

Harrowed Brine: Lyric Vapors and Spectral Forms

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in the Department of English at Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island

May 2025

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This dissertation by M.J. Cunniff is accepted in its present form
by the Department of English as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go first to my committee for their sometimes inhuman levels of patience. Tamar Katz, thank you for making me like reading novels, and for your kindness which has constantly reminded me that I had value both inside and outside academia. Ada Smailbegovic, thank you for all the conversations about Hopkins and Heaney and Lowell that made it into this document and all the conversations about Berssenbrugge and Eliot and Moore and Bishop that mostly didn't, for all the strange drawings and diagrams and notes and metaphors. Stephanie Burt, thank you for treating me seriously as a writer and thinker even when I wasn't treating myself seriously, and for all the games; I had the time of my life fighting dragons with you.

And many other faculty at Brown whose teaching, thinking, or mentorship I benefited from, including Tamara Chin, Marc Redfield, Jim Egan, Melinda Rabb.

Thanks are also due to many professors at UMass Boston, including Libby Fay, Erin Anderson, Hugh O'Connell, LaMont Egle, and Alex Mueller, the latter two of whom I feel an especial debt of gratitude to whenever I am teaching. Much of this first started at Wellesley, where Dan Chiasson, Frank Bidart and Alison Hickey all taught me how to *really* read and write a poem. Frank, thank you for being the type of poet I wanted to be and showing me how to be the type of poet I was instead. Alison, thank you for your now-decades of consistent support and kindness, for trying valiantly though unsuccessfully to even slightly tame my feral sentence structure in all those pages of writing (~), and for one pure crystal memory of reading "The Windhover" under a tree near Founders Hall.

I have been informed that the Graduate School does not agree that "the real dissertation is the friends you made along the way." However: thank you to the friends I made along the way. The many, many graduate students I met at Brown, for all the writing and thinking and talking, and especially the Poetry & Poetics Working Group, including Claire Grandy, Emily Simon, Leah Brooksher, and many others. Katey Preston, thank you for your sharp mind and especially for all the time spent together on this last home stretch. Thank you also to many others I met outside of Brown, including Jacquelyn Gill for reassuring me that grad school does end.

And of course thanks are due to my cofounder of the Poetry & Poetics Group, Scott Jackshaw: thank you for the 3AM conversations, for watching me throw up and telling me you were going to use it in your chapter, for the pandemic Zoom meeting wine mugs, for writing beautiful poetry. And to Chris Yates, who will surely be embarrassed no matter what I write about him here: there was never any point at which I could have done this without you. Thank you both for reading every word of this multiple times over and still somehow being willing to speak to me afterwards.

Thank you to the John Carter Brown Library for being a beautiful space to write and the best imaginable place to work, and to everyone there, especially Kim Nusco and Mark Armstrong.

Thank you to the Graduate Center Bar, the best bar in the entire city, for being one of the first reasons Providence felt exciting and one of the reasons Providence feels like home, and to all the many folks I met while hanging out there a little too often, including Susan Yund, Johnny

Johnson, Jesse Smith, Ed Goll, Annie Kim, Matthew Lueckheide, Michael Cleary, Julie Lamarre, Bill France, and especially Patrick Cull for the thousand conversations about writing and the second-best martini of my entire life. I love you all, thank you for letting me take my laptop out at the bar.

Thank you to everyone in Library Camp, for the adventures, the bad drinks, the good (and bad) books, for being both WISE emoji and ART emoji: especially Fuzzy and Ollie Shonaldmann, Cami Ramirez, Owen Williams, Liza Wilson, Ben Staffin, Rey Edison, and of course Kit Cali who I owe thanks to for several things before/besides these weird people you stuck me with.

Thank you to Kinan Dak Albab for all the pasta and pickles and blowtorched sandwiches, for trying to teach me about Arabic meter, for persuading me to write when it seemed pointless. To Jamie Cumby, for being so sharp and so cool and so unimpeachably brilliant in all things, for dressing up in wolf masks, and for showing me all the best stones and manuscripts. To Ted Nichols, for “essential validation and brotherhood” (this is not a puzzle.) Also to Sebastian Edwards for listening to me talk about poetry and dead monks in a graveyard ten years ago, for accidentally teaching me how to clown, for qualities of light as a love language, and for everything else.

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*Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made.
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.*
—The Tempest (1.2.474-9)

When someone inquired which were more in number, the living or the dead, he rejoined, “In which category, then, do you place those who are on the seas?”
—Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

INTRODUCTION

One starting place for the history of English lyric is with a ghost story.

Or at least, the Old English poem “The Wanderer” stages an encounter with an ambiguous spirit of the sea. The unnamed protagonist experiences his loneliness and nostalgia—characteristic of the Old English elegy, which among other genre markers features a “contrasting pattern of loss and consolation” (Greenfield 134)—in a setting where seabirds bathe in the water and frost, snow, and hail are intermixed (*gemenged*.) The wanderer imagines greeting lost companions, but is met with elision and silence: the things he addresses “often swim away.” This is, the narrator suggests, generally how this goes:

fleotendra ferð
no þær fela bringeð
cuðra cwidegiedda

That is, the *ferð* being addressed (a rough translation might go) never bring back much of speech (or song?), never have much to say. Attempting to translate *fleotendra ferð* gives us insight into the mysteries of this image: sometimes spirits or ghosts of lost kinsmen, sometimes birds much like the seabirds of the earlier lines. These silent figures are the ones who *fleotan*—the Old English verb which eventually becomes the verb and adjective “fleet,” which is defined variously as: floats, sails, drifts in air, swims (as a fish does), fluctuates, flows, dissolves, glides away, and overruns. Some of these eventually produce the later-English sense of “fleet” as rapidly disappearing, or as mutable, fast; many of them persist in the similarly-rooted English verb of “float.” The semantic multivalence here of what it is to float produces the interpretive ambiguity of the image, in which one might imagine a bird in the air, a bird on the sea, perhaps a figure in a boat, or a “spirit” which operates orthogonally to the strata of water, air, and land the protagonist is perched upon. So one might read it, as various translations do, as “gulls ghost-call,” “the

spirits of seafarers,” “the spirit of the floating ones,” “the floating spirits”¹—it seems clear that whatever they are, their primary quality here is that they refuse, in some way, interpretability or voice. They always swim—“swimmað oft”—away from the figure which addresses them.

In several features of these lines, I read the ghostly precursor of a certain modern poetic approach to the oceanic. Among other aspects: the environmental preconditions (put more simply, the season or the *weather*) has to be established aesthetically as a first principle, after which both internal changes and external acts follow: only *then* the heart grows heavy and the wanderer launches his nostalgic, failed interjection with the ones who float. It must be the sea that produces these impulses, especially in the way “float” conceptually *floats* (no other word for it) between the elemental possibilities of sea and air. Perhaps the ghosts are only seabirds, the “spirits” of the dead only imagined or metaphorical—and if so, this might be “imagination” in the sense of creative process or of hallucination, the “*phantasma*, the pure illusion” standard to early medieval theories of dream (Champion 339). Either way, as other scholars have noted, the grammatical ambiguity of this “curious half-line” produces a “fluidity of syntactical structure” which reflects the rhetorical fluidity present in the line’s meaning(s). In other words, this moment produces “a merging of the physical and metaphysical realms which the poem depicts at this point.” (Irvine 120)

Another of the Old English elegies (also found in the Exeter codex and often linked with “The Wanderer” for their shared oceanic setting), “The Seafarer,” similarly marks an impulse felt by the speaker and created or prefigured by the calling of seabirds and the falling of snow. Both the winter (the frost and hail from the north) and the spring (blossoms coming into bloom)

¹ These translations have been taken from the broadest possible range of sources: the OENPP Project at Rutgers, Sean Miller’s Early Medieval England website, Walter Bronson’s 1910 prose translation, and Roy Liuzza’s 2014 translation. See works cited for more information.

seem to suggest to the seafarer the need to set sail. I phrase it this vaguely because it is hard to tell whether the sea is viewed with despair or desire, or the combination of both sometimes called “sea-fever”—while the typical reading of this poem and its scenes of isolation is that of a penitential pilgrimage or other form of religious journey, some argue that “there is no reason they could not be spoken by an experienced sailor,” i.e. that the speaker might not be a pilgrim but instead a fisherman engaging in solitary contemplation between journeys. The speaker’s spirit (or mind, or thoughts) eventually leaves his body and takes flight over the sea, traveling over the “whale’s home” and returning to him; then the “lonely flier” (*anfloga*) urges the spirit back out again over the “whale’s path.” Here the soul is a bird, or it is urged back out away from the body and across the water *by* (and *as*) a bird—this mysterious encounter happens on land, but seems narratively indistinguishable from the sea it is entangled with.

Writing about her efforts to adapt and ‘translate’ “The Seafarer” along with other Old English and Old Norse texts into a poetic performance, the contemporary poet Caroline Bergvall writes: “The medieval quest poem sought its purpose and spiritual nature in the testing, frightening yet also inspiring symbiosis of the geographic and the symbolic journey. [...] Often written as a mix of mythical, poetic and actual journeys, these texts have also helped chart the geographical contours of the North Atlantic’s many coasts and islands.” (*Drift* 147) The book version of Bergvall’s adaptation—which also exists as a multisensory sound performance—depicts the indeterminacy of these journeys by a string of false cognates, missing letters, loosened syntax, and stream-of-thought grammar. An example from a section which loosely adapts the previous scene—spring urging the wanderer to sea—reads as follows: “Rushed my ship to sky Sailed straight into the / hammer green thunnor wall electromagnetic / warptides

wavelengths mindgawping nocturnal” (10). Bergvall’s process journal in *Drift* reveals a peculiar paradox that seems to be undergirding her choice of “The Seafarer” for this project:

Reading it with a literal word-to-word translation, the Seafarer's stark, repetitive and sorrowful beating at the waves and at the soul resonates with me in more ways than one. Yet in its original language the text evades me nearly completely. I stumble on the largely incomprehensible quality of the Old English language, the obsolete letters, the pervasive syntactical declension, its internal poetic rhyming and chain of alliterations, the repetitive and compact narration, very little of which can be accessed via contemporary English. Indeed at times it feels easier to think of it in relation to historical Norwegian, another language I know next to nothing about. (130)

This seems to gesture, if only obliquely, at the ways in which our affective response to a text intertwines with but diverges from the capacity to comprehend it. The fact that Bergvall’s *Drift* re-enacts, rather than clarifies, this obscurity suggests there is something useful in it, perhaps especially in response to texts like this, which depict sea-journeys. I suggest this because, as Bergvall’s version depicts, to be on the sea may be to have a purpose (pilgrimage, exile, migration, the herring season) but it more fundamentally risks a concept which she draws from the sagas: “hafville, sea wilderness, sea wildering.” To be *hafvilla* in the Old Norse and Old Icelandic sagas is to lose one’s bearings, to be—modern English usefully maintains a similar idiom—at sea. This state of being totally lost is a common sort of fugue in the sagas, and just as commonly (by technical maritime logic and, more importantly here, by literary convention) associated with a turn in the weather: sometimes fog or overcast skies which disturb various forms of visual navigation, and most commonly by the set linguistic trope that “the fair wind failed.” Indeed this phrase opens Bergvall’s “Hafville” section of *Drift*, “The fair wind failed. The wind dropped. Winds were unfavourable straightaway” as well as forms the base text for later permutations: “The fair wind failed and they wholly lost their reck their reckoning did not know from what direction Driven” (37). As other scholars have noted, Bergvall’s text seems

drawn towards this state of fogginess: “the text risks enacting its own state of *hafvilla*, in which precise definition becomes limited, and navigation too difficult” (Hood 191)

Of course, one might get lost on land—maps fail, darkness or a wrong turn disturbs the journey, a forest might overtake a former path or desert erode it—but the trope of *hafvilla* exposes the ways in which the sea in particular can be both entirely familiar and suddenly, contingently defamiliarized: the seafarer literally cannot ever imagine themselves on solid ground. The sea as representative not of mastery but the *loss* of mastery, or the impossibility of ever achieving it, is congruent with what is sometimes called the “blue humanities,” the subset or variant of ecocriticism which “self-consciously distinguishes itself from familiar terrestrial (or “green”) models of the relationship with the nonhuman environment” (Mentz 19). A related term, the “oceanic turn,” reveals the way previous models of oceanic thought—especially the Atlantic², which, as Caroline Rae writes is “geographically, historically and materially bound to the project of modernity” through colonialism and the slave trade—often suggest the possibility of agency or control in ways which are no longer viable.

Rather, as Elizabeth DeLoughery writes in her *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, the oceanic turn (she gives it yet another name, that of “critical ocean studies”) figures the ocean as “agent, as embodied place, or as ontology itself” (134). DeLoughery names one reason for the difficulties involved in narrating the sea:

² Saying “especially the Atlantic” is itself fraught. On one hand, a crucial early text in what would become oceanic studies was Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which traced the diasporic networks of Black culture created as a result of the trans-Atlantic network of slave trade. Many texts in Caribbean and Black studies draw on the particular histories and traumas of the Middle Passage and the way it has inflected Atlantic sites. Conversely, though, other scholars have suggested that the emphasis on the Atlantic reflects an Anglophone critical bias, or otherwise reinforces a limited colonial imaginary rather than a properly global perspective. Susan Ferwerda, for example, has recently explored the way that “blue transoceanic European and Pacific colonial connections become disarticulated in the blue humanities and their aquatic encounters” (1).

[...] it cannot be inhabited. In other words, the ability to experience the sea as an ontological place is challenged by the ways in which currents perpetually circulate the water and because of the inability to mark and monumentalize space into place. (135)

This lack of fixity, or troubled relationship to space and place, is found not just in the ocean but in other waters (or “waters”)—in *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, Steve Mentz charts a shift in the blue humanities “from a largely saltwater and liquid focus to more varied analyses of planetary water” (2). To do so, he draws on a quote from the inventor of the barometer, Evangelista Torricelli, who “accurately described the surface of our planet as covered by two bodies, a heavy and liquid one above which humans usually float, and a lighter gaseous one to the bottom of which we generally sink.” This “sea of air,” as well as the “cryosphere” of polar and mountainous ice, constitute alternate or additional “world-seas” which newer oceanic criticism often attempt to incorporate.

Alongside the oceanic turn which occasionally stretches to incorporate air, we might also note the proliferation of readings of air itself. In “Anthropocene Air,” Tobias Menely writes about the “phenomenology of air, a substance pervasive but perceptually elusive, life-giving but ghostly, occasionally felt as pressure on the skin and only rarely made visible as smoke or mist.” (93) For Menely, air is useful for conceiving the aura of things, since it is classically “tangible intangibility” and “a distinctive ambiance [...] available only to imaginative or esoteric ways of knowing.” This persistent conceptual figuration of air (here drawing on such figures as Walter Benjamin, Thomas Hobbes, and the first English translators of Marx) poses an interesting problem for the current era, Menely argues, where much of the problems of climate change—greenhouse gases, carbon and methane accumulation, the “delayed and disaggregated effect of fossil capitalism”—takes place in the medium of air.

These attempts to figure new forms of reading the natural world (or particular aspects of it) is broadly characteristic of a series of “turns” within criticism, all attempting to respond to conceptions of the current environmental era: the Anthropocene, whether the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (in Lynn Keller’s formulation) which understands *itself* as being in the Anthropocene, or the various broader figurations of the concept which might reclaim a few decades or centuries of historical discourse on industrialization and colonialism to be of the Anthropocene’s Party without knowing it. In Brian McAllister’s figuration of the problem: “Understanding the Anthropocene and our situation in it transforms relationships between subject and object, human and nonhuman, figure and ground.” (182) Poetry and poetics has often been one of the grounds for thinking these new relationships between space and time, these nonhuman (or “more-than-human”) worlds which exist outside, around, and intersecting with our own.

Interestingly, the reasons *why* we might turn to poetry posed by various critical interventions proliferate, differ, and even seem at first to clash. What does poetry (or “lyric” poetry more particularly) offer us in particular for thinking in this space-time? One reading is that poetry offers a way of sharpening attention—that lyricism is in Tom Bristow’s “the space in which we best witness the fragility, beauty, and indifference” of the world. (7) Implicitly here is the ethical attachment that might come with such noticing; that poems can “bring forth body and mind in affective accounts of the contradictions and ethical complications” (4) involved in the Anthropocene. The mode here is a mode of focus on the natural world, which brings with it the “felt experience” that has always characterized lyric poetry—in other words, it uses relatively traditional qualities of the lyric to bear in thinking through or emotionally managing the effects of untraditional subjects. (“Untraditional” if only because no subject is traditional in the

Anthropocene: our understanding of the landscape has changed if for no other reason than because we know we have started to irreversibly change it.)

Other readings of lyric poetry are more interested in lyric *time*—some positing that the “lyric” defined as “non-narrative” characteristic of poetry is what allows certain lyric poems to respond to different scales of experience: “lyric can teach spatiotemporal flexibility, moving readers back and forth between a sense of the planet at human and vastly nonhuman scales of space and time.” (McAllister 185) This is defined basically through negation, the incapacity of narrative: suggesting that since “even narratives beyond human scales [...] understand nonhuman narrators through human cognitive structures” and “readers engage narratives through anthropocentric frames,” a medium or tactic beyond or outside narrative is required to engage with non-anthropocentric substances. Still others, while similarly interested in “deep” or “thick” times—new (or new to us) scales of thinking—are disruptive to former lyric conceits. David Farrier, for example, in *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*, argues that in Anthropocene poetics “the two principal characteristics of the lyric poem—“the stability of the lyric ‘I’ and what Jonathan Culler calls ‘the special “now” of lyric articulation’—come under significant pressure” (17). For Farrier, then, “the Anthropocene must change our sense of the poem,” as it “torques the conventional priorities of the lyric” (18). (However, seemingly, it need not do so self-consciously: Farrier reads poets like Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney usually aligned with the lyric tradition as having a “multiscalar” sensibility that sufficiently attends to a “thickened” sense of time.)

This dissertation focuses on poetry out of a desire to attend to a certain effect sometimes produced in and by it: an experience of strangeness, a moment which (it seems) could not happen other than in poetry (though sometimes it *does* happen elsewhere.) It is tempting to call this a

quality of lyric in particular—a type of lyric strangeness in the sense that Jonathan Culler, in *Theory of the Lyric*, refers occasionally to “the strangeness of lyric language, even as evocation of the ordinary” (33) or “images [...] whose main function may be to signal imaginative strangeness, resistance to ordinary lines of thought” (30). “Strangeness” is the term Frederik Ruf, too, relies on when he writes: “The depth of lyric also comes from its strangeness—a strangeness of hearing words, not actions and characters, not time and place.” (45) Better perhaps, though, to swerve past the debates on lyric definition: to instead call it only poetic strangeness, or aesthetic strangeness.

Another word for this experience—or for the feeling, the human reaction *produced* by this—may be “wonder”: here placing us back in the realm of “new materialism” in partially drawing from Jane Bennett’s definition of “enchantment,” which is a “surprising encounter” that is charming, pleasurable, energizing, yet also slightly uncanny or disturbing.³ Authors including Yves-Charles Grandjeat and Bénédicte Meillon have suggested that ecopoetic writing in particular is capable of producing this type of enchantment or reenchantment, at the crossover of “the study of *textuality*—from the Latin *textum*, itself derived from the verb *texere*, meaning to weave—and that of the world’s different textures, which are at once interwoven between themselves, interlaced with human perception and language” (Meillon 118). There are, however, multiple ways of producing this effect—think of the way that “wonder” can be a noun and a verb. The first subset of this effect, then, we might tentatively call *aesthetic*, produced by and in attention to language for its own sake: a type of luxuriousness, richness, sensorial activation. The second type is what we might then call *intellectual*: “wonder” in the sense of a puzzle, a paradox,

³ I say “partially” because the poems under consideration in this dissertation do not necessarily interest themselves in nonhuman agency to the full extent that new materialism often suggests. Or, at least, the types of nonhuman agency they consider are particular to certain theological and symbolic structures.

an aporia or difficulty, something the mind cannot fully grasp. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Richard Crashaw's Marian tears, for example, often produce this in a double way, in lines which are both sensorially entangling and nearly semantically unparseable: "Tears shall take comfort and turn gems, And wrongs repent to diadems." Yet they are most often separate—but they produce the same effect, or an effect so similar as to be indistinguishable. They demand attention, a type of close reading.

This project emerges from a selection of these sites of encounter: these three poets whose language is irreducibly strange, specific, loaded—and who in the particular poems under consideration here are engaged deeply in a type of ecopoetics, an engagement (of various sorts) with the natural world, as well as (to various extents) with a theological or metaphysical poetics of death and divine knowledge. More specific than merely ecopoetics, however, this dissertation deals with poems that dwell in the thalassic and in the atmospheric. The reason for this is because both water and air lack a certain solidity or determinacy. Put another way: the more attention you pay to, say, a particular bird or statue or body, the more information (usually) you receive about it. Both water and air, and perhaps especially their meetings and intermixtures of vapor and rain and mist, often resist or elude this drive towards specificity. To subdivide air and water into their specific parts, you need a microscope or spectrometer—not a poem—and physically reaching to touch these elements does not provide their contours but merely displaces them around you.

In other words, they enact a particular kind of tension between formlessness and form: the more specific, the more detailed one is about a watery or airy site, the more one risks a deluge of indistinction. This is especially true at the sites of their intersection: where the ocean or the atmosphere could sometimes be read as a neutral "landscape" or figure of duration, a sort of

environmental *longue durée*, their intersections are more often shifting, dangerous, spectral, contingent: in other words, they show the edges of two elements without edges. I suggest that mists, vapors, and rains are liminal, but the states they shift between (water and air) are *themselves* liminal, such that attention to them is constantly unsettled and unsettling.

It is because of this hyperliminality, shifting between states that are already shifting, that I argue here for a type of “misticism”: an approach particularly attentive to the way formlessness changes form in poetry. I argue these mists and vapors are relevant substrates for both hauntings—present in two of the three chapters—and “mysteries” in the theological sense—present in, arguably, all three chapters. They are sites of estrangement and of strangeness—and this is no less true because each poet is writing about a setting that to each of them is historically specific, deeply familiar, and known. Rather than focusing on the lyric “I,” in other words, I propose the centrality of a lyric “eye”—a poetic subset of what Anna Tsing calls the “arts of noticing”—which takes in aesthetic qualities of the world and reflects and refracts them into lyric representations of limitlessness.

This dissertation traces certain elements of the oceanic and atmospheric—and, in particular, their intersections—in three Anglophone poets: Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing about English atmospheres and their disturbance by global cataclysm, Robert Lowell, writing about New England shoals and Atlantic disruptions, and Seamus Heaney, writing about Irish and Northern Irish loughs and islands of encounters. Some attention should be paid here to something touched upon in the chapters themselves, the literary genealogies involved in the project: that is, that Gerard Manley Hopkins is an often-acknowledged influence to both Robert Lowell and Seamus Heaney, perhaps especially in the early literary career of each of the two. So too were the latter two readers and critics of each other, and even (towards the end of Lowell’s

career and the early middle of Heaney's) personal friends. The extent of this interlacing grows most sustained, of course, in Heaney, the last of these poets chronologically, who had decades to engage with his predecessors in a series of reviews, lectures, and other such peripheral material, as well as to examine their significant influence on his own work. The literary genealogy is also an explicitly Catholic one: all three were Catholic during the periods of time they wrote the major works discussed in this dissertation, and arguably all three experienced their Catholicism as countercultural in ways which inflected the deployment of religion in their poems.⁴

Lowell's sustained engagement with Hopkins was, explicitly, with Hopkins as a Catholic poet, during the period of time leading to his conversion to Catholicism in 1941. Jean Stafford, Lowell's wife at this time, skewers him for it pseudonymously in her autobiographical fiction (later excerpted as its own story, "An Influx of Poets"): "Half a year after we were married, Theron, immersed in the rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins the poet, was explosively ignited by Gerard Manley Hopkins the Jesuit, and, as my mother would have said, he was off on a tear." (477) This indictment of "the watchful, jealous Salem Puritan, the watchful, zealous Roman Catholic catechumen" reflects the tangled literary-theological nature of the actual Lowell's conversion; according to letters sent by Stafford at the time, Lowell "told Jean that it was no longer important whether or not he became a writer. If he could not write devotional poetry—the

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins was a convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism during his time at Oxford, and somewhat infamously burned his poetry during his early years as a Jesuit priest; his poetry often contrasted the redemptive qualities of faith with the depressing or degraded qualities he associated with the industrializing, modernizing world, and the chapter dwells in more detail on some ways his Catholicism in a still often anti-Catholic England might specifically operate in "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Robert Lowell, also a convert to Catholicism (though he later lapsed in the faith), called himself a "fire-breathing Catholic C.O." [conscientious objector] in his "Memories of West Street and Lepke," and indeed his new faith was a significant part of his reluctance to serve in World War II as well as a form of distance from his "Puritan" roots in one of New England's most prestigious upper-class families. Seamus Heaney, of course, was born Catholic—in an era and place where Catholicism and Protestantism were in fierce sectarian conflict. Almost all of Hopkins' poetry is at least incidentally theological, and the two major works of Lowell and Heaney covered in this dissertation relate in part to Catholic (or formerly-Catholic) sites of pilgrimage.

poetry of Dante, Milton, Herbert, and Hopkins, the poetry of Eliot—then he would write nothing” (qtd. In Mariani 93). Lowell also wrote an essay on Hopkins for *The Kenyon Review*’s special issue on Hopkins in 1944; his contribution emphasizes the religious commitment undergirding Hopkins’ poetry: “he would have been a saint had he written nothing,” Lowell writes, and his fastidiousness, “had there been nothing else to Hopkins, might have brought him a sort of small and humorous fame as the absurd Jesuit” (“A Note” 583). With characteristic loftiness Lowell claims in the closing paragraph that “Hopkins’ epitaph, I should think, should run something like this. He wrote religious lyrics that are thoroughly of the 19th Century and yet are unsurpassed by anything written in the great ages of religion. He is probably the finest of English poets of nature, i.e., of inanimate creation.”⁵

Hopkins’ influence on Lowell has been studied at some length, most influentially by Stephen Gould Axelrod, who argues the influence is mostly visible in Lowell’s early work: “If we can hardly avoid sensing the impact Hopkins had on Lowell’s early work, it is equally difficult to avoid sensing that the impact eventually vanished.” (56) Axelrod traces some of the material evidence in Lowell’s journals of Hopkins’ influence—with copied-out lines or full poems from Hopkins often preceding or entangled with early drafts of early poems including “Rebellion” (next to Hopkins’ “No Worst, There is None”) and “Where the Rainbow Ends” (next to “Spring.”) But, of course, the most obvious connection is in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” and Hopkins’ “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (and to some extent Hopkins’ other “seawreck” poem, “The Loss of the Eurydice.”) For Axelrod, there is a clear Bloomian problem of the anxiety of influence here for Lowell, who criticizes Hopkins most strongly for a set of

⁵ Of some interest here, perhaps, is the idea Lowell puts forward that Hopkins is *of his time*—an unusual reading given the long gap between Hopkins’ writing and its posthumous (twentieth-century) publication, and one at odds with the common reading of Hopkins as a “protomodernist” or otherwise out of sync with the literary mores of his time.

“faults” which (Axelrod notes) Lowell’s early poetry shares: “styleless” exuberance, awkwardness, obscurity, a “hyperthyroid” rhythm, and a lack of facility with writing people (as opposed to nature.) “The degree to which he identified with Hopkins,” Axelrod speculates, “must have deeply troubled him as he wrote his own Catholic sea elegy, which at once imitated, challenged, and defied its most famous predecessor.” (62) One of the most important features of this reading is that, among the other direct references to Hopkins Axelrod reads in “The Quaker Graveyard,” thinking of Hopkins provides a clearer precursor for an otherwise cryptic line in the poem: “IS, the whited monster” is generally taken as a reference to God (from the Biblical proclamation “I am that I am”) but more specifically draws from Hopkins’ ending lines of “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire”: “I am all at once what Christ is [...] Immortal diamond / Is immortal diamond.”

Seamus Heaney is if anything even more explicit about Hopkins’ influence—or, as he terms it in his 1974 lecture “Feeling into Words,” “in-fluence,” literally a flowing in of words, “something in another writer’s sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system.” Heaney cites Hopkins as that early in-fluence: “The result of reading Hopkins at school was the desire to write, and when I first put pen to paper at university, what flowed out was what had flowed in, the bumpy alliterating music, the reporting sounds and ricochetting consonants typical of Hopkins’s verse.” Richard Rankin Russell notes that the intensity of this influence renders Heaney almost singular among Irish poets, most of whom with the exception of Heaney and Patrick Kavanagh take more influence from Philip Larkin and (of course) W.B. Yeats. This includes Northern Irish poets, though in “Feeling into Words” Heaney retrospectively theorizes that Hopkins’ poetic voice

reminded him of his own “staccato” Ulster dialect: “it may be because of this affinity between my dialect and Hopkins’s oddity that those first verses turned out as they did.”

Heaney, always more eager to discuss sound than sect, often speaks about Hopkins in these fundamentally lyrical terms; but he is willing to admit too, at least when asked, that the Catholicism in Hopkins’ verse played a part in that early interest. In response to a question from Dennis O’Driscoll in *Stepping Stones*, Heaney concedes the religious dimension of his similarities to Hopkins: “The fact that Hopkins had been a priest was incidental [...]. There were too many priests all round us for holy orders to be impressive as such. More to the point was the general Catholic thing, the fact that the theology and doctrines that Hopkins embraced were the ones that embraced me and my generation” (38). The fact that Heaney reads both the linguistic and theological registers of Hopkins as ones which were appealing to him for their essential accordance with his own upbringing seems worth emphasizing because, in many ways, these two aspects might clash for a Catholic in Northern Ireland. Heaney’s introduction to his translation of *Beowulf* discusses this in some detail—when speaking of “the poet who first formed my ear,” he writes that Hopkins was “a chip off the Old English block” and that therefore his own early poems in that register were “as much pastiche Anglo-Saxon as they were pastiche Hopkins.” Complicating this, though, was the fraught status of English within a Catholic and thus Irish nationalist context (that is, as the language which had displaced Irish), such that “to persuade myself that I was born into [*Beowulf*’s] language and that its language was born into me took a while” (xxiii).

Around the same time as “Feeling into Words,” Heaney gave another lecture on Hopkins, this time for the British Academy, in which he suggested that his literary criticism on Hopkins “springs from the slightly predatory curiosity of a poet interested in the creative processes of

another poet.” (*Preoccupations* 79) For Heaney, who was interested in this lecture in working out the differences between “masculine” and “feminine” poetic modes—a schema he inherited from Hopkins’ own letters and their criticism of Keats as well as from Yeats—Hopkins embodied “the crossing of masculine strain on feminine potential.” (95) That is, in this reading Hopkins is fundamentally a poet of *concepts*, even if his work “is immediately appealing or repellent...just because of its texture” (88); the thing undergirding the texture is a deeper theological necessity, or, in other words, “what is mimetic in the words is completely guaranteed by what is theological behind them.” Hopkins’ Catholicism, and its inseparability from his poetic process, are (for Heaney) what makes his poetics “a masculine forging rather than a feminine incubation, with a consequent intentness rather than allure in his style” (97).

Hopkins is also something Heaney reads *in* Lowell, as my chapter will briefly touch on—especially in “The Quaker Graveyard,” of which Heaney writes (decades after its publication):

The reader is caught in a gale-force of expressionism and could be forgiven for thinking Aeolus has it in for him personally [...] It is thrilling to put out in these poetic conditions, to feel what Yeats called “the stirring of the beast,” to come into the presence of sovereign diction and experience the tread of something metrical, conscious and implacable. (*Finders Keepers* 227)

Heaney recalls having read “The Quaker Graveyard” in particular as early as his undergraduate years. While the two would eventually form a friendship, for the younger Heaney Lowell was “the real canonical goods. All through the sixties I was reading him, constantly [...] books that were just part of the air we breathed.” (qtd. In O’Driscoll 217) Heaney would suggest that Lowell’s influence on him was especially vivid in Lowell’s later work, when “the blank-verse sonnets started to avalanche down on us” in ways that would influence Heaney’s *Field Work* and *North* (147). Addressing a question about his poem “Casualty” (“Were you not running the risk of yielding too much to Yeats’s influence?”), Heaney notes a less obvious (or at least less

critically remarked-upon) model for the poem: “At the time, I was more conscious that I was ventriloquizing for Robert Lowell” (194).

After the publication of *North*, Lowell would famously call Heaney “the best Irish poet since W.B. Yeats.” (“At the time,” Heaney wryly notes, “I didn’t take aboard just how badly Lowell had rocked the boat” [166].) Writing a letter to Heaney after a literary festival in Kilkenny, Ireland, Lowell noted that he had been reading Heaney’s work and even suggested that the younger poet’s facility with nature outstripped Lowell’s own, using a watery metaphor taken from Heaney’s own “A Drink of Water”: “Your Nature pours out images with a full hand; the cup (to work this figure to death) is so often dry for me, a town man in the end” (*Letters* 642). He would, characteristically, match this compliment with an imperious critique in the very next breath: “Sonnets seem in two ways perhaps the wrong form for your sequence [...] I’ve been so long netted in my own unrhymed sonnets that I’m no judge.” For the next few years, Lowell and Heaney were peers of a sort—in 1976, Lowell famously and disastrously presented Heaney with a major literary prize during a manic episode.⁶ When Lowell died suddenly in September 1977, less than a week after the two saw each other last, Heaney was asked to give an elegy for him at the memorial service in London, and his “Elegy” would memorialize Lowell, the “master elegist / and welder of English” in *Field Work* (31).

This “Elegy” shows attention to the watery bent of Lowell’s work in a way that reinscribes the presence of the Atlantic linkages between these two poets: Heaney writes of “a

⁶ David Gewanter, in discussing Lowell’s legacy as a “bracing, continually observing, and slightly minatory presence” for many poetic contemporaries even after his death, hints slyly that Heaney felt the lingering influence of Lowell even posthumously: “When I handed Lowell’s *Beowulf* fragments to Seamus Heaney, he shot me a furtive glance, and asked, ‘Any good?’” (138) This anecdote—about the poet behind arguably one of the most famous modern translations of *Beowulf*—also helps to gesture at the literary influences beyond Hopkins (and thus beyond the scope of this project) that Lowell and Heaney surely shared.

wind from the Irish Sea” shaking the flower by his desk. Heaney’s image of Lowell at the end of his life is a nautical one:

As you swayed the talk
and rode on the swaying tiller
of yourself, ribbing me
about my fear of water,

what was not within your empery? (31)

The conversation between a group of poets, and the self (experienced or represented—that is, the internal or external “yourself”?) Lowell shows in it become a site of nautically-inflected mastery. Lowell’s work or the figure of Lowell himself is “our night ferry” which allows him to transverse “the course set willfully across / the ungovernable and dangerous”—the central pun of the poem is the “craft” (ship or poem) which allows this transversal. In other words, Heaney “allows Lowell to master the sea” (Piavini 94). The line “helmsman, netsman, *retiarius*” suggests an almost too-wide-ranging sets of mastery over the sea as something to navigate across (as the helmsman), plunge into (as the netsman), and wield for violence (as the *retiarius*, the classical gladiator figure who fought with a fishing net and trident.) This elegy is willing to suggest what so many of Heaney and Lowell’s (and Hopkins’) elegies otherwise resist: the waters and atmospheres as a site of mastery.

The first chapter of the dissertation, “‘How air is azured:’ The Optics of Apocalypse in Gerard Manley Hopkins” reads one of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ Marian poems, “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” in terms of two structuring influences to the poem—one theological (St. Bernard’s image of divine grace flowing through an aqueduct) and one meteorological (the 1883 Krakatoa eruption). I argue that the apocalyptic tenor of this poem is due to two aspects: first that the aspect of Marian grace being discussed is an interesting contemplative problem, and secondly that the metaphors Hopkins uses are drawn from a cutting-

edge discourse on atmospherics and optics which he contributed to as a citizen-scientist. I use this as an example of a “failure point” of sorts—not that the poem *is* a failure, but that it risks and nearly achieves semantic rupture because of the scalar leaps its theological metaphors require. I take readings of Hopkins as a “nature poet” to suggest that his Scotian poetic theology (or theological poetics) of instress and inscape provide an early, if idiosyncratic, model of ecopoetry: a way of focusing attention on particular instances in the natural world. I then move to the less conceptual, and (perhaps) more elegaic, conceptions of destructive atmospheres in “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” which is famous among other things for its extensive, baroque descriptions of stormscares.

The second chapter, “‘*Clamavimus*, O depths,’: Revisiting Lowell’s Quaker Graveyard” focuses on “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” an early poem of Robert Lowell that elegizes his deceased cousin, Warren Winslow, in a poem that stretches trans-Atlantically and trans-historically in its series of references. I suggest that the poem’s many literary references—most obviously to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* but also to Milton, Thoreau, Eliot, and, of course, Hopkins—move beyond typical levels of poetic allusion to create a site of hyperreferentiality, where references churn into and contradict each other. The semantic overload that results is inextricable from the nature of the site in which it takes place: the Atlantic functions as a site that carries history in contingent and unpredictable fashions. I read one of the central elegaic images of the poem, the sailor drowned and caught in the dragnet, as a microcosm of the inherent instability of the poem: in other words, that the ocean functions as a site where it is impossible to know what *type* of history, memory, or object will emerge from its depths, just that something will. For a poet like Lowell, who will later come to prominence in part for his “confessional” imagery, the problem in this poem is of *too many* interpersonal linkages (both literary and genealogical) and

the lack of interoperability between them. For Lowell, caught at this moment of his career between pride in his Puritan New England heritage and a rejection of it inflected by a converts' zeal, the Cape and its turbulent ocean is a site which manages the contradictions, conflict and uncertainties of identity by submerging and surfacing individual elements at will—the occasional crypticism of its lines and the multivalence of its sources play out this drama. Part of this relies on a formal observation that is not new to this chapter, and that is almost too obvious to note: that the poem's "brackish reach" of language, its irregular meter and turbulent sound, is itself oceanic and coastal, that the poem *is* what it says the world *does*.

If this accomplishment—formlessness achieved through form—is one of the primary aesthetic brilliances of the poem, it is also one that is worth detailed attention when considering what Lowell really has to say about the thalassic space he builds. This chapter also attempts to address one of the central mysteries of the poem: the seeming tonal clash of the poem's penultimate section, "Our Lady of Walsingham," and the curious stillness of its central figure. Read sometimes as peaceful, sometimes as disappointing or disappointed, and sometimes as terrifying, the "expressionless" statue of the Virgin works as essential counterbalance to the waves and winds of the surrounding poem. Reading this poem, I have always been fascinated by the single figure around which a compressed, clean set of theological paradoxes clustered—the problem of divine knowledge expressed in the figure of the Virgin Mary, the *stella maris*, so differently from the tense, multiplying, and proliferating masculine figures of Christ-Ahab-Jonas-whale that structures the rest of the poem's theologies. In resolving this oddity in my own interpretive thought I am indebted to a comment made by none other than Seamus Heaney: the Virgin's face in Lowell is a star, an "energy source"—and that less important than intellectual justification for its presence in the poem is that we "sense its rightness as a matter of emotional

effect, a result of its timing and placing.” I suggest also that it is necessary to consider the palimpsest of religious conflict underlying this seemingly calm pastoral scene; ultimately, what I suspect of this poem is that it shows us two ways of accessing the sublime (or perhaps two different types of sublime), located in the sweep of the ocean and the starry point of a single face.

The last chapter, “‘My brain is a holy place for water’: Mists and Metaphysics in Seamus Heaney,” reads two instances of the intermingling of air and water in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Focusing primarily on his long poem “Station Island,” which locates itself on the ancient Catholic pilgrimage site of St. Patrick’s Purgatory in Lough Derg. Models of Heaney criticism often focus on his characteristic “earthy” imagery, sometimes elaborating on this model by dividing his career into a “grounded” early stage (often deeply pastoral, nostalgic even if that nostalgia is complicated, and Northern Irish) and an “airy” stage (often more cerebral, transcendent, or broadly humanistic.) Without denying the critical truth in these readings of Heaney, I seek to explore the lesser-theorized element of water in his work. I propose that water, itself a “minor” feature in Heaney’s oeuvre, can in fact be even further taxonomized: that is, that bodies of water often operate as *versions of* the same site-specific imagery present throughout his work (if necessarily also being more “fluid” and more formless.) The intersection of water and air, however, often has different mechanical effects—I call this “spirited weather” both for the intensity of its description and for the metaphysical hauntings it generates, most specifically in “Station Island.”

That is, this chapter emerges from my unexpected sense that the weather in this poem *does something*, has a narrative effect—participates, we might say, in worldbuilding. Most strongly in the poem’s opening and closing encounters with ghosts (of Heaney’s literary predecessors William Carleton and James Joyce respectively), the rain has specific metaphysical effects on the spirits

Heaney converses with, not just appearing with them but seeming to produce them and mediate their cognition and affect. More generally, the intense liminality produced by all sorts of airy waters and watery airs in this poem allow for spaces which are equally suffused by indistinction between life and death, memory and present day. “Station Island” of course features both of these types of water—the site-specific, rhythmic evocations of history and the contingent, startling encounters that accompany rain. I finish by reading one of Heaney’s well-known shorter poems, “Casualty,” which also features both ghosts and water: I argue that the “presence” of the dead in this particular elegy is inextricable not just from the lake that served as his livelihood but of the rain that characterizes his appearance(s) in the narrative.

Each of the poems under consideration in these chapters deals at great length with some “problem,” whether explicitly theological or more broadly metaphysical: how to think about things like grace and divinity, war and violence, salvation and damnation, death and mourning. To some extent, they seem also “stuck”—still troubled in ways the poem does not fully work through or resolve. Sometimes didactic or seemingly certain, they are never quite fully “fixed” in their answers: they overflow their own logic, break against their own constraints, let certain moods leak or spill out of the lines that produce them. In other words, there is often an intellectual or epistemological fluidity that matches the fluids, mists, and vapors of the poems’ seascapes and airspaces. But these gestures towards flow and formlessness are not—it should be said—intended to suggest a total disavowal, transcendence, or eschewal of form. Rather, they achieve this play of form and formlessness *through* form, and through the use of poetic language. For this reason, *formal* reading—even “close reading”—becomes the primary methodology by which this dissertation attempts to trace the poetic processes I read in these three poets. I attempt in my writing and thinking here to reflect the intense aesthetic focus and rigorous attention to

language found in the poems themselves, to be above any other considerations attentive to the way language operates—arguing not just about what the poems may achieve (or try to achieve, or achieve despite themselves) but *how* they do it. In this way I intend it to reflect an anecdote Heaney recalls of Robert Lowell: “‘A poem is an event,’ he told his classes, ‘not the record of an event’” (*FK* 220).

CHAPTER ONE

‘How air is azurèd’: The Optics of Apocalypse in Gerard Manley Hopkins

“There seems no reason why the phenomenon should not be common, and perhaps if looked out for it would be found to be. But who looks east at sunset?”

This sophistic play of negatives and hypotheticals in a description of a particular optical phenomenon is taken from what, in a certain lens, is the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins’ first serious publication—in another view, merely a letter to a magazine by an interested amateur. That magazine was, however, *Nature*; and the interested amateur was interested in a world where the definition of amateurism, of science, and of nature (lower- and upper-case) was rapidly changing. Hopkins, whose letter appeared in 1882 in response to a previous *Nature* publication about optical phenomena in China, argued that the “cloud-shadows in an unusual perspective and in a clear sky” might be observed just as easily (if less frequently) in England as well as abroad. He signed his name as “Gerard Hopkins” of Stonyhurst College, the Jesuit boarding school where, following his ordination, he taught Greek and Latin. His interaction was even within the bounds of fraternal religious life, in a sense, being a response to the published letter of the Jesuit meteorologist Marc Dechevrens who sent in the original observations from his post in Shanghai.

On the descriptive level, too, Hopkins’ naturalistic commentary never fully escapes the well of religious metaphors. Describing the optical characteristics of a sunset in an 1884 issue of *Nature*, his explicatory metaphor invokes a scriptural parallel: “Now it may be noticed that when a candle-flame is looked at through coloured glass, though everything else behind the glass is strongly stained with the colour, the flame is often nearly white...” (*Nature* 30, 633.) The undergirding here of the Biblical verse—“We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then

face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known”—would occur, perhaps, to a portion of the scientists and naturalists, amateur and professional, reading these pages. (None would yet recognize “G.M.H.” of Dublin as any significant theologian or scientist, of course—famously, Hopkins’ poetry was almost entirely unrecognized in his lifetime.)

The *Nature* letters reflect, as many scholars have noted, the way in which Hopkins’ work—as much in his sermons, correspondence, and (if not most so) in his journals as in his poetry—often touched on many of the contemporary scientific questions of the time: “admitting a dialogue between science and literature, across the vast distances which contiguity does not allow” (Banfield 175). Recent criticism often stresses particular types of encounters or particular recurring natural images in his poetry and journals, linking certain turns of phrase or unusual metaphors to the science of the day. Jude Nixon influentially notes, for example, the thermodynamic research undergirding Hopkins’ deployments of heat and light, showing the ways he was “beginning to associate (in)stress with energy” (135) and tracing the ways in which “Hopkins’ poems, and indeed many Victorian texts, were concerned with the protean manifestations of entropy on living systems” (139). Along similar lines of inquiry into these intersections, scholarship in the past several decades has read Hopkins’ pre-novitiate trip to the Alps—coincidentally making the acquaintance there of the physicist and optician John Tyndall—as a stage on which to “fuse the scientific and sublime” in his journal observations of the glaciers (Colley 2016). The *Nature* letters themselves also enter as evidence of Hopkins’ interest in clouds and meteorology in work like Jack Louis Hart’s 2023 article on “Hopkins’ Clouded Judgment”—in particular, how the seemingly unusual turns of phrase in the letters reflect “an ongoing and lively discussion about the way in which clouds were a centrepiece in broader debates over perception, change, and contingency” in both Romantic and Victorian aesthetic

dialogues and, concurrently, the formalization of scientific nomenclature and categorizations (134).

An implicit tension in many of these critical works is how to read the admitted strangeness of many of his metaphors, what Hopkins himself draws attention to in an oft-quoted fragment of a letter to Robert Bridges (his friend and, later, editor): “No doubt my poetry errs on the side of oddness...it is the virtue of design, pattern, or inscape to be distinctive, and it is the vice of distinctiveness to be queer.” (66) Deferring for a moment the temptation “queerness”—a term which Bridges later echoes in his commentaries on Hopkins—offers a contemporary reader, the distinctiveness of these metaphors (and of other aspects of Hopkins’ verse, his syntax and perhaps most notoriously his metrical schemes) contribute to the general consensus of Hopkins as, to cite the cautiously-worded description in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “one of the most individual of Victorian writers.” Critical readings in recent years, especially those which are particularly interested in Hopkins’ focus on the natural world, must then navigate certain interpretive tensions: whether, after tracing previously-unnoticed linkages and reflections between Hopkins’ thoughts and the theological, aesthetic and scientific discourses of his contemporaries and precursors, some essential “oddity” still remains.

In one poem¹, “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” air exists not as subject but operative metaphor. Indeed, the title seems to invert the order of the comparison with

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the quotations from Hopkins’ poetry are all taken from the 1990 Oxford English Texts edition of Hopkins’ poetical works, edited by Norman McKenzie. Punctuation, hyphenation, and even Hopkins’ characteristic stress marks all vary from edition to edition, in part because of the editing choices made by Robert Bridges in the poetry’s early publication life, and McKenzie notes in his introduction that “The problem becomes acute in the case of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland,’ [...] Here the autograph, like the ship itself, has foundered [...] The author’s own other-worldly neglect has introduced a limitation his editors cannot transcend.” (xlvii) I have abbreviated this in-text as *PW* for *Poetical Works*; occasionally, when poems other than “The Blessed Virgin” or “The Wreck of the Deutschland” are cited for explanatory or contextual purposes, I use the often simpler metrical marks in the 1918 edition of Hopkins’ poems.

its first lines: that is, the poem's first lines start not with a description of Mary but the "wild air, world-mothering air." Already these two descriptions seem almost at odds with each other—not, perhaps, as a description for the air, but as a description for Mary. "World-mothering" is, if unconventionally phrased, a fairly conventional theological attribute of Mary, as seen, for example, in Hopkins' other Marian poem, "May Magnificat." In that poem, Hopkins poses (rhetorically) the question of why "May is Mary's month," and his response, fairly didactic—though interestingly framed as a reported dialogue between the reader and Mary—is that the themes of birth and growth in springtime reflect the "world of good, / Nature's motherhood" and are therefore sacred to Mary. While the lines past this claim "Well but there was more than this" and swing into an ecstatic and barely controlled description of the natural world ("when drop-of-blood-and-foam-dapple / Bloom" as a representative line), "May Magnificat" still collapses into a relatively traditional explanation: the ecstasy of the natural world here is the "ecstasy all of mothering earth" and therefore reminds Mary specifically of her own ecstasy; the poem therefore resolves in a straightforward reference to the Magnificat, the Biblically-derived canticle that constitutes some of the earliest extant material related to Mary.

Other poems from Hopkins on Mary are composed on similarly generic theological lines—along with translations and compositions in Latin, the English-language "Ad Mariam" mixes the occasional diversion or stylistic flourish (May as "spring's one daughter" on "the young year-mother") with a relatively conventional exposition of Mary as vernal maiden and mother, interspersed with: "Wherefore we love thee, wherefore we sing to thee...Thee, o maiden, most worthy of praise" (94-95). If much of Hopkins' literary Mariology is, to some extent, more straightforward in content and even style than, for example, his Christology—or

other topics—the same cannot be said of “The Blessed Virgin,” in part because it chooses to start with this description of the “wild air.”

Looking at Hopkins’ notes for his sermons, however, we see that the organizational metaphor for “The Blessed Virgin” first occurred in a sermon several years previously—one of the first given in his curacy at St. Joseph’s in Bedford Leigh, an industrial region near Manchester which a Hopkins biographer, Gerald Roberts, described as “not the place for poetry” and Hopkins’ “first extensive acquaintance with the industrial North.” (87-88) Hopkins’ notes on his sermons show that he first preached that day (October 5th, 1879) on the Biblical anecdote of the paralyzed man at Capernaum who was lowered through a roof to beg Christ for a cure. His notes for “the evening, it being Rosary Sunday” are notably sketchier, seemingly dwelling on a history and conventional pedagogy of the rosary tradition which he felt comfortable fleshing out extemporaneously: “How best to pray the Rosary. One way to dwell on the persons of the mystery: examples.” It is when expounding on a theology of Mary that his notes become more detailed and introduce the sky as a metaphor:

St. Bernard’s saying, All grace given through Mary: this a mystery. Like blue sky, which for all its richness of color does not stain the sunlight, though smoke and red clouds do, so God’s graces come to us unchanged but all through her. Moreover she gladdens the Catholic’s heaven and when she is brightest so is the sun her son: he that sees no blue sees no sun either, so with Protestants. (29)

This metaphor is linked, then, for Hopkins, with a *mystery*—not one of the “mysteries” which structure devotional meditative practice in the Rosary, but one drawn from the sermons of the medieval theologian Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard’s sermon given on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin is one of the places where he most extensively develops his theology of grace, in which Mary is the “aqueduct” or channel by which divine grace reaches humanity: “This stream from the heavenly source descends to us through an Aqueduct [...] to moisten our

dry and withered hearts with some few drops of the waters of grace.” (82) More significantly, she is the sole source of this grace, so that, Bernard continues, “if there is anything of hope in us, if anything of grace, if anything of salvation, we may feel assured it has overflowed unto us from her.” Within this metaphor, the time before Mary was one in which “the streams of heavenly grace did not begin to flow down upon the human race [...] the precious Conduit whereof I speak did not as yet mediate.” (83) The mystery for Hopkins, then, may be in the seeming necessity of Mary—as he later writes in the sermon notes, “the grace he gives not direct but as if stooping and drawing it from her vessel [...] It is in some way laid up in her.” (29-30)

For Hopkins as for Bernard, the “fullness” of grace is expressed partially in aquatic metaphor (though elsewhere he, and other Catholic theologians, describe Mary as light, or, as elsewhere in this sermon, as the sun or a star); we might note too that aqueducts are a system to draw water through the air, merging these two elements. Hopkins, however, also pursues the metaphor as light instead: and he does so with an attention to the *specifics* of naturalist observation. It is not only that the blue sky transmits light without altering it, but that it does this “though smoke and red clouds” operate differently—not a default, in other words, but a way a particular color and circumstance work. Finally, the metaphor carries within itself a warning about what happens in its absence, here used for partisan denominational purposes to decry the blindness of Protestantism which, Hopkins implies, loses access to Christ’s light without the context of Mary’s blue. We also see elements of Hopkins’ tendency towards wordplay in these notes, where this doctrinal development is reliant on the interplay of “the sun her son.”

He would return to this theme in “The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe,” written three years later at Stonyhurst. In a letter to Bridges, he would note that his poem was

one of a spate of “polyglot poems” written in honor of Mary that day, and that he felt his own was “partly a compromise with popular taste.” (179)

One of the ways the air—and it does seem here to be the air described in its own right that Hopkins is interested in in this poem, not merely stripping it for metaphor—functions is with a dizzying attention to the question of scale. Air is pervasive and noticeable for Hopkins, and it is an air that “each eyelash or hair / Girdles”—an air that the thinnest filaments of the human form surround, but that also, conversely, “nestles” the poet “everywhere.” (“Girdle” for the contemporary reader might feel gendered, but Hopkins might be thinking of priestly garments—either way, a more enveloping and constrictive experience than one might normally expect of eyelashes or strands of hair.) The poem flips rapidly between the air as subject and the air as object: it nestles him, it is girdled by eyelashes, but it “goes home betwixt / The fleeci-est, frailest-flixed / Snowflake”—the pervasive omnipresence of air is thus configured as something outside of the bounds of actor and actant.

Air as a “needful, never spent, / and nursing element” similarly seesaws between its qualities of necessity and ubiquity, while tying this particular triad of descriptors together through alliteration; with semantic (if not practical) ambiguity especially in the third description, since “nursing” as a verb applies to the giver and recipient of that nursing. Necessity and ubiquity seem to go together in the nourishing properties of air for Hopkins, but it is an ubiquity that escapes form and constraint (it is his “more than meat and drink”)—and more than that, it is an element that seems almost to compel something from Hopkins in return.

That is, before fully turning to the comparison we know will be the subject of the poem, he has one more descriptor of air, including another mention of the word “air” itself (only the second line to do so), as if to reground us:

This air, which, by life's law,
My lung must draw and draw
Now but to breathe its praise,
Minds me in many ways

The syntax here turns an otherwise nearly tautological observation—to breathe praise, one needs to breathe—into a set of lines unusually interested in the biological nature of its constraints. It is “by life’s law” that one must breathe, and continue breathing (not just “draw” breath but “draw and draw”)—the idea that one must then praise air feels, then, like an inevitability or imposition of life’s law as well. The double meaning of the verb “draw” emerges due to this repetition—a lung *drawing air* is merely the biological process of breath, but an artist (or naturalist) might draw something to represent it. The creative impulse rides on top of the biological imperative, and is not syntactically separable from it—and all this “minds” the poet, pushing the comparison to Mary to the forefront.

Theologically, the description of Mary here is similarly concentrated on both scale and volition. First, Hopkins describes the Incarnation in a way that focuses on Christ in the womb—while, oddly, not mentioning Christ by name. The poet is “minded” of Mary’s acts of motherhood not only for Christ but for “our race”—but the description of the Incarnation is significantly odder than the description of her as the universal mother:

Of her who not only
Gave God’s infinity
Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk, and all the rest

The person of Christ, and specifically the fetal and infant Christ, is “God’s infinity / Dwindled to infancy.” Drawing our attention to the dizzying collapse of scale between infinity and infancy, the location of this roundabout description grammatically splits the phrase “gave welcome,” so that, momentarily, one might read against all normative Catholic theology that Mary “gave

God's infinity." The poet seems disinclined to dwell for too long on the bodily specifics of childbirth and breastfeeding—"and all the rest," drawing this portion to a hurried close—but, much like the poet's relationship to air, the biological and theological aspects are intermingled here.

If Mary actively "gives welcome" when first mentioned in this stanza, the last lines of the stanza render her more receptive:

This one work has to do—
Let all God's glory through,
God's glory which would go
Through her and from her flow
Off, and no way but so.

Syntactic inversion again creates ambiguity: does Mary have (only) one work to do, as in a unity of purpose, or is the one work something that she *has* to do—and if the latter, is this "has to" a question of theological necessity or a mandate? The act of participation in the Incarnation becomes, here, not just passive but almost inhuman: she needs only to "let through" something that would go "through her," prefiguring, perhaps, the descriptions of glass and light that occur later within the poem. Crucially, however, God's glory occupies an equally strange set of descriptors in this stanza: the word "would" might be volitional (the glory *wants to* go through her) or merely consequential (if you let something through, it *would* go through you), and the "flow" turns this away from the practical solidities of incarnation to a more liquid, fluid descriptor.

The poem's second stanza returns, briefly, to the broader human experience—but in a way that renders the experience of grace an almost restrictive experience: "I say we are wound / With mercy, round and round, / As if with air." The mechanics of rhyme and grammar press us into the right reading of the homonymic *wound*, but what does it mean to be "wound" with

mercy? “Round and round” emphasizes the tactile, almost mechanical quality that mercy takes on: mercy is not *all around* or *surrounding* but *round and round*, something that physically moves around us (as if a bandage) or perhaps even physically moves us (as if we are clockwork being wound up.) It seems almost that the declarative break of “I say,” almost introductory or invocative, is there not just to fill the meter of the poem but to passively acknowledge the strangeness of the claim. The other half of the simile does not immediately clarify but offers new problems—we might first think that air works in the same ambiguously mechanical, moved or moving way as mercy. Here a second problem emerges: we *are* surrounded (if we believe what the poem says) with mercy, but we are surrounded *as if* with air. *As if*, in other words, not *as*: Hopkins’ grammar here does not admit, entirely, any claim about how air itself works for us, only that mercy and air work together on a metaphorical level.

A few lines later, air reoccurs in the web of comparisons Hopkins is making, and in a clearer way: in terms of Mary’s role in dispensing God’s grace, she is “more than almoner,” and “men are meant to share / Her life as life does air.” From the hypothetical *as if* we have descended into the stronger claims of simile, of *as*: men are meant to share Mary’s life in the same way that life shares air, which it does. Repetition of *life* within the line strengthens the force of the comparison: life does, of course, depend on air, as the theology of this poem depends on it. Here, air is a substance in this poem that can contract or expand to the level of speculation it requires; it creates an open space of sorts for the “wild web” of Hopkins’ own theological claims.

The structure of the poem itself almost seems to inhale and exhale: each stanza, and in particular this and the next stanza, start with a line which reintroduces the poet’s argumentative voice. “I say” to open this string of wide-reaching claims, that closes with a less far-reaching and

relatively normative theological metaphor; the next stanza opens with the nearly ironically diffident “If I have understood,” which seems almost forced—except that it gives the reader breathing room of sorts, a line which reads placidly before swinging into equally intense claims. The rest of this stanza is focused not on understanding but on the “mystery” of Christ taking flesh, and on the processes of grace and salvation which Hopkins renders Mary a coparticipant in: when she “plays her part” in the hearts of men, it is not a matter (only) of sentiment but an oddly invasive biological impulse, “laying, like air’s fine flood / The deathdance in his blood.” The “flood” of air becomes almost liquid, rhymed against blood. Presumably this metaphor means to draw on the enriching quality of oxygenated blood, but “deathdance” renders it uncanny, especially as an echo of the “ghostly good” over which Mary is said, in earlier lines, to preside. Christ makes “New Nazareths in us / Where she shall conceive him,” as if the believing mind becomes a womb of sort, a growth medium for perpetual new incarnations of Christ: “Men here may draw like breath / More Christ and baffle death.” Air and breath here become the method by which this complex incarnational metaphor takes place, one in which Christ, Mary, and the believer each take turns at being the acting agent, the acted upon, and the site of action—and which draws on the language of death and ghostliness as an undercurrent to its conceptional and incarnational logic.

The next stanza in this poem attempts to clarify the relationship of Mary to divinity by drawing on the field of optics and color theory, drawing our attention to how “the air is azured”—not “azure,” the color, but made azure. Tactile and visual perceptive data get tangled here, as Hopkins describes how, upon lifting a hand to the sky, air “laps” in between one’s fingers; the “rich, rich” lapping renders air thick and palpable—air becomes something almost liquid or fluid against the (in this moment) more solid human form, which creates negative space

as “fingergaps.” (Air is similarly omnipresent or all-pervasive, then, if on a different scale than in the first stanza’s metaphors, where it “goes between” snowflakes.) But for Hopkins, the blueness of the sky presents an optical problem, almost a paradox:

Yet such a sapphire-shot,
Charged, steepèd sky will not
Stain light.

Daniel Williams notes how this draws on a “vivid problem in Victorian optics” (139)—the question of how light diffracted and the sky, for example, appeared blue was a contemporary topic of scientific thought. Williams notes that Hopkins met the physicist John Tyndall on a trip in the Alps shortly before the latter’s experiments which led to a greater scientific understanding of diffraction. For Hopkins, then, the basic conceit of this metaphor—how the blueness of sky “does no prejudice”—is not merely aesthetic observation or settled fact but an issue under active scientific debate. The gesture of a metaphysical conceit—the extended metaphor from the concrete world by which one understands some spiritual claim—crumples in the face of a more complicated dynamic wherein the spiritual and scientific both actively demand explication, or, in fact, where the theology is more straightforward than the optic science.

Mary, for Hopkins, thus operates like the “glass-blue days” where “every colour glows, / Each shape and shadow shows”—something that preserves the clear light of divinity while being, itself, fully colored and thus fully symbolically itself: “Performing the sky’s inescapable surround, Mary’s iconographic association with blue seeps through in ritual allusions to crystals (and perhaps prisms), to her dyed (‘steepèd’) blue cloak, and to panes paradoxically stained ‘glass-blue’ even as they do not ‘Stain light.’” (Williams 138-139) Interestingly, the problem of optics and visual perception leads inevitably to the issue of scale:

Blue be it: this blue heaven
This seven or seven times seven

Hued sunbeam will transmit
Perfect, not alter it.

The hyperrepetition of “blue” in this line, Hopkins’ insistence on it, stands up, then, against the whole range of scale found in a beam of clear light, whether it is prised into potentially “seven or seven times seven” hues—this against the meteorological truth, of course, that the sky changes color quite often. Syntactically, the logic of the verb “transmit” throws us, too, momentarily: does the blue heaven transmit the sunbeam or is the blue heaven a place where the sunbeam transmits itself? In the tranquility of a “glass-blue” day, the “problem”—the inextricability of white light and blue sky, color and colorlessness—plays out in a ambiguity of verb tense.

Hopkins even slightly withdraws from this claim once presented: the blue sky does not alter the sunbeam, but if it does— “or if there does”—the alteration draws away from the clarity of color theory, glass, and optics into something both floral and biological, if “there does some soft [...] Bloom breathe, that one breath more / Earth is the fairer for.” In other words, Hopkins plays the metaphor both ways in the poem in ways that do not occur in his sermon: when considering the sky, Mary is something that transmits perfect light (Christ) without alteration; when considering the earth, or faltering on the optical point made about the sky, she is nevertheless something that both breathes and blooms, a proliferation of life that renders the world “fairer.”

Whether a filter or a filigree, though, Hopkins reminds us of the absolute necessity of this blueness—or at least of air: if “did not air make / This bath of blue and slake,” the presence of the unaltered stars would be cataclysmic, nearly apocalyptic: the sun would “shake” as a “blear and blinding ball / With blackness bound,” a description that almost feels Miltonic in scope and Old English in (alliterative) form. Implicitly, the optical and experiential collapse into each other

here, as the “shaking” and “rolling” of the sun and stars seem to exceed a normal description of the night sky. The stars exceed pure description in this hypothetical: they are “thick,” again breaching the boundaries between air and liquid, and they are impossible to lock into one material comparison, “flashing like flecks of coal, / Quartz-fret, or sparks of salt, / In grimy vasty vault.”

Hopkins returns to theology in the next stanza, making the stakes of this flecked skyscape clear: “So God was God of old.” A common thread in Hopkins is the intercessory moment not of Christ’s death but of Christ’s Incarnation itself: not the sacrifice but the becoming-man which thereafter changes the nature of all mankind. Sometimes this is tangled with the resurrection, as in “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection,” where the reciprocity exists as a logical claim across a formal caesura: “I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am” (*PW PW* 198) But the claim itself is not based on death but being—and, elsewhere, Hopkins claims that this metaphysical equivalence is also matched by God’s own understanding of the resemblance. “As kingfishers catch fire,” one of Hopkins’ most-anthologized sonnets, explicates this in the sestet:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. (*PW* 141)

Because Christ was like man, man is like Christ, and appears so to God—there is something in mankind that is suffused with a particular “play” of divine resemblance, to which, Hopkins suggests, the ethical purpose of the “just man” is to align oneself with, or live up to, this resemblance.

At first, the operative metaphor seems the same when Hopkins considers the role of Mary: Christ has “those limbs like ours,” but is also a suffusive and optical force: her role is in

relation to “his light.” In light of the near-apocalyptic vision of the “God of old,” however, Mary’s role as Mediatrix suggests that the Incarnation might otherwise be unbearable. Elsewhere, Christ’s Incarnation endears mankind to God, but here, in reverse, *we* are the ones drawn to sympathy by the resemblance: it is the fact that the “limbs like ours” were “moulded” by a human mother that “must make our daystar / Much dearer to mankind.” (“Our daystar” refers, seemingly, to Christ, but even this image is grammatically ambiguous enough to produce a momentary uncanniness—since the image of the “daystar” or “morning star” in Christian tradition can refer, variously, to the fallen angel Lucifer, to Christ himself as in Revelations, to a divine presence in the hearts of believers as in the Petrine epistles, or to Mary in her classical epithet as *stella* (or *lux*) *matutina*, star (light) of the morning.)

Mary needs to “sift” this divine light because its “glory bare could blind / or less could win man’s mind”—like looking directly at the sun, there is danger (if only the spiritual danger of alienation) to direct perception of God that requires *her role in* the Incarnation to mediate. Unlike the previous stanzas, however, the sexed nature of motherhood, the physicality of “womb and breast,” is not particularly present: the trace of physicality remains only in “her hand,” which cleanly sifts light for human vision. Theologically, of course, there is nothing esoteric about the idea of Mary’s continuing role as mediatrix. But hands cannot quite interact with light the way that glass or atmosphere can; thus, here, the hand becomes either pure metaphor or, if material, some material apart from human flesh—the glass and sky of the previous metaphor given flesh of sorts.

The poem’s final stanza makes it clear that *comparison* is no longer exactly what is happening with Mary and the air, in a direct address to her: “Be thou then, O thou dear / Mother, my atmosphere.” Like air, Mary becomes ubiquitous, an atmosphere that Hopkins invokes to

“above me and round me lie,” a “happy world” within which he can “wend,” and a “live air” speaking to him (“stir in my ears”) of divine grace. A world, a sound, an air, a word: the same pervasive disorientations of scale occur here as, elsewhere, trying to grasp the metaphysics of air. The final lines of the poem include a chiasmus, a reversal of the order of the poem’s initial conceit: from “wild air, world-mothering air” we have progressed to “world-mothering air, air wild,” an air that *is* Mary, a collapse of metaphor into epithet. The ending appeal to “fold home, fast fold thy child” which seems to fold the poem into a conclusion still retains, perhaps, a trace of the excess, the storm of metaphor which occurred in Hopkins’ meditations on air and light.

In considering the way in which Hopkins’ poetry can be read as prayers, Martin Dubois reads these last lines as a moment that “moves the poem from elaborate simile [...] into metaphor” (57). He notes the shift in language in these lines, “the faintly archaic turn taken by ‘wend’ and ‘froward’” which “is not quite that habitual to formal religious language,” and reads these sudden archaisms as a way, in fact, to perturb the poem’s relationship to its own address of Mary. In this reading, the vertiginous feeling of the last lines can be explained by its troubled generic quality, since it has partially, but not entirely, become a prayer itself: it “is itself a prayer; but a prayer that includes within it an appeal to be reminded to pray, as if at this point in the closing address, the poem was not quite sure of itself *as* a prayer” (57). But because the “chiastic neatness” of the last lines in fact returns to the initial establishing image, the “rare” language of these last lines can be read not just as a collapse from simile into metaphor but, perhaps, a collapse, or at least a radical alteration, of the metaphor itself. As air expands, as the presence of Mary expands, the scope of the metaphor expands as well; nor can the troubling images of blinding light and stars shaking in the sky entirely fade from view.

To be sure, this glance at sublime terror in this poem is by no means uncharacteristic of Hopkins; some of his most well-known works are the “terrible sonnets” (a grouping term that arrived in Hopkins criticism as early as Robert Bridges), a set of works that describe a religious anguish and desperation almost at the edge of articulation, “pitched past pitch of grief” (*PW* 182)—so too do the shipwreck elegies, especially the “Wreck of the Deutschland” which signaled Hopkins’ return to poetry, brush against a nearly ecstatic terror of loss. “The Blessed Virgin” is distinct, however, in the way it deploys its negative affects: first in that they are a sort of inverted hypothetical (that is, the skyless atmosphere he references is what humanity was like or *would have been* like without the presence of Mary), and secondly that they seem to be driven as much, and arguably more, by the material properties of Hopkins’ structuring metaphors (sky and air.)

One way to read this is through an ecopoetic approach to Hopkins’ work, which has become increasingly popular in criticism in recent decades. One of the more groundbreaking critics of this type has been John Parham, whose *Green Man Hopkins: Poetry and the Victorian Ecological Imagination* (2010) notes that Hopkins’ work includes “nature writing where his own scientific awareness engenders what can be called a proto-ecological poetry,” as well as, in Parham’s argument, a more complex and actively “green” phenomenological poetics that enables us to “*feel* the modifications being wrought, on nonhuman and human nature, by an unsustainable Victorian political economy.” (51–52) The more obviously “ecological” poems such as, for example, “Binsey Poplars” where “after-comers cannot guess the beauty been” of a copse of aspens that have been “felled, felled, are all felled” are joined, in this reading of Hopkins, with a general concern about the limits of the natural world. (*PW* 156) In many cases this ecological crisis is assuaged with an explicitly theological stance which the ecopoetic

readings seemingly prefer to avoid: in the sonnet “God’s Grandeur,” for example, where “generations have trod, have trod, have trod; / and all is smeared with trade” in the initial octet, nevertheless the sonnet’s volta insists that “nature is never spent” explicitly *because* of the interventions of the divine, the “Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.” (*PW* 139) Parham reads this turn as a “Gaian, ecological sense that nature will survive its disfigurement” (234), suggesting that the primary effects of industrial degradation for Hopkins are social, but the survival Hopkins sees is due here to an active theological intervention.

Indeed, Pelham does read “The Blessed Virgin” as an expression of a concept of “wildness” he takes from Gary Snyder and other contemporary ecological critics, suggesting that “The Blessed Virgin,” along with (the perhaps more comprehensibly and obviously “green” poem) “Inversnaid,” are the two poems among Hopkins’ oeuvre that “most clearly exemplify, and enact, the three interconnected components noted above: of nature (and human nature) as “wild”; of a language that articulates and “reflects [...] wildness back”; and of the need for a social philosophy that takes account of that “wildness.”” (180) While “Inversnaid” (*PW* 167) is explicitly preservationist and even vaguely Romantic in its approach to the “wildness and wet” and the “weeds and the wilderness,” however, delving into a level of intense phenomenological description typical of Hopkins’ nature descriptions, “The Blessed Virgin” reserves its most descriptive passages for air and its apocalyptic absence.

What is it about *this* particular intersection of theology and phenomenology, then, that retains this essential strangeness? One factor requires thinking about Hopkins’ poetics as an expression of theological insight drawn from his study of the medieval theological Duns Scotus. Hopkins’ own poem (“Duns Scotus’s Oxford”) calls Scotus the “rarest-veined unraveller” of

reality (or “realty”) and the thinker “who of all men most sways my spirits to peace”—while, incidentally, describing the “air” and “weeds and waters” of increasingly built-up Oxford as a line of historical connection between himself and the fourteenth-century scholar he so admired. (*PW* 156) (Scotus is perhaps best known for his defense of what would become doctrine regarding the Immaculate Conception of Mary, a doctrine related to her perpetual virginity, which Hopkins notes in his closing of the poem: he “fired France for Mary without spot.”)

One of the major concepts Duns Scotus proposes, and certainly the one most omnipresent in Hopkins’ work, is that of *haeccitas* or *haeccity*: that is, “thisness,” the individuality, specificity, and particularity present in a subject. This principle, when Hopkins encountered it in his theological studies, would bolster the system of poetic neologisms he had already begun developing in his journals. These included *inscape*, the “species-specific pattern that becomes visible to the viewer’s eye when the features of the object [...] become defined against the figure’s unnoticed ground” (Seville 70), and *instress*, the energetic process by which a viewer “meets” or recognizes the inscape of an object. While inscape is often compared to *haeccitas*, Julia Seville clarifies that the proper comparison for *haeccitas* is to the related term of *pitch*, which is an internal or essential *individual* quality grasped through noticing these patterns: “Hopkins was at pains to distinguish inscape or the common nature [...] from the self or pitch or *haeccitas* that must be drawn out, or instressed, by dwelling on that inscape. It is pitch, therefore, not inscape, that Hopkins saw as the equivalent to Duns Scotus’s *haeccitas*. By inducing individuation, the effort of stalling on inscape permits the viewer to infer Christ in his infinite difference from the pitch or selfhood of objects” (70).

In other words, the system governing Hopkins’ poetics, by which poetry becomes an expression of instress, relies not just on careful aesthetic attention (though it also requires that)

but on the theologically-grounded conception of individual, particular *thisness*. Certainly it is possible to merely look at a sunset or a cow and marvel at God’s creation, and Hopkins does: another of his most-anthologized poems, “Pied Beauty,” does just this with an array of “dappled things” like clouds, trout, sunsets, and “all things counter, original, spáre, strange.” (*PW* 144) But this is a praise poem (indeed, this example of Hopkins’ compressed or “sprung” sonnet experimentation ends with the two-word line “Praise him.”) Other poems—like “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” which we have already briefly discussed—go further, or, as the volta of that poem puts it, “say móre:” this is not merely patterning or reflection but at points an incarnational logic. In fact the “Kingfishers” poem makes this poetic thesis explicit:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes its self; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.* (141)²

In this poem, at least in its opening analogies, the “mortal things” here are not merely human—kingfishers, dragonflies, rocks and bells and wells all have the capacity to *selve* themselves, to express their individual nature. (Scotus, too, found *haeccitas* in all aspects of creation.) The “móre” here then becomes interesting—is this more as in Hopkins’ own suggestion, more as in a mere continuation of the octet’s logic over into the sestet, or is something different happening? The “just man justices,” for Hopkins, and it is that—and perhaps, in the ambiguous syntax of the poem, only that—that allows Christ to be reflected in the “features of men’s faces.” In other words, man, because of the Incarnation, has a separate texture to the acting out of his own identity: when he “acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—” the line break allows us a

² Other renderings of this stanza, including earlier published versions, insist on more metrical marks (“*Whát I dó is me*”) as well as collapsing the word “itself.”

moment to parse this ‘selving,’ this act-identity expression of individuation, before introducing the new complexity that man, to God, *is*, in some way, “Christ.”

The obvious question is how to read “the just man”—whether this is relying on a masculine grammatical default to talk about a particularly human capacity, or whether it really is men, specifically, that reflect Christ in a gendered capacity. Given the critical consensus that gay attraction was, at the very least, a “temptation” expressed in Hopkins’ private writings during his early years—though some scholarly quarrels exist on how much this tendency towards homoeroticism inflects his theology—it seems on balance more likely to read the “lovely” Christlike limbs and eyes he describes as a particular masculine element. Regardless of how much emphasis to put on the (homo)erotic elements of this poem—which admittedly does not dwell nearly as thoroughly on the particular contours of masculine bodies as do, say, later poems like “Harry Ploughman” or “Epithamalion”—there is still something important about not just specification but individuality (or individuation) that underlies this theology for Hopkins. When the logic of the “The Blessed Virgin” works otherwise, it is perhaps not *solely* because of the theological difference between Christ and His mother but because of the elemental logic the poem’s major analogy draws upon.

In St. Bernard’s analogy, Mary is the aqueduct: a physical structure which moves a fluid (water or grace) through the air. When Hopkins deviates from this analogy to express this same “mystery,” however, his scientific interest in light and optics lead him to a less controllable structure. Air—even more than water, which can sometimes be seen in individual drops or sprays—is undifferentiated and undifferentiable: the pervasiveness and potential for scalar leaps that render it, for Hopkins, a suitable metaphor for God’s grace also potentially

problematizes one of the things that poetics, for Hopkins, is commonly *for*—the leap of inscape that connects with the object in its sight, that offers not just insight but an encounter with Christ.

The questions of movement, structure, and strangeness that Hopkins works out through this poem's theology are, interestingly, sometimes echoed in the criticism others would make of his writing. For all its apocalyptic gestures, the "Blessed Virgin" poem nevertheless met with high approval from Coventry Patmore in an otherwise relatively tense letter. Patmore—a writer and literary critic who is now perhaps most famous for his several-book poem "The Angel of the House," and who was a frequent correspondent with Hopkins—solicited a manuscript of Hopkins' poetry, and seemed to consider most of it a mixed failure. The reason he gave was the multiple layers of difficulty in the poetry—not only the concepts which "are such as to often require the whole attention to apprehend" but, Patmore writes, the additional difficulty "of following *several* entirely novel and simultaneous experiments in versification and construction, together with an altogether unprecedented system of alliteration and compound words;—any one of which novelties would be startling and productive of distraction from the poetic matter" (*Further Letters* 352). The "Blessed Virgin" poem, however, is for Patmore actually one of the few to escape this problem:

Whenever your thoughts forget your theories they do so move, and no one who knows what poetry is can mistake them for anything but poetry. 'The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we breathe' and a few other pieces are exquisite to my mind, but, in these, you have attained to move almost unconsciously in your self-imposed shackles, and consequently the ear follows you without much interruption from the surprise of such novelties; and I can conceive that, after awhile, they would become additional delights. But I do not think that I could ever become sufficiently accustomed to your favourite Poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' to reconcile me to its strangenesses. (353)

In other words, for at least one early reader of Hopkins—who would a few letters later, seemingly in a sidewise apology for his earlier remarks, gushingly refer to the Blessed Virgin poem again as containing "your Ambrosia-manner (as in 'Wild air etc.')" (355)—a type of

extreme “airiness” or freedom of motion is in fact what is necessary to endure the “novelties” and “strangenesses” of Hopkins’ poetry, by which he seems to mean not just the metrical and grammatical inventions but of some of the poem’s conceptual or emotional claims as well.

This “favorite Poem,” despite being Hopkins’ reentry into writing poetry and, according to many later critics his “longest and greatest” poem, faced deep skepticism for perhaps similar reasons. Notably for Hopkins, it was rejected by *The Month*, the Jesuit literary review. In a June letter to his mother when “Deutschland” was still under consideration, Hopkins notes that the editor of *The Month*, Fr. Henry Coleridge, at first seemed undaunted by the prospect of Hopkins’ difficult poetics: “I had to tell him that I felt sure he wd. personally dislike it very much [...] He replied that there was in America a new sort of poetry which did not rhyme or scan or construe; if mine rhymed and scanned and construed and did not make nonsense or bad morality he did not see why it shd. not do. So I sent it.” (*Further Letters* 138) Nevertheless, though at first it seemed that Fr. Coleridge would accept it under the condition Hopkins removed the poem’s extensive system of stress marks, the poem never appeared—similarly, a few years later, “The Loss of the Eurydice” was also rejected.

While the title and epigraph (“to the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns, exiles by the Falk Laws, drowned between midnight and morning of Dec. 7th, 1875”) mark the topic of the poem, the first ten-stanza section does not directly touch on any of the narrative facts of the incident, rather focusing on Hopkins’ own revelatory experience(s) of God. These experiences are shot through, however, with the maritime: God is found amidst the “sway of the sea / Lord of living and dead” and Hopkins’ own assent to him is framed as saying yes “to lightning and lashed rod.” But these take place among several roiling, elemental images: Hopkins portrays himself as a “dovewinged” heart flying to the “Host,” as “soft sift / In an hourglass,” and other

mutable elemental forms. The long metaphor in this section's last stanza explicitly casts conversion to religious belief (the respective abrupt and gradual conversions of Sts. Paul and Augustine) as either way a type of melting, two forms of elemental transformation wrought by a God who can wield the power of either a craftsman or a season:

With an anvil-ding
And with fire in him forge thy will
Or rather, rather then, stealing as Spring
Through him, melt him but master him still

Cheryl Stiles has suggested, however, that the first section's nautical imagery has been critically underrecorded because of this section's seeming disconnection to the actual maritime incident. She notes that "Manley Hopkins, GMH's father, made his living as a marine insurance adjuster [...] The Hopkins's family livelihood depended, in part, upon maritime accidents and disasters." (107) Drawing from nautical lexicographies and the elder Hopkins' own published manuals, her nautical glossary suggests the potential maritime resonances for even seemingly landlocked words like *grave* ("to pave a vessel's bottom"), *spring* (a split or cracked mast), *fall* (tackles for hoisting), *vein* (clear water between ice, channels of water, or currents of wind), and perhaps most importantly *master*: "According to the Board of Inquiry, the group charged with investigating the causes of the wreck, the ship's captain and five officers, all holding master's certificates, possessed no mastery of the tides of the North Sea." (108-112)

The glossary also suggests *stress* as "hard pressure by weather" and "strain on a cable, due to violence of wind" (110), and certainly one cannot escape the way the poem is, centrally, *about* stress—in multiple meanings of the term. It is the first example of what Hopkins would become famous for, sprung rhythm—which, as he notes in a letter to Richard Watson Dixon, he "had to mark in blue chalk" on the *Deutschland* manuscript, an "oddness" he blames for the poem's rejection. (*Correspondence* 15) Sprung rhythm, in Hopkins' own words, is an attempt to

imitate “the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced” (46) and “lends itself to expressing passion.” (*Letters* 92) In several of these early stanzas, though, stress is not just the compositional mode but the topic: “His mystery must be instressed, stressed.” The “stress” connects explicitly to the idea of instress, the energetic principle by which one might meet Christ—Hopkins then brings up only to foreclose the potential of meteorological vastness: “Nor first from heaven (and few know this) / Swings the stroke dealt—/ Stroke and a stress that stars and storms deliver.”

Rather, the “stress” and “stroke” that Hopkins feels so charged by he regrounds with a Marian context, the “microscopic and more intimate” depiction of Christ’s life in the seventh stanza, which as Katarzyna Dudek notes “recapitulates the history of Salvation and the role of the Blessed Virgin in it.” Here, “the whole mystery of the Incarnation is reduced to the most important facts [...] scaled down to the image of the womb, “the center of her inscape””; reading the line “warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey,” Dudek suggests this shows “the tension between life and death, but also the close proximity between the silence of the womb and the silence of the tomb [...] the mystery of Christ’s enfleshment and his redemptive death is guarded by silent hyphens, which speak wordlessly of Christ’s double nature.” (70-71) The Incarnation of Christ, Mary’s pregnancy, the “dense and the driven Passion” it would lead to, and the “stress” of meditating upon these things (finding its “instress”) all collapse into the grammatically overloaded “it,” which floods each of its potential contexts with a visceral affect: “Thence the discharge of it, there its swelling to be, / Though felt before, though in high flood yet.” The dually meteorological and Mariological “floods” of language turn eventually overwhelming for the heart, inevitably overflowing: as a sloe “Will, mouthed to flesh-burst, / Gush!” Maureen Moran refers to these sections in particular as combining “the clotted emotionalism of the

baroque sensibility with the sensuousness that informs much Catholic devotional literature and liturgy of the period” (265).

The second section’s opening lines are given a speaker only afterward, and it may be a surprising one:

"Some find me a sword; some
The flange and the rail; flame,
Fang, or flood" goes Death on drum,
And storms bugle his fame.

It may be too much to say that “Death himself ushers in Part the Second like a military recruiter” (Cotter 38), but nevertheless the introduction of a new figure jarringly triangulates the otherwise intensely interwoven devotional language of the previous section. The catastrophic imagery spoken brings to mind the elemental rhetoric previously associated with Christ himself or the experience of instressing Christ’s mystery—especially both flame and flood, seen at length in previous stanzas. In contrast to this, our conception—let us rather say *misconception*—of the world betrays a naivete Hopkins almost handles with contempt. In a newly earthbound and metaphor, he suggests that humanity forgets the nearness of death: “wé dréam we are rooted in earth” and therefore we “forget that there must / The sour scythe cringe.” The scythe is of course a longstanding trope, but it is strangely agricultural *here* when the poem otherwise intends to keep us at sea—and the other oddity here is, of course, that there is suddenly a “we.”

This presentation of the wreck as a communal problem aligns with a temporary realignment of language and rhythm to correspond with the narrative facts of the shipwreck: for the next few stanzas, the first four lines drop most of Hopkins’ characteristic compound words, heavy alliteration, and even the intense compressions of some of the sprung lines. These correspond with a sort of documentary clarity (“On Saturday sailed from Bremen, / American-

outward-bound”) and becomes almost saccharinely conventional in its sentiments as well as its rhythms:

Hope had grown grey hairs,
Hope had mourning on,
Trenched with tears, carved with cares,
Hope was twelve hours gone.

This is paired, generally, with lines like “frightful a nightful folded rueful a day” in the second half of the stanza, such that established facts and traditional sentiments tend to endure a *volta* of sorts which reentrench the linguistically overwhelming waters and weathers to which the ship is being subjected.

Some of the notes struck by Hopkins’ evocation of the North Sea storm seem almost to prefigure the optics of his later apocalyptic skies:

For the infinite air is unkind,
And the sea flint-flake, black-backed in the regular blow,
Sitting Eastnortheast, in cursed quarter, the wind;
Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivellèd snow
Spins to the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps.

The phrase “infinite air” summons the intellectual problem of infinity, similar to the sky which will (in his later poem) transmit light across dizzying (“seven times seven”) scales and produce, under contemplation, the apocalyptic vision of its own absence. “Flint-flake” and “black-backed” seem almost an echo or near-rhyme of Hopkins’ later hypothetical skyless void with “flecks” of coal and fires slaked in the “blackness bound.” In other words, we see a “real” event of apocalypse—a fatal storm—which perhaps forms the base of the intellectual conceit in the later poem. This storm was something unmuted by any intercessionary power, whether earthly, heavenly, or (now, in the poem) linguistic.

Daniel Tiffany reads these lines, as well as the prior lines which open the second section, as evocations of the Anglo-Saxon riddle poem: he suggests that Death’s claim needs only “to

supply the exhortation “Say who I am” at the end of these lines, the poem could easily be mistaken for an Old English riddle.” Moreover, he reads the whole of the poem as “a storm riddle, as a parable of theological materialism” especially resonant in the above cited lines with a storm riddle from the *Exeter Book*; the “flint-gray sea” as an Old English epithet, the dark waters, and even the “foam-fleece” echoing the “foam-flanks” of the earlier riddle. Tiffany suggests that “the storm becomes the material and figurative matrix of the poem’s theology” and that the poem “is inclined to discover the nature of its own materials in the substance of darkness and the weather.” (58)

The poem’s apocalyptic weather exceeds the traditional language of storm-riddles, however, by being cross-elemental: the snow in the upcoming storm (itself, of course, ice in air) is “white-fiery” and set against the “black-backed” water. The material reality of the storm—snow on water—is, through the medium of the winds which draw them together, transfigured into fire on flint: that is, something which carries a charge or spark. The “deeps” are described in terms of what they do—they kill—but in a linguistic format which plays with negation: they are widow-making, but unchilding and unfathering. All of this alchemical and transmutational chaos seems to be enabled by the scale of not the storm but the air it takes place in: the infinite air.

The crux of the poem—and the ethical problems some have associated with it—mentioned in the epigraph finally occur with more specificity approximately halfway through the poem: Hopkins is particularly interested in the five nuns who died on the voyage and, in particular, a “tall nun” who (in newspaper accounts of the disaster) was witnessed calling out for Christ to come quickly. Much has been made of the ways Hopkins relates to this nun, sometimes to the point of identification: “Sister, a sister calling / A master, her master and mine!” (Some call this identification overidentification, either to criticize the poem’s sensational deployment of

these women's deaths or to suggest that the tall nun, with a reported "masculine" voice, provided a gender-variant figure for Hopkins to inhabit and vicariously experience possession by Christ. Aleta Cane's "Double Discourses in The Wreck of the Deutschland" covers some of these readings in order to suggest the "doubling" of religious and homoerotic language in the poem; for Cane, "Hopkins creates the nun's ecstasy, not to devalue it because it is a woman's, but rather to create that feminine passivity which he believed was the sine qua non of the experience of becoming one with Christ." (177))

The tall nun in the poem exists too as a model not just of faith but of poetics: Joseph Bizup notes the way the nun "perceives the storm as a linguistic or semiotic phenomenon rather than a solely physical one" and, by urging on the moment of her death (perhaps her martyrdom), thereby "counters the chaos of the physical world by imposing a linguistic order upon it." (142-143)

But when in the next stanza Hopkins considers the "ordering event" he argues this prayer constitutes, his contemplation of it—his seemingly puzzled response, even if that confusion is only rhetorical—becomes routed through air and breath itself:

The majesty! what did she mean?
Breathe, arch and original Breath.
Is it love in her of the being as her lover had been?
Breathe, body of lovely Death.

The "arch and original Breath" is often read, here, as the Holy Spirit—often portrayed as the breath of God—but so, too, is the "body of lovely Death" also enjoined to breathe. (Kumiko Tanabe comments on this line that "[the] sensitivity that expresses Death as 'lovely' is rightly called baroque." (195)) The poetics of address here are complex—if apostrophe is one of the ways by which lyric functions, these apostrophizing lines push lyric to its limits. The rhyme draws attention to the vast semantic space between the opposing forces of "breath" and "death,"

but surely neither of these concepts are things that themselves breathe—yet in a literal reading Breath is itself invoked and asked to breathe, and so too is Death, or a body that belongs to Death. Another reading of these lines only urges the poet to “breathe,” to pause—it carves out space in contemplation of the ways the nun, impassioned and near death, might approach a more Christlike state (might be “as her lover had been.”) Here the mechanics of sprung rhythm, which starts each line with a stressed syllable, causes us to more deeply inhabit this call for a pause, to more deeply feel the injunction to breathe—air becomes the medium of contemplation, but it is air routed through impossible bodies.

Earlier the nun was both seeing and seen by the shipwreck weather (though the “brine / Blinds” her and the sight is thus perhaps imaginative or spiritual), as rendered by the impossible grammar of “but she that weather sees one thing, one.” But when Hopkins contemplates the meaning of her words, the next stanza provides a different type of weather for her to see—though for reasons which will soon become clear, it must remain an imaginative type of sight:

For how to the heart's cheering
The down-dugged ground-hugged grey
Hovers off, the jay-blue heavens appearing
Of pied and peeled May!
Blue-beating and hoary-glow height; or night, still higher,
With belled fire and the móth-soft Mílky Wáy,
What bý your méasure is the héaven of desíre,

The tréasure never éyesight gót, nor was éver guessed whát for the hearing? (*PW* 126)³

Hopkins immediately forecloses this vision in the next stanza's first line—"No, but it was not these"—but in the meantime we might note, as Richard Cronin does, the way this sky rapidly layers several incompatible times and weathers onto each other as possible visions:

Hopkins [in the poem's first section] saw a night sky patched with storm cloud, but with stars still visible, 'lovely-asunder', and a 'dappled-with-damson west'. A natural sky is appropriate to his victory, but in token of hers he offers a miracle; all at once a blanket of low winter cloud, snow cloud, the blue skies of spring, and the 'moth-soft Milky Way.'" (195)

The "jay-blue" and "blue-beating" skies are still "pied" with clouds, as is the night sky with galactic stars, since, as Helen Vendler notes in *The Breaking of Style*, "Because 'the heaven of desire' for Hopkins, in order to match his own sense of beauty, had to be variegated, his images for it are always those of pied configurations—blue and white, like the May sky in daytime, or fiery-against-black, like the night sky." (16) James Milroy even suggests—in a claim later scholars have criticized—a watery element to this otherwise cloudy but clear blue May sky: he argues for peeled as a variant of pool, such that May is "a month of clouds and showers resulting in the formation of small pools of water in fields, roadways, etc." (260)

We might note, though, as Hopkins later does in another poem, that "May is Mary's month"—and that blue and white are often her colors. In other words, the "miracle" of

³ The quote of this full stanza—stanza 26—is also my only attempt in this chapter to reproduce the exact system of indentation with which "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is often published. Hopkins felt that the indentation "guides the eye," as he writes in an author's note to the reader which is often cut from publications: "Be pleased, reader, since the rhythm in which the following poem is written is new, strongly to mark the beats of the measure, according to the number belonging to each of the eight lines of the stanza, as the indentation guides the eye, namely two and three and four and three and five and five and four and six" (118) This stanza is also a good example of the way Hopkins used metrical diacritics: the relatively "simpler" or at least (to Hopkins) more predictably readable lines of the early stanza bear very few, whereas the last lines require more attention to fit the meter. (Other stanzas feature the opposite pattern, however, while yet others are about even across the stanza either with very few or numerous marks—that is, I am not arguing an increase in marked stresses corresponding to line length, other than that there are more stresses in longer lines.)

multiplying skylscapes that Hopkins imagines for the nun, in which a glowing blue sky gives way to night-black, is in the broadest structural sense the same move which in “The Blessed Virgin” constitutes apocalypse. Here, rather than emerging conceptually (an intellectual consideration of what the sky would be without the atmosphere), it emerges instead perhaps imagistically: from the shifting and swirling storm. Much later in the poem Hopkins will note, addressing Christ himself, that the “feast that followed” the night of the shipwreck was Mary’s (the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, on December 8th)—and he seems almost to pun on the multiple meanings of “conception”:

For so conceived, so to conceive thee is done;
But here was heart-throe, birth of a brain,
Word, that heard and kept thee and uttered thee outright.

The understanding of the “event” of wreck—here it is unclear whether it is the nun’s understanding of her imminent death, the poet’s understanding of it being created in this compositional process, or both—is expressed in terms of emotional and intellectual labor, again in the double sense of the word.

In this model, then, Mary, the “one woman without stain,” is also then perhaps the model for integrating the disastrous, miraculous, and desired events of the poem; because we have been wrestling in this poem with the problem of how to accurately understand the wreck, here the ability to hear and keep and utter something outright—becomes a question of poetic utterance as well as perceptive faith. This offers a backdrop for why, as Christ is ecstatically summoned in the poem’s last two stanzas, he is constructed as a “dayspring to the dimness of us” and other images of flashing light and showery rain:

Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,
[...] Not a dooms-day dazzle in his coming nor dark as he came;
Kind, but royally reclaiming his own;
A released shower, let flash to the shire, not a lightning of fire hard-hurled.

Ultimately, despite the flashes, shocks, and fires of the poem, when Christ comes he comes in light and water, and in a manner immediately perceived by the tall nun who now much like Mary has her own intercessory power (“Remember us in the roads, the heaven-haven”) because she is “Drowned, and among our shoals.”

CHAPTER TWO

‘*Clamavimus, O depths*’: Revisiting Lowell’s Quaker Graveyard

When Robert Lowell’s second book of poetry, *Lord Weary’s Castle*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1947, *Life* Magazine covered the distinction in a short article on the “prize poet” which drew heavily on his ancestry: “A Lowell of Boston, he has been, like his great-granduncle James Russell Lowell and his cousin Amy Lowell, both poet and nonconformist” (“Prize” 91). The prior Lowells are given their own sidebar in this coverage, flanked by the typical 1940s magazine advertisements (malted milk tablets, scissors, DDT, cigarette holders); alongside small excerpts from “The First Snowfall” and “Patterns,” they are described respectively as “one of the most revered literary figures of the Victorian era” and “one of the first American poets to write free verse”—as well as, in the latter case, “a woman of considerable physical as well as mental girth” (94). Lowell’s poetry is described by the feature writer somewhat laconically: “He uses established and familiar poetic forms, but his tight, allusion-packed images are not easily understood” (91). The excerpt chosen to exemplify Lowell’s style for readers, which wields “an Old Testament somberness about death and about a world of violent passions in which the individual soul battles against the inertia of society,” is the first two sections of “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” set under a moody photograph of waves crashing under a dramatically illuminated sky (91). The poem is summarized for readers: “an elegy for his cousin whose ship was torpedoed in the North Atlantic. The poem describes the recovery of the body and its burial at sea. This tragedy reminds the poet of another tragic Nantucket sailor, Ahab, the whaler hero of *Moby Dick*” (91).

Two other poems are provided in this feature to contextualize Lowell's work, in a separate sidebar headed "POET WRITES ABOUT THE SEA AND DEATH." Of the first poem, "Salem," it is noted that "as in all his poems, Lowell is suggestive rather than strictly literal and each image has many overtones of meaning" (92). Of "The Dead in Europe," some useful biographical context is provided for the three-stanza evocation: first, that it was written "at the time when Lowell was particularly perturbed by the problem of whether or not to become a conscientious objector" (which, of course, he did famously become) and secondly that it reflects his 1940 conversion to Catholicism (92). "This poem is colored by Catholic feeling," the comment notes—not just for its repeated evocation of and prayer to the Virgin Mary but, too, for the fear of the dead, "expressing in the refrain 'Our sacred earth...' their symbolic fear of damnation unless they are buried, as Catholics should be, in blessed ground" (92). These two poems—under the respective poles of "the sea and death," perhaps, though each poem has at least a little of each—mirror many of the preoccupations of "The Quaker Graveyard." First, the "seasick spindrift drifts or skips" of Salem, in a poem with incantatory addresses to (dead) seamen, grotesque if also classical images of the dead as "sewage" and "damned goods" dumped from Charon's boat, and the lofty rhetorical question ending the sonnet. Secondly, the horror of war and its "jellied fire", where the speaker's "bones are trembling" amidst apocalyptic trumpets and earth-reverberations.

As cursory as this popular-interest coverage of the poem may be, it provides a useful lens on the reputation of Robert Lowell, who in a lengthier magazine profile twenty years later (this time in *Time*, *Life*'s sister publication, and as the cover story) would be described as "better than good. As far as such a judgment can ever be made of a working, living artist, he is, by rare critical consensus, the best American poet of his generation." Lowell became famous as a

confessional or proto-confessional figure (though his editors and critics often note he personally eschewed the term), associated with the explosion of biographically-inflected, personally revealing poetry that followed in the wake of his *Life Studies* (1959). Elizabeth Bishop, his longtime friend and fellow poet, once wrote to Lowell about the peculiar status that his “personal” or familial topics occupied in his poetry: “I am green with envy of your kind of assurance. I feel that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say—but what would be the significance? [...] Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc., gives you, I think, the confidence you display” (*Words in Air* 175). In other words, the New England legacy of Lowell’s family renders “significant, illustrative, American, etc.” things which otherwise, Bishop implies, might not accrue such automatic significance. The poetry in *Lord Weary’s Castle*, including “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” are early examples of the way this dynamic develops; the critic Marjorie Perloff would note that “[Lowell’s] most characteristic and celebrated poems have been elegies, particularly elegies on his maternal or Lowell relatives,” and describes “The Quaker Graveyard” along with other Winslow elegies in the early collection as the work of “a bitterly disdainful preacher-poet who regards the lives of the dead relatives he has presumably come to mourn as so many exempla of the ultimate failure of the New England Puritan vision.” (116-117)

The history, in other words, is almost impossible to avoid for Lowell; but the particular mix of histories—literary, national, military, genealogical, or otherwise—are exemplified in this poem’s sometimes contentious engagement with previous figures in the New England tradition. Sally Connolly suggests, in fact, that this poem “is the start of Lowell’s turn to the aesthetics of portraiture” in terms of his relations with other literary figures; in “The Quaker Graveyard,” she writes, “on closer inspection it can also be read as what art historians call *pentimento*: the

appearance of a ghostly figure from an earlier version of a picture the poet has painted over.”

(137) In Connolly’s reading, this is opposed to the poetics of familial elegy—but if one of the fundamental problems often posed by Lowell’s oeuvre is the inextricability, or the entanglement, of the personal moment with the long history that surrounds it, the sea is a site where those referents become particularly enmeshed.

Entering Lowell’s poem, we are both set adrift and fixed:

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket—
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet, (14)¹

The first line has no temporal placement or, indeed, verb, and the sentence wanders temporally in establishing the scene: the sea “was still breaking,” establishing a continuation of a previous (but unmentioned) action, while night “had steamed” in—“steam” here seems at first to indicate a vaporous and meteorological type of movement, but, of course, the line’s following deployment of the North American Fleet evokes the military purposes of steam combustion in “our” fleet.

¹ Robert Lowell’s publication history is complex due to his frequent, extensive, and often reversed editorial decisions, some of which I have noted elsewhere in this dissertation. Unless otherwise noted, I take the “authoritative” text, inasmuch as one can exist, to be from the edition of Lowell’s *Collected Poems* edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. This edition also collects errata, copious biographical, contextual, and scholarly notes, and many of the alternate or early versions of Lowell’s poetry judged by the editors to be “important.” Frank Bidart, a student and friend of Lowell often consulted in the preparation of many of his later manuscripts, discusses in the introduction Lowell’s unwillingness to defer to the notion of a fixed or finished version: “The two versions [of “Waking Early Sunday Morning”] refuse to be joined [...] Well, at some point I said something like this to Lowell. To my amazement he said that he felt the same way. I had fiddled with and fiddled with the lines, trying to join the two versions, and failed. He had done the same. I bemoaned this state of affairs. His reply is something that I have never forgotten, something that resonates throughout his work: ‘But they both exist.’” (xi-xii) David Gewanter, in an article published in the *Harvard Review* upon the volume’s publication, approaches the issue differently: “Helping to pull Robert Lowell’s collected poems into print, twenty-five years after his death in 1977, has been like towing a large undersea object into harbor [...] . This self-renewing quality parallels Lowell’s particular, and sometimes frustrating genius for revising his work—a reason for the delay of the *Collected* in his lifetime, and since.” (133)

(Though steam would soon be on the decline, the North Atlantic fleet was still composed primarily of steamships during the war.) Night is therefore either a type of fog or a type of vessel—in either case, it does not impede the visual in the third line, the “drowned sailor clutched the drag-net.” The corpse here enters the scene already drowned, but surrounded by the movement of the sea and of the night; yet there is something uncannily animated about the way the body is held in place. He is already drowned, caught in the scene of drowning, but clutches at the net—something useless at best (what would it save him from) or physiologically impossible, an active verb performed by a corpse. So, too, does the light playing around him—set off and amplified by its rhyme with “night,” the first rhyme of the poem’s rhyme scheme—flash not *on* but *from* him, as if the reflection were produced by the corpse himself. Even the poem’s enjambment juts the necessary rhyme of “light” almost off the third line, creating a flash of pressure to continue, imbuing both the poem and the drowned sailor with a sense of energy.

In this way the poem both introduces the clarity of its rhythm and the jagged edges of that rhythm—especially relevant at the particular historical moment Lowell, along with other poets, was busily both exploring and breaking the established forms of the English poetic tradition. Lowell would stage a dramatic break with rhyme and meter in his later book, *Life Studies*; and at least once in the late 1950s, currying some favor with Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, he would refer to the poems of his first few books—even from the distance of only a decade—as “prehistoric monsters dragged down into the bog and death by their ponderous armor” (qtd. Mariani 251). “Quaker Graveyard” here as in most of its sections establishes a complex, shifting rhyme scheme of mostly iambic pentameter lines interspersed with the occasional syllabic variant or trimetric line—it is almost too obvious, or a critical commonplace, to suggest the ebb and flow of line length reflects the motions of the waves. But here when the line lengths begin to

shift, they produce a type of mechanical sense of motion introduced into the poem, where the sailor is described as having “grappled” (in a short trimetric line) with the “coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs” (back in the pentameter)—the echo of “grappled” and “coiled” together create a sort of clenched potential energy, one locked in the past or in the impossibility of its release even as the metrical energy releases and re-normalizes. (The simple past tense of “grappled,” in other words, does not quite reanimate the sailor but does not foreclose the potential for active movement; “had grappled” would render it, more normally, an unsuccessful action to prevent the drowning which nevertheless occurred.)

The sailor, however, in the ensuing lines stops being referred to as “he” or, indeed, as a sailor at all and becomes what he already was: drowned. The speaker begins to refer to the body as “the corpse,” describing it as “bloodless, a botch of red and whites”—a peculiar blend of color and colorlessness, fullness and emptiness, both emphasizing the grotesque lifelessness of the figure *and*, crucially, being more fully embodied than the previous “marble” descriptions of his feet. Similarly, its (no longer his) “open, staring eyes” are described first as “lustreless sea-lights”—the rhyme playing both with “whites” of the skin and repeating the “light” of a few short lines earlier—or “as cabin-windows” on a stranded ship. Though “we weight the body, close / Its eyes and heave it seaward as it came,” the poem has already enacted a dizzying series of transformations and detransformations: as if the poem cannot decide, from line to line or even word to word, how much life to grant to the lifeless body. The particular body will essentially almost disappear from the poem afterwards; but it has already served as a statue, a source of life, a sailor, a corpse, a set of windows, a beacon or a phosphorescence (depending on the reading of “sea-lights”)—though never alive, its momentary placement on the shoal, suggest that this sea has a liminal quality which almost infects those who die in it.

Someone looking for the Robert Lowell of later years, whose work would be a “watershed moment in American literature” and a “foundational work of confessional poetry” (as per the *Encyclopedia Britannica*) might be forgiven here for imagining the clear link between the drowned sailor and the subject of the dedicatory preface: Warren Winslow, “dead at sea.”

Stephen Fender draws on naval records to examine the fate of Winslow, Lowell’s cousin on his maternal side (and one of several Winslows memorialized to variously scathing ends in *Lord Weary’s Castle*), hoping to add clarity to the “formidably inexplicit” (187) detail given in the poem. Fender finds that Warren Winslow was a lieutenant on the USS *Turner*, which was destroyed in an onboard explosion near New York’s harbor in 1944; Fender notes the two critical points in the historical narrative are that “the ship sank very near the most heavily populated part of the American coast” (in New York, we might note, not New England), and that “the *Turner*, so to speak, was destroyed by its own firepower.” (189) In other words, one thing worth considering in the poem is that Winslow’s sea death (if this is the drowned sailor, or at least one of them, whom we are supposed to have in mind) was the result of a mechanical mishap rather than a direct casualty of war—though the ship had seen combat in its role as a transatlantic escort ship (and prior damage was one theory proposed the ship’s explosions, the causes of which were never conclusively determined), its fate was as unrelated to the war as any military ship’s could be in 1944. (The *Turner* has mostly entered nautical history, in fact, for the rescue operation which could only occur because the ship was so close to harbor: the US Navy’s Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships notes that the incident featured “the first use of a helicopter in a life-saving role,” as the Coast Guard “flew two cases of blood plasma, lashed to the helicopter’s floats,” which saved the lives of many of the injured sailors.) For Fender, the relevance is primarily in this fact of internal damage: “It’s odd when one thinks of it that ‘the enemy’ is never

mentioned in *The Quaker Graveyard*.” (189-190) The self-destruction becomes, in this reading, in fact not a distraction from the narrative of the poem but the reason *why* its sinking “lie behind and produced this poem, even though none of its details appear in the poem’s text.” (190) That is—and this argument proceeds not only from Fender’s research on Winslow but on the rich set of allusions he briefly sketches—“for Robert Lowell, writing in 1944, the real theatre of operations was in home waters, the real violence self-generated, the real struggle within the American soul.” (190)

The allusions in the text also become increasingly important once we lose sight of the sailor’s body: some of them are more explicit than others, and range from referential name-dropping—the ocean referenced somewhat perplexingly as “Ahab’s void,” the first of many engagements with *Moby Dick*, the poem’s most famous intertext—to a near-plagiaristic and invisible incorporation of material from almost exactly a century prior, when Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Cape Cod* (1865) about a shipwreck of Irish immigrants off the coast in Cohasset. Geoffrey Hill, in a 1963 review of Lowell’s poetry, praised the “fine management of technique” (190) by which Lowell drew language from Thoreau’s stunningly detailed, if itself somewhat bloodless, description of the wreck and its aftermath.

For Thoreau, drawn off his planned itinerary to Provincetown by a desire to see the victims, “the sea was still breaking violently” several days after the crash, as he described dozens of victims being nailed into coffins and transported from the scene. The corpses are seen in glimpses as their burial shrouds shift around during the process:

I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl,—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family,—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white,—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, dead-lights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand. (5)

The coil, the marble, the mat, the reds and whites, and even the metaphors are all first strewn here on Thoreau's rocky coast: first in scattered glimpses of a multitude of corpses, and then very specifically in the body of a young girl. She lacks the bizarre kinetic vigor of Lowell's drowned sailor, and, of course, her body is not heaved back seaward (as would rarely happen that close to the shore, except perhaps at wartime) but collected. Thoreau's description drifts away from the corpses to a scene of the inhabitants harvesting seaweed from amidst the shipwreck and, in summarizing his recollection of the scene, blithely states that it was "not so impressive": "If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more...It is the individual and private that demands our sympathy. A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse." (9)

Lowell certainly makes his drowned sailor more "individual and private" in certain ways, not least of which by the connection to his own personal loss and the implication, in his reworking of the scene, of a singular corpse disposed of by its crewmates. But, too, as we have seen, the description of the sailor is almost impossibly multivalent, as are the varying impressions of light and sea that surround it. Even the location is somewhere both particular and imparticular: not in New York Harbor or even in the "hard senitic rocks" of Thoreau's South Shore but in Nantucket, or rather "a brackish reach of shoal" off of the western end of the island. Much has been written, of course, about both Lowell's deep-rooted New England pedigree and of the recurring significance of *Moby-Dick* to the text. (Indeed, Paul Mariani's biography of

Lowell notes that “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” had a series of draft titles over the long history of its composition that make its referents to even clearer: first “Jonah,” then “The Death of the White Whale,” and then “To Herman Melville.”) Nantucket is the whaling stronghold from which the *Pequod* departs in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*; his narrator describes it as an “ant-hill in the sea” from which the whole sea is circumnavigated and controlled by whalers, and writes that its inhabitants “retain in an uncommon measure the peculiarities of the Quaker, only variously and anomalously modified by things altogether alien and heterogeneous.” For Lowell, who had refused military service during World War II as a conscientious objector, the paradox of the Quaker whaler as described by Melville held perhaps obvious appeal.

But in “The Quaker Graveyard,” the initial death takes place on a shoal—not quite shoreline and not entirely sea, shoals are shallow and naturally dangerous to ships. (A shoal may run a ship aground, say, and cause the sort of “stranded hulk” used to metaphorize the drowned sailor’s face.) This liminal space between sea and land, from which or on which a strangely vital corpse might be viewed, requires the sailors to pitch the corpse, now a “portent,” fully into the sea to be rid of it. From the sandy shallows, it feels almost ironic for Lowell to warn the sailors that they will be in the future “powerless / To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark”—that is, perhaps, when they face their own deaths. (The “earth-shaker, green, unwearied, chaste / In his steel scales” almost recalls Lowell’s later description of his meter as “ponderous armor”; critics have read the “earthshaker” of this line as a warship from the “steeled fleet” or as an animated Atlantic, a sea-god of sorts.)

The syntax elevates with the stakes as the first section ends in prophecy: the sailors are warned to “ask for no Orphean flute / To pluck life back.” (Not “do not ask,” but “ask for no:” the inversion comes late in the injunction, hinting at the possibility before foreclosing it.) This is

one of the most explicit evocations of one of the poem's other major intertexts, Milton's "Lycidas." Critics have long since cataloged the ways in which Lowell draws from Milton in this poem (and in other poems of the era.) During Lowell's lifetime, in a reading of the Winslow elegies as a whole, Marjorie Perloff cites Hugh Staple on the structural similarities—"the death of a young man to whom the poet has a more than casual yet less than intimate relationship, death by drowning, the unrecovered body, the movement beyond the lament to a larger consideration of contemporary and universal issues, and the 'answer to the apparent futility of a young man's death'" (125). To this she adds the density of Biblical and literary allusions present in both, the evocation of regional "*genus loci*" by place name, and even the "intricate" meter and rhyme scheme to the list, while still arguing that "surely the differences between these two elegies outweigh the superficial similarities." (126) Others have noted, seemingly operating somewhere between numerology and an interpretive claim, that an early version of the poem contains the same—or nearly the same—number of lines as "Lycidas" (194 to Milton's 193.)

The force of the Miltonic reference here comes not just in the conjunction of poet and prophet, the consolatory Orphean power to recall or reclaim the dead which figures so centrally in Milton's "Lycidas" and thus after it in the Anglophone elegiac tradition, but in the very word "pluck": the opening lines of "Lycidas" has the poet seeking laurels and myrtles, to "pluck your berries harsh and crude" for an elegaic wreath. "Pluck" is a late addition to Lowell's stanza: the 1945 version of "The Quaker Graveyard" still uses the calmer, more musical verb "strum." Lowell would have known that verb in "Lycidas" by heart, if we trust his later sonnet sequence's self-description ("Charles River," first published in *Notebook*) as a college student "on the abandoned steps of the Harvard Fieldhouse, / calming my hot nerves and enflaming my mind's / quicksilver by saying Lycidas—" (37). Sally Connolly notes that this poem's revision in *History*

three years later inverts the order of the effect “Lycidas” has on Lowell, suggesting the poem “has a double effect on the young Lowell, calming and inflaming him.” (136) The addition of “pluck” makes the Miltonic effect more obvious and explicit, but it also makes the action more mechanistic, singular, even precarious: one *strums* a lute, but one *plucks* a single lute string, as one might pluck a corpse from the water or a bough from a bush. The kinetic energy is turned up slightly along with the heightened referentiality—but, as we have already seen, Lowell deploys Milton and Orpheus right at the moment of foreclosing it, forbidding the sailors he is addressing to ask for the possibility he has just dangled in front of them.

Other small changes to this section between the 1945 and 1947 publications heighten the tensions between address and participation in the speaker’s voice. Jahan Ramazani notes that “the poem’s persona is remarkably unstable, wandering among the positions of “we,” “you,” and “I,” between the realms of the living and the dead.” (229) Draft changes even at this late stage show that the varying positionality was being actively edited and tweaked. In the 1945 version, the speaker is a sailor or at least at work with them; they are still apostrophized as “sailor,” but it is “we” who pitch the corpse, and “we” who are powerless to sandbag. There is even a parallel, perhaps, between the motions required in both: the physicality of tossing a body, previously compared to a ship ran ashore on a too-shallow reach of ocean, and the (impossible or foreclosed) physicality of sandbagging a too-deep, too-powerful force. It may even be this double physicality—on the far different scales of a single body and an “Atlantic bulwark”—that causes Lowell’s speaker to almost waver in how far he chooses to implicate himself, hesitating between the vatic and narrative registers. One thing that does act in both versions, however, are the guns, who “recoil and repeat / Their hoarse salute.” The tense, coiled muscles of the corpse are transformed into the cleaner kinetic “recoil” of the inanimate objects of war. (The 1945

version has “last” salute, perhaps overlaying the farewell salute common to military burials onto the guns of the warships, but the hoarseness of the edited version grapples with the elegiac schema: if song underlies a attempt to reclaim the dead, hoarseness precludes it.)

The second section regularizes the line while intensifying the oceanic pulse of the meter:

Whenever winds are moving and their breath
Heaves at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
The terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
In these home waters.

Like the temporally ambiguous “when”s of the first stanza, starting with “whenever” both situates and leaves unspecified the occurrence—turning the act of remembrance or memorialization into a repeated but weather-dependent phenomenon, one instantiated by the natural world (the winds) and committed by its inhabitants (the birds.) The air being equated to breath is common to the English poetic tradition, perhaps most famously in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” In a letter written a few years later to his early mentor, Allen Tate, Lowell cites Shelley’s poetic breaths when critiquing the “terrific formal wrestling” he sees in Tate’s own *terza rima*: “My only kick is that the struggle, perhaps, slides at times into muddiness. In Shelley’s ‘West Wind’ say, you feel how like breath the form is—with you, here and there, how like choking.” (192) Here, Lowell’s winds become relevant where air meets water: the enjambment of the first line forces a metrical inversion, stressing “heaves”—so that the meter sloshes in the line as the sea sloshes in the “roped-in bulwarks.” (We have seen in the previous section, after all, the prediction that some bulwarks will be impossible to maintain.) Here nature is yoked to a type of grief expressed by the seabirds, who themselves are constrained to the littoral zone of sea and shore. But trembling, specifically, is perhaps itself even mechanistically indistinct—that is, the wind moving feathers produces a type of movement indistinguishable

from the trembling of internal muscles. All this occurs while the dead is addressed directly for the first time: *your* death, then, in the next sentence, only as “Sailor.”

The temporal clashes of the poem are only heightened by the specificity of references in this section: the nets and chalk that could have been (and indeed were) from Thoreau’s 19th-century shipwreck are replaced with an interlaced combination of sails and submarines, the “yawing S-boats” patrolling amongst more timeless nautical sights like spinnakers and fishing lines. The speaker asks whether the sailor—who is dead—can *hear*, not see, the “Pequod’s sea wings”; it seems almost that the visual field in Nantucket during the war is too crowded to make out the ship itself. If, as critics argue, the comparisons in these lines “extend the terms of Melville’s argument” to the World War and “suggest the ship from which his cousin was lost, like the Pequod, was asea for vengeance” (York 160), it does so by a sort of ghostly overlay: the “sea wings” of the bloody ship populated by Melville’s overly “sanguinary” Quaker quasi-pacifists evoke the wings of the birds which tremble for an individual sailor’s death. (Of course, too, the underlying logic of submarine warfare—which would have been known to the sailors of the *USS Turner*, who recently underwent anti-submarine training before the explosion, and would too have been known to the inhabitants of Nantucket who established civilian patrols against the threat of German *Schnellbootes*—is that their destructive power is inextricable from their ability to appear and disappear from an observer’s visual field.)

This section establishes with its rhythmic deployments of named sections of the island (off ‘Sconset, then off Madaket) and their wartime imagery that it *is* Lowell’s Nantucket, not Melville’s, that the poem inhabits—at least partially. It also establishes Lowell’s familial claim to the dead, just as it froths the poem into a further uproar:

The winds' wings beat upon the stones,
Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush
At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East.

The tongue-tying triple stress of “winds' wings beat” provides a metrical hammering that pushes forward this collapse of breath, body, and voice, pausing only for the address—“Cousin”—before reeling into an unpunctuated, run-on rush of both grief and violence. The winds become not breath but wings here (ships' wings? birds' wings?), but although they do not breathe something in the poem (aside from the guns) is finally given voice: they scream. The sea, too, has a throat—so far silent, but capable of being torn at, wrung, by the claws of what might also be the winds. The “old Quaker graveyard” here is, directly, the sea—but it is described as a “slush”: an indeterminate, messy intermixture of sea and air, sea and land, and, perhaps, most frighteningly, of water and the bones which inhabit that water and themselves, too, prove capable of speech. The bones can “cry out” for the hurt beast, which is yet unnamed—the fatally wounded whale surrounded by whaleboats at the end of *Moby-Dick*, most obviously, but just as possibly the fresh corpse, the sea-field of older bones which surround it, or the bruised sea itself.

Notably—as Lowell will make reference to in a later section, with the Quaker resting places being referred to as “unstoned graves”—Quaker burial places generally eschewed tombstones and burial markers, seeing them as an expression of worldly vanity or even of idolatry. This quirk of history produces a double vision of sorts: for the literal graveyard on the island and the sea functioning as a graveyard, the individual histories and memories of the dead are rendered impossible to capture or retain. (Indeed, even the exact location of the first Quaker burial ground in Nantucket was lost to history when the Meeting House moved in the early 18th century.) The burial ground is a mostly unmarked grassy field, punctuated only by a few sparse

tombstones (which a historical marker explains are the results of a variant sect of Quakers)—it is towards the center of the island, away from the mentioned coastlines, with no view of the sea. It is, however, at the corner of Quaker Road and Madaket Road—that is, it is literally *off Madaket*. Ironically, though, if the corpse is pitched seaward, the sea-graveyard becomes a more recently used cemetery than the one on land, which fell into disuse centuries prior. The duality of this “old Quaker graveyard,” operating on the island and the sea, is exemplary of the type of paradox Lowell generates in this poem: a set of referents and historical memory so tangled, rich, and specific that what it produces is a void, the absence of a fixed site or a fixed sentiment.

Though Winslow is addressed, again, at the beginning of section III (with the almost touching possessive “my cousin”), the poem seems to revert to the looser metrical alternations of section I, while drawing the poem’s elegiac eye outward to the array of dead in the waters: the “harrowed brine,” the speaker writes, “stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain, / Nantucket’s westward haven.” Though at first this appears geographically impossible, an inversion of the Atlantic crossing, a letter from Lowell to the scholar Shozo Tokunaga happens to explain this impossibility: “Someone in Nantucket once told me if I kept going east I’d come to Spain [...] maybe ‘westward’ should be ‘eastward,’ but I meant looking west toward New England! You know ‘Castles in Spain’ are illusory hopes or possessions.” (*Letters* 511) This explanation then removes the cartographic difficulty at the cost of wiping out, in a sense, the rest of the map of New England: the reality of New England, perhaps of all of America, becomes nothing more than an illusory set of hopes when compared to the dramas of death and grief being staged in Nantucket and the Atlantic. The guns reappear in this section, but here when they are set off they become earth-shakers of a sort themselves: they “blast the eelgrass about a waterclock / of bilge and backlash,” moving the “scaffold” of silt and sand.

Lowell's warships—"our warships," he calls them—are rocked, though on the water, by these earth-shaking cataclysms, rocked

...in the hand
Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
In the mad scramble of their lives.

The short-vowel assonant urgency of *mad scramble* almost eclipses, but cannot quite eclipse, the absolute void of meaning yawning in this sentence which seems, on the surface, merely diffident. What *is* it that the Quaker sailors lost? Not their lives, as one might assume (though, too, we know they lost these) but a more perfectly ambiguous claim: "whatever it was" that they lost *while* alive in the mad scramble of their—eventually also lost—lives. Almost as hauntingly ambiguous here is the preceding line: "time's contrition blues." To *blue* something, as a verb—though of course the mind first drifts to more common nouns, the blues of oceans, perhaps also the blues of sadness—is unusual. It is a rare verb, sometimes seen of the sea's color or of how artists may choose to treat the sea's color, a pure representational verb (one might *gild* the sun to show it as gold and *blue* the sea to show its color.) One might also *blue* a fabric with "laundry blue" to make it not blue but a brighter white, might *blue* a sword or other steel weapon to oxidize it before gilding it, might *blue* a tune by imparting a blues style to it. Among all of these, "blue" especially in its verbal form exists as a verb oddly apart from the everyday color which, in this poem's seascape, it must be surrounded by. Whatever act of music, laundering, alchemy "time's contrition" enacts on the Quaker sailors is matched equally by the ambiguity of the verb's object—whatever it was.

These lives lost, blued as they may or may not be, happened, here in Nantucket, temporally. This should clarify, but does not. Lowell tells us when they died: "they died / When time was open-eyed, / Wooden and childish", which in some sense locates and in another sense

perfectly and finally dislocates the deaths under consideration. “Wooden” and even “childish” might evoke the wood ships of the Quaker whaling trade, which would give way to the more complex steel ships of the Second World War—but how might one die where time is “open-eyed”? What does it mean, in other words, for time to be open-eyed—is it closed-eyed in other times and places? I am tempted to argue here that the time of the Quaker sailors, and of *Moby-Dick*, is “open-eyed” in Lowell’s much later poem not for what it sees but for the options it opens: time is open-eyed in Melville because Melville’s writing, its specificity and universality, allow someone to look back at those eyes. Regardless, the poem acts as if this open-eyed era is now (fore)closed: that openness is the first and primary definition of the “wooden and childish” era which thus implicitly differentiates us, perhaps less wooden and childish, but certainly operating within a time which is more closed. We soon learn the place—the water—“there, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed / Sky-high,” as if tossing a boat from the air to the sky could achieve the impossible paradox, somehow, of being in the nowhere.

We hear the echoes of the maritime trade network, intertwined with something more ominous and inchoate, in the perfectly ambiguous description of *cost* which accompanies the description of the Quakers’ deaths: “What it cost / them is their secret.” (By ambiguity I mean in terms of sheer plodding grammar: is there something which it cost them—life?—the exact nature of which they manage to keep a secret in their graves, or did they have a secret which was taken from them in their deaths, or in their being fixed here in Lowell’s elegy?) The conflation of the drowning Quakers and the sperm-whale’s “slick” feels both wildly, innovatively synaesthetic and, too, taken almost directly from *Moby Dick*. Save of course for the haunting counterfactual of salvation with which Lowell ends this third stanza:

If God himself had not been on our side,
If God himself had not been on our side,

When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
Then it had swallowed us up quick.

It insists on the possibility of salvation while foreclosing it; among the horrors of this stanza is we cannot tell whether there is even a glimpse of irony in the Quakers themselves, drowning, calling out about how the Atlantic *would have* drowned them—or whether this irony is all Lowell's. Certainly it is all Lowell's slightly later in "*Clamavimus*, O depths," playing with the invocatory verb and subject/object fixity of Psalm 130's famous *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine*—"From the depths I cry out to you, O God." The criers are pluralized, God is stripped from the picture except in the Latinate remnants of the reference to Him, and the object of this plural cry (who exactly is *we* in the pluralized *clamavimus*—we watching the drownings, watching the steel or wood or invisible boats off Nantucket, we reading the poem?) stops being God at all but the depths. It is not—this bears repetition—merely that God is replaced, but that the grammar is vertiginously inverted—from *from* the depths to *to* the depths. Not just ambiguity, then, in other words, but a churn: a relentless and liquid motion, which overwhelms the logic of the poem much as the waves (or "sperm-whale's slick") overwhelms the Quakers.

The poem insists on this relentless motion even as it insists, too, on the voiding-out of all things: "the end of the whaleroad and the whale." *Whale-road* comes from *hran-rad*, the textbook Old English kenning, direct from *Beowulf* and the corresponding literary tradition—but here this compound poetic figuration for the ocean is literalized, the whaleroad as the space literally traversed and occupied by the whale. More literally, of course, the Pequod aligns us solidly with the narrative of *Moby Dick*—and the end of "them, three-quarters fools," the drowned whalers who, Lowell writes, "sail / Seaward and seaward on the turntail whale." The repetitive alliteration of "seaward and seaward", the internal rhyme, all produce a frenzy of motion, though this motion is ultimately fruitless. The last thing it is the "end of" in this section

is the end, possibly, of *us*; “this is the end of running on the waves; / we are poured out like water.” The poet turns from spectator to participant in the drowning, with a “we” that implicates him and, potentially, his readers. As the whale and humans all seem to drown, we return to the odd level of personification found towards the end of the second stanza: here, it is the seagulls who “wail” (the poem’s rhyme for the “turntail whale,” lest we fail to notice the homonym) “for water, for the deep where the high tide / mutters to its hurt self, mutters and ebbs.” We see, in other words, not just the seagull’s scream and the “death-rattle of the crabs” as types of animal-kingdom grief but both the sea and shore personified: the tide’s “hurt self” and the beach as an “enormous snout / Sucking the ocean’s side.” Personification functions as a countercurrent, momentarily, to the emptying out of the more heavily symbolic Melvillian personages (the sailors and the whale.)

In Melville, of course, save for the necessary capitulation to narrative that forms the brief epilogue, *Moby Dick* ends when the ship, and Ahab, and all else save the narrator is dragged under the sea: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” (491) We might imagine the moves in the above stanza to be doing something similar—the screaming birds and slowly ebbing tides taking on greater importance as the moment of death and violence subsides. We would be left then with the line, somewhere between rhetoric and call to action: “Who will dance / The mast-lashed master of Leviathans / Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?” A poem might easily end on a question like this—but instead the next section starts with its own question, in the course of whipping back into a more grotesque, more visceral evocation of the violence of whaling and of the nearly infinite metaphorical reach this violence has taken on.

I say “visceral” quite literally: the whale’s viscera is shown, in the next section’s first line, to be a type of “corruption” which “overruns this world / Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Woods Hole”—the poem interstitches variations on its now-established apocalyptic themes (“the bones cry”) and escalatingly grisly images of whale-hunting (“hacks the coiling life out,” “gobbets of blubber”) with two direct addresses to the “Sailor” of earlier stanzas. The section’s final lines are often noted for their Biblical doubling of reference: “Hide / Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.” Here Christ is Jonah, the victim of a whale, and also is the whale itself, receiving the side wound; Robert Hass famously notes of this poem and these particular lines that “the fifth section, the most terrible, the one in which the whale receives the sexual wound of all human violence, ends with a prayer [...] Insofar as the poem is Christian, it seemed to me to be a very peculiar Christianity.” (67) This theological difficulty might be read in conjunction with the other semi-uninterpretable theological touchstone, found in the second section: “IS, the whited monster,” which, Philip Furia notes, “has proved almost as confusing as Milton’s ‘two-handed engine’” (837). Furia notes that the then-common reading, of IS as acronymic for *Iesus Salvator*, has “certain difficulties arise when that interpretation is applied to the poem,” and that the somewhat complementary reading that the white whale represents Christianity “seems as dubious for Lowell as it is for Melville.” His reading then draws more heavily on the Book of Revelations and the “the elegiac convention of blending Christian and Classical imagery” (839), but I am more interested here in noting this persistent interpretive morass. It is of the same type that attends the “Jonas Messias” reference, such that in 1983 one critic writes “[p]robably there is no way to make certain sense out of the passage, but if the punctuation is to be taken seriously [...]” (29)—proceeding to advance an argument on a comma present in the *Lord Weary’s Castle* printing of the poem, which scholars would eventually mostly concede to be a consistent

misprint. (Lowell said as such, at least, in the same letter to Tokunaga where he explained the poem's "castles in Spain," and fifteen or so other bullet-pointed references; his take on this much-discussed line in its entirety is: "No comma after 'hide'; Jonah a type of Christ, but Christ by my bitter jugglery becomes the whale not the Whaleman." (*Letters* 511) Earlier printings of the poem, or versions of it, often retain this supposed error, however.)

One way of reading this is merely to note that the hyperreferentiality which drives so much of the kinetic energy of the poem also causes these religious tangles; Lowell's "bitter jugglery" becoming bogged down, perhaps, under the weight of this much water (and the viscera, fat, fish, bones, steel, and blubber floating around in it.) The poem can never quite settle on one referent; Seamus Heaney, writing of it in an essay on Lowell, in fact describes this exact stanza as a "thrilling" attempt, amidst a poem already swarming with "taut-cheeked genii of storm," to surpass its referents: "'Take note, Hopkins!' it cries. 'Take note, Melville. And reader, take that!'" (*Finders Keepers* 227)

The theology of the sixth section of seven (and the only one with its own title, "Our Lady of Walsingham") is in some ways clearer, though this clarity introduces its own difficulties. It is adapted in large part from a section of E.I. Watkins' *Catholic Art and Culture* (1936). Watkins—like Lowell, a convert to Catholicism—describes the shrine in terms half travel-guide and half philosophy, such that chatty details about the architecture, style, and design adjoin a wish for a "new religion-culture," a revived Catholicism that is "the synthesis of a vertical movement which takes full account of the horizontal; an adoration of transcendent Godhood which does justice to His immanence in creatures." (217) Watkin's account of the shrine, which "for centuries has been an historical memory" but recently showed renewed pilgrimage, is the source of much of the striking details of this section—the opening image of pilgrims removing their shoes (at the

Slipper Chapel), the nearby stream as representative of the Biblical waters of Shiloah which “make glad the city of God” (though Lowell renders it “castle”), and, too, the physical description of the statue of Mary at Walsingham, “too small” and with “no comeliness,” analogized by the Latinate quotation to Isaiah, and even the “expressionless” face.

The “munching English lane” of Lowell’s Walsingham is as far from his Woods Hole and whales’ blubber as one might reasonably seem to get. “The fact that Lowell changes the setting from America to England is also part of the surprise felt by the reader,” writes Ross Labrie, who notes also that “the language in this section is comparatively bland and the tone neutral, if not dry, in contrast to the passion and outrage that appear elsewhere in the poem.” (169) Robert Hass has a similar reaction to the tonal change of this poem; it is, he writes, “a remarkable moment [...] I imagine that for a lot of younger writers it was the place where they learned how far away you could go from the poem and still be in it.” (70) It has been equally possible for readers of this section—to select again only from the critics in this paragraph—to consider this section “not especially Catholic, and that is its interest” (Hass 67) and the most traditionally Catholic portion of a poem which is otherwise “at odds” with or at best “something of a theological hybrid” of the Catholic tradition. (Labrie 171) So too might we “learn nothing substantive from it except that the ways of God are ultimately mysterious, and that life in any case is not a cheering, pastoral dream” (Bell 29), or find in it proof that “Lowell can propose a faith in which men can find peace” (Leibowitz 32).

Here it may be useful to recall some of the history of the Walsingham shrine in particular; Watkins’ reference to “historical memory” in the source text only hints at the complicated history of the site, which had been renewed in an uneasy Anglo-Catholic alliance only in the 20th century (in which the old Slipper Chapel had been restored and renewed as a site of

Catholic pilgrimage in the 1890s and the original Walsingham site, now in Anglican hands, given a new statue in 1922 and restored as a shrine in the 1930s.) Walsingham's longer history as a great medieval pilgrimage site dates back to the 11th or 12th century, when it was established as a specifically Marian site of adoration: the traditional account has the Virgin transporting a nobleman to Nazareth, the site of the Annunciation, and instructing a replica of the house to be built in England. The site, however, fell generally into disuse in the 16th century: the original statue and shrine was one of many Catholic sites suppressed during the English Reformation and the 1538 dissolution of the monasteries, with the buildings destroyed and the original statue either destroyed or hidden away. Such was *this* site's importance that its destruction became the topic of a popular Elizabethan-era ballad which, among other things, Ophelia sings a modified version of in *Hamlet*. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in one of his shipwreck poems, thinks of the folk traditions associated with Walsingham as the ultimate example of (the now-degraded) apex of piety in Catholic England: where England was so "at home" to God's grace "That a starlight-wender of ours would say / The marvellous Milk was Walsingham Way"—that is, that the Milky Way itself reflected, pointed to, or lit the pilgrim's route to Walsingham. The face "too small for its altar" in this poem is therefore both a fairly recent (re)invention and an echo of the source itself, a long—and particularly Catholic—history.

What does it mean, then, for Our Lady of Walsingham to be the central figure of this discursive break—this cross-the-pond vacation, of sorts, from the guts and waves of the Atlantic? Here we might return to what Watkins has to say about Walsingham, before it is chopped into some of the most foundational lines of this section: "That expressionless countenance expresses what is beyond expression. It is the countenance of one whose spirit dwells in a region beyond emotion and thought, in that centre of which mystical writers speak.

Mary is beyond joy and sorrow. For her spirit is in God, and she knows as He Knows, receiving His knowledge.” (213) For Watkins, in other words, the mystery of this “expressionless” face is, directly, a theological claim; she is expressionless *because* she has accessed something normally available only to God, something which, unusually, is expressed in counterpoint to her human knowledge: “No longer the Mother of Sorrows nor yet of the human joy of the Crib, she understands the secret counsel of God, to whose accomplishment Cavalry and Bethlehem alike ministered. Therefore her peace, the central peace of God, is beyond the charge of earthly experience.” In Watkins’ theology this is an incitement, for Catholics, to the contemplative life in general—to contemplation of the “inscrutable Will into which she has entered.”

In other words, the statue’s seeming peacefulness in this section is not, or is not *only*, because it is removed to a pastoral setting, though it may feel this way at the beginning—almost a stanzaic island in the roiling ocean of the rest of the poem. The markers of the pastoral in the mile’s barefoot walk to the “old shrine” are, in Lowell, almost too heavy-handed: the plodding movement of hedgerows, the stream, and perhaps the penitents themselves here in the “munching” English lane is compared to cows. One line break in particular sets up the placidity of this section’s first stanza: “you lose / Track of your dragging pain.” In a poem otherwise haunted by various losses and pain, we hang momentarily on *lose*—but here what we lose is pain, or at least our awareness of pain. There is something almost scattered about this description, and of pain as “dragging” in a poem where the sense of motion itself seems almost to drag, and even of the repetitive couplet-rhyme of “glad” when the Sailor is directly addressed in later lines. In a way, this image sharpens with the turn from the first to second stanzas, what Raphael Falco calls “the volte-face, ‘But see,’ a warning that not all will be as expected.” (163) (Barry Spurr notes of this phrase that it is “exactly the same imperative phrase the Puritan Milton

used, in the seventeenth century, at the end of the Nativity Ode,” such that “historical time is annihilated in this ambiance of timelessness.” (192)) The image of Mary that appears when our gaze is turned to it often strikes critics, including Raphael Falco, as being written in a tone of “aesthetic disappointment” with the statue’s size and expressionlessness.

But it seems important how consistently the statue, in Lowell, is described through negation: even more strongly than in the source material, where Watkins at times sets up a contrast between outer and inner beauty (the statue, he writes almost defensively, has “an inner beauty more expressive than outward grace” if we “look carefully”), in this poem what the statue *is* is inseverable from what it is *not*. This is achieved partially organizationally: whereas in prose the “non est species” line seems like a Biblical allusion made almost for the sheer sake of allusiveness, immediately preceding the description of the charmless and expressionless face, here it comes later in the description. The line in its original context is from a “suffering servant” section of the Book of Isaiah, often taken as Messianic prefiguration by Christian tradition—a figure with no “beauty or comeliness” we might translate it, as the Douay-Rheims translation does, providing an explanation for the “comeliness” deployed in these lines. (The KJV reminds us of another translation for the Latin *species*: form. In a poem so reliant, in many of its other sections, on the oceanic and metric tensions between form and formlessness, there is an echo of formlessness in this expression of divinity.)

What changes in our reading of this section if we read this persistent negation not as negativity (disappointment, insufficiency) but as a *via negativa*—a type of mysticism which approaches the divine through what it is not? The aesthetic qualities of the statue (other than its size) lack that which is human—no beauty, charm, comeliness, expression. “Expression” is, due to its repetition, seemingly the crux of this scene, and the mystery of the contemplative figure is

heightened in Lowell's change to the language. The dialectic is heightened by sheer proximity and compression: the face "Expressionless, expresses God." "She knows what God knows," but we—the reader, the Sailor, the poem—do not learn what that is; merely that it is *not* the human moments of extremity which Mary knew in her lifetime, the birth of her son or watching his death. (It is worth noting here that the quoted section of Isaiah, here applied to the face of Mary, is often associated with "Cavalry's Cross," with the Crucifixion—or, specifically, with devotional images of Christ suffering the five wounds, including the wound from a spear in the side, such that among other resonances there is a momentary echo of the previous section's much bloodier end.)

There is something apophatic here, in the image of a saint who has entered into the divine so thoroughly that it overrides or supersedes previous knowledge—almost paradoxical, because what God knows surely includes the moments of His birth and death. We are told, too, as the section ends, that "the world shall come to Walsingham"—practically the only thing in the stanza that is not negated. Perhaps this combination of prophecy and void is a contributing factor to the section's uncanniness—an uncanniness which seems, judging by the wide and contradictory range of criticism on this section—to strike some readers more strongly. Steven Axelrod often cites Randall Jarrell's comment written in the margins of a copy of this poem: "This is as frightening as anything could be, after the beautiful beginning." (61) Many who do find something uncanny about it take it, as Axelrod does Jarrell's comment, as a remark which "get[s] to the center of Lowell's religious vision here: it is colored by a sense of the extreme improbability and even, perhaps, the undesirability of faith." Rather than undesirability, however, I want to argue that the statue provides a way to think about continuity, memory, and

negation—one that, while obviously being different from the rest of the poem, can be read in continuity with it.

In other words, the statue represents a contemplative's approach to the same problems of knowledge which troubles the rest of the poem; what it offers is not *clear*, but it is, unlike the New England seascape, *stable*. In the rest of the poem, as we have seen, one of the primary effects produced is not merely the intensity of death and violence, but the instability of reference: Lowell gives us or shows us a coastline where the lines between eras are as troubled as the lines between sea and land, where referents and typologies pile, overlap, contradict and clash in the opacity of the water. The sea, or at least *this* sea in *this* poem, as a site allows for—or perhaps we should say creates—a medium where references, like flotsam or like corpses, might hang in suspended and uncanny stages, brushing against each other, intermingling and overlapping, and resurfacing at unexpected times and places, sometimes altered in unexpected ways. Off Madaket, this poses problems for Lowell, as it will for his readers—the clash of Puritan history, New England Quakerism, contemporary family sentiment, and an externally-imported Catholic pacifism that was, perhaps, already starting to fray at the time of this poem's composition. Thoreau, Melville, Hopkins, Milton, Eliot, childhood summers and Nazi submarines cannot all easily coexist for Lowell, but, of course, the problem of this poem is that they must.

The statue, as “expressionless” as it is, produces a single point on which to briefly fix the poem's gaze. Like Lowell's seascape, it addresses the problems of history, memory, and reference: a newly constructed statue taken from an early-modern image taken from the original, suppressed or destroyed, object. Like Lowell's Jonas Messias and Quaker counterfactual prayers, it addresses the problem, too, of the unknowability—the inscrutability—of God's will. It is a single stable thread—less tidal, less tumultuous—through which to address the same problems of

theodicy the poem wrestles with on more familiar shores. The paradox of how and whether God can exist in the void of the Atlantic is itself neutered by a counter-proposition of sorts in this section: a different type of negation (*non est*, “not”) which is almost a shortcut, or at least a lesser-used path, to the divine. The oddly assured nature of the section’s last line—“Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham”—deploys that enjambment to help create an enlargement of the poem’s claims. That is, the word “Now” almost helps us forget that the previous line started with “Not.” It acts as a subtle hinge, perhaps, for the temporality of the knowledge under discussion to subtly swell forwards: first from what she knows now (what God knows) to what she used to know (the crib and cross) and then to an ending which straddles the future-tense of prophecy and the imperative of divine command: what the world *shall* do. This line also loses the logical structure it has in Watkins (“When the world goes thus to Walsingham, it will return to the Church”) which itself is, though he merely refers to it as “the saying,” an expansion of Pope Leo XIII’s prayer upon rededicating the Slipper Chapel: “When England returns to Walsingham, Our Lady will return to England.” No such doctrinal nor regional specificity exists in what the statue knows: merely that the world will come to it.

This is not to say that the poem proposes land itself as a necessarily stable place—for one, because Walsingham and the surrounding area of Norfolk is near the sea (close enough that, for example, the region was patrolled heavily in the war), and the dedication to Mary therefore connected in earliest times to Mary as the *Stella Maris*, the “star of the sea”; and because the strongest influence for this particular section of Lowell’s poem is likely T.S. Eliot, who in his “Dry Salvages” section of the *Four Quartets* draws heavily on this particular typology of Mary: “Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory” (42). In the Walsingham section, the interplay created between its two stanzas create an effect unlike that which either would create on its own:

the heightened contrast between the “beautiful beginning,” to quote Jarrell, and the uncanniness of the statue mean we cannot quite reduce the entirety of the section to something merely stable, pastoral, or peaceful.

We might recall, too, that one of the major logistical problems in another poem written during this time, “The Dead in Europe,” is that of “sacred earth”—that among the terrors of the bombings being described is the problem of death in unconsecrated ground. It’s admittedly difficult in this poem, with its wordplay and conceits so elaborate that they tend to be the primary characteristic of the poem for both its admirers and critics, to fully untangle the problem of consecration, “sacred” earth, with the more directly material problem of the civilian deaths themselves; some critics note that Lowell’s pacifism was directly provoked by the bombing of cities being described in such detail in these lines. Regardless, the thorough elemental mixing present in the poem (aerial bombing causing burials in rubble and earth shaking, “jellied fire” being a cause of death) is an apocalyptic dilemma in “The Dead in Europe” that Lowell can assuage only by having his dead cry out to Mary for equally transelemental miracles, epitomized by the ending lines: “O Mary, marry earth, sea, air and fire; Our sacred earth in our day is our curse.” (68) Colm Toibin comments, not admiringly, that this poem is one among several of Lowell’s early poems “driven as much by [Lowell’s] fervid Catholic faith and devotion to the Virgin Mary as by his anti-war sentiments...It is clear from this poem that wherever Lowell was when the bombs fell, he wasn’t close by.” (LRB 35.15) And indeed, this poem like “The Quaker Graveyard” stages, at one point, a jarring trans-Atlantic shift: in one of the instances of heavy-handed punning that Toibin would call “clotted” but others such as Janis Stout would call reminiscent of John Donne, the poem asks “shall we rise on Mary’s day / in Maryland,” which

Stout calls “a playful renaming of heaven as Mary’s envisioned land and at the same time an invocation of an earthly place that was heavenly because it was not bombed.” (179)

In other words, whatever counterpoint the Walsingham section provides to the rest of the poem doesn’t align itself entirely comfortably with many of the binaries that might first come to mind (sea and land, New England and England.) There’s evidence too that at times Lowell himself doubted the Walsingham section’s place in the rest of the poem—though this came far later, after Lowell’s deconversion from Catholicism, and during a period of intense, self-contradictory, and not always successful editing and revision. While preparing for the 1974 British publication of his selected poems, “Our Lady of Walsingham” was edited out and included as a separate poem, although these changes were reversed by 1976 for the American version. Albert Gelpi notes that this was part of a “drastically shortened” version of the poem which cut much of the last section as well as the entirety of the second and fourth sections. Gelpi reads this edit as “a realization that the fixation with God’s otherness in the last two sections [...] diverged from the incarnational vision” of the fifth section, but suggests that “Lowell quickly realized the revised text diminished the unresolved drama of God’s transcendence and immanence” (63-64).

What it may offer, however, is a different way of thinking about historical continuity—by narrowing the poem’s vision briefly to the single point of the statue, and not just to any statue but to one that is almost insufficient even for its own canopy, we are nevertheless brought back to face issues of memory, prophecy, and knowledge as significant as those raised in the poem’s other sections. Barry Spurr suggests that the “particular tincture” of the image of Mary here is, essentially, a converts’ problem of representation: “a Platonic ideal of timelessness, as bloodless as the ‘still point’ of Eliot, another who, in maturity, rejected a New England Calvinist heritage

for the Anglican version of Catholicism.” (193) But the corpse of the sailor still floating in the poem’s other sections may remind us here of the multiple valences of *bloodlessness*—or, put another way, that the uncanniness of oceanic violence elsewhere in the poem perhaps tinge and inflect the uncanniness evoked here through entirely alternate means.

The poem shows us two ways of achieving the sublime: one through the sweep of the sea, its hyperreferentiality suspended in an indistinct medium (in which the whale, the whaleroad, and the whalehunter thus all intermesh along with a host of other sea figures.) The other picks a single image, a single point of reference, and expands out to the sweep of history behind it as well as, crucially, the theological paradox which propels its energy. Denying the essential charge of these lines—the real force of Marian dogma in a Catholic poem—might lead them to read as only peaceful (with whatever positive or negative critical valence a reading attaches to that term) or alternately as too disjunct from the rest of the poem. Taking it more seriously suggests it, instead, as an essential underside to the rest of the poem’s momentum. One argument behind taking Marian theology very seriously in relation to Robert Lowell’s Catholicism is that his later rejection of Catholicism was couched in it—at least in poetic representation. “Beyond the Alps,” the poem that would begin *Life Studies* (1959) and “symbolically encapsulate” the transitions away from *Lord Weary’s Castle* and from Lowell’s early style and faith, is tagged in the subtitle as taking place the year the Assumption of Mary (the belief that the Virgin Mary, like Christ, was “assumed” into heaven bodily) was made Catholic dogma by Pius XII. Among a string of other disappointed, scathing comments on the Church, Lowell takes umbrage to this specifically:

The lights of science couldn’t hold a candle
to Mary risen—at one miraculous stroke,
angel-wing’d, gorgeous as a jungle bird!
But who believed this? Who could understand?

Earlier drafts miss this emphasis in favor of Lowell self-apostrophizing as a “New England Puritan” who views with cynicism the “bread and circus piety” of a Rome recently marred by fascism—but even then he complains about the doctrine, seemingly less because of the concept itself but the way in which it became an authoritative claim: “They resign / God’s Mother risen to the realm of fact?” While it is difficult to retroactively read much into Lowell, it seems that one of the problems here is that of doctrinal authority rather than, necessarily, the theology itself.

The poem’s final section returns us to the sea, which in this last section feels almost becalmed—or perhaps exhausted: “The empty winds are creaking and the oak / splatters and splatters on the cenotaph.” We have moved from the ocean’s unstoned graves—body without memorial—to the cenotaph, memorial without body. It is a calmness achieved through emptying-out, and the many presences that *do* still exist within it are associated with both monstrosity and waste. Conceptually if not linguistically, it seems to abide by Eliot’s lines in “Dry Salvages”: “We cannot think of a time that is oceanless / Or of an ocean not littered with wastage” (38).

Resignation wars with a proliferation of monstrosity:

In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It’s well;
Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:

There is not much classic apostrophe throughout the poem, but previously it has always been to Winslow (in the figure of the sailor.) Here, though, Lowell addresses the whole Atlantic—and the “blue sailors,” possibly the corpses or the more chthonic entities of the later line, becomes something that *corrupts* that whole ocean. The mermaidesque grotesquerie of these sea-monsters are purely *Paradise Lost*, but where Milton’s Dagon is “upward man and downward fish” (1.462), here humanity is absented entirely, replaced with a more heavenly figure. These “unmarried and corroding” figures are waste, floating amidst the “spoil” of a bell-trap. The

winds take up the qualia of the sea beneath them—they become “brackish”—and in so doing are capable of being vivisected to “cast up” (as if fishing in them) an incident in the past. That incident is of Creation, but a creation where mankind is “formed [...] from the sea’s slime” and, immediately after receiving the breath of life, being beset upon by “blue-lung’d combers” (waves) with their own slow predatory impulses.

One thing it does not do is return to the purported subject of the poem, Winslow. In earlier versions of the poem it often does—“Passages from a Quaker Graveyard,” published in the *Partisan Review* in 1945, excerpted three sections from the poem. The third section would appear almost identical in its eventual published form (save for a few lines and the lack of the phrase “whited monster”), while the fifth section in this version offered a reminiscence of the Lowell-Winslow childhood and the material trappings—“model-boats,” “spangled coats,” the “ponderous plate from blue / Canton,”—that characterized prosperity in a “blue-blooded” New England family. (This stanza would be separated out and published as “Buttercups,” losing the direct address to Winslow and turning the boyhood anecdotes into the first-person.) The seventh section in these “Passages,” however, addresses the Sailor at great length, describing his death viscerally: “the long smother snaps your spine [...] and spins / Your green-eyed liquefaction.” The disgust produced in this section is more realist, the “disgusting gulls and terns / of the fouled Atlantic” which might feed on a corpse rather than a Miltonic monster, with the most forceful images being the “corrosive” “mould” and its effects not on the Atlantic but on the corpse, the “cordage of your brain.”

One effect of these changes—made perhaps in part because Randall Jarrell, in a letter to Lowell about this version of the poem, insistently pleaded with Lowell to remove both these fifth and seventh sections, calling the former “too didactic” and the second “overwritten, too

rhetical, not really functioning” (137-138)—is the removal of the human element, or at least of the elegaic element. It is almost as if the apophysis in the Walsingham section produces an epistemological hangover of sorts: in its wake in the concluding section we see “man” as a category, a signatory perhaps to the theological covenant signified by the rainbow, but we no longer see much of any individual dead. This elegy almost becomes something other than elegiac, drawn too deep into consideration of the site of death itself: such that its famous, vatic last line hinges entirely on the ambiguity of its verb. That last line is part of a rhymed couplet—the whole section exists in relatively smooth, commanding pentameter compared to some of the more complex meters of earlier sea-sections. However, it exists as its own self-contained thought, as if hermetically sealed from the rest of the poem: “The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.” No further clarification is given of what it means for a god to *survive* a rainbow, or even whether there is meant to be hope in this survival, in the continuing presence of God (or, conversely, the opposite, that God is a figure who has outlasted his promise of mercy, that, as Alan Holder suggests, “He survives; man, by implication, does not.”)

We might interpret this line by remembering that, in Walsingham, the statue’s access to divine knowledge was an apophatic negation of human knowledge. Here, perhaps, in the suddenly unpopulated Atlantic, we are meant to read the last line as something not malicious nor protective but operating on a level entirely orthogonal to its consequences for human existence—in other words, treating God and his rainbow much the way we have already learned to navigate the sea.

CHAPTER THREE

‘My brain is a holy place for water’: Mists and Metaphysics in Seamus Heaney

In 1972, on a public broadcast program designed for Northern Irish schoolchildren, Seamus Heaney met a pagan god.

So the BBC archives describe the clip from their programming, in which Heaney visits the rural Boa Island to face its early-(or pre-)Christian stone carving, often called the Boa island bilateral figure or, more poetically, the Janus figure of Boa Island.¹ For Heaney, shown traversing gates and grassland to get to the island’s early-medieval Christian graveyard and stand face to face with the figure, it is called merely “the first god.” Contemporary archaeologists have not fully settled on the statue’s exact provenance—whether it is contemporaneous with its fourth-to-eighth-century early-Christian graveyard surroundings or with the Iron Age pre-Christian figures it resembles. For Heaney and the BBC in the early 1970s, however, it was uncontroversially situated as a figure of the “first people” of the island. When it speaks, it claims to fear that it would be replaced by new gods, as, of course, the program implies with the camera’s leisurely drift towards a cross-shaped tombstone, it was. Heaney would soon after publish a poem, “January God,” inspired by this two-faced archaic statue, but in this television segment he instead vocalizes the god’s self-conception directly: “I am the god of Boa Island. I am the first god of the first people...” he begins over the background of a heartbeat, as the camera spins vertiginously around the two-sided statue to track Heaney’s own circuit of it.

¹ The show, *Ulster in Focus*, was an educational documentary series which, according to the BBC, showcased “different aspects of life in Northern Ireland, both past and present.” Seamus Heaney would be the presenter for several of these episodes, including one on Christmas traditions and another on the River Bann and Lough Neagh.

The god, here, is conceived as both worshipped and worshipper: “My feet worship the earth. My eyes worship the Sun. My brain is a holy place for water.” Heaney accompanies this claim by brushing his fingers lightly into the rainwater accumulated in the small indentation between figures. Here, the absence of stone—the empty space, which in modern days has begun to accumulate small coins and other mementos from passersby, though there is no evidence or mention of this folk tradition in the 1972 program—becomes a “holy place” where air and water meet. In poetry, Heaney writes that the god’s “brain is a watery wound” (in “January God”) or, later, that it is “trepanned” (in “At the Water’s Edge” in *Field Work*)—he is persistently interested in the way the “skull” or head(s) of the god is/are exposed to the elements, and suggests, in fact, that this is the location of the brain, the material precondition for the god’s ability to think.

This chapter thinks with the god. That is, it proposes attention to Heaney’s works through the intersections of air and water, and with the theological and pre-theological associations these accumulate. Here it is useful to return to Heaney’s description in this segment of the fate of the Boa Island god(s) or more generally of Irish pre-Christian faiths: when the Christian missionaries displaced the pagans (or “druids”) in the fifth century, he notes that “they turned men’s minds from the earth to heaven.” For Heaney, to be sure, this is no uncomplicatedly positive thing—neither in the movement towards heaven nor away from earth.

The reception of Heaney’s work routinely, and correctly, draws attention to his interest in the earth—he is read as a poet of landscape, of the farmland and peat bogs that characterized his childhood in rural Ireland and serve as a metaphor for an encounter with history. Some of his most famous poems of this type are found as early as his first two books, *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark*; perhaps his most famous poem, “Digging,” the introduction to that first book, infamously evokes his grandfather’s peat digging and his father’s potato planting as a

metaphor for his own poetic work: “The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it” (14). This poem, the official BBC obituary would read after Heaney’s death nearly half a century after its publication, “proved to be his manifesto. He spent a lifetime digging with his pen, but returned often in his poetry to the landscape and society of his boyhood in a countryside of farms and small towns.” The recurrent metaphor of earth and bog was not just agricultural but archaeological as well—the first major bog poem, “Bogland,” closing his second collection, would first introduce the bog as a receptacle for history, a repository for everything from hundred-year-old butter “recovered salty and white” to the “skeleton / of the Great Irish Elk,” an extinct prehistoric megafauna (55). Following these collections, in what Dillon Johnston calls the “accidental conjunction of history” (115), Heaney would discover P.V. Glob’s archaeological treatise on the bog bodies of Northern Europe, and the figures of naturally mummified “bog bodies” including the Tollund Man and the Grauballe Man would be compositional subjects on and off for the rest of Heaney’s career, albeit most extensively and famously in his collection *North* (1975). These were not mere historical artifacts for Heaney but served as visceral remnants from a deep history of sacrificial violence—in his own words, “the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles” (“Feeling into Words” 57–58).

In other words, it is easy to read Heaney as someone whose poetry is “in an almost literal sense [...] rooted to the Irish soil,” as the *New York Times* did during the announcement of Heaney’s Nobel Prize in 1995 (Grimes). Recent scholarship has often wrestled with reconciling this type of “traditionalist” reception of Heaney’s work with a new interest in theorizing literature(s) of the Anthropocene—with the bogs often serving as a particular site of contention. Andrew Auge, for example, notes the “virtual absence of any discussion of the peat bog itself in the swathes of scholarly writing on these [bog] poems,” suggesting that it is often considered as

a “mere container” (17). Auge’s attempt to resituate the bog as a figure of Latourian agency also attends to what scholars now know about the peat bogs’ role in carbon sequestration: “Heaney, of course, knew nothing of this. But that fact does not obviate our responsibility to re-examine these poems in light of this crucial context” (17). Conversely, Yvonne Reddick approaches the same fundamental problem through an archival approach only possible after Heaney’s death: through chronicling Heaney’s contributions to conservationist efforts in Northern Ireland as well as analyzing unpublished draft material, she suggests that a fuller understanding of his literary evolution “complicates Heaney’s early celebration of peat cutting, by showing that Heaney came to understand that peat extraction could damage the bogland and used his celebrated bog-poems to raise funds for bog conservation” (17).

Nicholas Allen notes, in a recent study of water and the coastline in Irish literature, that water “is a key image throughout Heaney’s work in the form of rivers, streams, bogs, lakes and oceans. It is there at the beginning as a drip from the farmyard pump, and there again at the end in the eel fishery at Lough Neagh” (127). Allen theorizes a triad of “weather, light, and land” in the poetic construction of place for Heaney and suggests that water has been “under-observed” in the critical reception of Heaney’s work primarily because of its metaphorical subsumption to a more politically interesting focus: land is “central to the study of nationalism, and consequently to the postcolonial” (127–28). For Allen, however, water serves as a “historicizable” and “flexible” medium with which to address the complex tensions associated with land: “That flexibility is a necessity when the poet is confronted with the immediate reality of territorial conflict and explains why, in writing about Ireland, water is such a common, if overlooked, source of metaphor” (128–29). Water as a medium is flexible, flowing, fluid; but a particular body of water is historically and geographically situated as much as the land(s) it borders.

Heaney's "Station Island," the title sequence in his 1984 collection, takes us on a thanatological pilgrimage to the ancient Catholic site. Also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, the island, one of a cluster in Lough Derg near the Irish-Northern Irish border, exists in the ecclesiastical and manuscript records of Ireland and greater Christian Europe from at least the 12th century, and archaeological evidence suggests a monastic presence starting in the 5th. The penitential exercises were and are notoriously rigorous—"austere in a high degree," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* notes, "though not so severe as in the days of faith"—and to this day are constituted by fasting, vigil, a barefoot procession, and kneeling in the penitential beds some claim to be the remnants of anchoritic cells from the island's past (Grattan-Flood 580).

Heaney, however, starts the poem with a nearly pastoral evocation of the natural landscape, presumably in the area of the site: the "bell-notes" of the pilgrimage ring out over "water-blistered cornfields," the "escaped ringing" having "stopped as quickly // as it started" (61). We see Heaney's narrator as a spectator to the scene: not pilgrim, yet, nor skeptic. The next thing to break the silence is not further bell-notes, nor pilgrims, nor Heaney's own thoughts, but a "man" who appears to consider pruning the hazel brushes on the road. In a stunningly blasé scene, Heaney tells us who he is: "I know you, Simon Sweeney, / for an old Sabbath-breaker / who has been dead for years" (61). The folkloric logic undergirding the poem's several spectral encounters are thus established by the third stanza. The ghosts - there will be several - arrive from various stages of Heaney's past; can answer him and do, often with insight into Heaney's own inner thoughts or perceptions; but seem to have no special desire to address him, with Simon Sweeney's first response being "Damn all you know." Sunlight that breaks through the hazel trees draws Heaney, in a few stanzas, away from the relatively truculent "mystery man," but the next image he sees has less clarity: "a crowd of shawled women / were wading the young corn, / their skirts brushing softly" (62).

This image draws Heaney into a memory of his own youthful pilgrimage at Lough Derg, and he falls in (seemingly almost unconsciously) with them. Notably, the poem does not clarify—is disinterested in clarifying—whether these figures are ghosts or actual contemporary pilgrims: the motion of their wading evokes repetitive prayer and conjures the “half-remembered faces” of Heaney’s own pilgrimage of, presumably, years before (63). They turn him to a “fasted pilgrim” who joins with them whether they are, themselves, really there: the unnamed, silent, all-female group achieve this through the “slushing” whisper of their footsteps in the watery cornfields. That is, there is something about the interchange of water and vegetation (and women’s garments) that produces the “drugged path” that Heaney walks down through the rest of the poem. The path of the pilgrimage is also, perhaps surprisingly, set against the ghost’s imprecations: Sweeney’s last words to him in this section are “Stay clear of all processions!” In an earlier version of the poem’s first three sections, published in the *Hudson Review* in 1983, Sweeney elaborates: the procession is something that will stop Heaney from facing Sweeney, which he will have to do “sooner or later” (259).

In other words, before we learn about the site or the island proper, water and light function as the elemental cues for the scene. The next ghost, the nineteenth-century author William Carleton, contextualizes the scene further, but does so because of something in the natural world which changes his sentiment. Perhaps the most famous literary description of this pilgrimage, Carleton’s “Lough Derg Pilgrim” paints a satirical tale of a foolish aspiring priest who, visibly proud of his own piety (as expressed primarily in speed-reading Latin prayers) to the point of pretending to be ordained, is swindled, misled, and abused by various fellow pilgrims over the course of his pilgrimage to the island. Carleton, a convert to Protestantism and viciously anti-Catholic polemicist, was purportedly first induced to leave Catholicism by his own disastrous pilgrimage to Station Island as a young man. Carleton’s

narrator's descriptions of the scheming peasantry and avaricious priests set amongst the "dark, awful beauty" of the lough and island itself, studded by the lacerating rocks of penitential pits and beset by dark waters, dips at times into the sublime, though it resettles frequently into a horrified dismissal of the whole experience: "Out of hell the place is matchless, and if there be a purgatory in the other world, it may very well be said there is a fair rehearsal of it in the county of Donegal in Ireland" (810–11). Heaney meets him on the pilgrim road as a figure on foot in the rearview of his driving mirror. ("Although strictly speaking," Heaney notes in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, "he should not have been visible in a mirror since he had to be a ghost. But it was a good way for him to arrive from his other dimension" [237].) Pulling over, the poet addresses him:

Your Lough Derg Pilgrim

haunts me every time I cross this mountain –
as if I am being followed, or following.
I'm on my road there now to do the station. (64)

Heaney, clearly 'following' in a particular Irish literary tradition, is nevertheless 'followed' or haunted by its effects, though he claims he is on the way to the pilgrimage—an interesting thing to say to someone who lost his own faith there, but one that draws Heaney, however lightly, to a side: to "do the station," in 1983 perhaps as much as in 1828, is to be Catholic in a sectarian Ireland. Those who might warn him away from processions, then, are not merely the ambivalent sabbath-breakers and secularists of a Catholic culture, but the figures in his own literary tradition whose criticisms of faith became volleys in a religiously coded war. The strength of Heaney's own faith, his by now established criticisms of the strictures of Catholic Ireland, or the theologically muddy waters of summoning and speaking to ghosts are, here, irrelevant: Heaney's admiration of Carleton's satire does not stop him from, at heart, seeing the two as borne out of a similar tradition, which Heaney does not abandon. Their

discussion starts on this shared context: where Carleton cites his origin as his disgust with the “byre” of politics, the “reek of flax” and “hanged bodies rotting,” Heaney notes that he grew up in “County Derry, / born in earshot of a Hibernian hall // where a band of Ribbonmen played hymns to Mary” (65). The reduced, grown-fragile “obedient strains” of mid-twentieth-century Northern Irish Catholicism made Heaney more conciliatory, he implies, but the cultural life in County Derry and Carleton’s neighboring County Tyrone remained continuous: “a lot of what you wrote I heard and did: this Lough Derg station, / flax-pullings, dances, summer crossroads chat” (66). This conversation, however, otherwise typical to Heaney’s deep interest in history and comparatively moderate political bent, is sandwiched by strange interactions. Like Sweeney and with equally good reason, Carleton is at first combative when approached (““O holy Jesus Christ, does nothing change?”” [64]), but then the ghost:

took cognizance again
of where he was: the road, the mountain top,

and the air, softened by a shower of rain,
worked on his anger visibly (65)

It is not just the particular location (where Carleton’s character had a particular encounter in *Pilgrim*) that Heaney sees as working on Carleton, but the intersection of air and water at that place: the mistiness of the rainy air is something which can “soften” a figure on the other side of a long conflict. The particular strange phrasing of “worked on his anger visibly” is sacramental or alchemical, especially compared to the more distant tone of “took cognizance again”: the air, transformed by rain or by the remnants of it, then transforms the ghost in turn. Carleton too is interested not just in location but transformation; in response to Heaney’s citation of a string of pastoral memories (“the alders in the hedge [...] the melt of shells corrupting”), Carleton interrupts him:

All this is like a trout kept in a spring
Or maggots sown in wounds—
Another life that cleans our element.

We are earthworms of the earth, and all that
Has gone through us will be our trace. (66)

Their shared setting—and implicitly, then, the connection Heaney tries to make in their shared familiarity with it—is not quite denied but reframed in a way that renders it potentially grotesque. The nature of these similes are fraught, such that they have been interpreted on one hand as Carleton seeming to “know exactly where Heaney is going [and] having none of it” (Duffy 42), and conversely elsewhere as “a justification for Heaney’s form of pastoral poetry at its best” (Gifford 103). They frame the poet’s recollection(s) or invocation(s) of the natural world as a process that is both consumptive and productive of its own natural material; something which cleanses by eating algae, infection, or decaying material (depending on the particular simile), while it also secretes a “trace” of its own. Less purgatorial perhaps than purgative—Richard Rankin Russell suggests that in this comparison Carleton “deemphasizes the spiritual, focusing instead on the body and earth” and contrasts it to the poem’s ending advice “advocating fluidity and buoyancy” (244). These are odd last words (if perhaps tonally appropriate for a sharp-tongued satirist) to charge off on as Carleton then does, perhaps odder still because they emphasize the visceral, perhaps even animalistic mechanics behind “all this” (66). Put more simply, fish, maggots, and worms—and poets—all “clean our element” and leave their trace when they do what the dead can no longer do: eat. (They might do this in earth, in water, or in the more ambiguous substrate of blood and skin that comprises an unhealed wound; and perhaps it is even relevant that the production of traces happens metaphorically within the earth, while the image of cleansing in the opening comparison appears in water.)

In the fourth section, Heaney faces the memory of a young priest, “glossy as a blackbird,” from Heaney’s childhood memories (69). This process is described as “blurred

swimmings as I faced the sun,” which resolve first into (equally blurred) photographs of newly ordained priests and then to a particular person, who visited home in summers from missionary trips to an unspecified rainforest and caught, at least in Heaney’s imagination, a tropical fever which follows him into the vision. By now, the appearance of these spirit-visions is treated quite practically by the poet, who politely breaks off from his current stage of the pilgrimage “to clear the way / for other pilgrims queueing to get started” (70). That is, the blurred swimmings of the poet’s encounters are not taking place wholly in dream but are presented simultaneously with the grounded motions of his progression through the stations. The priest raises a type of criticism that later spirits will echo, to some extent: they are unclear why Heaney chooses to return to the Lough at all or to summon them at this place and time, since, as the priest notes, “all this you were clear of you walked into / over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn.” But the priest, too, proposes an answer: “Unless...unless... [...] Unless you are here taking the last look” (71). The mention of the last look, an Irish custom for the dying where someone takes stock of their life, transforms the landscape Heaney is imagining, into a new image

bare as the roads
we both had grown up beside, where a sick man

had taken his last look one drizzly evening
when steam rose like the first breath of spring,
a knee-deep mist I waded silently

behind him, on his circuits, visiting.

The now-sick priest, who made the socially necessary “circuits” of visiting Catholic families, Heaney’s own circular progression through the stations of the island, and the folk tradition of looking around a home or property when one is near death, here collapse into the same image, overlaid upon each other in a patter of simile. Initially, the processes of memory and dream are themselves blurred and watery; as this section resolves, the wateriness is transferred to the air surrounding the bare landscape. Like the penitents who first draw Heaney into the broader

poem's dream-sequence in the first section, the process of pilgrimage—and of memory—become something one wades through; there is something recurrently misty not directly about the process itself but about the landscape that enables the process to take place.

Water does not, however, universally serve this spiritual function in the poem. The water of the surrounding lake, in fact, seems to serve an opposing purpose too: in the seventh section Heaney begins by saying he had “come to the edge of the water, soothed by just looking” (77), though this placid scene is soon disrupted by the shock of seeing another spirit come up behind him, a local shopkeeper who had been the victim of a grisly murder (implied though never directly stated to be an instance of sectarian violence). Water *can*, then, serve the function in “Station Island” of being “a clear barometer // or a mirror,” something calming and even a potential source of insight. But the island's offered insight—whether into the natural world, as a barometer, or the self, as a mirror—is, perhaps, more of a danger to Heaney than a balm: he seeks forgiveness for his “timid circumspect involvement,” the indifference or easiness which at the beginning of the pilgrimage he sought to justify to Carleton (80). That is, the “grounded” approach to Ireland—which Heaney is at this point already becoming famous for—in this poem results in befuddlement from these figures summoned from the past. When given voice, the murder victim cannot forgive Heaney for “the way I have lived indifferent”—more to the point, he cannot engage with the question at all. “‘Forgive / my eye,’ he said, ‘all that’s above my head,’” an almost gruesomely funny colloquialism from an apparition who appears with a smashed-in skull, is the last words of the shopkeeper, before being able to engage with Heaney's guilt. Two ghosts appear in the next section, while Heaney prays at a cell on the island called St. Brigid's Bed, and the second of them—Colum McCartney, Heaney's second cousin—levels a harsher version of this criticism at the poet. The “bleeding, pale-faced boy” criticizes Heaney for his indifference to Colum's murder, critiquing the poet for not coming home when he heard of

the murder years before: “They showed more agitation at the news than you did” (82). Heaney claims that the poets he was with “were getting crisis / first-hand, Colum, they had happened in on / live sectarian assassination”—while Heaney, conversely, “was dumb, encountering what was destined” (83). That is, this particular “sectarian assassination” had a more dramatic effect on the poets—of what nationality neither speaker specifies, though the place mentioned, Jerpoint, is a medieval Irish monastery far south of the border—who were able to experience it as a politicized instance of sectarian violence. Heaney, conversely, because of his direct relationship to his “own flesh and blood” or because of the general reserved distance with which he often treats the political violence of Northern Ireland, cannot speak, and cannot experience it as a first-hand crisis (82). His explanation of how he processes the grief is telling: “I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg / and the strand empty at daybreak. / I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake” (83).

This image, in fact, is taken from a poem Heaney had previously written about this incident, “The Strand at Lough Beg,” published in his previous collection, *Field Work* (1979). This elegy for McCartney starts by citing a tercet from Dante’s *Purgatorio* and imagines the victim transported from the site of the murder, “where you weren’t known and far from what you knew,” into a more familiar (and familial) locale, the shores of Lough Beg near Heaney and McCartney’s childhood homes (17). Here, a place where “you and yours and yours and mine” herded cattle and shot ducks, Heaney imagines encountering his dying cousin and gently washing the corpse of the blood and muck from the murder:

Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud. (18)

Here, the elements of the lakeshore—mist, moss, and dew, and a lake which “half shines under the haze”—are the stage for a seemingly conventional act of washing and ‘laying out’ of the

corpse of Heaney's cousin, close to home. In the closing line, Heaney "plait[s] / Green scapulars to wear over your shroud" from the lakeside rushes, an act which draws on literary tradition (in the epigraph from Dante, Cato is telling Virgil and Dante to clean and purify themselves with lakeside rushes in Purgatory) and with Catholic tradition (albeit ambiguously or metaphorically, since green scapulars, sacred to Mary, do exist, but are made with fabric rather than natural material). While the strand is studded with the "acrid, brassy, genital, ejected" cartridges of bullets from hunting, it is otherwise unpopulated save for the family's herd of cattle; the filling stations and streetlamps of the scene of McCartney's actual death are replaced by placid bovine witnesses (17).

In other words, the lough offers a pastoral escape from the interpersonal violence occurring elsewhere: the poet draws from the resources, both physical and psychic, of his best-known landscape to ritually summon his grief and achieve catharsis. "The Strand at Lough Beg" aligns, then, with certain conventions on what the land can offer poetry, especially on the consolatory powers of a well-known landscape. All the more interesting, then, is the sheer contempt with which the spirit of McCartney refers to this poem, which he seems to consider even a worse crime than Heaney's failure to return home:

"You saw that, and you wrote that—not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
and saccharined my death with morning dew." (83)

While the poet is operating in the natural world to some extent during "Station Island," he is being castigated, too, for his previous use of it: the conventional pastoral is nothing more than a way to "saccharine" and whitewash a death.

The spirit's criticism of his own elegy has, reflexively, implications for the poem in

which he speaks it: “Station Island,” like “The Strand at Lough Beg,” evokes the sensory specificities of a particular landscape; it encounters spirits of the dead and attempts to reckon with their deaths; it draws through epigraph or structure on the Dantean tradition of a poet’s religious journey, speaking to a procession of spirits who are both named individuals and metonymic for larger concerns; and it does so through an imaginative trance instantiated by the sound of “sweeping” feet through dewy or watery land. Whether or not Heaney fully agrees with the ghostly literary-criticism he has Colum offer, it closes off certain obvious ways to utilize water and mist: whatever they offer is not exactly cleansing.

One alternative model might be found in this section’s first spirit, “my archaeologist” (81)—Tom Delaney, an archaeologist friend of Heaney’s who died young. This material, which Heaney once noted was the first part of the poem to be written, is melancholy but not condemnatory: Heaney feels that he had “as usual [...] failed an obligation” by failing to respond appropriately to his friend’s hospitalization and imminent death, but the archaeologist seems mostly concerned about his own young death, archaeological passions, and spoiled potential. He is, in other words, a brief moment of intermission between two of the harshest critiques in the poem; it is worth, therefore, seeing how and why he is introduced. The section starts with a stylistic divergence as well, as the first line introduces three clipped descriptions, each in their own short sentence: “Black water. White waves. Furrows snowcapped.” The individual establishing images in this line are each distinct (no “blurred swimmings”) but the relationship between them perhaps less so: presumably the white waves cap the black water, but has the actual lakeside changed from the clear barometer of the previous stanza, or is this another memory being introduced? Are the furrows a new image or a metaphorical description of the waves—or, for that matter, is the water a metaphorical description of the furrows? The next line returns to longer sentences, reestablishing Heaney’s characteristic style, but it does not put a

focus on this juxtaposition of earth and water so much as triangulate it with a third linkage:

A magpie flew from the basilica
and staggered in the granite airy space
I was staring into, on my knees
at the hard mouth of St Brigid's Bed.

The open penitents' bed on which Heaney prays, little more than a stone-covered indentation in the earth, is described both as "granite" and "airy," and the bird's path of flight draws the eye, in a literal sense, first away from the earth or water and then down into the stone bed. Its juxtaposition to the first line, however, creates a space where air, water, earth and stone are all sharply present and described in terms of each other. It seems that it is this natural image—the bird's flight—that summons Delaney, whose "wing / of woodkerne's hair fanned down over his brow." Michael Thurston notes in passing that the woodkerne, an Irish term for a woodland bandit, is "an easy reference to miss," and that the term is commonly critically "misread" as being a type of bird (169). Nevertheless, the "wing" of hair still provides potential justification for the comparison; the sweep of hair across the archaeologist's face resembles, perhaps, the wing sweep of a staggering bird. Delaney's hair was also dark, and the contrast of black hair on white face also potentially echoes the dark-white contrast of the waves and furrows. These elemental transformations seem to, however briefly, open up a space disconnected from sectarian violence, though Heaney seems unable to sustain this when the ghost is replaced abruptly by Colum McCartney.

Thurston reads the spirit of Tom Delaney as evoking a specifically sectarian form of "digging" through the historical record of Irish conflict, noting the parallel between the archaeologist's self-description and "Heaney's early *ars poetica*, 'Digging' [...] as well as the archaeological poems of *North*" (169). For Thurston, Delaney's references to the "muck of bigotry" politicizes his research: "Poet and archaeologist arrived at different conclusions: where the bog poems of *North* discover evidence for atavistic and eternally recurring violence as

something like a universal human condition, Delaney comes upon the concrete specificity of Irish defeat at English hands in the seventeenth century [...] and this difference finally leads to diametrically opposed results.” Delaney’s research, however, digs *through* the strata of 17th-century Irish-English battles to uncover a medieval past, as seen in the spirit’s justification for why he pursued his field: *love*, his love for “the small crab-apple physiognomies / on high crosses, carved heads in abbeys” is his answer, and indeed is framed as the *only* possible answer (“why else”) for the difficult, isolating work of digging (82). This is echoed by Heaney’s musings after the spirit’s speech, which have him picture a transhistorical but architecturally unspecific armature—“a hoard of black / basalt axe heads” giving way to the “cairns” and “eggs” of gunpowder and grenades—which gives way to the image of a gift from Delaney, “a plaster cast / of an abbess, done by the Gowran master, / mild-mouthed and cowed, a character of grace.” This image is both religious and medieval, but it is, also, *pre-sectarian* in its specificity: the historical era Delaney speaks about, and that Heaney associates him with, is associated primarily with faith practices and conflicts that do not organize themselves along modern (that is, Catholic/Protestant, Irish/English) divisions. If digging is seen as a troubled or purposeless pursuit, then, it is one both poet and archaeologist seem to share.

The ninth section starts directly with a long speech from an unnamed spirit, who, though they do not say so directly, died in the infamous 1981 hunger-strike which took the lives of ten IRA political prisoners. The description of the striker’s starvation (“my stomach / shrank to a cinder and tightened and cracked”) and Heaney’s memories of the funeral laying-out “with a drift of mass cards / at his shrouded feet” combine, at the end of a day of pilgrimage, to give Heaney a night of unquiet dreams:

I dreamt and drifted. All seemed to run to waste
As down a swirl of mucky, glittering flood
Strange polyp floated like a huge corrupt
Magnolia bloom, surreal as a shed breast,
My softly awash and blanching self-disgust. (84–85)

Water is here turned to waste-water, the organicism of tumors seeming to be the product found in the “mucky” flood; recalling, perhaps, the “muck of bigotry,” here the poet’s emotional and psychological state is as complicated and perhaps as renounceable as the digging, and the corresponding elegaic tradition, which he has his second cousin criticize in the previous section. Heaney spoke often in interviews and essays about his reluctance to be directly involved in the 1981 strikes, though he, like other prominent Northern Irish intellectuals and artists, was asked to make public commentary. (In later years, Heaney would blame the aggressive demands of a Sinn Fein party officer, Danny Morrison, for his decision not to dedicate a poem at the time to the hunger-strikers; though Morrison and Heaney often differed in their descriptions of this encounter on the Dublin-to-Belfast train, Heaney was struck by what he described as Morrison’s presumption, and would eventually narrate his own memory of the event in a later poem:

“‘When, for fuck’s sake, are you going to write something for us?’” [*Spirit* 29]) When reminded of their deaths in the “black dorm” of the pilgrimage, however, the image sends Heaney into a “flood” and “wash” of self-condemnation: “I repent / my unweaned life that kept me competent / To sleepwalk...” (*Station* 84–85). Ironically, this repentance is a sort of sleepwalking, surrounded by surreal and threateningly autonomous clumps of matter that are both flowers, tumors, breasts, and indicative of total decay. Heaney is saved from this new-materialist agitas by two images, equally surreal: one a lit candle which emerges “like a pistil growing from the polyp” to steady him, perhaps recalling his comparison of Tom Delaney’s gift to a candle, and the other something described “like a bubbleskin / or a moon in smoothly rippled lough water” which resolves into the convex image of a trumpet from Heaney’s childhood memories.

There is something aquatic about these salvific images both ‘rising,’ as if from some psychological undercurrent, but in addition they also both deal to some extent with the interplays of water and light: the candle becomes a “bright-masted thing” on a specific set of steady currents, and the “round and clear / and mildly turbulent” trumpet bell is described first as a bubble and then a reflection. From this, Heaney achieves the “clarity of waking / to sunlight and a bell and gushing taps”—light and water rescue him momentarily from the muckier “flood” of his despair. Later in the hostel, he encounters a cornflower-blue cup which had, he writes, once been used as a prop in a play and, afterwards, was “dipped and glamourous from this translation” (87). Heaney compares this to a different type of submerging: the cup is physically unchanged “as the otter surfaced once with Ronan’s psalter / miraculously unharmed, that had been lost / a day and night under the lough water.” This story is found, among other places, in the medieval *Buile Suibhne*—which Heaney had recently published a translation of as *Sweeney Astray* (1983). “Mad Sweeney,” a deeply resonant figure for Heaney whom he returns to in the third section of the *Station Island* collection (“Sweeney Redivivus”), is a king driven mad as a punishment for a rejection of faith: among other misdeeds which incur the curse, he is the figure who throws St. Ronan’s psalter into a lake to prevent him from founding a church. As the saint himself tells us in a combination praise-poem and curse-announcement, the “speckled book” (in Heaney’s translation) survives unchanged in the water (5). Though Heaney is well aware of the geographic specificities behind Sweeney as a (northern) Irish king in Ulster, this reference purposely abandons geographical specificity: if the lake is merely “the lough,” the medieval miracle of preservation is, in a sense, transposed or translated onto the lake at which he is currently undergoing a pilgrimage.

We might read this section and the next as Heaney’s attempt to work out or remediate the challenges he has been posed during the pilgrimage, especially those posed by his cousin: what

does, and what should, art do? Heaney implicitly makes a claim here about the ability for art—and not merely the use of the cup for theater but the naming of it, as the actors “called” it a loving-cup—to make permanent changes to perception (87), for memory to adhere to and change the nature of even well-worn, well-known objects (but the change occurs in the object’s substance, not its exterior form: that is, it is transubstantiated). Thurston notes the “culturally specific means for effecting his poetic purposes” at play here, with the cup in his reading evoking a communion chalice, but the reading of the St. Ronan myth *or* of transubstantiation as merely cultural risks understating the particularly Catholic resonances involved (175). The next section resorts more explicitly both to translation and to transubstantiation, and it does so while maintaining the structuring logic of water and light: most of Section XII is a translation of the sixteenth-century poet-mystic-priest St. John of the Cross, preceded by a frame memory in which Heaney is set the task of translation in a confessional: “‘Read poems as prayers, he said, and for your penance / translate me something by Juan de la Cruz’” (89).

The memory of confession speaks about the need to salvage, and is itself introduced by a strange metaphor:

As if the prisms of the kaleidoscope
I plunged once in a butt of muddied water
surfaced like a marvelous lightship

and out of its silted crystals a monk’s face
that had spoken years ago

Here the kaleidoscope, like Ronan’s psalter or the cornflower cup, is plunged into something and emerges not exactly transformed but producing some other effect; though kaleidoscopes scatter and reflect light to produce their colorful patterns, here they emerge as a “marvelous lightship.” A lightship is a vessel, but one locked in place to serve as a lighthouse: that is, it guides not by reflection but by producing its own light. The “muddied” and “silted” nature of the water, perhaps, are part of what allows it to produce the association of a face in

the (usually darkened) confessional grille. Though the monk does not set Heaney with a particular text for this task, the one he chooses (commonly titled in English “Song of the Soul Who Delights in Knowing God By Faith,” though Heaney does not title it) uses the structuring metaphor of an eternal fountain for God’s presence, a current or fountain or stream which is eternal, fathomlessly deep, infinitely beautiful, trinitarian, and to be found “within this living bread that is life to us” (that is, in the Real Presence of transubstantiation) (90). The water is also “so pellucid it can never be muddied, and I know that all light radiates from it, although it is the night”—Heaney’s translation, in choosing ‘muddied’ (rather than ‘obscured’ or other more obvious translations of the Spanish *escurecida*), recalls the “muddied water” of his own introductory lines in this section. ‘Pellucid,’ similarly, more than simply ‘clear’ or ‘clarity’ or other translations of *claridad*, etymologically emphasizes the water’s transparency, its inability to be clouded or muddied, in terms of its relationship to light: it is *lucid*, that is, it allows light to shine through.

This translation comprises the bulk of the eleventh section, and, implicitly, finishes Heaney’s pilgrimage—in the twelfth and last section, he is stepping off a boat onto a tarmac. One last spiritual admonition remains, however, in the form of James Joyce, who appears with a “fish-cold and bony” hand (92). Heaney knows Joyce before he speaks: “his voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers came back to me [...] cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite.” When his advice does come, it is a tense mixture of approval, admonition, and guidance, beginning with a sort of release from the journey Heaney has just undergone: “Your obligation / is not discharged by any common rite. [...] You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note.” The advice turns to a more aquatic note in the end, before Joyce silently walks off:

When they make the circle wide, it’s time to swim
out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea. (93–94)

“It seems every critic of Heaney’s sequence must have an opinion about the significance of Joyce’s closing advice,” as Thomas Sawyer notes, “occasionally at the expense of the contents of the intervening sections” (113). Most, he notes, suggest that “Joyce’s advice proves liberating for Heaney’s aesthetic project,” with many of the countervailing opinions only suggesting that it is *ambiguously* or *incompletely* liberatory, or, at worst, that Joyce’s advice “might be understood as sincerely given and sincerely received—but not meant to be sincerely followed” (114–15). Indeed, the text Heaney references when he talks to Joyce is *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, from a section in Stephen Dedalus’s voice, perhaps the most famous modern literary example of a drive to escape a parochial Ireland. Reading Heaney’s summoning of Joyce as liberation provides a springboard to escape the “Station Island” sequence into the transgressive, liberated figure of Mad Sweeney in the book’s third section, as well as to a “freedom” or a change in priorities that critics read in his work following *Station Island*: that the poem’s ending “signals his freedom from attachments to the troublesome, the constraining, and the mundane, asserting by way of Sweeney and Joyce a commitment to unfettered poetic fashioning made evident in his later poetry” (116).

Dennis O’Driscoll echoes this common literary-critical conception of Heaney’s Joyce in an interview with Heaney, where he questions the choice to save Joyce’s presence for the end: “In the end, it was James Joyce who gave you absolution and, as they say, ‘permission’. I wonder if you ever thought of invoking Joyce earlier on the journey? I know you toyed with the idea of a guide, the way Dante enlisted Virgil” (236). Interestingly, however, Heaney defends his earlier evocation of Carleton instead: “William Carleton was the one who auditioned for that part. Joyce would never have walked those nineteenth-century Catholic roads or put up with the murmurs and the *mea culpas* of the island.” He presents a vision of Carleton as “a cradle

Catholic, a Northern Catholic, a man who had lived with and witnessed the uglier side of sectarianism, but still a man who converted to the Established Church and broke with ‘our tribe’s complicity”—here Carleton’s conversion to Protestantism (no matter how vicious his accompanying satire of Catholicism) is a rupture with community norms but does not, in the end, fully disqualify him as “a Northern Catholic.”

Neither Carleton nor Joyce fully inhabit a Virgilian role as guide in the end. Heaney notes during Joyce’s appearance that they gripped hands, “but whether to guide / or be guided I could not be certain” (92)—a biographical reference to Joyce’s near-blindness, but also, perhaps, a perceived caution about fully internalizing the advice he is about to receive. Reading Joyce as not the liberatory, cathartic concluding act to this poetic sequence but instead as one ghost among many, and especially one in tension with his “competition” of sorts in Carleton, alters the philosophical and theological balance of the poem. Against Joyce’s “let go, let fly, forget” (93) we might set Carleton’s earlier advice: “you have to try to make sense of what comes. / Remember everything and keep your head” (66).

It also, crucially, reemphasizes the importance of the island itself. Both Carleton and Joyce essentially reject the strictures of Catholicism which the island’s penitential rites could theoretically represent—but it is Carleton, not Joyce, who could serve as a model for engaging with the island *because he experienced it*. The penitential journey Heaney experienced on the island is not, then, meant to be fully rejected—as Joyce perhaps suggests when he jeeringly calls it “your peasant pilgrimage” and “the sackcloth and the ashes” (93)—but incorporated into a broader perspective. The formal work of pilgrimage is as inescapable in this sequence as the formal work of poetry: whatever conclusion Heaney reaches is inextricable from the specificity of how he reaches it.

What to make, then, of the watery bent of Joyce’s advice? In her book-length study of

Heaney, Helen Vendler notes that “Joyce speaks in a language [...] more Heaney’s than his own” (98)—which ultimately aligns with a broader reading of the ghosts of “Station Island” as essentially reflective: “its *dramatis personae* as a series of alter egos—men whose lives the poet, under other circumstances, might have found himself living” (93). This is one way to resolve the “problem” of style in this last section—why Heaney’s evocation of Joyce, especially in the end, is so deeply evocative not of Joyce’s language but of Heaney’s.

If we read the spectral appearances of Carleton and Joyce as the two major literary guides of the poem, each appearing as bookends to the journey—on the road to and in the carpark following the pilgrimage, rather than on the island itself—it also becomes apparent that weather has particular effects on each of these encounters. As we have already seen, the shade of Carleton is “worked upon” by the weather; the water and air on this specific road combine to change what he is willing to offer Heaney as his interlocutor. The situation with Joyce is somewhat more complex, and in fact some argue that Heaney is the one changed here by the weather. In Sawyer’s reading, for example, the rain is what saves Heaney from being tempted away from the careful balance he has achieved over the course of the poem: “Heaney, however, recognizes the false trail so many of his readers have followed. Refreshed by raindrops on his face, he awakens once again, hearing Joyce’s advice for the mockery that it is” (129).

Without necessarily taking such a fully negative stance towards the shade of Joyce here, one might instead note that water seems to, oddly, occupy two (or more) separate and not entirely compatible registers in this last section of “Station Island.” One is the language of water used of and by Heaney’s Joyce, the “eddy” voice and “elver-gleams” which seem to propose a heightened aesthetic relationship to the world, and to align with flight and freedom. The other is what we might call a more directly sensorial relationship to water, with raindrops causing Heaney to “come to” and try to redirect the conversation; this is also one way to read the final

lines of the sequence: “The shower broke in a cloudburst, the tarmac / fumed and sizzled. As he moved off quickly // the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk” (94).

The description of this sudden storm—rather than the literary conversation, any of the ghosts, or even the poet himself—is given the last word in “Station Island.” But here the water has *narrative*, rather than purely metaphorical resonance: it seems almost as if the weather scares the ghost into a quick retreat, an opposite effect to what it caused in Carleton, and in any case it eclipses him from view as he leaves. There is something elementally transformative about the storm’s effects on the world around it, with the artificial tarmac of the carpark almost paradoxically “sizzling” from the effects of the rain, but the real questions raised by the storm are metaphysical. (Why does the rain affect ghosts? And why does it affect them so *differently*?)

In other words, Heaney’s Joyce uses water as a metaphor or metonym (poetry, or the life of a poet, is *like* a sort of free-swimming, where the “soundings” and “allurements” of poetic or aesthetic experience might be described as a type of eel). This is, as other critics have noted, not different from how Heaney often, and famously, uses ecological and landscape metaphors. Poetry is *like* digging, or less explicitly, poetry is *like* retrieving objects from a bog. And indeed Heaney himself uses water this way often: “the wet centre is bottomless,” as in that first bog poem, and representative somehow of history (*Door* 56). Elsewhere in “Station Island,” however, the water serves not as metaphor but as narrative: it makes an impact, changes the environment, is not exchangeable in terms of meaning with other aspects of the world. At the intersection of hauntology and ecology, in the peculiarly Catholic sacramental transformations of water and the peculiarly pagan sway it has over the spirits of the dead, Heaney uses water differently in this pilgrimage-poem than he has Joyce use it, or even than he customarily uses it himself. The intersections of water and air, in particular, bookend these poems’ encounters with the dead: it is mist and fog that lure us into this altered space and rain that breaks and looses us

out of it.

The spirits of this pilgrimage were not, however, the first to emerge from (or be produced by) the mists. In Heaney's previous collection, *Field Work* (1979), a poem entitled "Casualty" elegizes an eel fisherman, Louis O'Neill, who died in a bombing after the Bloody Sunday massacre in 1972. As detailed in the poem, O'Neill—normally a regular drinker in Heaney's father-in-law's pub, one of the primary bases of his longstanding acquaintance with Heaney—chose to evade a paramilitary curfew imposed by the IRA, a tactic commonly used after funerals for victims of British state violence during the Troubles, and as a result died in the bombing of an after-hours pub. When in an earlier-mentioned interview Heaney refers to his figure Carleton in "Station Island" as breaking with "our tribe's complicity," in fact, he is quoting his own line in "Casualty" referring to O'Neill's choice to break curfew. Complicity, or the individualist spirit that moves someone to break it, is thus one of the central problems posed by the poem: "How culpable was he / That last night when he broke / Our tribe's complicity?" (23).

Complicity (and the critique thereof) was already becoming a standard problem for Heaney, especially in bog poems like "Punishment," so much so that Denis O'Driscoll supposed that the several revisions to "Casualty" were due to a wariness of being misread on this subject—an interpretation Heaney denied. He claims in response that the revisions of the poem were mostly a formal problem, working through a "new," "built-up" kind of poem, though he then immediately admits that the "one big uncertainty" impelling the poem was how to grapple with this problem of refusal: "I saw in Louis O'Neill's transgression of the curfew—which was basically a call to solidarity—an image of the Joycean *non serviam*" (215). The poem arguably balances these competing urges by refusing to balance them at all: rather than answering the question, Heaney ends the central section of the poem with an evocation of how the dead man himself might respond to such a question:

‘Now, you’re supposed to be
an educated man,’
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me
The right answer to that one.’ (23)

As Joycean as Heaney’s reading of the dead might be, the poem itself is inescapably in the register of a different predecessor. Hardly any commentary of “Casualty” avoids noticing the influence of Yeats’ “The Fisherman,” both for its formal qualities (the characteristically “middle-Yeats” iambic trimeter as well as, with some variation, the alternating rhyme scheme) as well as its topic. Nor can most respondents avoid noticing, with varying levels of approbation and condemnation towards the respective works, that Heaney’s fisherman is “a distinctive personality rather than the archetypal figure” of “The Fisherman” (Collins 115). The formal similarity, it is worth briefly noting, is one also shared by another of Yeats’ poems, “Easter 1916”—Harold Bloom notes baldly that “Casualty” “cunningly blends the modes” of these two poems (12), while other critics more reservedly suggest that “rising through the mists of the ellipsis [...] we can also surely just about perceive some other Yeatsian questions, those which end his best-known poem of all” (Corcoran 87).

Indeed, the recalled memory of going eel fishing on Lough Neagh with O’Neill, rather than, as Yeats does, merely imagining a solitary fisherman at his work, proves to be one of the major structuring images behind “Casualty.” (Although even this is closer to the uneasy politics of the poem than perhaps first imagined; Floyd Collins notes that O’Neill’s generation of eel fishermen on Lough Neagh might more technically be called eel poachers, since at that time “fishing rights on the Lough—originally acquired by chicanery and corruption in the sixteenth century—were owned by a London-based company” [115] and later by an international consortium, a situation which was in active legal and sometimes physical contention until the 1970s.) This memory of the lake, as well as the double set of funerals—the public funeral for the

thirteen victims of Bloody Sunday, followed by O'Neill's own funeral—drape the whole poem in a misty set of metaphors, increasing the reliance on water imagery as the poem continues.

One of the first images in the poem details how O'Neill “would go, / In waders and peaked cap, / Into the showery dark” at closing time (21)—the unseen rainstorms of the “showery dark” obscure his exit from his habitual scene, rendering him almost preemptively ghostly, though they also seem to be almost more fitted to his fisherman's apparel than the pub is. Later in the poem, Heaney skillfully turns the phrase “drinks like a fish” from a common trope to an extended metaphor leading into the stanza which explains O'Neill's death: “Nightly, naturally / Swimming toward the lure / Of warm, lit-up places,” the fisherman operates like a fish in more ways than just his drinking habits (23). More than that, however, the nightly pub rounds themselves take on a slightly watery effect: the “blurred mesh and murmur” of the crowds allow a figure to “drift” through the scene. In other words, the metaphor overflows the fisherman-fish linkage and suffuses the scene, so that qualities of light, night, and smokiness become intertwined with wateriness.

One of the most striking effects in this poem is the description, earlier in the second stanza, of the funerals held for the Bloody Sunday dead, on a “day of cold / Raw silence, wind-blown / Surplice and soutane”—the weather pervades and provides a descriptor for the silence of mourners and the liturgical garments of the priests. Even further than this, the procession itself becomes eerily aquatic:

Rained-on, flower-laden
Coffin after coffin
Seemed to float from the door
Of the packed cathedral
Like blossoms on slow water. (22)

“Rained-on” seems to become as much a part of the expression of public grief as “flower-laden,” given the constraints of the short trimetric line, and both seem to add a certain weight to the line

of coffins—but, despite this, the coffins “seemed to float.” The bobbing motion of a coffin being carried seems to float in the rainy air as if it were floating in water, while (in this simile) the flower-laden coffins turn into flowers themselves. There is, admittedly, nothing metaphysically strained or even particularly unfamiliar about this simile, but reading with an eye toward the ways water and air occasionally suffuse each other to unusual effect elsewhere in Heaney, we might note its pervasiveness. That is, that coffins which already *had* flowers *become* flowers, that the rain in the “real” description of the scene becomes the surface of slow water in the poetic conceit, that things become something new (re)composed of what they already were. Metaphors about water become somewhat watery, we might say, especially taking the first stanza of this section along with the second stanza’s fishlike pub scene.

Like the second section, the third and final section starts with a funeral—or, more accurately, with the occlusion of one: “I missed his funeral” (23). In the Bloody Sunday funeral, the coffins themselves—perhaps the dull horror of their repetition, perhaps the communal mourning gestures that floral ornaments represent—become the objects of focus as they turn into their own memorial wreaths. For the fisherman’s funeral, however, the mourners themselves are, as previously he was, turned into fish by the logic of the poem: “Shoaling out of his lane.” It seems hard in light of that unanswered question—that of tribal complicity—not to read something almost cynical or at least complicated in the image of mourners as a school of fish moving in unison. But the poem moves into a stranger take on this conceit, as the “[p]urring” of the hearse and the procession’s movement are described as moving with the “habitual / Slow consolation / Of a dawdling engine” and the line of a fishing rod being drawn. The scene slowly melts into the image of eel-fishing, but it is worth noting—indeed, it is the major formal quality of this point in the poem—that the comparison here does not grammatically operate on the levels of simile or seeming. Instead, we are just abruptly elsewhere, linked only by punctuation:

cold sunshine
On the water, the land
Banked under fog: that morning
I was taken in his boat

Metaphor folds or melts into narrative memory with no clear delineator, as if the qualities of light, fog, and weather create an aesthetic framework in which the temporality of the scene is able to drift further into the past. The rest of this penultimate stanza is in the infinitive (“to get out early”) as the tense also expands outward to a general “you,” with a prescription that is implicitly as much about poetry as it is about the act of fishing it ostensibly describes:

As you find a rhythm
Working you, slow mile by mile,
Into your proper haunt
Somewhere, well out, beyond... (24)

The poem, in other words, is interested not in an image of a fisherman but in taking *you*, the reader, out (perhaps alongside the poet and the elegized) into the act of fishing, the act of recalling. This is different from Yeats, though Yeats, too, compares poetry to the natural scene he has created (specifically, the light and weather—as he aspires, in the famous final lines of “The Fisherman,” to write a “Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn” [149]). But where Yeats compares the morning to poetry as product (as a finished object), Heaney writes about his morning here as process: the lough as something he went out into, *to* go out into; that is, that you, too, could go out into. There is, too, another instance here of the common idiom turned more complex in Heaney: inflected by the memories of a dead man, the otherwise unremarkable phrase “proper haunt” reminds us of this poem’s proximity to the dead.

Also unlike Yeats, Heaney’s poem does not end on the descriptor of light: though it turns out that light *is* the impetus for how the poem does end, albeit more subtly. Discussing the poem, Heaney notes: “The shine of morning light on the lough had an otherworldly quality, it reminded me of the dawn scene in *Hamlet*, when the ghost fades on the crowing of the cock—so in

‘Casualty’ Louis then turns into a ‘dawn-sniffing revenant’” (qtd. in O’Driscoll 93). It is exactly that “otherworldly” intersection of light on water, in other words, that produces—mediated through literary reference—the figure of O’Neill *as* ghost, as both a “revenant” and a figure, in death, repeating the same actions as life:

Dawn-sniffing revenant,
Plodder through midnight rain,
Question me again. (24)

Jahan Ramazani notes that this ending “ends with a traditional reference to the ‘dawn’ but couples it with the less consoling image of ‘midnight’” (349); but in light of the poem’s initiating image of O’Neill in life routinely walking in the showery dark after closing time, the midnight rain becomes a space which obscures distinctions between the living and dead.

In other words, there is an underlying metaphysics to the poem’s play of light on the lough that allows and creates a space for the spirit of O’Neill to potentially return (to be a revenant, to do things again) and a quality of rain—of watery air—that allows the poet to address and potentially be addressed by these spirits. This odd metaphysical weather is perhaps a less obvious throughline to “Station Island” than the presence of eels, which, as Daniel Tobin notes, structure the poetic metaphor of both poem’s endings: “we should not forget that Heaney already patterned the poet’s quest on the lure of the Lough Neagh eels, as he will again at the end of ‘Station Island,’ where his own artistic signatures are likened to ‘elver gleams in the dark of the whole sea’” (155). Nevertheless, in both of the poems under consideration here the *spirits* evoked by the poem’s weather—the liminality of life and death produced by the liminality of water and air—differentiate water here from its more usual deployment in Heaney.

Here I want to return briefly to where we started, in Heaney’s visit with the god—or the moment just after, his thoughts upon leaving the island. As the camera pans swiftly across light

flickering on water, Heaney seems to explain why this island was able to evoke such a wide swath of history:

When you take a boat out on the Erne waters, you voyage into time. Populations come and go; the lough goes on forever. The islands lie like stepping stones in the long river of our past. Wherever you look or walk or sail, someone has been there before you. You can take the pulse of Ulster's history in the slap of waves against the boat. ("The Loughsiders")

The lake functions as a spatial surface upon which the temporal plays, like light on water: that is, you go out onto it, but *into* time as you do. As the lough stretches into the infinite—temporally and perhaps spatially, it “goes on forever”—in some ways it functions as a repository of personal and cultural memory, much as the earth or bog might elsewhere in Heaney's poetry (or indeed as we see archaeology function for Heaney's vision of Tom Delaney). Lough Derg in “Station Island” functions similarly to Lough Erne: the waters are a medium of contact, collecting histories in not always categorizable fashions and suspending within themselves islands that are liminally charged sites of otherworldly encounter, whether of the old religion or the new. In “Casualty,” though the eelman's boat itself rather than an island seems to provide this pocket of contact, Lough Neagh is in some ways the same. In an early sequence of poems on the Lough Neagh eel fishery (published in *Door in the Dark*, his second collection), Heaney opens his meditations on this lake by granting it a type of uncanny preservative power accomplished through transformation: “It has virtue that hardens wood to stone. / There is a town sunk beneath its water” (38).

Certainly, the metaphors of swimming or fishing for history must often be phenomenologically distinct in certain ways from digging through the earth (whether with a poet's pen, turf-cutter's spade, archaeologist's tools, or earthworm's mouth), as an emergent consequence of the way bodies of water function differently than tracts of land: rather than ordered sediment and layered history, they often offer more fluid, unfixed access points, shifting

more rapidly back and forth between flat aesthetic surfaces and penetrable depths. (And even this lack of fixity is metaphysically suitable for water but not always inherent to it; in other poems across Heaney's oeuvre, like "A Drink of Water" or "Mount Helicon," he treats the more fixed sites of wells as places where a poem might dip a cup into waters for specific memories the same way it might "dig" into peat.)

More salient, however, is the difference water makes when it suffuses and intermingles with another element: at the points in the hydrological cycle in which it is mist, vapor, steam, rainstorms, and dew, it is used in these poems to create moments of uncanny contact, not merely as memory or metaphor but as an apparition which has its own effects on the narrative of the poem and its landscapes. (To put it another way: on the lake and its islands, someone will have always been there before you; in the mists, however, those someones may return, to speak to you or demand that you speak of them.) The contingency of these encounters, along with their metaphysical inexplicability, is part of what lends them their particular uncanniness and thus power. Mists emerge from and participate in the natural world without being predictable or parseable in the types of structured "Celtic pattern" (to quote Heaney's description of his Lough Neagh sequence) which so many other aspects of these poems fall into: the eels' migration, the cycle of seasons for fishermen, and the pilgrim's route of stations (qtd. in Parker 83). In other words, these types of spirited weathers work in the poem by working differently from everything else: by evoking a formlessness which operates as a counterballast to form.

In Heaney's acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, he invokes and close-reads the lyric effects which produce what he calls the "sheer in-placeness" of a Yeats poem he admires ("Meditations in Time of Civil War")—as part of a broader claim that there is "another kind of adequacy which is specific to lyric poetry," a ring of truthfulness separate from the poem's documentarian truth-claims and produced by the effects of language, the sound and energy of the

poetic line (“Nobel”). His metaphor for how this is achieved is, in this context, illuminating: “Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a steadying, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and whatever is centripetal in mind and body. And it is by such means that Yeats’s work does what the necessary poetry always does.” If poetic form is here the major structuring feature of lyric poetry, the ship in which one navigates the waters, we might read the liminality of poetic weather in these works as an admission, in form, of the peripheral presence of formlessness—just as any ship must navigate with an eye toward the weather.

CODA: TWO ELEGIES

The introduction to this dissertation discusses, at some length, Seamus Heaney's "Elegy" for Robert Lowell; this was only one among several memorial gestures Heaney made to his fellow poet. He gave a memorial speech at one of the ceremonies for Lowell in London, and shortly thereafter published a version of it in the *New York Review of Books*. The typical markers of both personal reminiscence and literary acclaim were there in Heaney's recollections of Lowell, who writes of him: "He was and will remain a pattern for poets in his amphibious ability to plunge into the downward reptilian welter of the self and yet raise himself with whatever knowledge he gained there out on to the hard ledges of the historical present, which he then apprehended with refreshed insight and intensity." He compares Lowell's work to T.S. Eliot's in "Little Gidding," whom he calls "another New Englander making casts in the Heraclitean stream." He ends by referring to a poignant exchange from one of Lowell's last letters, and ends perhaps appropriately by citing Lowell's own poetry, but Heaney's last comment *himself* on Lowell is one that attempts sidewise to comfort mourners of the perhaps-untimely death with the suggestion that Lowell's own personality was up to the challenge of death: "I did not know Robert Lowell long or intimately, but these four lines found among papers he left behind in Ireland made me think of a man who could meet Charon, dart him one of those penetrating looks and allow himself to be guided, as of right, into the frail skiff."

Many years later—among renewed interest in Lowell brought about by the release of his *Collected Poems*—Heaney would publish a poem with a different subset of memories of Lowell and his legacy. In the literary magazine *AGNI*, "Pit Stop near Castletown" describes distinctly less traditionally elegiac waters: the two poets on a drive back from a reading "pissing like men / Together and apart against the wall." The poem starts with Lowell's "incomparable high / What?

Pitched voice? Destiny? Mania and style?” as if Heaney is pointedly, purposefully uncertain about what attributes to focus on in the memory, in which Lowell intimates he might leave his current wife (which, implicitly, would take him somewhat out of the social orbit of Heaney, both because they often socialized as couples and for geographic reasons.) The poem is clogged with literary references (wryly echoing the “irremediably / Literary” presence of Lowell himself), with Shelleyan leaves and a Marlovian “glittering foil” of urine. Finally, Heaney skewers his own attempts to elegize Lowell:

I said the cabbie who’d ferried you to the door
And waited to be paid already had been
Paid in the coin of language, that East River was Styx
And so on, rising to the occasion
Perhaps too highly.¹

Heaney saves some deprecation of these claims for the novelist Mary McCarthy, whose scathing review of Heaney’s elegy—“The biggest cover-up since Watergate”—he relays to end the poem. We see, here, with Heaney’s characteristic wry humor, the underbelly to the attempts to bring water itself to rein in his earlier attempts to elegize Lowell. This serves as a caution, perhaps, at the end, for any statements too grand about what elegy—perhaps even about what poetry itself—can accomplish. The high allusion both Heaney and Lowell were so known for collapses in retrospect: it has risen but “perhaps too highly.”

But the temptation is always there—if one way to start English lyric is with a ghost story, another is with an elegy. Milton’s “Lycidas” insists that its purpose is that its purported addressee “must not float upon his watery bier / Unwept, and welter to the parching wind / Without the meed of some melodious tear.” English poetry has always been looking for some

¹ Lowell died in a cab near the East River.

melodious tear; we have always kept an eye out (whatever our ultimate motivations) for the ways in which tears might be melodious.

The most famous elegy for Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop's "North Haven," sets itself as firmly in the New England seascape as Lowell's "The Quaker Graveyard" ever did. (Bishop too was a New Englander—the title of the elegy comes from the Maine island where she and Lowell often spent time together.) It also, in its own way, provides a type of elegiac caution: the island, and the seascape and flower catalog surrounding it, becomes a figure for changelessness. Bishop wants to see the islands as "free within the blue frontiers of bay," as things that can shift, change, "drifting, in a dreamy sort of way, / a little north, a little south, or sidewise—" but she forecloses this dreamy imaginative movement in the first line of the stanza which she unreels it in. ("The islands haven't shifted since last summer," she writes, "even if I like to pretend they have—")

"North Haven" pulls out all the traditional pastoral stops of elegiac consolation: the flowers have returned, old memories of the deceased come to mind, nature renews: "Nature repeats herself, or almost does: repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise." Even the slight changes are wished-for, in Bishop's imagination of the scene—partially because Lowell himself becomes a figure for this desired change in the poem, for the way he would "derange, or rearrange, / your poems again." But again, for Bishop it is a fixed problem; the opportunities are foreclosed before presented: "You *can't* derange, or rearrange, / your poems again." (emphasis mine.) North Haven, "anchored in its rock, / afloat in mystic blue" offers only the brief fantasy of flux for Bishop; instead what Bishop sees, on the island staring out towards the sea, is a still bay and a cloudless sky. This poem, masterfully, forbids us what the poems elsewhere in this dissertation have sometimes offered us: the sea and air as indices for and mediums of change.

Not all seas work this way, in other words—even if they are the same seas. And as we have seen, even the three poets under consideration in this dissertation use the mists, the waters, and the waves for a broader variety of aesthetic and metaphysical purposes than this study of them has covered. It would seem perhaps counterproductive, too, to fully pin down, taxonomize, and map the figures of liminality and contingency I read air, water, and vapor as figures for. I want only to suggest the possibility of more or different strangeness than we sometimes account for in our readings of these works—something else that is present along the misty edges of lyric, under some conditions, in some lights.

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