

Facing the Bleakness: Death in Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*

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Introduction

Seamus Heaney's *Human Chain*, published in 2010, is still in the early stages of being placed in relation to the rest of the poet's work. However, it seems that in the immediate reception by critics, there has already emerged a consensus regarding two aspects of the collection; it is clear that the poems are written in the shadow of death, but, at the same time, that the poet is in a life-affirming mood. For instance, in his essay on Heaney's appropriation of Virgil in *Human Chain*, Stephen Heiny refers to the "insistent, urgent vitality" of the collection while acknowledging that "death is the central theme" (305) of the central poem, "Route 110" (*HC* 48-59), and Colm Tóibín observes an "an active urge to capture the living breath of things" that accompanies this "book of shades and memories". However, we should not equate this positivity with optimism; instead, we should place it in the context of Václav Havel's definition of hope (quoted in *RP* 4-5), which Heaney understands – in his words during an interview with Paul Muldoon – as follows; "it isn't grounded in the notion that everything will turn out well ... hope means that you believe something is worth working for" (*New Yorker* 40:50-41:10). In this thesis, I will analyse *Human Chain* through this concept of hope – cautious, realistic but deeper and more profound than optimism – as a way of explaining the curious combination that critics have identified in the collection: death and the vitality of life. By offering close readings of individual poems, I will demonstrate how "hope" underpins as well as produces this collection.

Before analysing the collection in question, I will look at Heaney's approach towards poetry in the face of death as he states it in his critical prose. His lecture "Joy or Night" (*RP* 146-63) tackles this subject exactly. In it, he lays out two different poetic attitudes, as represented by W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin. Heaney takes "The Man and the Echo" as an example of the former's deliberate resistance against "the dominance of the material over the spiritual" (*RP* 150) and as an instance, therefore, of poetry written against the supremacy of the realities of failing body and failing mind, and for the inclusion of "the supernatural" (*ibid*). This can be taken as hopeful in the sense of the

aforementioned definition. On the other hand, “Aubade” by Philip Larkin, is held up as a poem that capitulates to a baldly scientific understanding of death that, for all its brutal honesty, fails to live up to one of the key tenets of poetry, namely that it must counter this understanding of life. As Heaney says, “The poet who would be most the poet has to attempt an act of writing that outstrips the conditions even as it observes them” (159). We can view Larkin’s proclamation that “Being brave / Lets no one off the grave” (*RP* 154), as directly in contravention of this view. It follows that what Heaney aims to create in *Human Chain* is the opposite of this materialism. The main task of this thesis is therefore to discover in what ways Heaney manages to counter the outlook he sees in Larkin. The word “outstrips”, from the above quotation, suggests that, rather than ignoring scientific fact, Heaney aims for a taking-into-account-of and then a going-beyond in his poems. He must, in other words, try to stay one step ahead of the argument that reduces life to only its physical qualities, whilst simultaneously accepting “the conditions” in order to avoid a blind, naive optimism.

At this point it will be useful to provide a more full definition of exactly what these “conditions” are, which Heaney will take into account but then goes beyond. In the interview with Muldoon, he neatly summarizes them with the observation that, when he looks back at his childhood, he half-seriously views himself as an anthropologist rather than autobiographer. In other words, his childhood was lived in a different world from the one in which he was being interviewed. Ireland, he says, moved from a “mythic” (*New Yorker* 14:33) to a “late twentieth century landscape” (*ibid* 15:17) in the short space of one lifetime. As such, it has become less accepting of the Yeatsian attitude towards death and more inclined to that which Heaney sees in Larkin’s “Aubade”: a scientific, materialistic hopelessness in front of the “cliff-face of mystery” (*RP* 160).

Human Chain fits – as I will show – into Heaney’s overall vision of poetry as ideally a form of “counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress” (*RP* 3), as it aims to rebalance the scales between the modern reductionist notion of death and that which is deemed “spiritual”. He does this through both drawing attention to the joys of the physical world, while leaving space for a kind of

spirituality. Exactly how Heaney redefines the physical world of sensory experience, what form these notions of spirituality or “the supernatural” take, and how he navigates the difficult task of including them while simultaneously respecting “the conditions”, is what will occupy the major part of this thesis. Each chapter will be broadly concerned with a general notion that counterweights the scientific, sceptical attitude and with how Heaney avoids the “optimism”, as he refers to it in the Muldoon interview, of the “it’ll be grand” (40:40) mindset.

The first chapter focuses on the importance of the sensory, physical world and on the heightened awareness of the human body that the threat of death can bring. It takes “Had I not been awake” (HC 3) and “Chanson d’Aventure” (HC 14-6) as the central examples of such an attitude in the biographical context of Heaney’s stroke in 2006 and finishes with a reading of “The Baler” (HC 24-5), that raises questions about this attitude. In the second chapter, I examine the consolation that the aural aspect of poetry can offer, even while the body declines. In this light I consider “An Old Refrain” (HC 20-1), “Eelworks” (HC 28-32) and “Slack” (HC 33-4) as professions of faith in the consolations of the poetic vocation and of poetic language itself. In the third chapter and fourth chapters, I will read the poems in which Heaney is most strikingly non-consolatory; “Album” (HC 4-8) and “The Conway Stewart” (HC 9), in the third, and “Uncoupled” (HC 10-1) and “The Butts” (HC 12-3), in the fourth. In my fifth chapter, however, I will focus on the journey in “Route 110” (HC 48-59), in which Heaney ends by offering an understanding of life as a chain, rather than a ball-and-chain. I will also consider the two elegies “Death of a Painter” (HC 60) and “Loughanure” (HC 61-5) in the context of their position as elegies after the optimistic ending of “Route 110”. In the final chapter, I will explore the ways in which Heaney engages most explicitly with “the supernatural”. I will begin by reading “Human Chain” (HC 18) as a prefatory poem to the later, more explicit notion of the spirit, which cautiously hovers behind the final poems of the collection, “The door was open and the house was dark” (HC 82), “In the Attic” (HC 83-4) and “A Kite for Aibhín” (HC 85). This is the “cliff face of mystery” up-close, and Heaney makes a valiant final effort to scale it in these final poems.

Chapter One: “Not now”

“Had I not been awake”

In this first chapter, I will show that in *Human Chain* Heaney responds to the physical condition of having suffered a stroke in 2006 with a realistic but positive observation: a brush with death can heighten one’s experience of life. Helen Vendler describes this as “the inexplicable resurgence of primary first-order desire amid the exacerbations of death’s third-order reflection” (153) and argues that it is “too primal to be analysed” (ibid), but I will attempt such an analysis in this chapter. The first poem, “Had I not been awake” (HC 3) announces this new attitude and suggests that the collection as a whole arose out of this renewal. Wakefulness can thus be read as a synonym for a kind of poetic hyper-sensitivity. The title (and the very first words of the collection), is formulated in such a way as to allow for at least two interpretations. Most obviously it refers to the time after the stroke – with the opposite of “awake” being “dead” – in which his poetic abilities returned to him “like an animal to the house”, resulting in the proceeding collection. The inverted commas of the title imply that Heaney is observing his own recovery process in this poem. Through such a reading, “Had I not been awake” suggests survival and renewal, and therefore announces *Human Chain* as the product of his re-engagement with the sensory world – the collection arises from a heightened sense of what it is to be alive after a brush with death. The poet is now temporarily hyper-sensitive to the world around him; he can hear the movements of nature once again, and they run through him onto the page like a current conducted through the “t”s of “pattered”, “ticking” and “electric”. The electricity that runs throughout the first three stanzas of the poem in the “t” of the repeated “it” is like a signal running along nerves in the body, once the functions of the brain have returned to normal. The poem itself is the expression of this hyper-sensitivity, and as such, it is a part of his recovery. Jeffrey Bilbro argues that Heaney is aware – in the context of *Door into the Dark* – of “the healing delights that come from language’s sonic qualities” (322). Seen in this light, “Had I not been awake” is not only an example of this poetic healing, but

(unlike “Aubade”) also an argument for the case that poetry – through its “inarticulate, primitively aural function” (ibid) – can have a healing effect.

A second reading of the poem, stemming from a different interpretation of the inverted commas in the title, suggests a different attitude towards infirmity and death, which is perhaps more consistent with some of the poetry later in the collection. In an interview with Robert McCrum for *The Guardian*, Heaney speaks about his “sense of humour” still being intact while being carried downstairs immediately after the stroke: “It’s the curse of Field Day, I said.” McCrum calls this “his natural detachment”, as though the poet was observing himself while his body was suffering. The self-consciousness the inverted commas bring, in this way, does not apply to the time of recovery, but to the time of suffering; the poet is not observing his recovery, but the stroke itself. Had he not been awake – or poetically aware – he would have missed this moment of suffering. It seems an odd attitude towards such an event, when viewed in terms of only its physical effects, but by observing it as a poet, it becomes clear that recovery alone does not inspire poetry; suffering and the observation of suffering are necessary too. In this reading, the poem is a description of the stroke and the return of inspiration as one and the same, instead of one leading to the other after recovery. “Returning like an animal to the house” in the third stanza, is poetry accompanied “dangerously” by a stroke. The “courier blast” is a message of bodily suffering bearing with it a renewal that Heaney “would have missed”, had he not been awake to the sensations – which are both painful and poetic – during that night in Donegal.

“Chanson d’Aventure”

These biographical events are explored more fully and with a critically ironic slant later on, in the sequence “Chanson d’Aventure” (HC 14-6). Yet ““Had I not been awake”” does not therefore lose its power due to its seeming naivety. On the contrary, it is the forceful, optimistic nature of this poem that makes it a powerful piece with which to open the collection. The intention is overwhelmingly life- and poetry-affirming; it is a bold opening statement of defiance, establishing Heaney’s

determination to continue. In its final stanza he says, with gladness and intrepidity, that the end – both in terms of his poetry and his life – though it is coming – is “not now”. This deictic pointer – “now” – is important throughout the poems that I am analysing; I will return to it in the coming chapters, but it is sufficient to observe that, in this context, it is used as a way of – in David Kennedy’s words, in his essay on deixis in poetry – “emphasizing present conditions” (David Kennedy 2) and specifically the act of writing itself, as undertaken by the poet.

In “Chanson d’Aventure”, Heaney’s initial, electrified response to the stroke and the awareness that it brings with it, is questioned. In the first stanza, his body is acted upon by others – a long list of verbs presents him as an inanimate, cumbersome object, cumbersome like a sack of grain in “Human Chain” (18) or coal in “Slack” (HC 33-4): “Strapped on, wheeled out, forklifted, locked”. This is not the romanticised body of manual labour in the pastoral setting of “The Baler”, in which “Fork-lifted” is an action that Heaney performs. Here is the stark reality of the body failing into old age and becoming reliant on others due to its new feebleness – the labourer has become the laboured upon. However, Heaney once again finds some kind of consolation in the decline. The title of the poem, “Chanson d’Aventure”, refers to a specific type of pastoral lyric, in which the story of an erotically charged, chance meeting between the poet and a lone woman is told. Of course, a trip in an ambulance is far from a pastoral romantic encounter, so the title would seem to work against the content of the poem, as a wry joke highlighting the naivety of a relentlessly romanticised poetic point of view. The suggestion by Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação that “the title of the poem is opposed to its content” (254), however, does not pay heed to some seriously meant parallels between the romantic ideal of the title and the events that Heaney describes. And, furthermore, in the McCrum interview, Heaney talks about “the renewal of love in the ambulance”, implying that these parallels with love poetry should not be regarded as merely a wry comment.

The “symptoms of love” in the chanson d’aventure usually included “sighs, groans, tears, and trembling” and the lover is frequently “inarticulate” in the presence of the woman (Elinor Rees 83).

As such, the symptoms of Heaney's stroke can be read as a kind of love sickness. In this light, the epigraph, from John Donne's "The Extasie", suggests that if "the body is the book" of Heaney's soul, it is showing outward signs of love – the stroke, in other words, has not limited the poet's capacity for showing his affection – as one might expect from such an illness – instead, it is a manifestation of the depth of his feeling towards his wife, Marie. The circumstances are painful, but it is possible to see a mournful mirroring, in the ambulance, of the kind of encounters that the pair maybe had earlier in life.

In the third stanza, this reading comes to the fore when a positive connection is made between Heaney and Marie; their "eyebeams threaded laser-fast, no transport / Ever like it until then", which – through its frantic, garbled, polysyllabic sound – recalls the euphoric charge in the opening poem of the collection, and Donne's line in "The Extasie", "Our eye-beams twisted and did thread". The word "transport" here has a double meaning – the physical conveyance to the hospital in the ambulance, as well as "the state of being "carried out of oneself"" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This second meaning lifts their souls out of their bodies and binds them together as one in the ambulance in a modern retelling of Donne. As such, the poem is not only a "more literal" (da Anunciação 254) account of an adventure, but also one that treats "the metaphysical tonality of John Donne" (ibid) with seriousness, and therefore renders the parallel between the chanson d'aventure and the trip in the ambulance all the more poignant. Heaney is aware that the entwining of their souls, though a "renewal of love," could possibly be one of its final expressions.

Heaney, however, leaves space for this "renewal" to be surpassed as, although their silent communication in the ambulance is unique at that point of time, the phrase "no transport / Ever like it until then", leaves space for future experiences of the same or an even greater magnitude. It is up to the reader to interpret this – perhaps the allusion is to the births of the grandchildren that he writes about in "A Kite for Aibhín" (HC 85) and "Route 110" (HC 48-59), or perhaps he is suggesting –

with a wry pessimism – that the event of his death, as he foresees it, will surpass the moment in the ambulance. In this way, both the ironic and the romantic readings of the title are sustained.

The final stanza of this first section brings together the spiritual and the material. The line “When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne”, could be interpreted as a fantasy in which the stroke did not happen, and the couple lived as before, bodily able to quote Donne to each other. Alternatively, it is possible to read it as an accompaniment to the ambulance drive – they could have quoted “The Extasie” because it was apposite. In the former, the lines are spoken but have not been truly experienced, whereas, in the latter, the lines cannot be spoken because the experience itself prohibits the act. Heaney does not privilege one reading over the other – he states them as two ways of viewing the same event – one might wish it had never happened but equally, if it had not happened, their love would not have been “renewed” in this way. The final line continues this ambiguity, as “body and soul apart” could be read as a lament for the body’s physical limitations or alternatively as a holding onto the positive that his soul – through its separation from his body – is closer to his wife.

While the first poem in the sequence suggests– albeit with an ironic awareness of the absurdity of the statement when in the context of the physical reality – that such sudden shocks to the body are an invigorating part of life that serves, simultaneously, to enrich it, in the second section, the physical consequences are more weighty and the romantic suggestions fall away. It is as if reality has begun to sink in and the souls that hovered above the lovers in “The Extasie” have returned to their bodies. The ambiguity of the final line in the first movement is gone – now their bodies are “apart” even if their souls were mingled. The word itself, “apart”, is repeated but separated by the break between the two movements – thus mimicking, on the page, the real separation.

The second section is much less sympathetic to the metaphysical thinking of Donne. In “The Extasie” a “fast balm” of sweat mixes in the lovers’ held hands, but in “Chanson d’Aventure”,

Heaney's lies "flop-heavy as a bellpull." The phonetic drag of the plosives in this line strikingly slow the poem and emphasise the drag of the arm and oppose the erotic implications of "The Extasie". In the final stanza, the life-affirming eye-contact is "bisected / By a hooked-up drip-feed to the cannula", emphasising, once again, the physical reality of the situation and rejecting the metaphysical – Heaney is literally connected to the medical equipment and numb towards his wife's touch. The fact of death is an "un-get-roundable weight" in this section, which, unlike in "The Settle Bed" (OG 345), cannot be easily "reimagined," as the connection between Heaney and Marie is disrupted. Though there is a "renewal of love in the ambulance", the ultimate physical reality of the situation is not circumvented. The *chanson d'aventure* typically ends with the uniting of "the noble in heart" with "a worthy woman" (Rees 83), but here, although their love is revitalised, and Heaney's body may be read as displaying something akin to love sickness, the poet and his wife are destined for physical separation.

John Wilson Foster highlights, in Heaney's oeuvre, his "ease of turning everyday brass into visionary gold" (206), an imaginative progression in which the "commonplace" object is credited as "marvellous" (207). With this in mind, the focus on material reality in the second section of "Chanson d'Aventure" can be seen even more clearly. The poem begins with a memory, prompted by the similarity between the word "Apart" and the sound of a tolling bell that "outrolled", "*In illo tempore* in Bellaghy". The first two stanzas suggest that the rest of the poem will be concerned with the marvellous echoing implications of this tolling. However, the bell is muffled, as we return, instead, to the source of the noise: Heaney's "flop-heavy" bellpull of an arm – the plosives of which, as already noted, dampen rather than echo. The movement of the poem is from the "marvellous" to the "commonplace". The structure of this second section is restrictive rather than expansive, honing in on the medical apparatus rather than floating in the air.

However, the line describing Heaney's hand – "flop-heavy as a bellpull" – does not only muffle. A bell rope, of course, contains the potential for being used to make sound. As such, Heaney

himself can be rung by other poets. Though the movement of the second section of “Chanson d’Aventure” is towards silence, within this silence it is acknowledged that a space has been made for others in the tradition of poetry. Heaney says, “I tolled in Derry in my turn”, suggesting the inevitability of a “turn” for someone else, whose task will include remembering the deceased poet, explicitly through elegy and eulogy, but also through Heaney’s influence on Irish poetry. While he describes himself, in this moment, as an inanimate object, the possibility that his memory and influence will continue to reverberate is acknowledged, though clearly not as a consolation.

The final section shifts to the time of Heaney’s recovery. He begins, far away, by describing “The charioteer at Delphi”, a statue cast between 478 and 474 BCE, which, though missing its left arm, chariot and team of horses, still stands with “straight-backed posture”. In the third stanza, he reveals the reason behind his description of this monument to endurance in the face of bodily disintegration; its posture, he explains, is like his own while “Doing physio in the corridor”. Yet Heaney then revises the comparison, and compares his physiotherapy, instead, to his past self, ploughing a field and feeling the vibrations in his once again capable hands. The images of the charioteer and the ploughman – though seemingly disparate – are masterfully brought together by Heaney through the several aspects they have in common – a team of horses, reins and need for skill and concentration. By combining the two, Heaney ennobles the task of ploughing a field and suggests that the humble image of labour on a farm, is equal to the grand, Greek, Yeatsian “monuments of unageing intellect” (“Sailing to Byzantium”, Finneran 84).

At the same time, Heaney is still living, moving and connected to the earth. The vibrations felt through the shafts of the plough are beautifully evoked by the metre of the lines, roughly iambic tetrameter and then switching briefly to a trochaic metre when the stress on “hit” bumps up against the stress on the first syllable of “Registered” before returning to the iambic rhythm:

u / u u u / u / u /

Each slither of the share, each stone it hit

/ u u u / u u / u /

Registered like a pulse in the timbered grips.

The stresses in the first line mimic the plough hitting stones and in the second line, the stresses are akin to the corresponding jolt felt by Heaney. It is a call-and-response between the poet and the earth that he works. Simultaneously, the “i” sounds in “hit” and “grip” suggest the poet’s quickening pulse, as though it is this relationship between poet and earth that keeps him going. “Chanson d’Aventure” concludes, therefore, with an affirmation of the commitment made in ““Had I not been awake”” to not miss “it”, where the “it” stands for the inspiringly poetic “everyday brass” that can be transformed “into visionary gold” (Foster 206). Heaney – though suffering the decline of old age – will continue to “credit marvels” as he put it in “Fosterling” (OG 357). In *Human Chain* it is still true that “There is time to be dazzled” and for “the heart to lighten” (ibid).

“The Baler”

The idea that there is still “time to be dazzled” is complicated by “The Baler” (HC 24-5), which begins by presenting the reader with a pastoral scene, in which the poet suddenly becomes aware of the beauty surrounding him. Though it is not made explicit what triggers this sudden appreciation for his surroundings, it is implied by the description of the baler as “cardiac-dull” that it is some kind of radical shock that reminds him of his mortality. “It was evening”, he says, “before I came to”, mirroring the major concern, in ““Had I not been awake””, with the stimulating effect of a brush with death. The “it” that Heaney would have missed in the opening poem, had he not been awake, is equivalent to “Summer’s richest hours” in “The Baler”. The repeated “t” of “to” at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth line, recalls the same noise in ““Had I not been awake”” – it is a jumpstart, as though the engine of the tractor is leaping into life.

In many ways, this is reiterative of the commitment in “‘Had I not been awake’” and the final section of “Chanson d’Aventure”, to continue experiencing the sensory world and transcribing it in poetry. However, as Bernard O’Donoghue observes, the writer of pastoral has two options, namely, poetry which can be “conventional or founded in reality; it can be idyllic or threatened” (119). Heaney, true to his belief that poetry should “add a complication where the general desire is for a simplification” (*RP* 3), chooses the latter. In “The Baler”, the threat to this idyllic setting is, quite simply, death. Life before this reawakening was “cardiac-dull”, precisely because the threat of death did not lend it any urgency. Instead, the poet took “for granted” the perpetual cycle of the seasons – without considering the linear nature of his own life. But having awakened to this fact, he is aware that at “the end of the day”, when he is “Last-lapping a hayfield”, it is more significant than a seasonal last-lap.

In the seventh and eighth stanzas, Heaney compares this moment of reawakening to the reaction the artist Derek Hill has – in the words of Larkin in “Aubade” – to the impending “anaesthetic from which none come round”. While the poet is newly attentive to the beauties of the pastoral setting, Hill can “bear no longer to watch // The sun go down”. It is too painful for him to witness the sunset because of the knowledge that it may be the last time that he does so. In the penultimate line the word “please” is stressed, causing it to stand out in Hill’s voice, emphasizing the strength of conviction behind his request to sit “With his back to the window”. The spoken quality and quiet dignity of this plea asks the reader to consider the rightness of the request. On the one hand, Heaney’s suggestion that the ideal is to take in every second of “summer’s richest hours” implies that Hill’s decision is essentially misguided. But on the other hand, Hill’s actions cast these ideals into doubt by suggesting that the last is not necessarily the best; perhaps the closeness of death and, with it, the awareness of the coming ending, taints – rather than renews – one’s perceptions of the world’s beauties. Thus, the commitment to sensory experience is problematical in the face of mortality.

Chapter Two: “Erotic mouth-music”

“An Old Refrain”

In the previous chapter, I discussed the notion, as it appears in “Had I not been awake” and “Chanson d’Aventure”, that a brush with death can heighten one’s experience of life. The emphasis was on this phenomenon as a biographically observable effect in the poet’s life, which is explained by the poems of *Human Chain*. However, in this chapter I will move away from analyses that focus on the “explicit content” (Bilbro 325), as it is presented to the reader through conventional meaning, towards an understanding that, instead, takes into account the effect – as Bilbro highlights from Heaney’s essay “Englands of the Mind” – of “the word as pure vocable” (321). In other words, I will take Heaney’s view (as Bilbro summarizes it) that “what is often most significant about a poem is not its explicit content but its sound” (325). A belief in the primacy of sound is, according to Bilbro, “most intentional and explicit in his early poetry” (323), which was frequently thematically concerned with the home turf of childhood. It is not surprising therefore that in *Human Chain*, in which memories of childhood figure prominently, the concept should have a resurgence. “An Old Refrain” (HC 21-1), “Slack” (HC 33-4) and “Eelworks” (HC 28-32) are three poems in which sound is intrinsic to a deeper level of understanding. Poetry, according to Bilbro, in the crafting and the speaking, is a space in which to experience the “healing delights that come from language’s sonic qualities” (322).

This is the case especially in the second section of “An Old Refrain”. In this poem, Heaney attempts to connect the sounds of words to objects in nature. The four examples are italicised, as if to suggest that they are in a different language to the rest of the poem. This language, it seems, is Heaney’s, with its own association with the Irish landscape. The italicization suggests that they must be spoken out loud and considered as aural happenings: “*seggins*”, “*boortree*” (the genus of the elderberry tree) “*benweed*” (a local variant for the plant *Jacobaea vulgaris*, which is also commonly known as ragwort) and “*easing*”. The sibilance of “*seggins*” perhaps captures “the wind”. The shape of the mouth as it makes the “o” sound in “*boortree*” perhaps brings to mind a hollow in the trunk of

an elderberry tree. In the shift from the short to the long “e” sound in “*benweed*” might be captured the “Ragwort’s / Singular unbending”. The “*easing*” in the final stanza is a more enigmatic phonetic experience, but perhaps its position in a chain of long “e” sounds (“*boortree*”, “*benweed*”, “*easing*” and “*eaves*”) suggests something of “Drips of night rain / From the eaves” when it is uttered. The point is not to pretend to know the exact significance of each word as Heaney brings it up. Rather, it is to encourage the reader to roll the words around and consider strange links between word and world that would otherwise be ignored.

“Slack”

If in “An Old Refrain” Heaney implies that the words he foregrounds have aural qualities that are ultimately unique to each reader, in “Slack” he states this fact explicitly. The poem is a prime example in this collection of – in Foster’s words – the poet “turning everyday brass into visionary gold”. The “brass”, in this case, is: “the weighty grounds of coal” that are delivered to the Heaney household. After having described the coal visually and metaphorically as “Keeper of the flame”, in the second section Heaney turns to an aural description which prioritizes sound over definition as the conveyer of meaning, as he believes the significance of the coal can be better understood through such a medium. “The sound it made”, he explains, was “More to me / Than any allegory”, implying that the words read out loud: “*Slack schlock. / Scuttle scuffle. / Shak-shak*” contain a meaning – in Bilbro’s words – that resides in their “guttural, illiterate sounds” (323). They are better equipped, though devoid of clear definable meaning, to dredge up Heaney’s particular memories of childhood. The reader is encouraged to read aloud again, and to share, even if only in a limited way, in the experience that the poet is attempting to convey, as the “explicit content” of words cannot be relied upon to effectively carry the significance that Heaney found in the sound of the coal.

“Eelworks”

In Bilbro’s essay, he describes Heaney’s poem “The Gutteral Muse” as “modelling an erotic use of words that fingers the mysterious underside of language” (323). This amatory “underside” is

the driving force behind the poem “Eelworks”, which describes the courting between Heaney and his wife, Marie. The “sonic qualities” of poetic language are as vital to this poem as conventionally defined meanings. To use a phrase that Heaney speaks in a different context, in several sections, this poem is primarily “erotic mouth-music” (quoted by Neil Corcoran in *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 43). In the first section, Heaney remembers that “To win the hand of the princess”, he had to eat “An eel supper” with her family. Large parts of the poem that follows are symbolic of this slippery dish, particularly sections IV and V, which I will look at in more detail.

Section IV describes, on a literal level, Heaney catching “a young eel” for the first time. It then goes on to contrast this fish with one he would “live to reckon with”. It is clear on a biographical level that he is referring to his wife. In section V, he compares a slowly undressing woman with the “skinpeel drawing down” of an eel. In this way, “Eelworks” fits in with Adam Kirsch’s understanding of “The Otter” (OG 174) and “The Skunk” (OG 176), from *Field Work*, as poetry that “does not flatter but teases, in the way happily married couples often do” (12). The reader can understand the poem as teasing and affectionate because the comparison with an eel – as with an otter or a skunk – is comically uncomplimentary and, also, because the “erotic mouth-music” sets the tone. The alliterative and sibilant phrase, “Flip-stream frolic-fish”, is actually hard to say without a sense of its rhythm, due to the balance between the two hyphenated words. Heaney’s use of the verbs “Flip” and “frolic” as nouns, imbues the “stream” and the “fish” with a sense of movement that they would not normally have. In section V, the switch from the short “a” sound in “flash” to the short “e” sound in “flesh”, in the line “Sylph-flash made flesh”, suggests the change in state from clothed to unclothed. This playfulness with language and its seductive, tongue-twisting qualities, in turn implies to the reader that the courting of this “selkie-streaker” involves “mutual desire – of wife for husband as well as husband for wife” (Kirsch 12). In the final movement, the poem shifts from “I” to “our”, sealing the relationship which began at the place they call “The eelworks.” The word itself, “Eelworks”, becomes something of an Irish and personal synonym for going “a-courting” (a phrase

from the previous poem in the collection, "Derry Derry Down" (26)). Furthermore, it stands for working with eel-like words to create poetry.

While it is true that Heaney is also concerned with the "etymological occurrence" (Heaney quoted from "Englands of the Mind", Bilbro 321), this is not the main force behind these poems. Instead, they are driven by, and demonstrative of, the power of "linguistic delight" in an "often-grim" world (Bilbro 322). The "not now" that ends "'Had I not been awake'" refers to Heaney's willingness to continue writing. This willingness stems from the fact that language "as pure vocable" is capable of soothing and healing, while it also stems from, in a phrase that points to poetry as a force against a reductionist world-view, "the way the spirit moves in a cadence" (from Heaney's interview in *Talking with Poets* quoted by Bilbro 325).

Chapter Three: “Medium”

“Album: I - II”

The previous two chapters have considered the poems in *Human Chain* that foreground the interpretation of the “now” ending of “Had I not been awake” as a reference to “present conditions”. As Kennedy points out in his essay, however, this temporal pointer is more complex than it might immediately seem. As a reference to the present, it necessarily entails a suggestion of contrast with the past and the future. In this chapter, instead of regarding the emphasis as on the present, I will consider it as marking “a point of cleavage or rupture” (Kennedy 2) with the past. “Now”, begins “Album” (4-8), the second poem in the collection, “the oil-fired heating boiler comes to life”. This immediately reworks the final words of the previous poem. “Now” is no longer electric; it is “oil-fired”, automatic, tame and domesticated. “Abruptly, drowsily” the poet comes back to his senses – as though suddenly wakened though unprepared to continue. But the poet does continue, seemingly pushing himself into poetic thought through the effort of memory stimulated by a photo album. “I imagine them”, he says, and the reminiscences of *Human Chain* begin. As such, the word “now” invokes what is gone; it is a place of reflection and contemplation about what is no longer in the present. This is applicable to many of the poems in the first half of the collection, in which what is gone is frequently more important than what is present and what is to come.

The first section of “Album” proceeds by drawing attention to the fictional nature of the memories that the notional photo album of the title evokes: “as it must have been”, “it dawns on me”, “could have been”. In this way, it draws attention to the treacherous nature of memory and the desire for it not to fade. The Sundays that he recalls are possibly only fictions. Heaney’s joke about looking back on his childhood as an anthropologist holds true here, as his past seems to be fading into obscurity. An optimistic reading of this first section might construe it as evidence that veracity is not vital and that what is important is the effort of remembering for its own sake. The image of the

family – “Shin-deep in hilltop bluebells” – is compensatory, even if it is fictional. However, in the final stanza the compensatory aspect of memory is cast into doubt, as Heaney laments the fact that it is “now” – in “present conditions,” in which his parents are lost – “Too late ... for the apt quotation”, by the French poet Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “About a love that’s proved by steady gazing / Not at each other but in the same direction.” The reality is that these unexpressed sentiments will forever remain unexpressed; they will fade from memory and never be redressed.

The second section continues in this vein of supposed honesty about the inefficacy of poetry when it comes to redressing pain felt in the past. The subject is the moment Heaney’s parents delivered him to St Columb’s College, Derry. He stands on a mosaic, set into the floor of the “Junior House hallway”, that depicts the school’s insignia and motto; “*Seek ye first the Kingdom ...*”. For Heaney’s family, this phrase has always concluded with “of God”, but the ellipsis suggests that something else is being sought for by the poet. “Of knowledge”, perhaps. “Of poetry”, maybe. But the main point is that Heaney – left at boarding school – is no longer “gazing in the same direction” but surveying a new, academic, cultural landscape that is completely alien to his agricultural family and ancestry. The physical separation in this event is of primary importance in this section, as it encapsulates the moment in which Heaney first experiences the breaking apart of family. He stands alone, “Seeing them as a couple, I now see, / For the first time”. In this case, the “now” refers to his perspective at the time of writing. At this point, he is used to the idea of the evolving dynamics of family, but while he stands “in the Junior House hallway”, this is a new and surprising development. The fact that they are “as close / In the leaving (or closer) as in the getting” is observed from both perspectives. The younger Heaney cannot necessarily make sense of this development; his bearings are lost as he stands at the threshold of a new beginning. The elder Heaney, meanwhile, understands such changes, but cannot instruct his younger self. “*A grey eye will look back*”, he says, trying to console the child. But it is, of course, a futile gesture; the grey eye of his future self – the colour of age and distance – is unable to ease the pain of separation. Once again, the language of poetry –

though it may strain to do so, though Heaney may seek to speak directly to himself as a child – cannot compensate for the physical actuality of past loss; it can only stand as an ineffectual witness.

“The Conway Stewart”

Before turning to the third section of “Album”, it will be useful to consider “The Conway Stewart” (HC 9), as it is pertinent to Heaney’s search for a “*Kingdom*” of a different sort. The first two stanzas describe the pen in minute detail. The third and fourth then anthropomorphise it, conferring upon the pen an appetite for ink. In the final two stanzas, the poem zooms out to include Heaney and his parents in the picture. At this point it becomes clear that the pen is a going-away gift and that the word “Medium”, as Parker highlights (330), refers not just to the size of the nib, but also to the pen as a device for mediation between Heaney, while he is away at boarding school, and his parents. Parker’s interpretation of the gift as a facilitator is reasonable, but it is also possible to read it, simultaneously, as an object that comes between the relationship. In the final stanza, the word “Dear” occupies its own line, dividing “my” in the previous, and “them” in the next, reiterating what was suggested in the second section of “Album”, namely that Heaney’s new beginning as a scholar will create distance between himself and his family. Moreover, the penultimate stanza describes gazes focussed in different directions, rather than “the same direction” that the Antoine de Saint-Exupery quotation in “Album” advocates. They “look together and away” at the pen, which signifies their “parting, due that evening”. As such, “The Conway Stewart” symbolizes the widening of the gap between the parents and child and between the writerly profession and the agricultural, land-based professions. In this way, it marks a change in emphasis from “Digging” (OG 3), in which Heaney attempted to close the gap between his own profession and that of his father and grandfather, by casting the pen as “an instrument of exploration and excavation” (Vendler 29).

“Album: III - V”

This theme of the dispersal of family is continued in the next section, in which Heaney joins his parents at their wedding meal, as a ghost from the future. “Uninvited, ineluctable”, he is a

presence soon to arrive; the first son about to forever alter the relationship between his parents. Or so Heaney imagines. After all, “They are not ever going to observe // Or mention even in the years to come” these events. The whole thing, Heaney reminds us, is invented by the poet. It is strange, then, that even though he imagines himself as part of the company, he is seated in an awkward “Stranded silence”, and it is stranger still that he “leaves them to it”, physically and poetically. This begs the question, why imagine “it” in the first place, if the central moment of the poem, the unlidding of “a clinking dish”, is going to reveal only an anti-climactic absence? It seems that the poet is illustrating a limit to his poetic imagination. To imagine the parents’ wedding meal in any more depth would be a trespass on something that he could never know, as it ended with his birth. Indeed, parents prior to the birth of their children will always only be addressable by the offspring through pronouns such as “they’ve”, “their” and “them”, as, once the “we’ll” of the final stanza is possible, the parents – purely as a couple – become impossible. As such, the third section of “Album” unveils the absence in Heaney’s knowledge of his parents. At the very centre of this poem is an unveiling of the simple fact of the poet’s powerlessness, even in such close quarters as family life.

The fourth section of “Album” is the most explicit about the uselessness of poetry as a form of compensation for the physical loss of death. The lack of a physical, tactile relationship between Heaney and his father is the subject. He recalls three failed attempts at an embrace, modelled on book six of *The Aeneid*, in which Aeneas three times “embraced – nothing ... the phantom / sifting through his fingers” (Virgil 6.809-10). This book of *The Aeneid* provides Heaney, according to Stephen Heiny, in his essay on Virgil in *Human Chain*, with “images and symbols adequate to our predicament” (a phrase quoted by Heiny, from Heaney’s essay “Feeling into Words”). This is usually taken as referring to wider historical contexts – for instance, the poem “Anything Can Happen” (DC 13) draws on the mythological figures Jupiter and Atlas, in order to convey the magnitude of the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. But, as Heiny observes, in *Human Chain* these “images and symbols” are part of Heaney’s search for a way of expressing his own “predicament.” Lysaght observes, in his review, an avoidance of “large-scale rhetorical gestures”

(152) in this collection, and attributes it to a wish, on Heaney's part, to avoid hubristic comparison, especially in light of the considerable critical scrutiny his collections are subject too. However, a more convincing reasoning behind Heaney's seeming reluctance to make such gestures is that his project is the adaptation of "images and symbols" from texts such as *The Aeneid*, in order to honestly (and therefore "adequately") represent his own "predicament".

In the fourth section, as part of this process of adaptation, Heaney reverses the epic tendency towards externalization which – in the words of Erich Auerbach in relation to Homer, rather than Virgil – leads to characterization in which "personages vent their inmost hearts in speech" (6). Where in book six Anchises asks, "Has the love your father hoped for / mastered the hardship of your journey?" (6.794-5), and Aeneas exclaims, "I beg you don't withdraw from my embrace!" (6.806), in the fourth section of "Album", the young Heaney is "not thinking how he must / Keep coming with me because I'd soon be leaving", and his father "in his prime" cannot overcome the distance between them, because of a fatherly sternness. In the third stanza, the failed embrace comes about because his drunk father cannot manage to do up his own trouser buttons; an incident clearly unimaginable in an epic universe. In the fourth stanza, Heaney does not shy away from an honest depiction of the failing body of his father, its "webby weight" – the "ws" of which are somehow suggestive of the father's lightness, especially when compared with the solid monosyllabic word, "prime" – in contrast with the unchanging figures of epics, who "appear to be of an age fixed from the very first" (Auerbach 17). By rejecting certain aspects of the epic text while retaining other aspects, Heaney finds "images and symbols adequate" to his own "predicament". His "strategy to appear as casual as possible" (153), as observed by Lysaght, is not a "strategy" at all, but a product of an honest search for expression.

The contrasts between the conventions of epic and the content of this poem heighten the tragedy of the distance between Heaney and his father. Their lack of communication, the reality of bodily decline and above all, the absence of physical affection undermine the Antoine de Saint-

Exuperant quotation, from the first section of "Album", which suggests that such concerns are of lesser importance to "steady gazing / Not at each other but in the same direction." Re-reading this section with the fourth in mind, uncovers the contradictory nature of Heaney's desire to voice the "apt quotation"; he would contradict the wisdom of this proverb, by shifting his gaze in order to speak it to his parents.

In the final section, Heaney recalls a successful embrace between his father and his own son, The latter makes a "snatch raid on his neck", succeeding where Aeneas failed in his attempts "to fling his arms around his [Anchises] neck" (6.808). Words of affirmation about the event, such as "properly", "proving", "great proofs", "*erat demonstrandum*" and "*verus*", emphasize its solid, confirmatory nature. As opposed to the phantom embraces of the previous section, it is tactile, affectionate and verifiable. This is in line with Heaney's observation that, "Whatever Virgil thinks of the corporeal, Heaney understands it to be central to human life" (309). Though the poem laments this lack, it is suggested, by the final stanza, that poetry – though it clearly cannot rectify these physical deficiencies – can provide a "great proof" of a different sort. The description of section four as a text that "Swam up into my very arms" implies that the poem can act as a substitute, of sorts. In Heaney's words, "Heaney can embrace the text when he cannot embrace his father" (317). However, this is too optimistic when considered in light of Heaney's argument the Heaney assigns great importance to physicality. The final line of the poem reiterates the fact that poetry – language – cannot verify in the same way as physical actions. Heaney writes that "*Verus*", meaning the true, the real and the right, "has slipped from "very"". If "very", in this context, refers to the eloquence of poetry, then from this medium has "slipped" any pretence of redress for physical loss. Essentially, the text that Heaney "can embrace" is an ethereal phantom, when compared with the interaction between his son and his father. The "now" that opens the sequence, though it literally refers to "present conditions", thus emphasizes the present as a time in of reflection upon loss.

Chapter Four: “The ash-pit”

“Uncoupled”

While “Album” and “The Conway Stewart” explore the emotional pain felt as a result of the dispersal of family life, “Uncoupled” (HC 10-1) goes even further by suggesting that the idea of family that is presented in these poems is a fiction. At the heart of this poem is an absence that suggests, in the words of Seamus Deane, as quoted by Brendan Corcoran, that “the quest for ... omphalos is darkly stimulated by the recognition that the idea of a centre is fictive” (145). This notion is neatly illustrated by the anti-climactic absence that is revealed when the waitress “unlids a clinking dish” in the third section of “Album.” At the heart of this moment in which the family begins – through marriage – there is an emptiness that Heaney’s poetry cannot penetrate. However, though this absence is transcribed onto the page, and therefore literally stimulates poetry, in the third section of “Album”, as well as in “Uncoupled”, the undermining of the idea of origin or centre, it is implied, does not stimulate, but leads to a dead end.

Irene Gilsenan Nordin in her essay, “Nihilism in Seamus Heaney” discusses the stimulating effect of absence that she finds in the earlier poetry, specifically “Clearances” (OG 313) in *The Haw Lantern*, in which the death of Heaney's mother results in “a hidden presence that is only possible as a result of original loss or absence” (411) – the mother’s life has physically ended, of course, and as such is an absence, but in Heaney's words, “The space we stood around had been emptied / Into us to keep”. Nordin likens Heaney’s stance in this poem to that of the “active” (406 and frequently thereafter) nihilist, who – following acceptance of the Nietzschean premise that God is dead – accepts the subsequent “state of nothingness that is unmasked” (407) and continues by creating “new interpretations and values” (ibid). Nordin’s parallel is between the propensity of “active nihilism” to lead to “new interpretations and values”, on the one hand, and the way in which death in “Clearances”, although leading to an “empty space” (409) where the mother once was, develops into “a generating source” (ibid), on the other. This, movement, she argues, is “a metaphor that informs

much of Heaney's poetry" (ibid). But in "Uncoupled", as I have already intimated, the "empty space" is reimagined. Thus, the alternative "positive" (412) view that Nordin sees, in which "loss and absence are overcome in an act of creative celebration" (413), is replaced by a reductionist negative, of a similar kind to that which Heaney reads in "Aubade". As with Heaney's own analysis of Larkin's poem in "Joy or Night", it is worth noting that – in a fundamental sense – all poetry is on the "side of life", but the two sections of "Uncoupled", I will argue, have an affinity with the the "dominance of the material over the spiritual" that Heaney finds in Larkin's approach to death.

"Clearances" ends with the essence of the recently deceased mother – whether it is in the form of memories or some kind of spirit, is left to the reader to decide – emptying "Into us to keep." In "Uncoupled", Heaney attempts to capture this essence on the page. Both sections begin as questions, with the words "Who is this", implying that an answer will be given, but in each case the parent becomes less knowable as the stanzas proceed. In the first poem, the essence of his mother is her otherworldly pride and ceremonious dignity. Performing her duties of keeping the house and children warm she is "walking tall, as if in a procession". Contained within this unflinching dignity is an honourable stubbornness, encapsulated by her willingness to suffer her "burden" of motherhood in silence. In its balanced, decasyllabic lines, the metre of the poem reflects her determination – apart from the when, in the ninth line, an extra four syllables are added: "Unwavering, keeping her burden horizontal still". The length of this line threatens to unbalance the poem, but the next – "Hands in a tight, sore grip round the metal knob", with its monosyllabic words – reinforces the balanced, evenness of the poem, as though keeping the metre balanced mirrors the effort of maintaining her "sore grip" on the fire box. The final word of the line, "still", is stressed, and stands out as a moment of concentration. The contained, levelly-met suffering, and the honourable stubbornness that goes with motherhood, are, in this way, built into the fabric of the poem. In the second poem, the answer to the same essentializing question, "Who is this", is that this is a man defined by his profession, and perhaps his "prime", to use a word found in "Album". The "ashplant" that he waves with one hand, and the "stick of keel" – a substance for marking ownership of

livestock – he holds in the other symbolize, rather than his ownership of livestock, his profession's ownership of *him*. Like the mother, his hands are full – he is occupied by something else.

Yet, at the same time, although the question “Who is this” would seem to be answered, both parents remain, to some extent, enigmas. The mother “proceeds” (rather than recedes – implying that it is a positive decision taken by her), eventually disappearing from view, as the watchers “have lost sight of her / Where the worn path turns behind the henhouse.” It is a sign of her strange gravitas that the mention of a “henhouse” does not undercut the dignity of her journey. Instead, it is elevated and becomes a part of the fabric of sacred home-keeping. It is a “henhouse” to the whole family, but there is an unknowable, higher aspect to it that the mother perceives and is a part of. Thus, while she is on solid ground with the rest of the family, she also seems to exist on a higher plane. Heaney and the reader eventually lose sight of her due to this ethereal quality. The father is distant, too. Though “working his way towards” the poet, it seems as though he is subject to Zeno's dichotomy paradox; somehow ending up further away the harder he tries to reach his destination. “Who is this”, the poem asks, setting the figure off “Working his way towards” his son, before almost losing sight of him among the cattle. By the second stanza all we can see of him is his ashplant, “Lifted and pointing”, before he is drowned out by “the lowing and roaring, lorries revving / At the far end of the yard”. Throughout the poem, the father's direction is the same, but the disruptions and interruptions into his journey make him seem further away by the end than when he started. Whereas the mother is on an ethereal, otherworldly plane, the father is concerned with the land and the livestock. It is his profession that results in his eyes breaking gaze with Heaney.

The separate poems suggest unknowability in each relationship; motherhood is accepting the ever growing distance between mother and child, while fatherhood is a doomed struggle to get closer to the child. When considered as a sequence, they strongly imply that the omphalos is a forever shifting concept – impossible to pin down and therefore not a centre at all. The mother moves away from the rest of the family, the father fails to reach his son, the son himself is “perched /

On top of a shaky gate” – a threshold – ready to depart and the empty space dividing the two poems suggests that the parents are “Uncoupled” from each other. Furthermore, the centre of the home – the firebox – is borne away by the mother. As Daniel Tobin highlights, Heaney is concerned with the “desacralizing of civilization” (5), which stems from a “lack of focus” (ibid). The word “focus”, he explains, is translated into Latin, by Heaney, as “hearth” (in “An Interview with Seamus Heaney” by Randy Brandes). The mother’s walk, in this light, symbolizes the “desacralizing” of home – it is a funeral procession for their specific familial dwelling, but also for the sacredness of such places, in general, because its centre is removed.

In “Uncoupled”, Heaney questions the “construction and the assumptions that maintain” (Christopher T Malone 1098) the idea of home. In this case, it is the assumption that existence on the same physical place results in existence on the same spiritual plane. By the end of the first section, the ashes that the mother bears – already associated with a kind of funeral for family life – take on a new significance; they stand for the mother’s own ashes, as though she sacrifices herself for the sake of family. The final word of the second section, “term”, is the terminus of the father’s doomed journey. It can be read in three different ways. Heaney can feel the “pain of loss” on a pre-linguistic level if it is taken in the sense of “term” referring to Heaney feeling these emotions before he is able to define the word “loss”. As such, “loss” is a concept that is always there, instinctively felt, even by a young child. Thus, the omphalos is a concept always under threat. “Term” can also refer to Heaney’s first term at college; he can feel the “pain of loss” before the events of the second section of “Album”, emphasizing, once again, the omniscience of the idea of loss in family life, before any physical manifestation of that loss. And, finally, he can feel the “pain of loss” before the full-term of his father’s death – in this reading death is bound with birth; at full-term an absence is born. The terminus of this poem, then, is an absence. The illusion of home as omphalos is shattered in “Uncoupled”, as Mossbawn is shown as a shifting, indeterminate, fragmented concept rather than as “a potential ground for stable identity” (Malone 1098). The eternal state of family is dispersal.

“The Butts”

Heaney’s relationship with his father is a primary concern in *Human Chain*: the final two sections of “Album” lament their lack of physical connection, the second section of “Uncoupled” casts this as a part of the wider struggle to find meaning in fatherhood, while in “The Butts” (HC 12-3) Heaney returns to the “active” nihilist mode that Nordin highlights, and asserts that “the empty space” left by his diminishing father is “a generating source”. It begins with what might first be taken as a scene from Heaney’s childhood, in which he reaches into the pockets of his father’s suits, searching, with “forbidden handfuls,” for, presumably, cigarettes, only to come up with useless “chaff cocoons”, or empty rolling papers. The comparison between the suits and “waterweed disturbed” recalls “Death of a Naturalist” (OG 5), in which the poet describes his fear that if he dipped his hand into the flax-dam, “the spawn would clutch it”, seeking retribution. Similarly, the first seven stanzas of “The Butts” create the impression that Heaney is trespassing, and that he feels guilty for this behaviour. What contributes to this feeling is the father’s imagined omniscience. Even while physically absent, he instils a feeling of guilt in the young Heaney; the personified suits look on, proxies for the father’s disapproval, while the “empty-handedness”, “the cold smooth pocket-lining” and the “chaff cocoons” stand as a rebuke for his errant behaviour.

However, the final three stanzas lead to a complete reinterpretation of the previous scene. They describe the bathing of Heaney’s elderly, helpless father. With this in mind, the search through the wardrobe is reconfigured as a trespass behind which there is no threat of punishment. The personified suits are no longer a symbol of the father’s omniscience, but a reminder – through comparison – of his diminished, “meagre” stature. This time it is Heaney as an adult who grasps for “The forbidden handfuls”, as though recalling his youthful, trespassing search for cigarettes. From the adult point of view, Heaney still comes up with only “empty-handedness”, the feeling of a “cold smooth pocket-lining” and the “chaff cocoons”. But he is looking for something else this time – sensory evocations of his father when he was in his prime. The emptiness of the suits, the hand, the

pocket and the rolling papers, in this reading, serve only to remind Heaney of his aged, declining father, who is regressing into nothingness and destined to become a “chaff cocoon” or a used-up cigarette. The once omniscient father – now naked and vulnerable – is slowly passing into the care of his children. They have to adjust to the reversal of roles that takes place in family life; when parents become the cared for, children “must learn ... to lift and sponge”. Heaney regards such behaviour as obligatory; despite the uncomfortableness of the situation, they *have* “To keep working”. It is a part of the covenant of family life. As Heaney writes in “Clearances” about his mother, so too the father is “emptied / Into us to keep” – it is a duty of care. “The Butts”, therefore, envisions a chain of responsibility, in which each generation takes seriously the charge of caring for their forbears.

While the word “paperiness” describes the fragile body of the father, it also implies that what remains of him is text on paper. The poem itself is what is left behind – it is generated by his absence. As such, it is one aspect of Heaney’s duty of care as a son, for his father. “The Butts” therefore claims that poetry is responsible as a repository for memories of the dead. Nordin argues that, in “Clearances”, the mother’s “dying spirit becomes an empowering force for the loved ones left behind” (411) – this is clearly the case in “The Butts”, too, as Heaney is empowered by his responsibility to translate his father onto the page. But this poem deviates from an emphasis on empowerment to an emphasis on responsibility. Kristin Reed argues, in the context of elegies, that “the dead, by the mere act of dying, are in the care of the living, who are called to respond in some way” (50), Heaney responds through the poem itself and by foregrounding the duty each generation has to its parents, in the face of the state of “nothingness” that is death in a world without God. The poet constructs new “values” – in the active nihilist mode that Nordin discusses – which work against those he uncovers in his analysis of “Aubade”.

Chapter Five: “the age of births”

“Route 110”

As I have shown, many of the early poems focus on consolations for the slow death of the declining body and for the event of death. In this chapter I will analyse the aftermath of death, commonly understood as the opposite of life, and show how Heaney challenges this assumption. In the second half of the sequence “Route 110” (HC 48-59), the time after death is a key theme. In agreement with Heiny, in his essay on Virgil in *Human Chain*, I will argue that “life, not death, is central here” (314), but I will strengthen the parallels between the work of the modern and the ancient poet and, by doing so, show how far Heaney descends – as it were – into the Underworld, before re-emerging with new wisdom about the future.

While Heiny is correct in his view that the sequence is ultimately “on the side of life”, he fails to recognize the ways in which Heaney uses Book Six of *The Aeneid* not just to offer a compensatory “reincarnation motif” (317) but also to provide “images and symbols adequate” to the predicament of post-Troubles Ireland and the personal predicament of the ageing poet. In the first five poems, Heaney makes his descent. In the first section, the custodian of the bookshop in which Heaney purchases a copy of Book Six, “absorbed in her coin-count”, parallels the Sibyl, in her “awesome ... secret haunt” (6.12), who instructs Aeneas about how to enter the Underworld. The word “awesome”, of course, can hardly be applied to the shopkeeper’s situation, which, instead, smells of “dry rot and disinfectant.” This contrast sets the tone for the rest of the sequence, in which – in a similar manner to “Album” – the poet employs the symbols and images of Virgil’s epic without pretension. In the second section, Heaney highlights the detail of “Feather dusters and artificial flowers” in a shop window and goes on to compare “racks of suits and overcoats that swayed” (reminiscent of the suits in the wardrobe of “The Butts”) with “their owners’ shades close-packed on Charon’s barge.” In the fifth section, Heaney asks, jovially, “Venus’ doves? Why not McNicholl’s pigeons ... ?” as a substitute for the twin doves that guide Aeneas and to whom he raises “a prayer of

joy" (6.228). Heiny focuses on the "aesthetic beauty" (308) that Heaney sees in Ireland, but it is also true, as these instances show, that Ireland is cast as an understated, dusty substitute for the epic world that Aeneas travels. Though his comparison is meant truthfully, Heaney is aware that there is a comical side to his claims. It is an honest and affectionate rendering that shows the poet's selective approach in his search for "images and symbols" and lends credence to his later, more serious comparisons between the Underworld and Ireland.

With this qualification in mind, I will move onto the second half of the sequence, in which these more serious comparisons are made, by a poet who has displayed an intimate and affectionate knowledge of Ireland, and therefore gained authority as someone worthy of entering the Underworld, just as Aeneas proves himself to be as worthy as the Greek heroes who have made the descent; Orpheus, Pollux, Theseus and Hercules (6.140-6). There are two instances, in Book Six, when the proper behaviour towards the dead is the subject. The first is the washing up onto the shore of Misenus's body: "cut off by a death all undeserved" (6.195), and the second is the discussion with the shade of Palinurus in the Underworld, in which he desires, "At least in death / [to] find a peaceful haven" (6.422-3), a release that is impossible while his earthly body is "unburied" (6.426) and not yet honoured. Clearly, the body of the deceased is of vital importance in speeding the soul on its way in Virgil. In section six of "Route 110", Michael Mulholland, who was "lost in the Bristol Channel", mirrors the story of Misenus. Heaney calls him "Sonbrother swimmer", a comradely description that recalls Misenus' identity as the son of Aeolus and like a brother to Hector (6.196-200). In Book Six, his body is recovered, mourned for and, subsequently, it can be assumed that his soul has crossed the river Styx. "By the fourth" night, writes Heaney in section VI, Mulholland's "coffin, with lid on, was in place", suggesting that, as with Misenus, as his body is honoured, his soul is at rest. Though the mourning process in section seven is modern and restrained, the image of the soul on its journey to the underworld lends it gravitas and meaning. This "house of hospitalities", in which "cigarettes on plates, biscuits, cups of tea" are constantly offered, provides an ancient comfort. These trivial, homely offerings are thus wonderfully presented as the equal of the "piled offerings

[that] blazed" (6.262) on the pyre of Misenus. Heaney leaves, appropriately smelling as if he had "fed a pyre", implying that he has been in touch with the ancient world of epics. In the final line, the mother of Mulholland shows Heaney "a right of way / Across their fields", thereby absolving him "thus formally of trespass." This gesture welcomes him into the adult world, but also into an other-world of ritual and tradition that reaches far back into the epic tradition.

The eighth section introduces the Troubles as a state of affairs about to disrupt this ancient process of mourning. The poem describes Heaney pulling out of a driveway whilst being watched by a Dido-like figure "At the dormer window". His brake-lights are compared to "red lamps swung by RUC patrols". It thus announces the coming civil war blighted sections of "Route 110" as parallel to the "low point" (Michael Thurston 5) of Aeneas's journey. After the Trojans depart from Carthage and leave Dido to her fate, Palinurus falls from his position as helmsman into the sea and is washed away. When he found land, his shade explains in Book Six, "a band of brutes ... ran [him] through with knives" (6.408-9). When Aeneas finds him in the Underworld, he begs for someone to "Throw some earth on [his] body" (6.416), so that, the proper rites performed, his soul can finally cross over the river Styx. This request is not met, but the Sibyl assures him that "great gods on high, will appease" (6.433) his bones. This brutal, cowardly murder and the tragic lack of proper behaviour towards the dead parallels section nine in "Route 110", in which Heaney uses the image of Palinurus's restless soul to emphasize the presentness of the deaths of Mr Lavery and Louis O'Neill. These victims of the Troubles go through – as Parker highlights – an indignity that is equivalent to that which Palinurus suffers. They are not honoured like "those who may very well bear responsibility for ending their lives" ("His Nibs" 339) by being "Fired over on anniversaries". Instead, they are crudely "accounted for and bagged", in stark contrast to the treatment of Misenus and Mulholland, once they are salvaged from the water. The opening words of the section, "And what in the end", indicate that the conflict is in the past, but, at the same time, in his descriptions of the victims, Heaney emphasizes their deaths as ongoing facts; Mr Lavery, "bore the primed device and bears it *still*" (my emphasis). Similarly, the death of Louis O'Neill, it is implied, is still current, as the

old ground of “Casualty” (OG 154) is re-trodden. These deaths are “Unglorified” and, as such, the souls of Lavery and O’Neill still wait to find peace, like the tragic shade of Palinurus on the banks of the river Styx.

In this light, section ten, which Heiny argues is equivalent to Virgil's narrative of, in his translation of the Latin, “joyful places and pleasant glades in the blessed groves” (313), is tinged with a mournful yearning. The victims of the Troubles, while they are “unglorified”, will not experience the Elysian Fields that Heaney compares to “a sports day in Bellaghy”. They will not, that is, until they are properly honoured. If “Route 110” constitutes these “final rites” (6.250) then perhaps Heiny’s interpretation of section ten, as an untroubled comparison between the Elysian Fields and an Irish sports day, is tenable. However, it seems more likely, especially if O’Donoghue’s view is true, that Heaney’s “poetry itself seems less confident” (119) of its capacity to redress than the man himself, that what section ten represents is hope, in the sense that Havel defines it. The sports day in Bellaghy – which consists of opposing teams seemingly managing to get along while leaving “stud-scrapes on the pitch and on each other” – is not a naively optimistic vision, but one that takes into account “the conditions”, while remaining committed to harmony as an ideal that “makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (RP 5).

The final two sections of “Route 110” return to the personal domain and an introspective mode. In section XI, Heaney stands “waiting, watching” at the banks of the a river, as though ready to be ferried over, just as the soul of Palinurus waits at the banks of the river Styx for Charon. He switches to first person plural, without indicating exactly who constitutes the “we” of whom he speaks. The most obvious reading would be that this is Heaney and his father, a recurrent figure in *Human Chain*. There is a feeling of closeness between the two, which is signalled by their mutual silence. Although there is no discussion, and although the moment is fleeting, they both see what they think may be “an otter's head”, or, if not an otter, at least “a turnover warp in the black // Quick water.” In other words, there is unspoken communication between the “we” on the river bank; some

shared knowledge. Heaney's essay, "The Government of the Tongue", in which he examines the seal in Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses", might shed some light on the significance of the otter. Bishop's seal, he explains, arrives "like a messenger from another world" (105), indicative of some kind of "dream truth" (106) that exists alongside the "daylight truth" (ibid). If the otter – an animal that exists in two elements – is the Irish equivalent of Bishop's seal, then it would seem to suggest that father and son are momentarily united by a fleeting knowledge of a mysterious beauty lying behind that of the natural world. This moment offers some consolation for the physical distance between them and brings us back to "the apt quotation" in the first section of "Album", "About a love that's proved by steady gazing / Not at each other but in the same direction".

This raises a question: why does the particular experience of section eleven bridge the gap between Heaney and his father? To reach an answer, I will return to the parallels between "Route 110" and Book Six. Taking these into account, Heaney's father – as in the fourth section of "Album" – can be related to Anchises. When the old Trojan is reunited with his son, he delights in showing to Aeneas the illustrious future of his offspring. As such, the Irish pair, it can be assumed, are "waiting, watching" on the river bank, united by their keen interest in the family members that will drink of the Moyola and return to, in the words of Aeneas, "the shackles of the body" (6.833). In the context of Heaney and his father's relationship, this line becomes deeply tragic; as the pair know, only too well, that the body is not a shackle but, to return to Heaney's observation, an aspect that "is central to human life." A consolation is found but, as the final line suggests, a gap will always exist between generations; "Needy and ever needier for translation".

In section twelve the vigilance of the two fishermen is rewarded, as Heaney turns towards the future: "And now the age of births." As Heaney observes, coming after section eleven, in which the poet reflects on his own crossing over of the river, there is an implied notion of "a consoling balance in the cosmos" (314), as death is replaced by birth. Of course, it all depends of perspective, but it is a sign of Havel's hopefulness, again, that Heaney places "the age of births" as the final section in the

sequence, rather than an age of deaths. The poet's arrival, with his "bunch of stalks and silvered heads" is the final placement of a silver equivalent of the golden bough, mirroring the point in book six at which Aeneas "stakes the golden bough" (6.738) and, by so doing, gains admittance to the Fields where he will meet the shade of his father, Anchises, who will reveal "bright souls, future heirs of our name and our renown" (6.877). For Heaney, there is, of course, no parade of heroic offspring; he avoids comparing himself with the warlike sons of Troy by focusing on the purity and innocence of his granddaughter. He even goes so far as to "quell whatever smells of drink and smoke / Would linger", as though purging any hint of the mourning process found in the "house of hospitalities" of section seven. This final section dispels the atmosphere of doom that hung over the funereal earlier sections of "Route 110". As such, it alters the behaviour of the adults, who "gather round / Talking baby talk" as an antidote to the subdued speech in section seven. General troubles of life (and the Troubles themselves) having temporarily vanished from view, the grown-ups live vicariously through the new born child, experiencing life briefly through the granddaughter's perspective. Thus, the pains of death are redressed by the innocence of a newborn child who, through contrast with the future Roman kings that Aeneas surveys, shows that, in Heaney's words, "there is nothing Roman or epic in Heaney's Virgil."

"Death of a Painter"

Immediately following "Route 110" are two elegies, "Death of a Painter" (60) and "Loughanure" (61-5), which may seem out of place considered in light of the newly ushered in "age of births". However, both contain intimations towards the idea that life is born out of death; as Heaney argues, in *Human Chain*, "death is a secondary offshoot from life" (314). The first tracks the gradual fading of the painter Nancy Wynne Jones through a chain of images. She is represented first as herself, surveying "A Wicklow cornfield", then this landscape is compared to one of Thomas Hardy's, while the painter herself is compared to Hardy in his old age, still writing in a cold study. From Hardy, she is compared to a butterfly on its way through Casterbridge. She is then compared to "Jonah

entering / The whale's mouth" and, finally, this image is compared to that of "a mote through a minster door". It's a string of comparisons built around constant modifications: "Not a ... but a", that eventually results in Jones's diminishment to merely a speck of dust. Along the way, she becomes a part of the landscape that she painted, and the art through which she lived her life, though no definitive comparison is settled upon, until the final stanza in which she is likened to Jonah and to the mote entering the minster.

This final comparison pits her smallness against the vastness of the cosmos, but it is a comforting, warm image, evocative of a beam of sunlight cast through an open church door and contextualized as part of a journey willingly taken into the welcoming landscape that she has been "long gazing at". Of course, it is also specifically an image of absorption into the divine: Jonah is reborn repentant and the mote enters a minster. But "Death of a Painter" should not be read, therefore, as a poem that relies exclusively on a religious consolation that denies the material evidence. It is conceivable that the "Not a ... but a ..." structure could continue indefinitely, implying that this final image is not the only conclusion, but that it is – at this point in time – the most fitting. Jones is absorbed into something grander than herself, and the stature of religious architecture and Biblical mythology provide "images and symbols adequate to" her end. Jahan Ramazani, in his book *The Poetry of Mourning*, writes that Heaney is more sympathetic than most modern poets towards "old-fashioned poetic codes" that might "transfigure the dead into heavenly beings or consolatory art" (xiii). This is surely akin to what happens in this poem, though it is also "sufficiently tempered by the scepticism of our time" (ibid), as it recognizes the difficulty of finding the correct, truthful narrative through which to elegize Jones.

"Loughanure"

The five part "Loughanure" (61-5) sequence is the next poem *in memoriam* to come in the "age of births". The most striking aspect of this elegy is its *enargaic* portrayal of the subject, Colin Middleton. As Kristin Reed defines it in her thesis, "The Rhetoric of Grief", *enargia* is "description so

vivid that it recreates something or someone, as several theorists say, “before your very eyes” (19). Reed observes the tendency in Heaney’s elegies to favour “work as the most apt monument” (78) to a life. It is also the case that work is an aspect of life that Heaney employs, most convincingly, in order to create resurrective moments. Middleton’s minute mannerisms are recorded; the narrowing of his eyes, his “Licking and sealing a hand-rolled cigarette”, his grunt and nod when he looks at his painting of Loughanure, hanging in the Heaney household. It is not these details alone that bring him so vividly to life, but the way in which they are recalled with language that at once suggests the poet’s familiarity, but also the impossibility of conveying the mannerisms with exactness unless the reader was there in person: “The way he’d...” and “how he’d”. This might seem, logically, to be a technique that would distance Middleton, but instead, it brings him closer and makes him all the more real, because it strongly evokes his particularity. The reader is allowed into the circle of people who know his indescribable, unique mannerisms. In “Loughanure”, the observations of Middleton are made while he is sizing up a subject: “As if you were a canvas” in section one, while, in section three, Heaney describes the way he would “Spread his legs, bend low, then look between them”. The vividness with which he is recalled creates the impression that he is gazing out of the poem. Playfully, it is suggested that the text is reading the reader, rather than the other way around. As such, it is as though Middleton continues to paint through this elegy, and Heaney achieves a kind of “resurrection through the medium of the text” (Reed 21). In the second section, however, the poet is less confident about the value of this *enargaic* elegy. The promise of an afterlife lived through art that is left behind is of small worth when compared to the “immortal souls” that feature in Dante and Plato. What is left of Middleton? “A cloud-boil of grey weather on the wall”, is the depressing answer, and “a remembered stare” that belittles the elegy itself, which gets its *enargaic* power from Middleton’s gaze.

However, in section three, Heaney implies that these monuments to the dead are – in Reed’s words – “the most apt”. Middleton’s work is dignified by his artistic integrity. This may seem counterintuitive when the painter is described as, comically, straining to find “the mystery of the

hard and fast” by turning away from the object in question, peering at it, instead, with his head between his legs and contorting his face “Like an arse-kisser’s in some vision of the damned”. The point that Heaney makes becomes clear in the last two lines, in which Middleton straightens himself out and stands, suddenly dignified, “with the brush at arm’s length, readying.” It was a performance, mocking those who strain to see something that is not there, like arse-kissers, blindly following other people’s dogma. Heaney hopes that Middleton’s burlesque of the pompous artist does not describe his own career. “Did I seek the Kingdom?”, he wonders, recalling the motto of St Columb’s in the second section of “Album”. But this is not the kingdom of Heaven reached through devotion to God, but rather, the kingdom of the afterlife in art, in which an honest search for a personal truth through art is the only thing of value.

In the final two sections, Heaney wonders about his search for “the Kingdom”. In section four, he recalls his time at the Irish College in Rannafast, where Gaelic was, and still is, taught. His Irish was not sufficient to make the link between lore and history and language and place; “The *seanchas* and the *dinnsheanchas*”. As a result, “Language and longing” were not able to make “a leap” and Heaney was unable to find the deep wellspring of his Irish identity. For him, as Fionntan de Brún argues, Irish revivalism “did not quite work” (17). Though the wistful “Had I” that opens the poem suggests that he wanted it to, “The Kingdom” was not to be found in the Gaeltacht. In the fifth section, Heaney suggests the difficulties of revivalism. As de Brún argues, these are encapsulated by “Hannah Mhór’s turkey-chortle of Irish”, which is “unmistakably described” yet indicative of the “unattainable” (*ibid*) nature of the desire for restoration. Heaney’s enigmatic description of himself as “unhomesick” tells us that he is both at home and not at home. Like the Irish revival, the poet stands on a threshold between the past and the present; this place provide Proustian promptings about “Clarnico Murray’s hard iced caramels”, yet, at the same time, its “grant-aided, renovated” landscape is “unhome”. Heaney hopes that, like Middleton’s painting, the poetry that he will leave behind has been honest about the Irish landscape, and that it has not strayed into “it’ll be grand” optimism.

Chapter Six: “backbreak’s truest payback”

“Human Chain”

In this final chapter, I will examine Heaney’s poetic attitude at the “cliff-face of mystery”. In “Joy or Night”, this phrase is used to describe the situation in Yeats’s poem “The Man and the Echo”, in which the man asks questions of an oracular rock face, which simply echoes his words back at him. According to Heaney, “the echo marks the limits of the mind’s operations even as it calls the mind forth to its utmost exertions” (*RP* 160). Heaney most admires the persistent, straining and unceasing nature of the man’s (and Yeats’s) enquires but, by comparison, the poems at the end of *Human Chain* – situated at the cliff-face of the greatest mystery; death – suggest a completely different attitude; an acceptance of the moment of letting go and becoming the “generative source” that Nordin sees in Heaney.

Before analysing these final poems, however, I will turn to the title poem of the collection, “Human Chain” (18), which is distinctly earth-bound – it continues the collection’s foregrounding of the importance of sensory experience, felt until the end. Heaney watches as “bags of meal” are passed along a line of aid workers – presumably on television, as a camera is suggested in the “close-up”. It is a similar perspective to that which he takes in “Out of Shot” (*DC* 15), in which he watches the “TV news” of a bombing in “the bazaar district”, of, perhaps, Baghdad. The two poems are unusual in Heaney’s work, because, in part, they describe distant events, viewed through a screen and not through their physical attributes. Due to the juxtaposition of the bombed city and the television viewer’s perspective, “Out of Shot” evokes what Michael Parker calls a “sense of missed harmony” (“Fallout” 374), which, he observes, comes through stylistically in half-rhymes. However, “Human Chain” is the antidote to this. Heaney runs the two worlds that are being represented into each other – after the passing of the “meal bags” by aid workers and soldiers on the screen, without announcement, Heaney suddenly shifts focus onto his own “grip on two sack corners”. The sack on-screen, it would seem, is passed into Heaney’s reality in Ireland, suggesting solidarity between

humanitarian labour and agricultural labour. As such, the “human chain” of the title is not just an expression of personal, familial connection, but of a global, human one, based on the universal virtue of honest labour in pursuit of a better world. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that, as Reed highlights, Heaney often views “work as the most apt monument” to a life.

In his review of the collection, Seán Lysaght singles out this poem as indicative of Heaney’s knowledge that he is at the point of “handing on and handing over, conscious that his work is now approaching completion” (153), but in light of the harmony between the two worlds that are described, Heaney’s description of “letting go” as “backbreak’s truest payback” is a much grander vision – it is an expression of what a life of integrity entails: honest labour felt in the body, for the good of humankind. This is a very different vision to that which Heaney reads in “The Man and the Echo”. The ideal of persistent questioning until the end is replaced by a confirmatory image of backbreak being paid back. It is therefore easy to read “Human Chain” as a poem in which the coming end is accepted, but the final two lines suggest an alternative interpretation. The letting go that constitutes a reward for exertion “will not come again” and, if it does, it will be “once. And for all.” In its euphemistic phrasing, the poem shies away naming this ending, uncovering a tension that might otherwise have remained hidden. The poet does not welcome the final payback for a life of labour, and therefore, he ultimately asks whether it is the labour itself or the end of labour that is satisfying.

“The door was open and the house was dark”

In “Human Chain”, Heaney is not yet prepared to let go of earthly labours, but by “The door was open and the house was dark” (82), after the “age of births” is welcomed at the end of “Route 110”, he describes a dream of “a not unwelcoming / Emptiness”. In his chapter on “Joy or Night”, Michael Cavanagh argues that Heaney imagines the “generative source” that Nordin discusses “as the night, not menacing, as night can often be, but rather as an emblem of a deep source of faith” (206). His description is strikingly similar to the experience that Heaney describes in “The door was

open and the house was dark". In an interview with the BBC, he explains that the origin of the poem was "an extremely strange, haunting dream" ("I live in panic") – it is worth noting that Heaney calls it a "dream" rather than a nightmare. The darkness that the poet approaches is gentle – the door is open but there is no hurry or panic in the "and" which balances this with the second half of the title – "the house was dark". Calm reigns in the aural effect of the poem, produced by a soothing chain of rhymes; "knew", "grew", "too", which evoke the steady growth of the darkness. The house in question is that of David Hammond, Heaney's recently deceased friend, to whom the poem is dedicated. For the first time, Heaney feels "a stranger" at this house – there is a sense of trespass, but no accompanying sense of threat. He is "wanting to take flight", but aware that there is "no danger". It is as though Heaney knows the response that he should have to "Emptiness" but cannot make himself feel it. The optimistic, forward looking message of the final "not now" of "'Had I not been awake'", is tentatively reformulated here, to a question more like "what if it is now?" The "silence" and the "emptiness" belong to Hammond, but in this encounter, the answer is that the house of death before Heaney is "not unwelcoming".

As this is the case, the deliberate link between the titles of the vivacious "'Had I not been awake'" and the poem under discussion (they share an eye-catching format; lower case, enclosed by inverted commas) might seem to have been made in order to draw attention to the contrasting nature of these poems. After all, the opening poem courses with electricity, while, here, Heaney writes that "The streetlamps too were out". The electric vivacity of the opening poem has dissipated. But while there are differences, there is an important similarity; curiosity, approached in a different manner to "The Man and the Echo", but nevertheless similarly unquenchable, is at the root of each poem. The final one line stanza suggests a kind of "indeterminate grandeur" to the universe – as Cavanagh puts it in relation to "Joy or Night" – as Hammond's house is compared to the vastness of "a midnight hanger", which opens out to the still vaster airfield in which it stands. Heaney will "take flight" – not from the darkness – but from the "overgrown airfield" and into the unknown. As such, it ends on similar note to that which was struck in the opening poem; in both there is a deep-seated

sense of “oneself [as] a resident of a large universe” (Cavanagh 202). But while in the earlier poem this is experienced through a sensory buzz, in the later poem, to return to Nordin’s exploration of nihilism in Heaney, “the whole concept of empty space as a generating source resurrecting new life” (409) creates a powerful but “vague sense of transcendence” (Cavanagh 202) that Heaney imagines he will soon enter.

“In the Attic”

This sense of “emptiness” as “not unwelcoming” is a fleeting shadow that passes over the collection. The next poem, “In the Attic” (83-4), reiterates the poet’s commitment – first made in “Had I not been awake” – to feeling “present conditions” (Kennedy 2), albeit with a heightened awareness of the infirmities of old age. In the first section, he compares himself to the young hero of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, Jim Hawkins, as he hangs onto the mast with nothing but “green water and clean bottom sand” underneath him. The comparison appears as something of a non-sequitur; it hangs in mid-air, lacking foundations, in a similar manner to Jim in the *Hispaniola*. It is a fragment that occurs to the poet out of nowhere. It is only in the second section that the significance of this image is made clear: Heaney is like Jim because he, too, is “a man marooned”. From his attic, he can observe the world and write – stimulated by “all that’s thrumming up from keel to masthead” – still like “a boy” discovering the world. From the skylight, he can see “A birch tree”, while he describes his vantage point as a “Buoyant, billowy, topgallant birch”. This opens up a comparison with the Robert Frost poem “Birches” (91), in which the action of swinging upon the branches of these trees symbolizes imaginative endeavour and play. In Frost’s poem, the speaker explains that the tree “dipped its top and set me down again”. But Heaney is “marooned”; the mast of a ship will not bend to gently set its occupant back down on solid ground, instead, it threatens to throw him into the storm tossed seas below. This is the difference between the predicaments of the poet and the boy on the rigging; Jim, can return home but Heaney is already at home and has nowhere else to go.

The first line of the third section finds the poet in his youth on the “*terra firma*” of “hallway linoleum”, having just returned from a matinee performance of *Treasure Island*. His grandfather enquires about Israel Hands – getting the name wrong and asking about “Isaac Hands”, instead. This small error lodges itself in Heaney’s memory, finally revealing to the reader the reason for the non-sequitur of the first section. The mistake is “perpetual, once and for all”, recalling the last line of “Human Chain”, in which, after a life of toil there is a final release. The small mistake, it is implied by this link, is magnified and becomes symbolic of the old man losing touch with earthly matters. This moment of confusion stands for the fate of Israel Hands; shot in the chest by Jim, he plummets, dead, into the sea. Disintegration of memory is a fatal blow that results in a loss of contact with the physical world; “all that’s thrumming up from keel to masthead” can no longer be felt and therefore rendered as poetry.

However, in the final section, Heaney remains steadfast in his commitment to stay in the crow’s nest of poetry, even as he begins to “blank on names” and his “uncertainty on stairs” increases. Instead of viewing this as the fatal blow that he envisions in the third section, he compares it to “a cabin boy’s first time on the rigging”. Like Jim, he is setting out on an adventure; leaving the safe-harbour of “the memorable” as it “bottoms out / Into the irretrievable”. In the final line, Heaney imagines “a wind freshened and the anchor weighed”, recalling the flight that is suggested at the end of “The door was open and the house was dark”, but more closely resembling the ship that sails over the monks of Clonmacnoise in the eighth section of “Lightenings” (OG 364). This comparison suggests that when the ship sets sail in “In the Attic”, Heaney is embarking on the opposite journey from the man that “climbed back / Out of the marvellous as he had known it”. The wind that “rose and whirled” in “Had I not been awake”, and picks up again in the penultimate poem of the collection, will bear Heaney into the marvellous. In her discussion of the eighth section of “Lightenings”, Vendler writes that it would be “fatal to human beings to attempt to breathe for any length of time the rarefied air of the transcendent” (137) but Heaney still, wilfully imagines this voyage. The image of Yeats, “the supreme model for poetic persistence into old age” (Neil Corcoran

166), balancing on the precarious “timber toes” of his stilts in “High Talk” (148), resolving to “stalk on, stalk on”, is the same as Heaney's predicament – stranded with poetry in old age – but Frost's line, “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches”, better captures the poet's hopeful attitude.

“A Kite for Aibhín”

The rising wind of “In the Attic” continues to blow in the final poem of the collection, “A Kite for Aibhín” (85). Written for his second granddaughter, it follows Heaney's poem, in *Station Island*, “A Kite for Michael and Christopher” (OG 231), in which the kite is likened to “the human soul” which pulls away from the earth towards the heavens. This poem ends somewhat gravely, with the kite plunging back down to the earth like a soaring soul brought back to reality. The stanzas themselves gain in weight; the first is three lines, the second and third four, the fourth five and the final, fifth stanza ends the poem with seven lines, creating the effect of perspective on the page – the top stanza, small in the distance, and the bottom stanza large and lying on the ground. Heaney tells his two sons that they “were born fit for it” – the taut, painful pull of the soul and its summary dive-bomb back down to earth. Gabriella Morisco views the flying of the kite in the earlier poem as symbolic of “the art” that Heaney as a public poet and an Irishman had to practice, of maintaining “a constant and often painful equilibrium” (36). But in “A Kite for Aibhín”, all these troubles seem to have dissipated; the line is no longer taut with the “long-tailed pull of grief”, instead it is now a “thin-stemmed flower”; where before the stanzas plummeted to the bottom of the page, here the final stanza is one line – lighter than the rest, indicative of the snapped string and the kite being carried away on the wind.

But in “A Kite for Aibhín”, unlike in its earlier model, the soul is not explicitly invoked. Undoubtedly, it is a meaning that can be carried over, but it is also the case that Heaney is more cautious about spiritual pronouncements here. The kite could be, as the second stanza suggests, simply the object: “And yes, it is a kite!” As a result, the poem operates on a literal, physical level that delights in how “now it hovers, tugs, veers, dives askew”. Therefore, Heaney occupies “the atheist

position" (my emphasis: Cavanagh (200) notes Heaney's non-committal word choice) in relation to the afterlife — but, at the same time, there is also a suggestion of the "vague sense of transcendence" found in "Joy or Night"; "heavenly" with a lower case "h". As such, the poem retains a sense of mystery, and does not surrender to the defeatist, materialistic position that Larkin takes; in Cavanagh's words, Heaney stands on a threshold; "the authentic place of poetry" (208). The final line offers two kinds of redressal — the grounded, earth-bound birth of a granddaughter — umbilical cord cut in the line " — separate, elate — " — but also an air-bound, spiritual absorption into the vastness of the universe.

Conclusion

In none of these final poems does Heaney resort to “it’ll be grand” optimism. Havel’s definition of hope, instead, holds true, as each one is “sufficiently tempered”, to use Ramazani’s phrase, “by the scepticism of our time”, but they all contain a yearning towards something larger, that transcends the visible world and “is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons” (Havel, quoted in *RP* 4). The emptiness that Heaney approaches, as Cavanagh summarizes Tobin, is actually “a conception of the totality of reality [that] reveals ultimately that all matter and spirit are connected” (206). In other words, the bleakness that the poet faces is transformed into something positive and creative. This process, which Nordin refers to as “active nihilism”, finds three main expressions throughout *Human Chain*; from the threat of death springs renewed vitality, from the threat of silence springs poetry and from the departure of the older generation springs the younger. To return to the essay with which this thesis began, “Joy or Night”, and Larkin’s pronouncement that “Death is no different whined at than withstood” (*RP* 155), I have shown that this claim – which seems most to go against Heaney’s view of poetry – is powerfully rebutted with an assertion of vitality, curiosity and hope in the face of the bleakness that death might seem to entail. *Human Chain* thus fulfils what Heaney envisages as poetry’s mission; “to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it” (*OG* “Crediting Poetry” 467) and is, itself, a monument to rightness enlightened by wrongness.

Abbreviations

DC	<i>District and Circle</i>
HC	<i>Human Chain</i>
OG	<i>Opened Ground</i>
RP	<i>The Redress of Poetry</i>

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