into something else as the poem reaches its climactic end: fury and incredulity. But first Ali experiences profound "terror," as the moon, which has now "risen" and "silvers the world / so ruthlessly," illuminates for him (to himself) the depths of his own fear of the present and its absences:

> What
> rustle of trees the wind forgot
> reaches me through this roar as the moon,
> risen completely, silvers the world
> ruthlessly, shining on
> me a terror so pearled
>
> that *How dare the moon*—I want to cry out,
> Mother—*shine so hauntingly out*
> *here when I've sentenced it to black waves*
> *inside me? Why has it not perished?*
> *How dare it shine on an earth*
> *from which you have vanished?*

In this section's other stanzas, the first two lines always rhyme, sometimes gently. Here, in the last stanza of the section and of the entire "From Amherst to Kashmir" sequence,

the first two lines rhyme, but with one another: "out" rhymes with "out." It recalls the opening stanza of the ghazal, where the refrain appears in both lines, effectively rhyming with itself. What is *in* the world, the poet asks, when his mother is "out" of this world? What else goes "out" with her? Her death seems to erase the world as Ali knows it. And yet, in a haunting irony, the world *does* continue to exist, blasphemously; the moon and stars continue to shine. They are figured as desecrations of a deeper truth: that light, for the poet, has gone out, just as the poet requests earlier in the poem, in section 8, "Srinigar Airport":

> Let night begin
>
> without any light, for as they carry the coffin
> from the mosque to the earth, no stars shine
> to reveal Him as only the final assassin.

"From Amherst to Kashmir" is a heartbreaking sequence, but in its length and allusiveness it does not have the same dense, lyric power of "Lenox Hill," which is Ali's crowning achievement both as an elegist and as a contemporary formalist. The poem, like much of *Heavenly Questions*, is set in a hospital and has the same narcotic, dream-like quality of much of Schnackenberg's elegy. The atmospheric effect, too, is similar: we sense we are in a twilight state, where reality and fantasy cohabit for both the patient and the caretakers. Ali's elegy is in the very difficult and intricate Italian form of the *canzone*. It resembles the sestina, in that it is not reliant on a rhyme scheme *per se*, but on a system of repeating end words. Contemporary poet and critic Edward Hirsch defines the *canzone*, delineating its historical context, helpfully:

> A term referring to various kinds of medieval Provençal and Italian lyric poems, usually on the subject of love. Petrarch established (and perfected) the *canzone* as a form comprising five- or six-line stanzas and a concluding envoi (half stanza). Dante composed a maddeningly difficult

> form of the *canzone*—an unrhymed poem which uses the same five end words in each of the five twelve-line stanzas, intricately varying the pattern […] This form of the *canzone* has been keenly employed in our time by W.H. Auden, L.E. Sissman, James Merrill, Anthony Hecht, and Marilyn Hacker.[181]

Ali should be added to that list of contemporary poets for executing Dante's "maddeningly difficult" *canzone*, "a form of unusual rigour and difficulty (the poet Anthony Hecht once remarked that Shahid deserved to be in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having written three *canzones*—more than any other poet)."[182]

Amitav Ghosh articulates beautifully how Ali maximizes the *canzone*'s structure, with its built-in contrasts of scale, to great elegiac effect, creating a kind of home, or monument, for his mother:

> In 'Lenox Hill', the architectonics of the form creates a soaring superstructure, an immense domed enclosure, like that of the great mosque of Isfahan or the mausoleum of Sayyida Zainab in Cairo: a space that seems all the more vast because of the austerity of its proportions. The rhymes and half-rhymes are the honeycombed arches that thrust the dome towards the heavens, and the metre is the mosaic that holds the whole in place. Within the immensity of this bounded space, every line throws open a window that beams a shaft of light across continents, from Amherst to Kashmir, from the hospital of Lenox Hill to the Pir Panjal Pass. Entombed at the centre of this soaring edifice lies his mother.[183]

Although the *canzone* would seem to share very little with the ghazal, a closer look reveals how they both use refrain as their principle structural device. As Ramazani observes, Ali combines aspects of the ghazal with the *canzone* to create a formal and thematic hybrid:

> Just as the canzone and the ghazal converge in the repetitions of Agha Shahid Ali's elegy for his mother, "Lenox Hill," so too, at the level of trope, a cross-cultural simile fuses the tenor of sirens heard through a New

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[181] Edward Hirsch, "Glossary," *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 1999), p. 272.
[182] Ghosh, "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," p. 320.
[183] Ibid., pp. 320-21.

> York City hospital window with the legendary cry of elephants killed by a sixth-century Hun King in India who enjoyed rolling elephants off cliffs […] This transnational trope for the vocalization of grief bridges the transhemispheric worlds inhabited and crossed by poet and mother.[184]

Ramazani notes here that trope—or what we might call extended metaphor, in this case—has the capacity to figuratively diminish distances in time and space. But while the act of metaphor-making is inherently imaginative, it is also the purview of delusion, delirium, and illness. It is the mother, after all, who in a post-surgery state compares the sound of sirens to elephants from a legend:

> At dawn, my mother
> heard, in her hospital-dream of elephants,
> sirens wail through Manhattan like elephants
> forced off Pir Panjal's rock cliffs in Kashmir:
> the soldiers, so ruled, had rushed the elephants.[185]

The elephant legend provides a perfect metaphor for the poet, who seeks to recreate the sense of longing for home he and his mother feel and the magnitude of the suffering they are jointly experiencing. Lastly, the elephants foreshadow, of course, the mother's death. (Interestingly, the name of the hospital has the word "hill," but the mother envisions a larger landscape: a range of rocky cliffs.)

Let us consider the choices Ali makes in his end words, the DNA of his *canzone*: elephants, mother, Kashmir, universe, and die. The scale of the poem could, in some sense, be defined by these elemental terms. They speak eloquently and economically of the size (elephants, universe), the kind (mother, Kashmir), and the nature of loss (death). But Ali also varies these fixed end words, making them more capacious in their connotative reach. In the first stanza, "dye" replaces "die," and then becomes the "dia" of

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[184] Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 90.
[185] All citations from "Lenox Hill" taken from Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, pp. 247-249.

"diamonds" in the second. "Universe" becomes "traverse" and "verse" in the third stanza. And "Mother," fascinatingly, becomes "Father" in the fifth stanza, when Ali expands the poem to elegize both of his parents (even though his father is still alive) by recreating their first date: "'As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,' / she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir, / she's watching, at the Regal, her first film with Father." Here, "Mother" and "Father" rhyme, as they are always unified in memory. The one time that Ali alters the end word "Mother" is to accommodate an imagined recollection—he has only heard it second-hand, of course—of his parents before his birth, just as we saw in his early poem "A Lost Memory of Delhi" in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*.

To pause at minor variations in end words may seem picayune, but I would argue that such nuanced changes have far-reaching significance. When Ramazani and other critics write about Ali's use of the *canzone*, they do not show us how, at the micro-level of line and word, Ali gestures at themes central to this poem and his *oeuvre* as a whole. Take, for example, the fact that "Kashmir" and "elephants" are the only end words that are never altered. Why might this be the case, especially with "Kashmir," which Ali has often invoked in alternate spellings? One interpretation of "Kashmir" as an unchanged end word might be that, in the midst of so much flux, one element is constant: Ali's desire to return home, which has become a kind of platonic ideal. This homeland, in reality, has changed drastically. But in the poet's hands it remains the unchanged end word in a *canzone*, memorialized as a dream of home, a fantasy of eventual return, a Zion. As for "elephants" remaining unchanged, that is more inscrutable. Would it be glib to suggest that "elephants" is just too unwieldy a word to alter? Perhaps, but Ali, despite

his elegiac bent, has proved himself to be a playful poet, eager for any verbal challenge. Perhaps Ali is suggesting, with the reappearance of these legendary elephants, the prevailing and enduring power of myth (whether it is the myth of a homeland or that of elephants being sacrificed).

It is insufficient to say that Ali employed a difficult form, or that he used that form—which bears some resemblance to the ghazal in its employment of refrain—to memorialize his mother. The form itself demands that a careful reader look at broader issues of scale and measurement, even if they seem minute or fussily technical. For a poet to attempt a form this taxing, and to execute it this strictly, is no easy feat, but Ali has proven, time and time again, that he welcomes a formal challenge. So why, if he can execute this "maddeningly difficult" form, does he choose to bend the rules in certain places? We owe it to the poetry to try to determine how such formal exceptions might be strategic. For example, when Ali alters the end word "universe," replacing it with "no verse," it is to make a meta-poetic admission of artistic limitation in the face of tragedy:

> they asked me, *So how's the writing?* I answered *My mother*
> *is my poem*. What did they expect? For no verse
> sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir
> and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir
>
> (across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. *Kashmir,*
> *she's dying!* How her breathing drowns out the universe
> as she sleeps in Amherst. Windows open on Kashmir:
> *There*, the fragile wood-shrines—so far away—of Kashmir!

There is much to say about this passage, but what is particularly arresting is how Ali engages huge dimensions. His mother has become so titanic, so all-encompassing, that she has become his poetry, his life's work. To convey his incredulity at her impending death, Ali apostrophizes Kashmir, investing it with a talismanic power to intervene in one

individual's life, as if it is a kind of deity (*Kashmir, / she's dying!)* in contention with Ali's doubted Allah. What could be a greater contrast than the breath of one person set against the entire universe? And because she is present, so are all of legend and the past: geography and centuries melt away, as the windows in the hospital "open on Kashmir." But she is also, paradoxically, absent; she is already like "the promise, fading, of Kashmir," which is both audible through the elephants' cries and "so far away." In this twilight state, the mother is at once alive and dead, and Ali asks, in desperation: "*Are you somewhere, alive, somewhere alive, Mother?*"

As the poem draws to a close, becoming denser and more compressed in its final envoi, we sense, as we did in "From Amherst to Kashmir," that no amount of poetic imagination ("no verse / sufficed") will stop the inevitable, which exists on its own scale:

> Ivory blots out the elephants.
> I enter this: *The Belovéd leaves one behind to die*.
> For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
> and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
> when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

It seems that the elephants, who were never altered in the poem, are about to be erased, "blot[ted] out." The poet, who is recording in the "ledger" of the "universe" his mother's death (recall how Schnackenberg looked for her husband's name in the phone book as he was dying), does not say anything specific about her or her life. The story is a universal one: "*The Belovéd leaves one behind to die*." But the diction here, "*Belovéd,*" is that of the ghazal. The ghazalist frequently addresses his song to the Belovéd, whom he at once courts and mourns. It does not seem fruitful to pursue the fact, although it bears mentioning, that Ali's implicit portrayal of himself in this *canzone* (a love poem, as well) is as his mother's lover or romantic interest. To me, this is not truly an Oedipal move, just

another employment of scale for elegiac effect. His love for his mother is so immense that there is nothing else comparable. He experiences grief as commensurate with romantic passion. Casting her as the beloved love-object of the ghazalist, Ali situates his grief within a cultural tradition he shared with his parents, as he enshrines his mother in the haven of a poetic form they cherished together. But he also alludes to the ghazal as a means of foreshadowing his own death, since his mother "*leaves one behind to die*." It is in Ali's role as a self-elegist that he recovers his ability to use poetry to imagine the future, even if this future is figured, paradoxically, as a kind of afterlife.

Agha Shahid Ali, Self-Elegist: Imagining the Future

Ali is certainly not the first poet in English to write self-elegy; British and American literature is full of poetic contemplations of the afterlife of the artist and his legacy. From Donne, who imagines coming back as a ghost to avenge his unfaithful love interest in "The Apparition," to Dickinson, who envisions the rituals of her own death in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," to Hardy, who wonders what the world will say of him in "Afterwards," poets have often used poetry as a way of speaking from beyond the grave. And this tradition continues in twentieth-century poetry, with Yeats crafting his own epitaph in "Under Ben Bulben," Plath flirting with suicide and resurrection in "Lady Lazarus," and Heaney contemplating the process of dying in "A Kite for Aibhin." So what distinguishes Ali as a self-elegist?

Curiously, a partial answer may lie in his consistency. To say that poets are interested in the question of mortality—especially in the wake of loss or aging—is the dullest of truisms. And yet, while many poets are elegiac, few contemporary poets are as

self-elegizing as Ali in their earliest poems. Even in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, Ali often refers to or imagines his eventual death. But Ali goes a step further, not just in picturing the world without himself but in creating the illusion of speaking both in the present and in the future, of being both a living being today and a ghost tomorrow. He inhabits in the present a kind of suspended futurity. Ali is never quite where he says he is. His sense of time is more providential than chronological. When we are in the present, we are often imagining the past, a past that we could never have known and therefore cannot remember. When we are in the past, we often have the vantage point of the lyric present to guide us. And when we are in the present, Ali often wants to transport us elsewhere, to some place in the near or distant future. This mobility is simultaneously disorienting and freeing, as we move from continent to continent, from era to era, from memory to fantasy. And although Ali is profoundly interested, like Heaney, Walcott, and Schnackenberg, in dilating fleeting experiences so as to record them, he is more concerned with the movement from one experience to another and less invested in accurate and faithful record-keeping (whatever that might mean in poetry). The imagination, for Ali, is often a more powerful and generative source of inspiration than memory.

Although most of the poems in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* imagine the past, we saw how Ali's opening poem, "A Postcard from Kashmir," envisions the future, one in which the poet's future memory of his homeland will betray him. There is still a future to speak of. In other poems, like "Vacating an Apartment," Ali uses moving out of a property as an extended metaphor for his own death; he becomes, effectively, a tenant evicted from the world of the living. He describes how the cleaners eradicate all traces of

him: they “whitewash my voice-stains” and “ignore my love affair with the furniture, / the corner table that memorized / my crossed-out lines.”[186] It is unclear what the fate of the poet will be after he leaves his apartment, but the final image is stark: “I’m moving out holding tombstones in my hands.” What seems doubtful, in this poem, is the possibility of a poetic legacy, as only the “corner table” seems conscious of Ali’s work. Compounding the poet’s sense of being erased is the appearance of those who will next inhabit his space: “When the landlord brings new tenants, / even Memory is a stranger.”

Many of Ali’s early poems contain self-elegiac moments, as the poet often imagines others receiving the news of his death, but the best example of an earlier self-elegy is “The Last Saffron,” which appears in *The Country Without a Post Office*. The strangeness of Ali’s use of time is evident even in the grammar of this poem: “I will die that day in late October, it will be long ago.”[187] The conjugation of the phrase “it will be long ago” speaks volumes. The future and the past are synchronic. In an even eerier move, Ali imagines himself—impossibly—among the very people who will wonder where he has gone after he dies. If that sounds incomprehensible, it is because it defies any logic but that of Ali’s sense of poetic time: “‘No one’s seen Shahid,’ we’ll hear again and again, in every tea house from Nishat to Naseem.” The poem concludes with an image we will see again in Ali’s greatest self-elegy, “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World,” that of himself being rowed in a boat to the afterlife, figured as an island:

> Yes, I remember it,
> the day I’ll die, I broadcast the crimson,
>
> so long ago of that sky, its spread air
> its rushing dyes, and a piece of earth

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[186] Ali, “Vacating an Apartment,” *The Veiled Suite*, pp. 61-64.
[187] Ali, “The Last Saffron,” *The Veiled Suite*, pp. 181-83

> bleeding, apart from the shore, as we went
> on the day I'll die, past the guards, and he,
>
> keeper of the world's last saffron, rowed me
> on an island the size of a grave. On
>
> two yards he rowed me into the sunset,
> past all pain […]

This is the perfect distillation of Ali's conflation of memory and imagination: "I remember it, / the day I'll die." The poem then lurches to the present tense ("I broadcast the crimson"), but it is unclear where we actually are in time. Memories and imagined memories have been layered into such a complex palimpsest that only a literalist would seek to isolate them from one another. Here, again, we have the poet bifurcated: at once dead and alive, inside himself and outside himself as an observer ("as we went / on the day I'll die"). This poem that spans several different time periods narrows telescopically toward the end, shrinking to one time (a "sunset") and one place: "an island the size of a grave."

The figures of the oarsmen, the boat, and the island return in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, in "I Dream I am at the Ghat[188] of the Only World." In this poem, Ali crafts a self-elegy that includes apostrophes to his mother and that is thoroughly protean, as it changes its voice, diction, and focus throughout. A formal and thematic hybrid written in *terza rima* with three main characters, Ali's poem pays tribute to Dante's pilgrimage with Vergil while imitating the very different poetic style of his mentor and close friend, James Merrill, in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Finally, Ali ends the poem with a ghazal-like third-person address to himself from himself (and from Merrill) that alludes to lines of Merrill's "For Proust."

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[188] A *ghat* is a flight of stairs leading down to a river, in this case, the Jhelum.

The voyage begins in a recognizable place, in the waters of the Jhelum, which Ali crossed many times as a boy. It soon becomes clear, however, that the landscape is also phantasmagoric. The oarsman, who is both a Grim Reaper figure and the poet's guide to the underworld, leads him past visions of people and places he knew. In one apparition, Ali sees the houseboats of people who are long gone, as they "wave, longing for letters, frantic to tear open / envelopes."[189] The country without a post office is waiting for communication from the outside world, from the land of the living, just as Ali waited for news from Kashmir throughout his life: "When I look back, nothing at all is heard / though I can see them furious in oblivion's // shade, crumpling postcards." As the boat travels onward, Ali arrives, miraculously, at the house where his mother died in Massachusetts:

> But the trees have vanished when I step off the boat.
> Instead, there is a house, the one in Amherst, the one
> where my mother fought death, by heart able to quote—
> to the last—from the Urdu of Ghalib, from the Persian
> of Hafiz. I keep ringing the bell.

Ali reminds us, again, of his mother's love of the ghazal, but he also warns us that his own death is imminent, and that with it, "A night of ghazals comes to an end."

But wasn't the ghazal endless? Can't it be forever rearranged and expanded? Is the poet, in this self-elegy, announcing not just his own death but also that of poetry? One answer to this question is yes, but the poem is more than just a lamentation on endings and on the limitations of art. By situating himself within an international lineage of writers—from Ghalib and Hafiz to Dante and Merrill—Ali affirms the power of poetry to live in newly adapted forms, even as its poets die. As the poem concludes, Ali reminds us of "one definition of the world *ghazal*: It is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a

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[189] All citations are from Ali, "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World," pp. 313-21.

hunt and knows it will die."[190] Has the poet been cornered? Has life hunted him down? Here, Ali portrays himself, through the gazelle, as the inevitable prey of circumstance. As he completes his journey, it becomes clear that his purpose is twofold: to make a pilgrimage to his mother's "shrine-island" and to cross the threshold from "the only world" to the unknown. At the climax of the poem, Ali mourns his own impending death: "Now the cry of the gazelle— / it breaks the heart into the final episode."

The "final episode" of the poem, curiously enough, bears some resemblance to a ghazal, even though it imitates the style and structure of much of *The Changing Light at Sandover* with its use of polyphony and its capitalized words. As the "boat enters fog," it is unclear how and when Ali will confront his death. But then he hears a voice:

> WEEPING? YOU MUST NOT. I ask, "Which world will bring her
> back, or will he who wears his heart on his sleeve eaves-
> drop always, in his inmost depths, on a cruel harbinger?"
>
> SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE
> ALWAYS LEAVES.

The voice cautions the poet to stop his grieving. In response, Ali asks whether he will encounter his mother in another life ("Which world will bring her / back?") or whether he is doomed to continued mourning, to "wear[ing] his heart on his sleeve" and awaiting—in seeming perpetuity—his own end. But the voice knows better. It is the disembodied voice of Merrill telling the poet to "HUSH," to end the poem because loss is inevitable: "THE LOVED ONE / ALWAYS LEAVES." Who is the loved one? Is he or she the same as the ghazal's Belovéd?

One way to read this ending casts the mother as "THE LOVED ONE." In this reading, Merrill is telling Ali that grief is futile. By definition, the loved one leaves, or

[190] Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities,* p. 3.

dies. In Merrill's poem "For Proust," the death of a friend catalyzes the epiphany that those whom we love leave us, but not merely that: they leave us with unfinished work:

> Though in pain
> You let her leave—the loved one always leaves.
> What of the little phrase? Its notes, like leaves
> In the strong tea you have contrived to drain,
>
> Strangely intensify what you must do.[191]

What is left for Ali to do, once the self-elegy is complete? Ali seems to be speaking to himself, ventriloquized through Merrill. In this interpretation, Ali implies that he himself is the loved one who will leave; he is announcing his own death by referring to himself in third person. This reading puts Ali, rather than Merrill, in the position of the sage, the consoler. We, as readers, are enjoined not to mourn the inevitable, even as the poet leaves us, as a night of ghazals draws to a close. By apostrophizing himself, Ali recalls the signature of the ghazal, where the author steps outside of the text, observing it from a third-person point of view. This is, perhaps, one of the goals of poets: to observe things both closely and at a critical distance.

Ali died—in an uncanny parallel, he suffered from the same kind of brain cancer as his mother—in 2001. Writing of Ali's last moments, Amitav Ghosh marvels at the tranquility with which his friend approached his death. But even more remarkable, perhaps, was how Ali lived his final moments in a consciously and calmly elegiac manner:

> Now, in his absence, I am amazed that so brief a friendship has resulted in so vast a void. Often, when I walk into my living room, I remember his presence there, particularly on the night when he read us his farewell to the world: 'I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World.' I remember how he created a vision of an evening of ghazals, drawing to its end; of the be-

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[191] James Merrill, "For Proust," *Collected Poems*, reprint edition, eds. J.D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (New York: Knopf, 2002), pp. 139-140.

> diamonded singer vanishing through a mirror; I remember him evoking the voices he loved—of Begum Akhtar, Eqbal Ahmed and James Merrill—urging him on as he journeys towards his mother: '*love doesn't help anyone finally survive*'. Shahid knew exactly how it would end and he was meticulous in saying his farewells, careful in crafting the envoy to the last verses of his own life.[192]

Is the eulogist making the poet's death too self-consciously literary? Maybe. But reading Ali's work, from his earliest poems in free verse to his formalist elegies later in his life, one observes a crafted-ness—a love of artifice that shapes, but never dilutes, the authenticity of experience. Ali was a writer—and a person—who structured his life in a literary way and who used literature as a refuge, as a homeland that rivaled Kashmir or the United States.

The last poem in Ali's collected works is included in a book of ghazals, but it does not adhere to Ali's strictest definition of the form. A mere two lines long, it is only a *matla*. The *qafia* and *radif* are established, but I wonder if we can even call them such, given that they do not have the space to rhyme or to refrain:

> If you leave who will prove that my cry existed?
> Tell me what I was like before I existed."[193]

Such a poem is an extreme experiment in scale. What does it mean for a form to be a form if it does not fulfill its basic requirements? At what point do we reach a kind of formal *reductio ad absurdum*, the poem distilled to its essence to the point of self-erasure? Ali selects a fascinating end word to invoke these poetic questions: "existed." Not "exists," in the present tense, but "existed." Is this, perhaps, his final self-elegy? A self-elegy that, ironically, ends at the beginning of the ghazal, at the completion of the *matla?* We do not know who the "you" refers to—the reader? The poet's mother? The

[192] Ghosh, "'The Ghat of the Only World': Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn," p. 322.
[193] Ali, "Existed," in *The Veiled Suite*, p. 376.

ghazal's abstracted "Belovéd"?—but it does not matter. What matters is that in a couplet, in the smallest unit of poetry, Ali crystallizes the importance of others, of human relationships, in making sense of our individual pasts, which we want to have meant something, "to prove" worthy of. And the past does not exist, he seems to say, unless others collaborate with us in imagining it. We are all self-contained, like the ghazal's couplets, but we haunt one another.

Envoi

To return to the question that ended my introductory chapter: what can poetry offer us? Are imagining and remembering at odds? Yes and no. Poetry will never measure or record data like other media. If we are looking for accuracy, poetry always falls short. But poetry's idiom, metaphor, offers us something else. In ushering in, as Donoghue argues, a new world, metaphor provides us not just with an alternate way of seeing and of being; it offers us the possibility of more metaphor. What do I mean by this? Metaphor engenders metaphor. If we compare the poem to a Grecian urn, we usher in, by implied analogy, other unspoken comparisons and possibilities. If it is a scullery bucket, what does that say about it? What do scullery buckets and urns have in common? Where did we get the idea of the poem as a container? Recall how Auden calls Yeats an "Irish vessel" in his elegy. What other objects, apart from an urn, might represent poetry? The mere fact of the comparison invites other comparison, especially since metaphor has, in many ways, a limited longevity before it lapses into cliché. By comparing x to y, we shut out other possibilities, but we also invite them. Because a new metaphor does not exist in a vacuum; it creates the space in which it lives; it perpetuates the movement of thought.

Metaphor, often based on contrasts of scale, structures how we remember our lives. Poets are particularly interested in simulating, in the microcosm of a poem, this larger process whereby we always compare the present to the past. But metaphors also exclude, overwriting memory, drowning out, erasing. What we may lose in factual accuracy, however, we often gain in insight. But in order for a poem to be memorable, to move us, we need it to aim not to be comprehensive, but to be representative. It can never

be true to the scale of life. Take, for example, Bishop's famous "One Art." The poem is a catalogue of everything the poet has lost. In creating an inventory, Bishop paradoxically preserves these losses within the world of the poem. These losses are not meant to be exhaustive, however, but rather suggestive. Perhaps they are the most important losses to the poet—we will never know. But their presence tips the scale in their favor, giving them an added weight. Are the keys Bishop loses just keys? What is the gesture that she loves and never names?

There is an arbitrariness, of course, to memory. But what the artifice of poetry offers us is a constructed-ness, even if what is constructed creates the illusion of being arbitrary. The poem is a deliberately crafted object, one whose specific images and figures, by virtue of *not* being all other images and figures, both exclude possibilities and generate their own fields of reference, their own futures. The form of the poem might be its vehicle; the content its tenor. But rather than one replacing or superseding the other, they work in tandem to constitute the poem. All four poets I have looked at are committed to using poetry to record loss and limitation. They do not have illusions about the power of poetry. Yet all four also believe in the generative force of metaphor, in its implication of futurity, in its imaginative resources, which, though they cannot compensate for loss, exactly, give us something new to remember.

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