

Forms of Memory: The Sonnet in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis explores the extraordinary profusion of the sonnet in contemporary British and Irish poetry, focussing in particular on the work of Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Don Paterson and Alice Oswald. Drawing on critical interventions by Steph Burt, who characterises the sonnet in terms of its longevity rather than any technical feature, and situating the contemporary form within the long durée of its late-eighteenth century revival (especially in Wordsworth's work), I argue that contemporary poets have taken the sonnet up as a way of writing the past. Chapter one explores the sonnet's fraught commemorative role in the work of Hill in the 1960s and 1970s in particular in which the form becomes a type of 'belated witness' to violent historical traumas. Chapter two considers Heaney, whose early sonnets are also commemorative and historical, but also increasingly, under Wordsworth's influence, frame their commemorations in more personal, private terms, a shift that culminates in the more spiritual outlook of Heaney's later sonnets. Chapter three focuses on Muldoon, whose relentless experiments with the sonnet mark him out as perhaps the most significant sonnet writer of the second half of the twentieth century. I read his mix of invention and obsession in relation to the form as an instance of Freudian repetition in which the past is both omnipresent and elusive. Chapter four examines Paterson, and tracks his sometimes contradictory investments in Scottish history alongside his more speculative metaphysical interests, partially derived from his translations of two crucial twentieth-century European sonneteers, Rainer Maria Rilke and Antonio Machado. The fifth and final chapter explores Oswald's ecological commitments in sonnets marked by the influence of John Clare and Sir Thomas Wyatt. As these disparate examples indicate, the sonnet does not articulate just one past, but multiple overlapping and sometimes competing pasts.

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Dear son, I was *mezzo del cammin*
and the true path was as lost to me as ever
when you cut in front and lit it as you ran.
See how the true gift never leaves the giver:
returned and redelivered, it rolled on
until the smile poured through us like a river.
How fine, I thought, this waking amongst men!
I kissed your mouth and pledged myself forever.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

History, Form, and Memory: Tracking the Contemporary Sonnet.

This thesis examines the place of the sonnet in contemporary British and Irish poetry, and especially in the work of five contemporary poets: Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Don Paterson and Alice Oswald. That the sonnet is in vogue, few critics seem to do doubt. ‘There are more kinds of beetles than kinds of sonnets’, Steph Burt assures us, at the start of her essay on ‘The contemporary sonnet’, and ‘more beetles on earth than sonnets by living authors, but sometimes it seems a close call’ (2011: 245); “I’m up to my bollox in sonnets” (2012: 567), Alan Gillis declares, ventriloquizing Brendan Kennelly ventriloquizing Edmund Spenser; while Don Paterson, a little more prosaically, says simply that ‘the sonnet is pretty much in the eye of the beholder. The form has diversified to the point where its definitive boundaries are so blurred that it has effectively ceased to exist’ (1999: xi). Burt samples a few of the many extravagant contemporary incarnations of the form, from ‘sonnets spoken by Bruce Wayne as Batman’ to ‘sonnets called “Sonnet” in demotic, unrhymed free verse’ to ‘a crown of fifteen sonnets about e-Bay’ (2011: 245), but her opening remark articulates something of the weariness – and wariness – that the form can induce in twenty-first century readers. There are simply too many types, too many examples and counter-examples of sonnets, and an excess of innovation and experiment that threatens to overwhelm whatever excitement we may feel in seeing the form get stretched into new shapes. Sheer numbers creates a sense of weight, and even inertia, with the quantity of the experiments seeming to deaden their quality, so that at a critical and conceptual level at least, it becomes virtually impossible to think about the contemporary sonnet as whole. Indeed, Paterson disparages even the effort to do so, adding a tired musical analogy to go with Gillis’s bollocks and Burt’s beetles: ‘Amongst people who have time for such things, the “is-it-a-sonnet?” debate can rage on with all the fervour and pointlessness of country-and-western music fans trying to decide whether a record is truly “country” or not’ (1999: xi).

Given this extreme diversity, it is perhaps not surprising that critics have largely shrugged their shoulders. Burt notes that whilst ‘A list of contemporary sonnets would be its own book...a list of critical writings on the contemporary sonnet in general might be surprisingly short’ (2011: 245). Generally speaking, such critical writing has tended to take a particular aspect of the contemporary sonnet, such as Gillis on ‘The Modern Irish Sonnet’, or to come as part of an anthology on the sonnet, such as Eavan Boland’s and Edward Hirsch’s *The Making of a Sonnet* (2007), or Don Paterson’s *101*

Sonnets (1999), or Jeff Hilson's avant-garde *Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (2008). Two 2011 publications are more comprehensive, but consider the sonnet as a whole: *The Art of the Sonnet* (2011) collects essays by Burt and David Mikics on 100 English language sonnets from its sixteenth-century origins with Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey to the present. *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (2011), which includes Burt's essay on the contemporary sonnet and other valuable work on the form, takes a longer historical perspective and splits its focus across the sonnet's multiple periods. Stephen Regan's comprehensive historical study *The Sonnet* (2019) unfortunately appeared too recently to be taken into account in this thesis.

So whilst there has been critical interest in, and engagement with, the contemporary sonnet, it has to an extent been scattered and ad-hoc, or framed within the context of larger historical enquiry. Introducing his miniature anthology, Don Paterson does go on to work up a theory of sorts for the sonnet, relating its off-centre box-like structure to the golden mean, but also later converts these ideas into a theory of the lyric as a whole, and I consider this move in more detail later in the thesis. It is in the work of Burt herself that the contemporary sonnet finds its most pertinent definitions. Rather than sort through the different shapes and sizes of the contemporary sonnet, whittling them down to some essential kernel of sonnet-ness, Burt suggests the form is now characterised largely by the sheer fact of its longevity. She argues in 'The contemporary sonnet' that 'Five characteristics distinguish the most original recent uses of sonnet form...formal play, a sense of history, a commitment to dailiness, use within sequences, and tension between vatic ambition and ordinary experience' (2011: 246). Of these characteristics, the sense of history is perhaps the most important, and I would argue even underpins the others. How we define and distinguish between 'dailiness' and 'sequences', 'vatic ambition' and 'ordinary experience' depends upon a sense of history, and even 'formal play', which seems to cut against the form's traditions, relies on having a sense of history to subvert. The sonnet acts as a reminder of its presence:

The sonnet can stand in 2010 (far more than it could in 1610 or 1810) for fixed or for inherited form in general, for history or for literary history, since it is by far the best known fixed form, one of few still in common (and classroom) use. As other parts of pre-modernist literary history recede, the sonnet becomes important as a sign that contemporary poetry *has* a history, one that includes several centuries and nations (2011: 255).

In this thesis, I engage with the sonnet as 'a sign that contemporary poetry *has* a history', and that this history includes 'several centuries and nations'. Contemporary poets in Britain and Ireland who have turned to the form have frequently done so with a consciousness of the form's multiple histories. Two of Geoffrey Hill's early sonnets, 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' and 'Two Formal Elegies' (subtitled 'For the Jews in Europe'), from his first book *For the Unfallen* (1959), directly address historical events. Seamus Heaney's sonnets 'Requiem for the Croppies' (1969) and

‘Act of Union’ (1975) address Irish history but he also uses the form for more intimate, personal histories in ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ (1979) and especially ‘Clearances’, his 1987 elegy for his mother. Two younger Northern Irish poets, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson, have similarly juxtaposed the private and public, but in more explicitly (and sometimes violently) experimental sonnets that interrogate the distinction between categories like ‘private’ and ‘public’. Muldoon and Carson respond to, but also surreally re-imagine, the historical context of 1980s Northern Ireland in sonnets such as Muldoon’s ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ and ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’ (from his 1983 collection *Quoof*), or Carson’s ‘Belfast Confetti’, from 1987’s *The Irish For No* and written in spiralling nine-line forms that, according to Gillis, ‘unmistakeably feel like sonnets’ (2012: 583). Brendan Kennelly’s *Cromwell* (1983) offers a similarly phantasmagoric vision of history. Tony Harrison, writing from a different cultural background to Heaney, Muldoon and Carson, also veers between historical and personal concerns in *The School of Eloquence* (1978), a sequence of sixteen-line sonnets partly modelled on George Meredith’s *Modern Love* (1862) that mixes political comment with autobiographical reflection. Edwin Morgan’s ‘Glasgow Sonnets’ (1973) also turn around marginalised national and class identities, as do Don Paterson’s sonnets from his first book *Nil Nil* (1993), though more obliquely than Morgan. Jo Shapcott, meanwhile, voices female perspectives often occluded by male poets in ‘Mrs Noah: Taken after the Flood’ and ‘Cheetah’s Run’, from *My Life Asleep* (1998). In ‘Muse’, from *Phrase Book* (1992) the speaker of the poem – possibly the title character – says ‘I have to kiss deeper / and more slowly’, explaining that it is not ‘until you fall quiet because only then / can I get the damned words to come into my mouth’ (2000: 58).

For modern sonnets and sonneteers, literary history has also been vital. Burt cites Paterson’s *Orpheus*, his 2005 ‘Version’ of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), as evidence of the on-going importance of translation to the sonnet: ‘Anglophone sonneteers of the past fifty years look back at earlier English uses for the form, but they also notice modernist examples from other languages’ (2011: 259). Paterson not only translates Rilke but also the Spanish poet and sonnet writer Antonio Machado, and other poets have found translation to be a similarly fruitful way of engaging the form and its traditions. Elizabeth Jennings’s 1961 *The Sonnets of Michelangelo* are an early instance, while an influence behind Hill’s 1978 sequences ‘Lachrimae’ and ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ are the sixteenth-century Spanish sonnets of Lopa de Vega and L. L de Argensola. More speculatively, Alice Oswald considers how the early modern English of Thomas Wyatt’s sonnets might be ‘translated’ into contemporary speech in her selection of his poetry, claiming that ‘Wyatt in modernised spelling sounds like an out-dated, reedy-voiced old man, but in his own spelling he is revolutionary and alive’ (2008: xviii). And more speculatively still, Patience Agbabi ‘translates’ the sonnet into the format of an Agony Aunt column in the opening poems of her collection *Bloodshot Monochrome* (2008), responding to the imaginary letters sent to her by famous sonneteers (2008: 31-46). Translation, of course, comes baked into the sonnet’s

histories so that, in one sense, the form has always looked back to a literary and cultural past, to earlier versions of itself, even at its newest with Wyatt and Surrey in the early sixteenth century. But as my (admittedly incomplete) list of prominent sonnets from the later twentieth century suggests, the form's historicity is especially pronounced in its current incarnations. No longer simply one attribute among many, the form's long and varied past has become for contemporary poets its most salient feature.

Although the five poets explored in this thesis are not a necessarily representative list of contemporary sonnet-writers – if there is such a thing — they have nonetheless been especially powerful and influential sonnet writers. Between them, Heaney, Hill, Muldoon, Paterson and Oswald have staked out some of the most important terrain that the form has occupied in contemporary British and Irish poetry. As the few poems that I cited earlier suggest, these poets have at times used the form to address explicitly historical subjects, especially in the case of Hill and Heaney. But they have also used it to probe constructions of more personal forms of memory, as in the later Heaney, and in Paul Muldoon's work, though both poets retain a powerful sense of personal memory's public dimensions. Paterson and Oswald, meanwhile, use the form to shape alternative senses of history and memory. In Paterson's case engaging with Rilke and Machado leads him to conceive of the sonnet in more spiritual, metaphysical terms, though in ways that are still embedded in history. Oswald's sonnets from *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996) and *Woods etc.* (2005) articulate her ecological and environmental pre-occupations , exploring timescales beyond those conventionally associated with 'history' and 'memory'. As these different pre-occupations show, contemporary sonnet writers have used the form in vastly different ways and for vastly different things, but there is also, as we shall see, a certain degree of overlap and convergence generated by the fact that so many disparate poets have drawn on the same poetic shape. I have already noted that Paterson's metaphysical turn partly comes from Rilke and Machado; comparably Oswald's ecological sonnets are worked out in conversation with Wyatt and, perhaps even more significantly, John Clare, a romantic legacy in conversation with other poets' romantic legacies, such as Seamus Heaney's investment in William Wordsworth. As these poetic cross-currents suggest, Hill, Heaney, Muldoon, Paterson and Oswald are influential as readers of sonnets, as well as writers of them, and all of them have in various ways been important critical voices in contemporary British and Irish poetry. Hill's *Collected Critical Writings* (2008) is in some respects as monumental as *Broken Hierarchies* (2013), his version of a Collected Poems. Paterson has also weighed in with an expansive theoretical tome, *The Poem* (2018), which builds on several of his earlier essays, such as 'The Dark Art of Poetry' (2004). Heaney and Muldoon have both produced volumes of critical prose and, with the recent election of Alice Oswald to the post, four out of the five have been Oxford Professor of Poetry. Although each poet has conceived of their scholarly personae in different ways, their critical ideas have proved to be a vital influence on how they have engaged with the sonnet.

I have preferred the term *Forms of Memory* for my title, rather than Burt's 'sense of history', but I believe this is an extension rather than a rejection of Burt's arguments. As a concept 'memory' has its problems, in part because of its sheer capaciousness, but this capaciousness also means that it is productively ambiguous. Memory can cover many different versions of the past – public, personal, poetic, just to take three immediately apparent examples – and their complicated interaction. Indeed, I would argue that memory better suits Burt's purposes than history, given the protean way she uses 'history'. When she notes, for example, how Seamus Heaney's late sonnet "The Nod" places the child Seamus Heaney in political, public history; in family history; and in the history of the sonnet form' (2011: 255), memory better catches the intimate aspects of 'family history', as well as its potential strain against 'political, public history'. It better catches, too, the personal and private dimensions of 'dailiness' and 'everyday experience', two of Burt's five key features of the contemporary form. Memory also suggests something more active and dynamic, if also more elusive, than 'history'. Burt notes how the sonnet 'attracts poets who want to write history, and to write, in effect, historiography; to consider how writers (poets among them) record and interpret successions of public events' (2011: 255). 'Interpret' is not quite the same as 'record', and suggests the many ways in which the past gets reshaped by its recollection, an issue that insistently recurs in the work of contemporary sonnet writers. Memory, of course, does not just pertain to poetry but has an extraordinarily wide currency that extends beyond some of the crude definitions I have hinted at here, with many different meanings over multiple scholarly fields. In the next section, I consider some of these different meanings, and some of the different ways in which memory – and its vexed relationship to history – have been understood, and how these bear upon the contemporary sonnet.

Memory and History

To talk of 'the contemporary' is inevitably to invoke the notion of memory, one of the most expansive terms in contemporary critical discourse. Michael Rothberg notes that 'The literature on memory is enormous and continues to grow at a staggering rate', so much so that the 'growth...has itself become an object of study' (2009: 3). Richard Terdiman, Geoff Cubitt, and Anne Whitehead, amongst many others, have all considered the variety of meanings that memory can take, with Geoff Cubitt cogently tracing a few of the most common in his 2007 book *History and Memory*: 'According to some of these understandings, memory is something essentially personal and individual; according to others, it is basically connected to social institutions and cultural forms; to some, it is a survival of past experiences; to others, it is essentially a reconstruction of those experiences from a present standpoint' (2007: 4). As Cubitt's title suggests, memory is not a term that can be defined in isolation,

but is almost always part of a larger web of meanings, and sometimes the history/memory binary has been used to label one or other of the contrasts that Cubitt points out (individual/social; past experiences/present standpoint), with the exact constitution of the contrast changing over time.

Two important figures that Cubitt draws attention to are Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, both of whom tend to subsume the individual within the collective, and the present within the past. For Halbwachs, whose work *On Collective Memory* was published posthumously in 1950, memory is collective. Cubitt summarises his notion of memory like this: ‘it blurs distinctions between different phases of past experience’ and ‘emphasizes the organic unity of each group’s relationship to its past development’. History, however, ‘produces narratives of change that emphasize (excessively, in Halbwachs’s view) discontinuities in human experience, dividing the past into periods as well as distancing it from the present’, with the result that ‘the connections between past experiences and present identities is loosed’ (2007: 43). Associating memory with ideas of unity and immediacy, and history with distance and fragmentation, Halbwachs’ ideas implicitly set up a narrative of decline in the passage from the former to the latter. This narrative of decline is further developed by Pierre Nora in his massive project *Realms of Memory* (originally written in French from 1984 to 1992, and partially translated into English in the late 1990s). For Nora, history (Cubitt says) is the treacherous ‘nemesis of memory’ (2007: 46). Although originally intended to buttress and augment memory, ‘the development of history’s critical practises...subvert the mnemonic purposes which these practices were originally intended to serve’ (2007: 46-47). Historical memory becomes unable to function as it should and withdraws from the communities it used to bind together, leaving behind *lieux de memoire* that ‘are quintessentially residual: what they bring into focus is not the existence of still living communities of memory, but merely the lingering awareness of memories and traditions that once had social meaning’ (2007: 47).

For Halbwachs and Nora historical memory is a privileged concept embodying certain desirable values that, especially in the case of Nora, are felt to be disappearing. Anne Whitehead, in her 2009 study *Memory* suggests that Nora’s ‘work is imbued with the sense that something has been lost from French national values and culture, something that is intimately associated for him with the disappearance of the peasantry and the rhythms of a rural life’ (2009: 142), and many historians and theorists have criticised this sense of loss. John Frow, for instance, argues that Nora’s notion of memory is defined by ‘Four features’: ‘It is a realm of immediacy and plenitude’; ‘It is a realm of presence’; ‘It is organic and holistic’; and ‘It is plural and concrete’ (1997: 220-221). Taken together, these four features add up to an idealised state of complete being, in contrast to history’s complexities and ambiguities. Frow criticises this idealised state as an instance of cultural nostalgia.

In contrast to the holistic immediacy and presence of Nora's sense of historical memory, Frow articulates a rather different relation to the past, one that does not strive to recover some lost unity or plenitude but is instead 'predicated on the non-existence of the past, with the consequence that memory, rather than being the repetition of the physical traces of the past, is a construction of it under conditions and constraints determined by the present' (1997:224). In this notion of memory the past is not a separate, self-sufficient entity that exists on its own terms but always deeply intertwined with the present, and, at least partly, a projection of it. Time, in this conception, 'is not the linear, before-and-after, cause-and-effect time embedded in the logic of the archive but the time of a continuous analeptic and proleptic shaping'. The past no longer has 'a meaning and a truth determined once and for all' but rather 'its meaning and its truth are constituted retroactively and repeatedly'. Significantly, this brings memory in to contact with its apparent opposite, forgetting: 'Forgetting is thus an integral principle of this model, since the activity of compulsive interpretation that organizes it involves at once selection and rejection' (1997: 229). This is not to say that the past is entirely fictional, or a site of untrammelled invention. Rather, Frow suggests that historical memory follows a different set of imperatives to those articulated by Halbwachs and Nora. These imperatives are rooted less in the idea of a collective society (though this continues to be an important context) and more in psychoanalytic processes and ideas: 'Like a well-censored dream, and subject perhaps to similar mechanisms, memory has the orderliness and the teleological drive of narrative. Its relation to the past is not that of truth but of desire' (1997: 229).

Aside from the interest of their specific arguments, Nora and Frow are significant for my purposes here because their respective positions suggest two influential ways of thinking about memory. Whitehead cites Frow's distinction between memory as truth and memory as desire and suggests that it 'correspond[s] to the two main ways in which memory has been conceptualized in Western culture': the first understands memory as 'a system used for storage and retrieval' in which 'the object to be located is precisely that which was initially laid down'; while the second views memory as 'the activity of ceaseless interpretation' (2009: 48-49). What I want to suggest is that these different accounts have an important bearing on the way the sonnet has been discussed in relation to memory and history at various points throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Robert Sheppard, for example, writing in *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (2017), draws a contrast between 'conventions, which are sanctioned by tradition (one of the reasons for the frequent return to the sonnet in literary history is for the continuity and authority afforded by simply plugging into previous manifestations of the form), and constraints, which are freshly invented for each occasion' (2017: 58). His account of the sonnet, presenting it as a site of authority and tradition and continuity, is congruent with Nora's sense of memory as a privileged place of wholeness and unity and presence, the difference being that Sheppard is hostile to such privileged places. His notion of 'plugging into' earlier versions of the sonnet also sounds a critical version of Whitehead's storage-

and-retrieval metaphor, as though some poets felt they simply had to touch base with the sonnet's past to write new instances of the form. In a similar vein, Jeff Hilson, a poet cited by Sheppard in his study and the editor of the linguistically innovative anthology of sonnets, *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets*, negatively equates the form with 'the foundations of the wider poetic tradition' in his introduction to anthology (2008: 10). He makes the same point in the 'trialogue' with Paul Muldoon and Meg Tyler that opens *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, suggesting that the sonnet is 'virtually a synecdoche for the poetic tradition itself, its most venerable and enduring object' (Muldoon, Tyler and Hilson, 2011: 12).

The practise of criticising the sonnet has its own traditions, and Hilson invokes William Carlos Williams's critique that the sonnet 'does not liberate the intelligence but stultifies it – and by its cleverness, apt use stultifies it the more by making pleasurable that which should be removed' (1974: 17). Peter Howarth, writing in 'The Modern Sonnet', quotes a still more vitriolic Williams critique in which he said that 'to me the sonnet form is thoroughly banal because it is a word in itself whose meaning is definitely fascistic' (1954: 236), as well as Ezra Pound's denunciation of the form as 'the *devil*' for 'not needing a new tune perforce for every new poem' (1979: 157). Some modernist poets set themselves against the sonnet as a ready-made, off-the-shelf form whose handed-down conventions embodied everything about poetry that they despised and sought to overturn. But the situation was always more complex than that. As Howarth notes, 'even Williams ended up returning to sonnets of sorts' which shows his 'discomfort was less with the form itself than with what it had come to stand for, the peculiar compact sealed by the sonnet's *fin de siècle* admirers between cultural elevation and formal rigidification' (2011: 226). Similarly, I would suggest that contemporary antagonism towards sonnets is less about the form per se – else why go on experimenting with it? – than with particular versions (or uses) of the form. James Longenbach, in an insightful essay on 'Modern Poetry' from 1999, distinguishes between 'tradition (a state of becoming)' and 'authority (a steady state)' (1999: 122), which helps to explain some of this antagonism: the form had become an authority, and kept on needing to be rediscovered as a tradition, or even as several overlapping and sometimes competing traditions. Eliot himself suggested in 'Reflections on *Vers Libre*' (1917) that 'formal rhymed verse will certainly not lose its place', in spite of the advent of free verse, but also claimed that 'As for the sonnet I am not so sure' (1975: 36). But the Eliotic idea of tradition in some ways seems well suited to the sonnet. When Alan Gillis claims that 'The sonnet tradition is like a microcosm, an admittedly enormous microcosm, of T. S. Eliot's idea of literary history', and that 'What we know about the sonnet is comprised from all those that we have read: a simultaneous order modified by each new innovation' (2012: 568), he is offering an outsized, speeded-up version of Eliot's tradition. Gillis, indeed, suggests that this more open-ended sort of tradition has been a part of the sonnet's legacy for a long time: the 'English Renaissance giants of the form', he says, established a 'will to adapt that would be taken up by English-language sonneteers of the future' (2012: 576).

This version of the sonnet does not treat it as authoritative or perfected, but protean, and its traditions are a means of effecting change rather than closing it down.

It is important not to overstate these contrasts. Authority and tradition can easily slip into one another, so that Gillis's notion of a will-to-change becomes its own coercive standard for subsequent poets, carrying echoes of a domineering and coercive Nietzschean will-to-power that are at odds with the initial impulse towards change. Similarly, the gap between historical memory as truth, and memory as desire is not always very great. Frow's critique is a complication of Nora, rather than an outright rejection, in which the past's truths are made complex and mutable, rather than superseded completely. When Whitehead uses Frow's argument to highlight 'the two main ways in which memory has been conceptualized in Western culture', she also observes how they 'intertwine, and continually surface and re-surface across different thinkers and historical contexts' (2009: 48-49). This is a crucial point for the sonnet which often draws on both models, even within the same poem. To take just one example (to which I will return more fully), Geoffrey Hill's 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' adopts the mid-nineteenth century idiom of the Gothic Revival, and seems to look back longingly to the pre-industrial past as a site of unity and meaning in ways that chime with Nora's account of memory. But the complex, many-layered pastiche in Hill's sonnets also draws attention to the 'ceaseless interpretation' that has created this vision of the past, so that it comes to seem less like an actual memory of agrarian life than a retrospective vision of what such a life might have looked like. These two different ways of thinking are not easy to separate, and conceptualising historical memory is less a matter of choosing one over the other, than tracking the tensions that they encode, between groups and individuals, the past and the present, and remembering and forgetting.

II. Form and Memory

These debates around the meaning of memory parallel, and sometimes overlap with, debates around form. On the face of it, this seems unlikely, given memory's long-standing, if ambivalent, relationship with history. Derek Attridge, in his 2004 book *The Singularity of Literature*, suggested that 'In turning to issues of form...we inevitably find ourselves confronting the long and rich tradition of aesthetics' that intellectual tradition that thinks about 'the artistic work in terms of some version of the "beautiful," existing in a sphere separate from the practical and the utilitarian and governed by purely, or largely, formal considerations' (2004: 11). This tradition, or at least its most recent literary incarnation, New Criticism, tends to separate poems from practical, empirical reality, preferring to locate them 'in a domain of ineffable, unknowable, transcendent principles' (2004: 12). Form thus

stands in a world of timeless beauty into which the messy business of history does not intrude. Thought of in this way, there would seem to be little connection between form and memory.

As Attridge goes on to note, however, this aesthetic tradition, though not in retreat exactly, has endured a period of sustained criticism in the latter quarter of the twentieth-century, and many writers and readers are suspicious of its claims. Universalizing aesthetic principles, far from being ahistorical, often ‘turn out on inspection to look a lot like the governing, and class-determined, canons of taste, or some identifiable reaction against these’ (2004: 12). Rather than see form as separate from history, theories of literary and poetic form increasingly stress its interaction with the world around it. Indeed, it is tempting to see some kind of connection between the “‘turn to memory’” from ‘the last quarter century’ (2007: 2, 1) that Geoff Cubitt identified in 2007, and the post-2000 ‘return to form’ that Attridge posits in his 2013 book *Moving Words* (a return that critical publications on the sonnet, such as 2007’s *The Makings of a Sonnet* and *The Art of the Sonnet*, have helped drive). I do not propose to consider any causal connection between these two turns – an undertaking beyond the scope of this thesis – but I do want to flag up some common ground in the debates that surround how the two concepts, ‘memory’ and ‘form’, have been defined.

The dichotomy that Attridge discerns between (aesthetic) form and history is similar to the dichotomy between memory and history in the work of Halbwachs and Nora. The ostensibly ‘ineffable, unknowable, transcendent principles’ of form are similar to the ‘immediacy’, ‘plenitude’, and ‘presence’ that Frow attributed to Nora’s notion of memory in that these terms delineate an idealised space that is orderly and timeless. As such, both memory and form are cordoned off from history, which is (negatively) characterised by change and flux. But just as recent theories of memory have tended to complicate such ideas of timelessness, and blur the distinctions between an idealised memory and a fallen history, so too contemporary theories of form have tended to foreground its important exchanges with history. Terry Eagleton, in *How to Read a Poem* (2007) asserts that ‘Form is not a distraction from history but a mode of access to it’, and that ‘To look at the historical high points of literary criticism is to witness a kind of dual attentiveness: to the grain and texture of literary works, and to those works’ cultural contexts’ (2007: 8). Angela Leighton (2007) similarly points to the ‘multi-dimensionality’ (2007: 3) of form, its capacity to both inhabit and elude its historical moment, suggesting that even at its moments of evasion, form sustains its relationship with the ‘real’ world. Discussing Picasso and Cézanne, she suggests that ‘form is both a container and a deflector...it looks two ways: to the shape it keeps in and the shape it keeps out’ (2007: 16). Although Leighton’s focus here is on the visual arts, the tension she describes could easily be reformulated for the historical contexts of literary form, which we could describe as being contained or deflected by a poem. Leighton suggests that this boundary itself is malleable, that ‘What is formed may be transformed, deformed, or reformed; it may contain a formative or forming purpose; it may be formal, informed, or multiform’ (2007: 2), and that whilst ‘it looks like a fixed shape, a permanent

configuration or ideal, whether in eternity, in the mind, or on the page, in fact form is mobile, versatile. It remains open to distant senses, distortions, to the push-and-pull of opposites or cognates' (2007: 3). Leighton thus articulates an idea of form that is based on movement, rather than stasis, and in doing so recalls the more mobile, dynamic theories of memory that involved a reconstruction of the past, rather than a straightforward retrieval. She emphasises form as process, not object, as verb, rather than noun, and quotes approvingly Attridge's comment that form 'needs to be understood verbally – as "taking form," or "forming," or even "losing form"' (2004: 27).

Attridge's ideas about form have been an influential part of the formal turn. Whilst he insists that such a turn attends to the specifically literary dimensions of novels, poems, and plays, he makes clear that it is not, or should not be, a return to an abstract and a-historical aesthetics. Indeed, rather than posit a break between the literary and the non-literary, and try to keep them apart, Attridge's notion of form, and those of critics like Leighton who have come after him, probes ever more closely the problematic border between the two. For Attridge, this has involved articulating what he terms the singularity of literature – not a specific, isolated essence that differentiates literary texts from others, but rather a web of shifting relations, in whose interaction the literary is constituted. He writes that 'The singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a particular manifestation of general rules but as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations' (2004: 63). Singularity is not 'a core of irreducible materiality or vein of sheer contingency' but 'a configuration of general properties' which 'go beyond the possibilities pre-programmed by a culture's norms' (2004: 63). Singularity is a quality or attribute, rather than an essence, and emerges from the relationship between objects, rather than any residing in any inherent feature of the objects themselves. In literary terms, this means that texts acquire their identity as part of a series of relationships with other texts and with other elements of the surrounding culture.

Though Attridge does not say so, the sonnet is a good example of what he has in mind, both in terms of its history and the ways it is read. Writing of the sonnet's origins in *The Development of the Sonnet* (1992), Michael Spiller argues that thirteenth-century Provencal poets used a form called the canzone, 'a long poem...made up of a number of identical stanzas' which, though the exact length varied from poem to poem, 'fell into two not necessarily equal parts, called *fronte* and *sirma*, each with its own musical phrase' (1992: 15). Spiller suggests that this asymmetrical divide was then adapted by the earliest writers of sonnets into the octave-sestet split that has been crucial to so many instances of the form. Just as in Attridge's account of literary invention, when a particular cultural configuration shifts, even just a little, a new literary entity comes into being. Given its longevity, the sonnet is now itself just such a configuration, but it can still be the site of further invention and creativity. Spiller sketches the outlines of the sonnet, writing that 'it has proportion, being in eight and six, and extension, being in ten- or eleven-syllable lines, and duration, having fourteen of them', and

suggesting that a poem ‘which infringes one of these parameters will remind us of a sonnet quite closely’, but the more infringements there are the less we will identify the poem as a sonnet: ‘a poem which infringes all three will not be recognisable as a sonnet at all, and we will regard it as something else unless there is contextual pressure – if, for example, we found it in the middle of a group of normal sonnets’ (1992: 3-4). He outlines the particular literary codes through which the sonnet finds its identity, and traces the different ways in which those codes might be modified without the initial sense of coherence being lost. What I want to suggest, following on from Attridge, is that the different types of ‘contextual pressure’ that might allow an ostensibly non-sonnet poem to be considered in terms of the sonnet are greater than Spiller acknowledges, so that the form possesses a greater elasticity than he allows for. Line-lengths, rhyme schemes, internal stanzaic patterns, and even the fourteen-line limit have all become so variable that the ‘basic or simple sonnet’ is more like a ghost than a template. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth-century so many of these contextual pressures have so many well-known precedents that it sometimes seems a poet need only call a poem a sonnet for it to be one.

Whilst Attridge’s notion of singularity exceeds what can be explained within pre-existent cultural models, it is worth reiterating that this excess does not exist outside history, that it is not a-temporal. Literary singularity occurs as part of the arrangement of existing culture, not outside of it. One of Attridge’s key claims is that texts occur in time, and that ‘a literary work is a temporal event rather than a static object’ (2004: 103). Poetic forms cannot be abstracted from this temporality, which undermines the form-content binary and makes it difficult to think of form as a static shape. In Attridge’s terms, form’s temporality requires us to ‘apprehend...so-called “formal” features as *already meaningful*, and meaningful in a particular context’ (2004: 113), and to acknowledge that ‘forms are made out of meanings quite as much as they are made out of sounds and shapes’ (2004: 114). Forms, then, are not conveniently geometric patterns whose arrangements possess the finality of a mathematic equation, but come freighted with contexts, ideas, and values. In this account of form, what Spiller calls ‘contextual pressure’ becomes much more central. Such pressures are not only the cues through which a pre-existent version of a form might be altered: they are the forces that constituted that pre-existent version in the first place.

Foregrounding meaning over shape (or again, to be accurate, foregrounding the meaningfulness of shape) is very helpful to readers of contemporary sonnets, in that it allows us to side-step wearisome questions of what really ‘counts’ as a sonnet. Releasing the form from narrow technical definitions allows for a more cogent, nuanced understanding of the sonnet’s place and uses in contemporary poetry. Instead of viewing the form in discrete, binary terms, in which a poem is either definitely a sonnet or definitely not depending on its adherence to one or other particular formal feature, Attridge’s notion of form allows us to consider the complex range of shapes that the form has

taken. Some recent readings of the sonnet have tended in this direction. Alan Gillis, for example, follows Helen Vendler's magisterial study of Yeats's forms, *Our Secret Discipline* (2007), in drawing attention to Yeats's near- or almost-sonnets, such as the thirteen-line 'The Fascination of What's Difficult' and 'No Second Troy'. Gillis suggests that Yeats 'was studying sonnets as he learnt his trade: learning how to combine and sequence short stanzas, balancing development with symmetry, dynamism with echo' (2012: 571). This is a more nuanced account of the form that allows the reader to think about what sorts of meanings (development, symmetry, dynamism, echo), that sonnets might bring with them, rather than get caught up in whether or not any one poem is a sonnet or not. Not only does this help us read more deeply sonnets by, say, Paul Muldoon, whose poems Gillis calls 'fourteen line verse-units' (2012: 568), it also allows us to see the way the form gets caught up and talks back to other forms and genres. Attridge's thinking on form means the twelve line stanzas of Geoffrey Hill's long sequence *Speech! Speech!*, for example, can also be placed within earshot of the sonnet, as can embedded sonnets, such as those that occur in Paterson's 'The Alexandrian Library' (1993) and Oswald's *Dart* (2002).

III. When is now?

To talk of the contemporary sonnet is to invite questions of chronology and periodicity, to ask as Burt does, 'When does that time – when does "contemporary poetry" – begin?' (2011: 246). She speculates that 'It might begin, as far as the sonnet goes, with the best-known opponent of sonnets in the early twentieth-century' and floats William Carlos Williams's 'Sonnet in Search of an Author' as a possible moment at which 'the sonnet becomes contemporary inasmuch as it no longer represents something inimical to the modern', calling the poem a 'rough-hewn, American sonnet' (2011: 247). Both the date of 'Sonnet in Search of Author' – 1962 and Burt's wider references suggest a period somewhere in the middle of the twentieth-century, so the contemporary sonnet might be thought of as beginning where the hostility of modernism ends. Howarth implies a similar time frame when he suggests that modernist poets re-invented the sonnet as a site of experiment rather than a dead-end of outmoded traditions, that 'the new poetics Eliot did so much to inculcate were, in fact, instrumental in reviving the form they despised' (2011: 228). Without specifying a particular date, I have largely followed Howarth's and Burt's sense that the contemporary sonnet begins at some point in the two decades after the end of the Second World War. In a British and Irish context, this fits the loose chronology of the form's expansion: Geoffrey Hill's first two books, *For the Unfallen* and *King Log*, contain important sonnets, and appear in 1959 and 1968 respectively, while Jennings' *The Sonnets of Michelangelo* was published in 1961 and Heaney's *Door into the Dark*, which includes 'Requiem for the Croppies' was published in 1969. Hill and Heaney wrote sonnet sequences in the 1970s, as did Harrison and Morgan, while Paul Muldoon's intense affair with the form begins in earnest in his second book, *Mules* (1977), and from there the tide has kept on rising, driven by further Heaney and

(especially) Muldoon collections, Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* (1986), Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell* (1983), Carson's long-lined experiments in *The Irish for No* (1987) and *Belfast Confetti* (1989) and, as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, sonnets in books by Jo Shapcott, Don Paterson and Alice Oswald, as well as more Heaney, Muldoon, and Carson, and Hill's *Canaan*, which initiated his mid-career resurgence.

I begin, then, in the mid-twentieth century, but in a larger, more speculative and slightly mischievous sense, I want to suggest that the sonnet can be thought of as becoming contemporary not with Hill or Heaney or Muldoon, but with William Wordsworth. Burt's observations on the multiplicity of the contemporary sonnet, with which I began earlier, are echoed in her introduction, written with Mikics, to *The Art of the Sonnet*: 'Coleridge, in 1796, was writing at nearly the last moment when it was plausible to define the sonnet in English, in general, by criteria of external form and at the same time by topic, theme, attitude. William Wordsworth was about to make it impossible' (2011: 17). In a shift that anticipates the contemporary sonnet's formal diversity, the rapidly expanding Wordsworthian sonnet, coming in the wake of the sonnet's inflated currency in the late eighteenth-century literature of 'Sensibility', encompassed such a broad swath of subjects that it became difficult to suggest that one informed the other. This late eighteenth-century revival, coming after a sustained period of the disuse in the sonnet's English-language history from the end of the seventeenth century, presaged the form's flourishing in the early nineteenth century with, amongst many others, Shelley, Keats, and John Clare crucially engaging with the form. Wordsworth himself, of course, wrote innumerable sonnets on all manner of subjects, including two influential sonnets about sonnets, which stress the form's versatility. 'Scorn not the Sonnet' catalogues the different but vital functions the sonnet has performed for poets over the centuries: a 'key' with which 'Shakespeare unlocked his heart'; a 'small lute' that 'gave ease to Petrarch's wound'; 'a gay myrtle leaf / Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned / His visionary brow'; and 'a trumpet' with which Milton 'blew / Soul-animating strains' (1984: 356-257). The reference to Milton is telling. James Phelan, in his illuminating 2005 study *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*, has written that the late eighteenth-century sonnet revival (sometimes erroneously attributed to Wordsworth almost single-handedly) was due, in part, to 'elegiac sonnets' that centred on expressions of personal sentiment and were associated with Charlotte Smith. Wordsworth himself wrote such 'elegiac sonnets' but turned against them when he discovered the Miltonic sonnet: 'Where the elegiac sonnet is emotional, excessive and formally undisciplined, Milton's sonnets are characterised by a properly masculine self-discipline exemplified in their unswerving adherence to the rules of Petrarchan or 'legitimate' sonnet' (2005: 12). In sonnets such as '1801', 'To Toussaint l'Overture', and 'London, 1802' Wordsworth keeps returning to the question of political freedom, and 'London, 1802' addresses Milton directly, praising him as 'Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free' (1984: 286). Wordsworth's rediscovery of the Miltonic sonnet is not just a way of re-imaging the form along stricter lines, but also a way of thinking about history.

Phelan notes how, in the ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ sequence in particular, ‘Wordsworth presents himself as nurturing and preserving a national tradition of virtuous republicanism derived, above all, like the sonnets themselves, from the work and example of Milton’ (2005: 24). In doing so, Wordsworth revived a version of the form that was not only ‘manly’ and disciplined, but also historical in orientation, and established history as a crucial context for the form in the future.

This historical context is, however, complex. Phelan notes how, in Wordsworth’s sonnets the ‘national tradition of virtuous republicanism...merges insensibly with a puritanical, nationalistic and ultimately conservative rhetoric’ (2005: 24), and adherence to the form’s rules and conventions becomes an emblem of submission to political authority. More frequently Wordsworth was caught between these two positions, and his sonnets stage a conflicted response to history. It is in this context that Phelan discusses Wordsworth’s other sonnet upon the sonnet, the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ that precedes and introduces the two sequences, ‘Miscellaneous Sonnets’ and ‘Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty’ in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807). He argues that the poem’s famous ‘narrow room’ in which ‘Nuns fret not’ (1984: 286) is not only a meditation on ‘the paradoxical relation between freedom and imprisonment’, but also ‘a place of refuge from a perplexing and intractable reality’ (2005: 14). Phelan suggests that the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ responds to, and subtly encodes, the predicament Wordsworth faced at the start of the nineteenth century. The violence of the Revolution, the rise of Napoleon, and the war between Britain and France complicated Wordsworth’s allegiances to a republican Miltonic tradition, as well as made the overt expression of that tradition more difficult. Phelan suggests that the sonnet became an arena in which to articulate these difficulties, and highlights the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’’s ‘hermits...contented with their cells’ and ‘Maids at the wheel’ (1984:286) as a case in point: ‘the images used in the poem are carefully chosen to blur the boundary between engagement and withdrawal, indeed to present withdrawal as the most productive form of engagement available at the present moment’ (2005: 14). The sonnet’s peculiarly rule-bound vision of freedom can function as a model of ‘strategic limitations and withdrawal’ to ‘fortify Wordsworth, the republican and the revolutionary of the 1790s’ (2005: 13) as the political climate becomes increasingly difficult. At the same time, the poet ‘comes to like the “narrow room” of the sonnet too much to ever want to leave it, and begins to accommodate his opinions to his new surroundings’ (2005: 14), at which point both he and the form slip into ‘a puritanical, nationalistic and ultimately conservative rhetoric’.

I have dwelt at some length upon the Wordsworthian sonnet and its multiple responses to history because they are a crucial context for the contemporary form. James Longenbach, again in ‘Modern Poetry’ (1999), argues that the central issue for modern poetry was the question of ‘poetic ambition – what the social effectiveness or responsibility of poetry might be’ (1999: 102). He represents this issue in explicitly Wordsworthian terms, arguing that twentieth century poetic

responses to history, and especially to the First World War, ‘play[ed] out a drama that was enacted by romantic poetry’s response to the French Revolution. As the Utopian dreams inspired by the Revolution were demolished by the Reign of Terror’ the romantics ‘lost faith in the power of political action to effect social change’ and ‘looked to poetry to carry the burden of spiritual and cultural enlightenment’ (1999: 109). For Longenbach, a crucial division in modern poetry is between those poems and poets that strive to carry this burden of meaning, and those that resist it. Arguing that ‘modern poetry grew from a sense (already highly developed by the Victorians) that the great claims made for poetry by the romantics were no longer viable’, he goes on to claim that ‘few of the modern poets could remain content with this small world’, and that by the 1930s ‘the great modern poems – *The Waste Land*, *The Tower*, *The Cantos* – seemed as ambitious, for better or worse, as their romantic antecedents. Some modern poets (Hardy, Moore, Stevens) resisted the twentieth century’s epic challenges, hanging on to a strategically circumscribed world, but all poets felt them’ (1999: 102-103). Without wishing to insist too closely on the parallel, some of the terms in which Longenbach describes these complicated modernist responses to history resonate with Phelan’s account of the Wordsworthian sonnet, and especially Wordsworth’s tactic of ‘strategic withdrawal’. More to the point is the fact that the sonnet makes an oblique, and unannounced appearance in Longenbach’s account by way of Robert Frost. Identifying Robert Frost as a poet suspicious of poetry’s capacity to either intervene in history or make sense of it, Longenbach cites ‘Once by the Pacific’ – a sonnet – and ‘For Once, Then, Something’ – a fifteen line near-sonnet – as examples of Frost’s poetic ‘skepticism’. Longenbach writes that ‘When he gazes into a well in “For Once, Then, Something”, repositioning his head so that he sees neither the reflection of the clouds nor of his face, he cannot be certain of what he finally sees’, but whatever he does see – the poem ends with the line ‘Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something’ (1969: 225) – is enough for Frost. As Longenbach puts it, ‘That something – the one, particular thing he sees, however insignificant – is all the consolation he requires’ (1999: 105). The poem does not preclude the possibility of enlightenment, but it is wary of presuming too much meaning, and its fifteen line limit seems emblematic of this restraint. In this sense, the sonnet and sonnet-variants are a mark of a strategically circumscribed world.

To an extent Frost stands at a tangent to narratives of modernist poetry, and was faithful to the sonnet throughout his long career. He has also been, through Paul Muldoon (and to a lesser extent Seamus Heaney), a vital influence on the contemporary sonnet, but a Frostian scepticism is not the only role the form plays in the early decades of the twentieth century. Patrick Kavanagh, another career-long sonneteer working outside modernist paradigms, also uses the sonnet to meditate on different scales of meaning. His portrait of ‘Ballyrush and Gortin’ in ‘Epic’ (2005: 184) for example, asks without definitively answering what counts as epic, in both historic and poetic terms. Other poets used the sonnet in a more expansive, ambitious manner. Yeats famously voiced a version of his apocalyptic vision of history in sonnet form in ‘Leda and the Swan’, while in different ways the

American poets Allen Tate and Robert Lowell cross history with religious introspection in taut and intricate sonnets such as Tate's 'Sonnets at Christmas' (1934) and 'More Sonnets at Christmas' (1942), and those from Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946). Lowell was also to return to the sonnet in the guise of unrhymed free-verse in his massive collections of the late sixties and early seventies, one version of which he titled *History*. And in a very different context, and at a slightly earlier historical moment, Wilfred Owen also responded to history through the sonnet, albeit in a very different way, in 'Dulce et Decorum Est', with its recoil from traditional Horatian war poetry.

The sonnet also appears by way of W. H. Auden, who is a crucial figure in Longenbach's account of modern poetry. For Longenbach, Auden's career enacts many of the tensions of modern and modernist poetry: 'Having began by taking Eliot and Yeats as his models, Auden turned in the late thirties to a poetry of more Augustan, civic virtues' (1999: 101). That is to say, he moved from making bold claims for poetry's importance to much humbler ones, though this is not so much a once-and-for-all transition as a recurrent tension. Framing the problem from the opposite direction, Peter Howarth argues that Auden's analytical poems are not just sober-minded expositions but also 'want to dazzle by the sheer verve of their analysis, as if disenchantment were enchantment by other means' (2011: 241). Auden wants to both advance poetry's claims to spiritual and cultural meaning, and to restrict those claims, a double bind that gets played in his crucial sonnet sequence, 'In Time of War', originally published in *Journey to a War*, the 1939 travel book Auden co-wrote with Christopher Isherwood. Auden imagines 'Violence pandemic like a new disease' before turning to the figure of Rainer Maria Rilke 'Who for ten years of drought and silence, / Until in Muzot all his being spoke, / And everything was given once and for all' (1976: 194). As the visionary poet of *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922), a vital instance of the modern European sonnet, Rilke represents the promise of a revelation whose force might mitigate the chaos of historical events. In Auden's poem Rilke has withdrawn from the world, perhaps the better to intervene in it, but there are no guarantees that this tactic is successful. Rilke might speak his entire being, but Auden does not vouchsafe the assurance of answer, and the sonnet ends on a bathetic note. Imagining the German poet going 'out in the winter night to stroke / That tower as one pets an animal', Auden drains away the visionary capacities of Rilke's tower, where his great sequence was composed, and punctures the mythic with the domestic.

As Auden's intervention suggests, the sonnet in the first half of the twentieth century continued to be an arena in and through which poets could articulate their multiple responses to history – as Wordsworth had – even if the form had been partially occluded by hostility from some modernist poets, and by the substantial shadow cast by their longer experimental work. It is as a response to history that the form resumes in the decades following the Second World War. Chapter One discusses Geoffrey Hill, who is not only the earliest poet in this thesis, but also arguably the most history-obsessed. Over the course of his long career he returned time and again to the question of poetry's relationship to history, and subjected it to formidable scrutiny. In sonnets such as 'Two

'Formal Elegies', 'September Song', and 'Funeral Music' – intensely wrought poems that show the influence of Tate and Lowell – Hill enacts what he calls 'belated witness' (1985: 200), striving to do justice to the traumas of the past but constantly failing to do so. Later sonnets, especially the sequences of *Tenebrae*, are preoccupied with different versions of historical memory, and go back to different periods in English history to consider the basis of collective identities. Two crucial influences on this book are Gerard Manley Hopkins and, especially, Milton. Milton's political sonnets offer Hill a way of conceptualising public speech and civic identity that was to prove immensely influential for his later career, even though the sonnet itself – apart from a few late poems – has featured less prominently in his oeuvre from the late 1970s onward.

Chapter Two considers Seamus Heaney, who has also been preoccupied with history in sonnets, and in early poems like 'Requiem for the Croppies' – influenced by Kavanagh – and 'Act of Union' commemorates specific events in Irish history. Heaney's historicity has been of a rather different kind to Hill's, however, and makes more space for individual memories and personal experience. The pivotal sequence 'Glanmore Sonnets' imagines the poet withdrawing to a 'strange loneliness' (1998: 165). This is not represented as a break from or contrast with history, but rather what Alan Gillis calls a 'broader vista' (2012: 580) not solely determined by history's constrictive pressures. This, I argue, is a Wordsworthian move that adapts the tactic of strategic withdrawal that Phelan discerned in Wordsworth's sonnet, and tries to imagine a peaceful, restorative poetry that 'refreshes and relents' (1998: 165), as one of the sonnets puts it, whilst also being cautious about the success of such a poetry. This is a crucial aspect of Heaney's later sonnets, which are more directly spiritual in orientation. Beginning with 'Clearances', an elegy for Heaney's mother, the form hints at the possibility of a transcendent vision drawn partly from Dante, but its scaled-down fourteen line horizons also query notions of transcendence, so that the form contrasts 'vatic ambition' with 'ordinary experience', to go back to Steph Burt's key characterisation of the form.

Chapter Three examines Paul Muldoon, whose persistent and insistent returns and turns upon the sonnet have been perhaps the most extensive of any English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth-century. As I noted above, he has been profoundly shaped by the example of Robert Frost, so that whilst his sonnets are also taken up with histories and memories of all kinds, he is much more suspicious of poetic claims to social responsibility or efficacy, and sonnets such as 'The Sightseers' and 'Quoof' have tended to reframe poetry's relationship to history as one of vulnerability and exposure. This change in emphasis reveals a rather different understanding of memory to Heaney and Hill, which Muldoon seems to view much more as 'ceaseless interpretation', and a matter of 'desire' rather than 'truth', to go back to the ideas of Anne Whitehead and John Frow that I discussed earlier. This 'ceaseless interpretation' resonates with Muldoon's seemingly endless experimentation with the form, as well as suggesting a Freudian context for Muldoon's work, and by drawing on Freud's essays 'The Uncanny' (1917) and 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through' (1919) I

argue that Muldoon's constantly shifting sonnets enact a Freudian 'compulsion to repeat' (Freud, 2006: 394).

Chapter Four considers Don Paterson's sonnets. Paterson, writing after Muldoon and partly under his shadow, is similarly compulsive and repetitious in the sonnets of his first book, *Nil Nil* (1993), though he conjures the very different historical context of late-twentieth century Scotland, and especially the often aggressively frustrated figures that haunt its derelict, post-industrial landscapes. His later work, however, is written under the sign (as I noted earlier) of Rilke and Machado, and the sonnet becomes much more 'a metaphysical genre' (2014: 39), to use Hugh Haughton's phrase, which contrasts Auden's war-time appeal to Rilke. Paterson has also been increasingly prominent as an idiosyncratic and polemical theorist who emphasises poetry's mathematical and geometric properties, ideas first articulated in relation to the sonnet in his 1999 anthology *101 Sonnets*. Whilst these metaphysical and mathematical interests seem to take the form away from history and memory, I argue that his most recent collection, 2015's *40 Sonnets*, intertwines metaphysics with meditations on the seemingly memory-less non-places of the contemporary globalisation. In doing so, Paterson uses the form to articulate varying states of absence and desire.

The last chapter focuses on Alice Oswald, whose work can also seem at a remove from history, in the sense that it is frequently pre-occupied with questions of ecology and environment. The title of her 2005 anthology – *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* – gives an indication of her concerns, but her work is not a celebration of de-historicised 'nature'. She does not so much turn away from questions of history and memory, but expand them to encompass timescales beyond that of human lives and communities, considering the complex interaction of the human and the non-human. The sonnet has been a crucial site for this exploration, from her several 'Sea Sonnet' poems of *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996) to her playful revision of Wordsworth in 'Another Westminster Bridge', from 2005's *Woods etc.*. A number of these poems are set on shore-line or river banks, most notably the 2002 book-length poem *Dart*, recalling the littoral context of many late eighteenth-century sonnets and their interplay of self and landscape, mood and description. These sonnets tend to emphasise, or want to emphasise, balance and harmony ('the river glideth at his own sweet will' (1984: 285), as Wordsworth puts it in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge'), but Oswald's sonnets are more shifting and mutable, and characterise the relationship of self and environment as complex, and uncertain. I noted earlier that Wyatt has been an important presence in her work; so too has John Clare, whose quirky, open-ended rhythms offer Oswald an alternative to what she perceives as Wordsworth's human-centric poetics of balance and harmony.

I am mindful that in choosing to focus on these poets I have excluded others. I have not found space, for instance, for any of the 'linguistically innovative' (2008: 8) sonneteers – poets such as Tom Raworth, Peter Riley, and Geraldine Monk – collected in Jeff Hilson's anthology *The Reality Street*

Book of Sonnets (2008), and my examples are all what would probably be termed ‘mainstream’ poets (and Don Paterson has written critically and polemically about linguistically innovative – or postmodern – poetry). I have also omitted other poets, such as Tony Harrison, Edwin Morgan, and Ciaran Carson, who have written important and influential sonnets and sonnet sequences, though I have tried where possible to gesture towards their work. I have also tended to concentrate on national and regional traditions at the expense of other contexts, such as race, class, and gender. Class features importantly, if intermittently, in relation to Hill and Paterson (and is a significant if occluded dimension of Heaney’s and Muldoon’s work), and I also glance at gender in relation to Alice Oswald. Oswald is the only woman poet, however, and I am aware that I have seemed to focus on one type of history – a public history of events – at the expense of others, and particularly the marginalised histories of women and BAME traditions. Important female voices, such as Shapcott and Agbabi, whom I noted earlier, have taken the sonnet up as a way of talking back to a male-dominated tradition. Omitting these voices has largely been a practical matter, and a consequence of the way I have defined ‘the contemporary’. In going back to the mid-twentieth century with Hill and Seamus Heaney, I have taken a long view of the sonnet that has squeezed out some of the more recent uses of the form, where poets such as Shapcott, Agbabi, and Leontia Flynn, have flourished most. A study that began in, say, the late 1980s rather than the late 1950s would have had more scope to consider these poets, but also would have missed crucial sonnets by Hill and Heaney, and Muldoon’s early flirtations with the form. I have preferred this longer context as offering a fuller explanation for the sonnet’s extraordinary profusion in the second half of the twentieth-century.

Perhaps just as importantly, whilst the sonnet does begin with a sense of public history, so to speak, it does not end there. In the story I tell, the sonnet is not a privileged site of lyric exaltation but – to borrow a phrase Peter Howarth uses to describe Robert Frost – a ‘self-testing’ (2011: 232) form as prone to interrogating traditions as to articulating them. As such, national traditions are points of departure, not fixed destinations, and Hill and Heaney have inhabited such traditions in order to examine, question and re-shape them. Muldoon has, even more extremely, pushed at the boundaries of what counts as a national tradition, while in different ways he, Heaney and Hill have also been pre-occupied with the divergences of, and tension between, personal memory and public history. Paterson and Oswald have also used the form to explore other, less immediately historical concerns. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century sonnets by women and BAME writers would, I believe, extend and deepen my argument that sonnets are forms of memory, but restless, quarrelsome forms, and in what follows it is this restless, quarrelsome nature that I foreground in the work of Hill, Heaney, Muldoon, Paterson and Oswald.

Chapter One

‘ec - /centric as a prophet’: Geoffrey Hill

Some of Geoffrey Hill’s best known poems – ‘September Song’, ‘Funeral Music’, ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ – are sonnets, and some of his most abiding and important influences, such as Donne, Milton, and Hopkins, were powerful sonnet writers. Still, little attention has been paid to Hill as a sonnet writer, perhaps because his achievements with the form have since been overshadowed by the massive body of work to emerge since his mid 1990s renaissance, perhaps because his sonnets frequently do not sound like sonnets, and perhaps because the form says something about Hill’s attitude towards history and the past. To ape an exercise conducted some time ago by Hugh Haughton, sampling Hill’s sonnet titles mark him as at best an antiquarian and at worst a reactionary, determined to put the clock back on literary history: ‘Asmodeus’, ‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’, ‘Two Formal Elegies’, ‘Annunciations’, ‘Funeral Music’, ‘Lachrimae’, ‘De Jure Belli ac Pacis’. Haughton suggested that ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ ‘must be one of the most immediately unappealing poetic titles in the literary history of recent years’ (1985: 129), and the thirty or so years since have not produced a stronger candidate.

Thought of in this way, the sonnet represents everything off-putting about Hill, and reinforces the impression that he is hidebound and out-of-touch. Sometimes Hill seems to connive at this process. In a 1981 interview he said ‘there’s a real sense in which every fine and moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom of innocence and original justice...The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice’ (1981: 88). This ‘kingdom’ appears to draw on certain ideas about poetry and memory that I discussed in the introduction, in which an atemporal memory bears and transmits ‘timeless’ values, and is often associated with strictly hierarchical societies (like kingdoms). Hill further adds a not-so-implicit Christian narrative of a fall from a state of innocence, so that the overall impression he creates is of a backward looking poetry enamoured with the memory of a lost golden age that it hopes might one day return.

Whilst such criticisms have some validity, they also overlook important aspects of Hill’s writing career. Although Hill’s theologically inflected outlook does gesture towards the atemporal and eternal, it is counterbalanced by an obsessive interest in history. Whatever ostensible timeless values and traditions appear in his poetry are subject to formidable scrutiny, and an extreme historicization that is constantly embedding such traditions back in their historic contexts. Matthew Sperling, writing

of Hill's understanding of language, refers to a 'mythological sense of language's historical drama', pointing both to Hill's more transcendent impulses, and to his historical obsessions. For Sperling, this mythological sense centres on 'the idea that language is fallen', and that 'language's perfect original state cannot be recovered, for humans are creatures of sin...It is because of sin that expression and intent, word and thing, are not perfectly congruent; because of sin that ambiguity and error infect, but also enrich, all acts of utterance' (2014: 2). Though Christian in orientation, Hill's mythology comes with in-built tensions. The idea of a 'perfect original state' is always confronted by a 'fallen' reality comprised of brutal and traumatic histories.

Tellingly, language is a crucial arena in which these confrontations are played out. In a key early essay, 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', Hill writes that 'Language, the element in which a poet works, is also the medium through which judgements upon his work are made', and claims that 'The arts which use language are the most impure of arts' (2008b: 3). Hill places great emphasis on the shape and form of poetry, on 'matters of technique', whilst also situating those techniques within the histories in which they have been written and read. Though Hill rarely discusses the sonnet directly, what I want to suggest is that its techniques have been a vital space within which Hill's understanding of history has been explored. In 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' he writes that 'however much a poem is shaped and finished, it remains to some extent within...a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection' (2008b: 3-4). The sonnet's significance lies in the way that it can play both sides of this equation. Its formal patterns can indicate shape and finish, but its long history inevitably entangles the form in more than just aesthetic questions. The sonnet also comes freighted with difficult political, historical, and ethical questions, making it the bearer of 'shapelessness and imperfection', as much as formal completion.

In this chapter, I consider the different ways in which Hill configures that balance. The 'belated witness' of his first two collections *For the Unfallen* (1959) and *King Log* (1968), grapples with the violence of European and English history, and ask questions about art's capacity to represent such violence. Sonnets from 1978's *Tenebrae*, by contrast, are much smoother and more polished, adopting the style and idiom of two particular periods in English history – the late sixteenth century and the nineteenth century – but also qualify those idioms, disclosing often unnoticed gaps and occlusions. In a final section I also consider the influence of this self-resistant sonnet on Hill's more expansive, associative post-*Tenebrae* work, and the form's re-emergence in some of his late collections. Such qualifications, I argue, are the hallmark of Hill's sonnets. If he is everywhere obsessed with the past, then the obsession is an antagonistic one. Jeffrey Wainwright notes his veneration of 'against-the-grain, practically defeated heroes' (2005: 5), like William Blake, William Cobbet, and Charles Péguy, and the figures he invokes in his sonnets form a similarly quarrelsome tradition, poets like Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Robert Southwell, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and John Milton.

This is not simply a matter of recuperating neglected poets, or recasting canonical ones. Hill's 'practically defeated heroes' raise 'The issue of poetic ambition – what the social effectiveness or responsibility of poetry might be' (1999: 102), to return to the terms James Longenbach uses, and that I discussed in the introduction. Longenbach positions this as a choice between too much ambition, and too little, between 'an epic subject' and a 'studiously diminished' poetry. Hill, too, takes on this dilemma, and Stephen James, writing in *Shades of Authority* (2007) notes that whilst 'A conception of poetry as public utterance, shaped with a regard for the public good, has repeatedly found expression' in Hill's work, he 'is under no illusions about the limitations of the poet's public voice' (2007: 65). Rather than pick one side or the other, however, and either aggrandize or diminish poetry, Hill's solution is to continually re-iterate the problem – indeed, to ever more loudly state the problem, as his career goes on. This is the appeal of his exemplary 'practically defeated heroes', who hang between the two poles of the dilemma, both making claims for poetry and constantly qualifying those claims. So, too, do Hill's 'against-the-grain' sonnets which become, to use a phrase James applies to Hill, 'eccentric', and cultivate a deliberately tangential relation to 'prevailing cultural assumptions and linguistic practises' (2007: 67). The result is a sense of tradition made up of ruptures and breaks, rather than continuities. It is this type of eccentric tradition that Hill's sonnets stage, and that ensures both his 'marginality' and 'an awkward, off-beat form of authority' (2007: 67).

I. 'belated witness': *For the Unfallen* and *King Log*

For Hill, history almost always means war, conflict, and violence. His first two books, 1959's *For the Unfallen* and 1968's *King Log*, contain poems on the Wars of the Roses ('Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' and 'Funeral Music'), the American Civil War ('Locust Songs'), the First and Second World Wars ('Of Commerce and Society' and 'Ovid in the Third Reich'), and the Holocaust ('Two Formal Elegies' and 'September Song'). The result has been an intense preoccupation with the differing forms of history and collective memory, which are largely understood in public and political terms. The sonnet has been a crucial site of such memories, and some of Hill's earliest sonnets are among the most historically minded from *For the Unfallen*, with 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' conjuring the posthumous presence of its eponymous subject, and 'Two Formal Elegies', which is subtitled '*For the Jews in Europe*' asking 'Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, / Of what they have witnessed and not seen?' (2013: 16).

'Two Formal Elegies' raises two related issues that are central to Hill's understanding of memory, and his engagement with the sonnet. The first is the inadequacy of witness, which can never fully recapture and convey the experience of the past to those living in the present, even for those events that seem relatively recent. When Hill contrasts what is 'witnessed' with what is 'seen', he

seems to indicate the deficiencies of memory, as though even those who lived through traumatic events cannot fully comprehend them. Secondly, and following on from this, are the difficulties posed by slippages, occlusions, and distortions to which memory is prone. Even the attempt to retrieve the past is inevitably tainted with errors and falsities, however well-meaning the attempted recollections. The ‘brief screen’ on which the past is displayed becomes a version of the past, constrained by its own brevity to include some things and leave others out. The problems of memory become problems of representation, which is particularly important for the poet, whose poem is another type of ‘brief screen’, another mode of representation through which the past is falsified rather than recovered.

Hill’s early engagement with the sonnet – indeed, much of his oeuvre – turns on the difficulty of representing the past. His early sonnets are dark, imposing poems replete with destructive blood and stone and sea imagery. ‘Two Formal Elegies’ imagines the dead ‘Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves, / In clenched cinders not yielding their abused / Bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance saves’ (2013: 16), while ‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’ has its titular figures ‘At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,/ With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs’, their corpses ‘secure in the decay / Of blood, blood-marks, crowns hacked and coveted’ (2013: 15). The violence of the subject matter is such that the sonnet’s formal resources struggle to bear up under its pressure:

Arrogant acceptance from which song derives
Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish young
Roots in ashes. The wilderness revives,

Deceives with sweetness harshness. Still beneath
Live skin stone breathes, about whom fires but play,
Fierce heart that is the iced brain’s to command
To judgement – studied reflex, contained breath –
Their best of worlds since, on the ordained day,
This world went spinning from Jehovah’s hand (2013: 16)

The buttressing power of the sonnet’s rhyme scheme is sapped by the sheer density of the poem. The sibilant weave that runs through the two lines either side of the octave-sestet division, for instance, muffles the rhyme of ‘derives’ with ‘revives’, which is further undercut by the fulsome (if not quite full) internal rhyme of ‘Deceives’ with ‘breathes’. The rhymes of ‘play’ and ‘day’, and ‘command’ and ‘hand’ are strident enough to give the impression of binding the poem up into some kind of conclusion, an impression heightened by Hill’s sonorous diction (‘Fierce heart’, ‘ordained day’), but this unity is compromised by the double meaning of ‘went spinning’, which could mean that

‘Jehovah’ commanded ‘This world’ into being, and thus that it is within his control, or it could mean the opposite, that this world has spiralled beyond his control.

The double meaning behind ‘went spinning’ recurs, in a different guise, in ‘Annunciations’, a double sonnet from *King Log* which claims that ‘Our God scatters corruption’ (2013: 40). This, too, could be read as an affirmation of divine power, in which ‘scatters’ means to defeat and dissipate, or it could be read as an accusation, in which ‘scatter’ means to be spread (the *OED* gives ‘to disperse, dissipate’ as one meaning of scatter, and ‘to distribute’ as another). This theological and ethical problem is also a literary problem (partially signalled through Hill’s invocation of ‘The Word’ as the start of ‘Annunciations’). Do the poet’s creations defend against, or contribute to history’s ‘corruption’? One way of thinking about this is to see poems as enacting two types of violence. One is the violence of history itself, which is so extreme that it breaks the fabric of the poem. The tensions and fractures within Hill’s sonnets are thus mimetic of the tensions and fractures of history. The second type of violence is not continuous with history, but rather directed at it. The formal patterning of the poem, which include its calculated breaks and tensions and is especially prominent in a prescriptive form like the sonnet, do not represent the past, but are an imposition on it by the poet writing in the present. Hill’s poem, his ‘song’, ‘Deceives with sweetness harshness’, and ‘makes flourish young / Roots in ashes’. It is a work of artistic and aesthetic patterning, the final shape of which falsifies the material it originally set out to represent. In doing so, Hill’s act of remembrance betrays the people and events being remembered. Andrew Roberts suggests that whilst ‘The basis of ethics is the ability to empathize imaginatively with others, to “identify” with their experience, including their suffering’, such identification can ‘become appropriation’, and thus raise the question as to whether ‘imagining oneself as the other acknowledge[s] or efface[s] the identity of the other?’ (2004: 12). Hill strives to do the former, and acknowledge the past, but is always acutely aware of how easy it is to slip from acknowledgement to appropriation. As Roberts puts it, his ‘early poetry springs out of the poet’s powerful sense of two conflicting moral imperatives: to commemorate the dead (especially the victims of war and oppression) and to avoid speaking for the dead in such a way as to submerge their otherness in our own needs, fantasies and ideas’ (2004: 14).

This tension is not a new one, and what I want to suggest is that, in spite or perhaps because of T. S. Eliot’s hostility to the sonnet, the tensions in Hill’s sonnets come from an Eliot-derived idiom of selfhood and tradition. The contrast Roberts discerns between the urge ‘to commemorate the dead’ and the problematic presence of ‘our own needs, fantasies and ideas’ distantly recalls Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, which emphasises ‘this historical sense’ and resists, to an extent, the individual sensibility: ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from these things’

(1975: 38, 43). This is not quite the same as an outright rejection of the self, and Hill, in his Haffenden interview praises ‘the celebrated passage from Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, which does not deny personality but enters caveats against the false equation of poetry with a certain kind of luxuriating in personality’ (1981: 86). He draws on a similar vocabulary in a 1983 essay on John Crowe Ransom, another early twentieth-century American poet and sometime sonneteer, quoting Allen Tate’s assertion ‘that “self-expression” is a term that ought to be “tarred and feathered”’, though also suggesting that ‘self-affirmation may be very different from self-expression’ (2008b: 134). Similarly, in a review of Robert Lowell’s collection of translations *Imitations* (1961), Hill observes that although ‘Baudelaire’s *Le Gouffre* is a sonnet’ Lowell’s version of it is ‘in thirteen lines, which is a nice irregularity, a titillation of disorder’, and claims that ‘the skill and appeal’ of this version ‘rests in the fact that it can enjoy the ultimate in selfhood, expressing rhetorical equivalents of Pascal’s and Baudelaire’s spiritual vertigo, while patently engaged on a full-time and self-abnegating task’ (1963: 197). Immersion in a tradition takes a poet out of themselves but can unexpectedly turn them back on themselves, leaving them vertiginously exposed and vulnerable, when irregularities and disorders emerge in that tradition. Although the ‘self-abnegating task’ that Hill discusses here is translation, his reference to the sonnet (long connected to histories of translation) is telling, and his own sonnets are full of both self-abnegation and spiritual vertigo.

Lowell and Tate are important as the mediating influences through which Eliot’s impersonality is inscribed into Hill’s sonnets. As Stephen James notes, Hill’s scattered corruption in ‘Annunciations’ ‘may well have been prompted by’ (2007: 112) Robert Lowell’s ‘Winter in Dunbarton’ – ‘the tall / Snow-monster wipes the coke-fumes from his eyes / And scatters corruption’ (2003: 26) – and whilst ‘Winter in Dunbarton’ is not a sonnet, Lowell returns to the form repeatedly in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1947): ‘Salem’, ‘Concord’, ‘Napoleon Crosses the Berezina’, ‘The Soldier’, ‘War’, ‘Charles the Fifth and the Peasant’, and ‘France’ are all sonnets that address themselves to weighty historical subjects. They also bristle with the heavy tread of violently wrought metre and rhyme – ‘In Salem seasick spindrift drifts or skips / To the canvas flapping on the seaward panes’ from ‘Salem’ for example (2003: 29). Another source is Lowell’s one-time mentor, Allen Tate. Hill’s early poem, ‘Of Commerce and Society’, takes its title, and in the 1985 *Collected Poems*, an epigraph from Allen Tate’s ‘More Sonnets at Christmas’ (1942), and though ‘Of Commerce and Society’ is not a sonnet, ‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’ and ‘Two Formal Elegies’ borrow some of Tate’s gory imagery and compacted rhythms: ‘I feared / the belly-cold, the grave-clout, that betrayed / Me dithering in the drift of cordial seas’ (1970: 57).

In spite of this mediating influence, however, I want to suggest that Eliot’s, and Modernism’s, hostility to the sonnet is an important part of its appeal for Hill. James quotes Hill’s comment in his Ransom essay that argues that what ‘is eccentric is not concentric; it does not share a common centre; and phases of absence, of exclusion, are a recurrent theme in Ransom’s work’ (2008b: 130). He offers

such eccentricity as ‘a suggestive analogy for Hill’s peculiarities of voice and stance, including his strangely mannered prophetic, or mock-prophetic gestures: his poems orbit the world at odd angles, making clear their misalliance with the *Zeitgeist*’ (2007: 66). In spite of its longevity and fame, the sonnet in the fifties and early sixties might be thought of as an eccentric form that was in ‘misalliance with the *Zeitgeist*’. Standing at a tangent to an influential Modernist poetic culture, but also gesturing towards larger literary and cultural histories, the form offers Hill an oblique point of entry into that history. Such eccentricity re-constructs the sonnet as a form of tension and friction, and in so doing gives Hill a way of writing the past, and writing against the past.

These tensions become a crucial formal and imaginative resource for representing history. Far from trying to resolve them, Hill sharpens them in order to represent perhaps the most challenging, compromising history, that of the Holocaust. In ‘September Song’, perhaps Hill’s most famous single poem, he exceeds even the formal violence of Tate and Lowell:

Undesirable you may have been, untoouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough. (2013: 44)

This is a bruised and broken sonnet, that ruptures all the patterning of stanza, metre, and rhyme associated with the form. Its extreme state of fracture seems designed to indicate the extremity of the violence suffered by its unnamed dedicatee, whom the poem’s epigraph tells us was ‘*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42*’. At the same time, however, the presumption of the comparison generates a self-

accusing guilt, in which the very fact of having written the poem, even with its minimally articulated aesthetic shaping, is felt to be reprehensible. Though it is complicated by the line breaks, one way of reading Hill's third verse paragraph is as a shame-ridden confession that the poem is really about the poet, that 'it / is true' that 'I have made / an elegy for myself'. This verse paragraph's parentheses heighten this effect, making it seem like an intrusive parasite lodged in the body of the poem. Poetry is not history, and no amount of formal violence can approach the experience of physical violence endured by the victims of atrocities. Hill's final lines, pared down to a series of austere observations in which particular words – 'fattens', 'harmless', 'plenty' – come freighted with disgust and shame, further make this point.

One way out of this dilemma, as Roberts notes, is 'the possibility of silence, of ceasing to write', as though no poem could respond adequately to such an extreme trauma as the Holocaust. This would be the final contraction of Longenbach's 'studiously diminished' poetry, where the only acceptable action is to fall mute. Geoffrey Hartman, in his 'Introduction: Darkness Visible', an article whose Miltonic title resonates with Hill's own preoccupations, suggests that 'as public recognition of the Holocaust increases, so do charges about exploiting, profaning, or trivializing the suffering', so that 'Many of the more sensitive prefer a respectful silence' (1994: 10). Michael Rothberg, in his 2009 study *Multidirectional Memory*, further claims that 'the Holocaust has come to be understood in the popular imagination, especially in Europe, Israel, and North America, as a unique, *sui generis* event. In its extremity, it is sometimes even defined as only marginally connected to the course of human history' (2009: 8). Such was the extent of the Holocaust, the scale and depth of its trauma, that it cannot be comprehensibly discussed or articulated. Its uniqueness will always confound any effort at representation, however fractured or dislocated.

For the most part, however, Rothberg and Hartman do not endorse or advocate this silence, even though Hartman is fiercely opposed to comparing the Holocaust to other events. He writes that 'keeping silent only strengthens those who wish to deny or evade knowledge' (1994: 10), and Rothberg argues that, though well-intentioned, the moral uniqueness of the Holocaust is based on dangerously essentialist, exclusionary 'competitive memory' that too closely identifies traumatic histories and collective identities: 'Memories are not owned by groups – nor are groups owned by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant' (2009: 5). In his writing elsewhere on the Holocaust, Rothberg outlines the 'fundamental demands that confronting the Holocaust makes on attempts at comprehension and representation' including both the 'demand for documentation' and the 'demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation' (2000: 8). These two demands are akin to the 'conflicting moral impulses' of commemoration and appropriation that Andrew Roberts identified, both of which can be felt in 'September Song', whose damaged form can barely contain the terrifying details it describes -

‘Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented / terror’. Paradoxically, however, the formal rupture enables the documentation, rather than undermining it. If the Holocaust exceeds explanatory frameworks then no document can encompass it completely. Forfeiting documentation completely, however, would only enable ignorance and denial of the horror. The only ethical course of action is to emphasise the partiality and fallibility of each act of documentation. This emphasis acts as a guarantee of sorts, preventing a poem’s representations from becoming appropriations, and whilst the result is a ruptured, fragmented account of the past, such fragments are the best that can be hoped for.

Antony Rowland calls this a poetics of awkwardness, made up of ‘a self-critique which emphasises that the post-Holocaust poet can only write self-consciously as a secondary witness of historical events in Europe’ (2005: 66), and in which ‘Awkwardness resides...in the self-conscious depiction of the poet’s own shortcomings’ (2005: 67). This poetics of awkwardness insistently, and even accusingly, builds a sense of formal limitation into all acts of documentation and representation. Hill’s particular handling of the sonnet allows him to compress both these impulses in a single formal gesture. Just as certain phrases – ‘This world went spinning’, ‘Our God scatters corruption’ – combine contradictory means, so too Hill’s sonnets stage both the urge to represent the past, and the urge to problematise such representations. ‘September Song’’s damaged form and mutilated rhythms suggest that the violence done to the form in some ways mimics the violence of history, as ‘Two Formal Elegies’ does. At the same time, such damage draws attention to the poem’s rhetorical strategies (however broken they may be), and in so doing re-inscribes the poem’s status as a construct, and its representation of the past as always mediated. Indeed, both things seem to be happening simultaneously within the confined space of the sonnet, so that the tension between them is not dissipated but heightened, and becomes a constant lurch between competing demands.

‘Funeral Music’ also stages versions of this exchange. A sonnet sequence commemorating the Wars of the Roses, it too meditates on the tension between commemoration and representation. In a brief essay about the sequence, Hill notes the twentieth century trend ‘to play down the violence of the Wars of the Roses’; ‘Statistically’, he says, ‘this may be arguable; imaginatively, the Battle of Towton itself commands one’s belated witness. In the accounts of contemporary chroniclers it was a holocaust’ (1985: 200). Hill here catches in a single phrase the conflict between remembrance and its representation, and the gap between ‘belated’ and ‘witness’ registers the gap between poetry and history. Such a belated witness anticipates Rowland’s ‘post-Holocaust’ poet, as opposed to poets (such as Paul Celan) who experienced the Holocaust first-hand. More complicatedly, however, Hill here invokes a sense of belatedness not in relation to the Holocaust itself, but to an event – the Battle of Towton – to which he obliquely compares it. In doing so, he intensifies the aesthetic and ethic dilemmas implicit in writing about historic trauma. Calling Towton ‘a holocaust’ offers a contemporary point of reference that can make the distant battle seem current and compelling for twentieth-century readers. In effect, Hill is using a well-known trauma to articulate a less well-known

one, but it is a contentious move, as the comparison risks eliding what is particular about the Holocaust. This is especially troubling as the other (Christian) meaning of holocaust, as a sacrifice, implies that there is a structure to historical violence, and that there might be an overarching pattern which mitigates or even justifies individual atrocities.

In considering historical memory, and the comparison that it entails, Rothberg argues that ‘It is often difficult to tell whether a given act of memory is more likely to produce competition or mutual understanding’ (2009: 11). Drawing on Vico’s schema of anachronism, he suggests that comparisons across periods can be productive, but are also potentially limiting. In particular, he makes an important distinction between ‘two versions of anachronism’, one that is ‘a force for re-historicization’, and another that is ‘a force of de-historicization’: ‘the first is a force of rehistoricization that cuts through the calcified distinctions of period and identity in order to create new ways of seeing history as a dynamic force field of intersecting stories, the other is a force of dehistoricization that removes those intersecting stories from any relationship to power and any possibility of change’ (2009: 152). The example that Rothberg gives is Andre Schwarz-Bart’s novel *The Last of the Just* (1959) which blends history, folklore, and fiction to create a narrative capable of encompassing ‘the deep history of the Holocaust’ (2009: 140), a history that stretches back to the twelfth century and ranges over any number of different European locales. Such an expansive narration operates in two ways, according to Rothberg. In the first, more positive way, it works to generate ‘new ways of seeing history’ and Schwarz-Bart’s strange blend of genres creates a different sort of ‘dynamic’ history that sees unexpected connections and patterns. In the second, less positive way, this expansive history does not so much as uncover unexpected patterns as impose them. Schwarz-Bart’s narrative slips from history into myth, where everything is connected, but the connections are static and immobile.

To call the battle of Towton ‘a holocaust’ is to both re-historicize it, and de-historicize it. On the one hand, Hill’s description creates ‘a dynamic force field of intersecting stories’, but on the other it threatens to displace history into a timeless world of myth. The tension between these ‘two versions of anachronism’ gets played out in the fraught sonnets of ‘Funeral Music’. Jeffrey Wainwright, echoing Hill’s own words, describes the American Civil War battle at Shiloh Church (subject of Hill’s poem ‘Locust Songs’) as ‘a holocaust so locking the combatants that none will move without the total destruction, their own as well as their enemies’, and argues that ‘The presentation of such a tableau as this at Shiloh Church, or the Battle of Towton almost exactly four hundred years earlier under the comet’s light in “Funeral Music”, appears as a central feature of *King Log*’ (2005: 18). Hill’s Towton poems certainly have a tableau-like quality, and the second sonnet of the sequence catalogues ‘fastidious trumpets’ and ‘trampled / Acres’ and ‘strange-postured dead’, but these tableau-esque descriptions are destabilised by intimate and intensely physical interjections. The same poem asks

‘For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain - / For none but the ritual king?’, and partially answers that ‘we are dying / To satisfy fat Caritas’ (2013: 48). Hill’s direct, earthy modifier ‘fat’ punctures Caritas’s theological pretensions, whilst ‘scrape’ echoes the ‘scraped sand’ on which ‘the pushing midlanders stand’ in ‘Two Formal Elegies’. This close-up focus on often painful physical details and sensations interrupts and undermines any theological grand narrative in which suffering might be redeemed.

Like ‘September Song’, the sonnets in ‘Funeral Music’ are shorn of rhetorical devices, and Haughton suggests that the form has been ‘stripped of its rhyme like a monument defaced’ (1985: 130). This defacement opens the sequence up to rather different noises. Hill describes ‘Funeral Music’ as ‘a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks’, and an ‘ornate and heartless music punctuated by mutterings, blasphemies and cries for help’ (1985: 199-200). Elsewhere in the sequence Hill contrasts the sonorous ‘chant’ of ““Ora, ora pro nobis”” with visions of suffering: ‘Those righteously-accused those vengeful / Racked on articulate looms’ who demonstrate the ‘flagrant / Tenderness of the damned for their own flesh’ (2013: 51). The close proximity of ‘tenderness’ and ‘flesh’ threatens to turn these tortured bodies into meat for consumption, a queasy suggestion that partially recurs in the ‘gobbets of sweetest sacrifice’ in ‘Annunciations’ (2013: 40). The sequence’s first poem also contrasts elevated rhetoric with grotesque flesh:

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.
The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
With an equable contempt for this world,
‘In honorem Trinitatis’. Crash. The head
Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood. (2013: 47)

After a string of elaborately phrased clauses, culminating in the Latin tribute to the Holy Trinity, Hill breaks the sonnet with the onomatopoeic monosyllable ‘crash’. Rather like a grunt or shriek breaking a florid music (or a church sermon), these lines juxtapose a physical immediacy with a religious generality. Hill generates this effect not only through shifting the register of his lexis, though this is clearly important, but also through his handling of the sonnet. The structure of these poems does not lie so much in formal devices such as rhyme or metre, but more in their knotty, impacted syntax. The first sonnet is representative of the whole sequence in the way it lines up dense phrases – ‘Processionals in the exemplary cave, / Benediction of shadows’ – like great slabs of stone being built up into a massive cathedral. Without any rhyme to catch the ear, these slabs of phrases weigh down all the more heavily on the reader. When Hill suddenly cuts to a shorter phrase – indeed, a phrase so

short it is only a single sound – the interruption becomes more strident, and the shrieks and grunts much louder.

Hill trades on this effect elsewhere in his sequence, but it would be a mistake to assume that these pointed moments of physical immediacy get the poet, or the reader, any closer to the historical subjects that they gesture towards. Vincent Sherry discerns ‘the different voices’ of ‘an antiquarian’, ‘a soldier in the scene’ and ‘an historical scholar’ (1987: 95) in Hill’s lines ‘They bespoke doomsday and they meant it by /God, their curved metal rimming the low ridge. / But few appearances are like this’ (2013: 49), from the third ‘Funeral Music’ sonnet. These voices are themselves unstable, and prone to bleed into one another in fraught, and even violent ways. The ‘antiquarian’ who utters the ‘archaic, affected’ (1987: 95) phrase ‘They bespoke doomsday’ could just as easily be the historian who declares that ‘few appearances are like this’, whilst ‘this’ supposes a degree of proximity to actual events which is more appropriate to the soldier than the scholar. Moreover, the enjambed ‘by / God’ might, as Sherry notes, be a curse that ‘breathes awe into the grand perspective on the surrounded valley’ (1987: 95), but might also be an aggressive outburst before combat or, even, a sincerely meant religious exclamation, an oath given before God. The line break invites questions about tone and mood that place the speaking voice at the centre of the poem. In doing so Hill animates some possible ways of writing and speaking of the past, whilst also reminding us that they are only possibilities, and always open to revision and change. Similarly, at the end of the third sonnet, Hill imagines that ‘blindly we lie down, blindly / Among carnage the most delicate souls / Tup into their marriage-blood, gasping “Jesus”’ (2013: 49). The exclamation of ““Jesus”” is as tonally uncertain as ‘by /God’ from earlier in the same sonnet, and the sexual connotations of ‘Tup’ – with its distant echo of *Othello* – and ‘marriage-blood’ make the scene even more grotesque than the executions that open the sequence.

It is in this sense that Hill’s ‘witness’ can only ever be ‘belated’. He is always coming to history too late, and it is something to which he can react, but not participate. His putative presence in any historical tradition is therefore always anachronistic, and always exposed to the charge of appropriation. This is true even of such ostensibly direct and immediate moments like ‘Crash’, in the opening sonnet, where the extremity of the contrast with what went before becomes almost a self-parody, a lurid, cartoonish account of an execution written from the safety of five hundred years distance. The sequence’s last sonnet turns around this tension:

If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,

How that should comfort us, or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end ‘I have not finished’. (2013: 54)

The apparent intimacy of the conclusion, in which a collective ‘we’ contracts momentarily to the singular ‘me’ who idiomatically speaks to a particularised listener – ‘love’ – is balanced by the de-contextualised scene. Both consequential and inconsequential histories ‘are the same’, flattened to an indistinct ‘eternity’. Similarly, Hill’s account of being ‘Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place’ is disconcertingly both precise and vague, specifying ‘this’ place but also expanding to take in the whole world. The weight of the rest of the sequence suggests this is a fifteenth-century scene – an execution, perhaps – but Hill might also be alluding to contemporary histories of sudden, forced deportations, especially as the mode of address seems to situate the poem in the present tense. To borrow Rothberg’s terms again, the sonnet is poised on the border between de- and re-historicization. Its lack of specificity implies a recurrent, archetypal scene, a ‘timeless colloquy’ that ‘bear[s] witness / ...to what is beyond’ (2013: 54). At the same time, however, there is just enough detail, especially in the vividly physical verbs ‘Dragged’ and ‘Crying’, to resist the impression of timelessness. The sonnet, too, looks both ways at once. The poem’s weighty, ornate syntactic structures can feel ‘Poised, answerable’, like the ‘distant sphere of harmony’ that stands beyond history, but they are also vigorously rough-hewn, and the unpredictable line-breaks and enjambments send disruptive jolts through the sonnet’s densely wrought poetic architecture.

Rothberg, writing of the particular challenges of writing the Holocaust, says that ‘these demands on representation are relevant not only to the study of the Holocaust, but to all confrontations between culture and history’ (2000: 8). Hill’s work identifies a tension between commemorating the dead, and acknowledging the partiality and compromises of that commemoration. Whilst this tension has roots in Holocaust representation, it also operates across historical periods and cultural traditions. Hence the intermittent, but recurrent, comparison between the Holocaust and violent phases of English history: not just in ‘Funeral Music’ but also in the pairing of ‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’ and ‘Two Formal Elegies’, and later in the 1998 essay ‘Language, Suffering and Silence’, where he claims ‘Questions of silence are essentially questions of value’ and argues that ‘A Jew of the Shoah, an Iraqi opponent of Saddam Hussein, must elect to write and to speak on the same plane at which Thomas More and Margaret Clitheroe elected to be silent’ (2008b: 395, 399). In a related vein, Anne Whitehead acknowledges that the Holocaust has ‘commonly been seen to mark a radical break in memorial consciousness, giving rise to concerns about the very possibility of representation and remembrance’ (2009: 84). She also suggests, however, that the Holocaust can be seen as part ‘of a prolonged late-modern “memory crisis”’ (2009: 84-85), representing ‘not so much a break with nineteenth-century concerns as a “deepening” of them’ (2009: 85). Hill’s historical

references are broader than the late nineteenth-century (though he ruminates on that period too, as we shall see), but what I want to suggest is that his historical sonnets are an instance of such a ‘deepening’. Rather than try to resolve or answer the tensions raised in representing history’s traumas and atrocities Hill intensifies them, and the sonnet is a crucial arena in which this intensification occurs. The result is a constantly, even attritinally, self-critiquing form whose interrogations have influenced the whole of Hill’s career.

II. Southwell, Hopkins, Milton: *Tenebrae*

Andrew Roberts has argued that ‘The historically distant setting and seemingly abstruse concerns of “Funeral Music” probably meant that, despite its concerns with questions of power and violence, critical responses did not focus to any great extent on political issues’ (2004: 50), but the same cannot be said of *Tenebrae* (1978), Hill’s most sonnet-heavy collection. Roberts notes the ‘very different’ response to ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ in particular, whose ‘focus on nineteenth-century history (including the history of the British Empire) and the sense of loss which pervades the poem made contemporary political implications more evident’ (2004: 50). If fifteenth-century England seemed remote enough to the twentieth-century that Hill’s emphasis on it was not especially important, then the same cannot be said for the nineteenth-century, or the British Empire. Reviving this period of history brings it closer to the present day, and means his poetry is not just public speech, but contemporary public speech (somewhat ironically, given the medievalising ambience of the collection). In particular, the Gothic revivalism in ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ drew criticism as an instance of reactionary cultural nostalgia. Most stridently, Tom Paulin characterised the sequence as ‘kitsch feudalism’, and accused Hill of a ‘reactionary Anglo-Catholicism’ (1992: 279) that idealised a pre-industrial medieval fantasy-world of hierarchical, agrarian, Christian communities.

Whilst Hill certainly raises questions of nostalgia in his *Tenebrae* sonnets, his revivalism is less a matter of veneration than investigation. A crucial notion here, as many of Hill’s readers have noted, is pastiche. Hugh Haughton notes ‘There is an element of historical pastiche in all Hill’s poetry’, and that such pastiche ‘draws attention to the way in which the historical past is necessarily fictive, in whatever degree, and a source of, as well as subject to, rhetorical contrivance and the consolations of poetry’ (1985: 130). This foregrounds the tensions and discontinuities in pastiche, its complicated re-invention and partial reconstructions. Roberts notes pastiche’s ‘older, etymological sense, of a pasting-together of material from various sources’ (2000: 155), which also emphasises its flaws and breaks. Hill’s performance of historical pastiche, however, is so particular that these flaws and breaks are easy to miss. A contrast with Hill’s fellow Leeds poet Tony Harrison is instructive. Harrison’s long sonnet-sequence *The School of Eloquence*, published in 1978 like *Tenebrae*, is also

much pre-occupied with questions of public histories and identities, and public speech, but takes a sledgehammer to the smooth veneer that Hill's sonnets seem so assiduously to polish:

Each swung cast-iron Enoch of Leeds stress
clangs a forged music on the frames of Art,
the looms of owned language smashed apart!

Three cheers for mute ingloriousness! (2006: 112)

The working-class Yorkshire subject matter, the pointedly colloquial lexis and speech rhythms ('Three cheers'), and the sixteen-line form, technically derived from George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), but also glancing at the satiric seventeen-line caudate sonnet form Milton used for 'On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament' (1646), all disrupt the sonnet's formal finish. Harrison sharpens the tension between the form's high-cultural 'courtly' inheritance and more radical, working-class literary contexts. Hill, on the other hand, more studiously and thoroughly adopts the idioms of a single tradition (Gothic revivalism in the case of 'An Apology'; sixteenth-century Catholic writing in 'Lachrimae', *Tenebrae*'s other sonnet sequence). Adoption is not the same as endorsement, however, and these sonnets are just as critical of their historical context, but Hill's immersion in that context means the critique occurs in a subtler way. Rather than employ large scale formal gestures, such as inscribing regional accents into the sonnet, as Harrison does, or foregoing rhyme, as 'Funeral Music' does, *Tenebrae*'s sonnets are more forensic. They probe specific words, phrases and cadences, often in dialogue with specific precursors, such as Robert Southwell in 'Lachrimae', and Hopkins and Milton in 'An Apology', and in doing so disclose a more ambiguous, interrogatory stance towards the traditions than Hill's critics, such as Paulin, have sometimes allowed for.

'Lachrimae', the first of *Tenebrae*'s sonnet sequences, takes its bearings from the sixteenth-century Catholic composer John Dowland and the poet, priest, and martyr Robert Southwell, who provides Hill with his title and epigraph and is the subject of a 1979 lecture (and later essay) 'The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell'. Southwell is a curious figure to home in on. More 'minor' than, say, John Donne — to whom Hill briefly compares him — he is also not a sonnet writer, and he seems a somewhat tangential point of entry into the sixteenth century. In another sense, of course, his Jesuit mission and eventual execution place him right at the centre of the conflicted politics of the age. This historic specificity is important, as it suggests the significance Hill attaches to a recusant tradition. Brian Cummings notes that 'Admiration for the writing of the English recusants has been a persistent ground-note in Geoffrey Hill's poetry and prose for over thirty years', and argues that 'the idea of recusancy – as a form of vexed or even self-denying personal affirmation, or

as an embrace of an idea of personal or political reformation that is also a rejection of the possibility of such reformation as conventionally understood – seems fundamental to Hill’s concept of the vocation of poetry’ (2012:32). References to the self-denying stance and habits of the English Catholics pervades ‘*Lachrimae*’:

Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross
and never move. Sometimes in dreams of hell
the body moves but moves to no avail
and is at one with that eternal loss.

You are the castaway of drowned remorse,
you are the world’s atonement on the hill.
This is your body twisted by our skill
into a patience proper for redress. (2013: 121)

Meditating on the image of the ‘Crucified Lord’ draws on a quite specific Jesuit devotional exercise. In his Southwell essay Hill quotes the ‘Ignatian practice’ of ‘seeing in imagination the material place where the object is that we wish to contemplate’ and claims that whilst ‘The “object contemplated” was most frequently and formally the Passion of Christ...there can be little doubt that for Southwell it was also his own “almost inevitable martyrdom” (2008b: 21). To contemplate the crucified Christ is also to contemplate one’s own violent death, and this context darkens the sequence’s own address to the ‘Crucified Lord’, which is made twice more later in the sequence. Indeed, Hill moves from contemplating ‘Crucified Lord’ to ‘the body’ in this first sonnet, as though to blur the boundary between his poem’s speaker, and what he is imagining.

As Cummings asserts, the self-interrogation and discipline central to recusancy offers Hill a model for his own poetics, and Hill writes of Southwell in terms that resonate with his critical vocabulary, arguing that while

Southwell composed his *Humble Supplication* “rapidly and vehemently”...one would hesitate to call such works “spontaneous effusions”. They have nothing in common with that facile self-expression which so debases much modern acceptance of spontaneity. Such ease and rapidity as they manifest are the issue of years of arduous rhetorical and meditational discipline. (2008b: 23).

‘*Lachrimae*’ at times seems to aim for a comparably felicitous mix of spontaneity and discipline. Several of the sonnets read as being both arduous and effusive, such as ‘the patience proper for

redress’, in ‘*Lachrimae Verae*’, or the ‘Self-seeking hunter of forms’ for whom ‘there is no end / to such pursuits’ in ‘*Pavana Dolorosa*’ (2013: 123). Hill is nevertheless acutely aware of the very real violence that constitutes this discipline, and not only in terms of mental contemplation. Adapting one of Southwell’s own commendations, Hill notes that ‘Violence of one kind Southwell not only allows but approves’...“violence to oneself”’ (2008b: 31), and such self-directed violence further darkens ‘*Pavana Dolorosa*’:

Self-wounding martyrdom, what joys you have,
true-torn among this fictive consonance,
music’s creation of the moveless dance,
the decreation to which all must move. (2013: 123)

Cummings suggests that in ‘*Lachrimae*’ ‘the rhythm of the verse works in a contrary direction to what is being said’ (2012: 38), and ‘*Pavana Dolorosa*’ is a case in point. It is a ‘self-wounding’ sonnet in which the balance of Hill’s iambic pentameter lines and his Petrarchan rhyme scheme are constituted out of a series of formal contortions. In the first two lines of this stanza, for instance, spondaic substitutions in the first feet of the opening two lines in this stanza – ‘Self-wound’ and ‘true-torn’ – give way to a regular alteration of stresses in the rest of the lines, as does a trochaic substitution in the first foot of the third. Possible infelicities, such as the unstressed final syllable of ‘consonance’, are modified by other aspects of the form: ‘consonance’’s full rhyme with ‘dance’, respectively applies just enough stress to complete the iambic pattern. The result is a tension between the sonnet’s well-wrought patterns, and the contortions necessary to achieve those patterns, a tension further heightened by the pointed contrast of opposites – ‘creation’ with ‘decreation’, and ‘moveless’ with ‘move’. Formally, Hill’s sonnets are constructed out of such self-directed, ‘self-wounding’ violence, in which their patterns, paradoxically, need to be distorted in order to be completed.

‘*Lachrimae*’ is replete with such contortions: ‘Splendour of life so splendidly contained, / brilliance made bearable’ (2013: 122); ‘uttermost exile for no exile’s sake’; ‘I founder in desire for things unfound. / I stay amid the things that will not stay’; ‘You are the crucified who crucifies, / self-withdrawn even from your own device’ (2013: 123). To say ‘You are the crucified who crucifies’ is to again blur the distinction between the object and the agent of violence, to imply that violence is self-willed, and Hill again uses the tactic of wrenching stress with rhyme, with ‘device’ giving an extra jolt to the last syllable of ‘crucifies’. The result is both alluring and estranging. These sonnets compel their readers as feats of rhetorical skill, but the self-destructive violence that comprises such formal mastery is, as Hill notes elsewhere of the Elizabethan Catholic martyrs, ‘chilling’ (1981: 91). By foregrounding this formal violence, Hill keeps bringing the period’s historical violence back into view. Which is not to say that ‘*Lachrimae*’ is a critique of Southwell and English Catholic devotional

and literary practises. Hill's account, in 'Lachrimae' and his Southwell essay, finds much to commend in them, and the commendations are couched in terms that resonate with his own work. Still, however, such admiration is always tempered with historical knowledge, and the poems oscillate between the two positions, much as his acts of belated witness in *King Log* veered between identifying with the past, and distancing himself from it. And as in *King Log*, it is the formal resources of the sonnet that enable Hill to articulate this oscillation.

The sonnet, then, becomes the means of a complex historicization in 'Lachrimae'. Formal completion, in Hill's hands, does not result in aesthetic distance but an often violent immersion in historic context. 'An Apology', the sonnet sequence that follows 'Lachrimae' in *Tenebrae*, employs the sonnet to similar effect (although it uses different methods) and indeed, in spite of jumping forward two and a half centuries, is in important ways part of the same context. Taking its cue from Pugin's 1843 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England', Hill's sequence explores nineteenth-century Gothic revivalism that itself drew partly on English Catholic traditions. His Southwell essay, in fact, alludes to a 'vision of the pre-dissolution Church, movingly evoked by a modern Catholic historian ("the intimate religion of the little shrines...God's Presence in tranquillity in the fields")', calling it 'a beautiful but nostalgic image...which perhaps bore, and bears, little resemblance to late medieval and early Tudor reality' (2008b: 24). Hill calls up the image of England as rural, organic, hierarchical, and religious, and some of the language he uses overlaps with that of 'An Apology': 'the sacred well, the hidden shrine', and 'the rood blazing upon the green' (2013: 125). But as his guarded account suggests, whatever attraction Hill feels for the period is balanced with a degree of realism, and the rhetoric he assumes in 'An Apology' is subject to just as much scrutiny as that of 'Lachrimae'. The sequence's last sonnet, 'The Herefordshire Carol', is a case in point:

So to celebrate that kingdom: it grows
greener in winter, essence of the year;
the apple-branches musty with green fur.
In the viridian darkness of its yews

it is an enclave of perpetual vows
broken in time. (2013: 131)

This sonnet seems to have all the trappings of a Gothic Revivalist rhetoric, from the fusty-yet-enduring 'kingdom', to the symbolic genius of the English landscape – the yew tree – and the ornate half-rhymes that bind the sonnet's architecture together. This architecture is not, however, as secure as it seems at first sight. Hill's finely tuned etymological sense undercuts the yew's timelessness by

flanking it with ‘viridian’ and ‘enclave’, Latin derivates whose earliest usages are 1882 and 1868 respectively. In a similar vein, the (Catholic) Gothic ‘rose window’ and Puritan ‘iconoclast’ of the sonnet’s last lines raise the spectre of bloody English religious and civil conflicts, with the relationship between the two ambiguously signalled by Hill’s verbs: ‘Touched by the cry of the iconoclast, / how the rose-window blossoms with the sun!'

Hill says of ‘An Apology’ that ‘The celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape is bound, in the texture of the sequence, with an equal sense of the oppression of the tenantry’ (1981: 93). ‘The Herefordshire Carol’ registers the tenantry in its sestet, where Hill imagines ‘the squire’s effigy bewigged with frost, / and hobnails cracking puddles before dawn’. Whilst this seems fairly innocuous, and the cracking hobnails just another feature of the landscape, I want to suggest that there is an implicit and easily missed violence to these hobnails. Partly, this stems from the implicit violence of ‘the squire’s effigy’ and, elsewhere in the sonnet, ‘disfigured shrines’ and ‘ruined braids’ which, when taken together, hint at a submerged history of oppression. But there is also a buried echo of Gerard Manley Hopkins and his caudate sonnet ‘Tom’s Garland: Upon the Unemployed’. Or rather, an echo of a letter Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges trying to explain his intent in writing the poem. In his later essay, ‘Alienated Majesty: Gerard M. Hopkins’, Hill cites this letter (2008b: 527), though he does not include the reference to hobnails:

It means then that, as St. Paul and Plato and Hobbes and everybody says, the commonwealth or well ordered human society is like one man; a body with many members and each its function; some higher, some lower, but all honourable, from the honour which belongs to the whole....The foot is the daylabourer, and this is armed with hobnail boots, because it has to wear and be worn by the ground. (1935: 272-273).

This time-honoured, organic analogy of the human body and the body politic speaks to the feudal hierarchies invoked by Hill in ‘An Apology’, and resonates with the Hopkinsian word ‘kingdom’ in ‘The Herefordshire Carol’. Though Hopkins tries to integrate the labourers, his eponymous ‘Unemployed’, into these hierarchies, it is not clear that he is successful, especially in his poem. The term unemployed was ‘new and contentious’ in the 1880s, according to James Phelan in his reading of ‘Tom’s Garland’, and he suggests that their presence ‘leads to a severe formal and thematic dislocation’ (2005: 81) which is encoded in Hopkins’s use of the sonnet.

Phelan relates ‘Tom’s Garland’ to another caudate sonnet, ‘Harry Ploughman’, which employs a ‘medieval-revival framework’ and ‘Look[s] to the Middle Ages for a stable, hierarchical organic political community’ and represents Harry as ‘an idealised rural labourer of a renewed middle ages’ (2005: 76). The ornate hierarchies of this community are represented by the ornate structure of the caudated sonnet, whose rhythmic complexities are an attempt to “naturalise” the form, which becomes ‘a kind of Gothic revival masterpiece, a pastiche of what an English sonnet might have

looked like in the days of Langland and Chaucer' (2005: 79). The formal intricacies of 'Tom's Garland' serve a similar purpose, and are intended to integrate the new category of the unemployed into society's hierarchies. But the density of the poem, its typically Hopkinsian surfeit of sound and stress, makes it difficult to hear this integration. The 'pastiche' threatens to overcome the idealisation, so that by the end of the poem the unemployed have been 'by Despair, bred Hangdog dull; by Rage, / Manwolf, worse; and their packs infest the age' (1953: 64). The result is a charged ambivalence, with the unemployed poised menacingly on the cusp of the idealised organic commonweal. Hopkins stages this ambivalence through his intricately formed sonnet. Whilst the elaborate patterns of the caudate sonnet might be intended to suggest a cultural and social order in which everyone has their place, the sheer complexity of that order undercuts its proposed balance and harmony: 'the unemployed and their violent progeny are both within and outside society, just as the "codas" to the poem are both within and outside the sonnet form' (2005: 82-83).

Hill does not write caudate sonnets, but he does consider what is 'within and outside' society, and certain key words and phrases signal this ambivalence, like 'cracking hobnails'. These phrases act as pressure points or fault lines that disrupt the ornate elegance of the sonnet, as in 'Loss and Gain', whose title alludes to John Henry Newman's 1848 novel of the same name:

fuchsia-hedges fend between cliff and sky;
brown stumps of headstones tamp into the ling
the ruined and the ruinously strong.
Platonic England grasps its tenantry

where wild-eyed poppies raddle tawny farms
and wild swans root in lily-clouded lakes (2013: 128)

This sonnet locates England not in the sumptuous architecture of the Gothic Revival but the humbler 'stumps of headstones' in isolated and anonymous gravestones. Just as Hopkins's working class stood ambivalently both within and without 'Tom Garland''s elaborate hierarchies, so too Hill's 'tenantry' are both dangerously inside and outside an idealised English identity. The verb 'grasps' indicates the predatory nature of the relationship between a hierarchical society and its lower orders, whilst 'raddle' and 'root' bristle with furtive and unrestrained movement. Hill's repeated 'wild' further heightens the tension by undercutting two of Platonic England's symbols: the poppy, emblem of war remembrance, and swans, who by custom belong (when unmarked) to the monarch. The sonnet's apparently well-ordered metre, rhymes and images are destabilised by the charge Hill's word-choices carry, so that whilst Hill's sonnet does not sound or look like Hopkins's, it draws on a similar sense of a partially excluded working class that disrupts Platonic England's ordered hierarchies.

Writing of ‘Tom’s Garland’ in his ‘Alienated Majesty’ essay, Hill quotes Hopkins’s comment that the poem ‘has a kind of rollic at all events’, and as being ‘robustious’, a word whose evolution he cites from the *OED*: ‘In common use during the 17th century. In the 18th it becomes rare, and is described by Johnson as “now only used in low language, and in a sense of contempt”. During the 19th it has been considerably revived, esp. by archaizing writers’ (2008b: 528-529). Hill suggests a contrast between ‘robustious’, and its implication of ‘low language’, with the ‘highly wrought’ form of ‘Tom’s Garland’ (2008b: 529). He then goes on to relate this contrast to ‘one of [Hopkins’s] sharpest creative realizations: the relation of “monumentality” to “bidding”’. This is a complicated move on Hill’s part, and he defines “Bidding” as ‘Hopkins’s term for “the art or virtue of saying everything right *to* or *at* the hearer...and of discarding everything that does not bid, does not tell”’ (2008b: 529). Bidding, then, can be thought of as ‘robustious’, or ‘strong and hardy’, or even ‘violent, rough; strongly self-assertive’, and contrasted with “monumentality” and ‘artifice’. Hill suggests that this relation ‘is the key to what is right and wrong’, or ‘strong and weak’, in several high-profile poets, including Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Whitman, Hopkins himself, and Wilfred Owen (2008b: 529). He calls this ‘structural compounding’ (2008b: 529), which does not mean unity, or harmony, but instead implies tension, as though the compound were made up of conflicting rather than complementary forces. This tension can be felt in words like ‘raddle’ and ‘tamp’ – possible instances of ‘low language’, given their labouring connotations – and ‘grasp’, all verbs that disclose the friction between English society and what it excludes. Hopkins employed codas that stood ambivalently both inside and outside his sonnets to indicate such partially occluded presences; Hill uses charged verbs whose jolt threatens to rupture the frame of the sonnet and destabilise its intricate architecture.

Probably the earliest and most famous caudate sonnet in English is Milton’s ‘On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament’, and Hill notes the connection in ‘Alienated Majesty’, arguing that ‘Tom’s Garland’ ‘is so unwieldy largely because Hopkins, in 1888, is attempting to compose a variant upon a mid-seventeenth century political sonnet, such as Milton, or perhaps even Hobbes, might have written’ (2008b: 527). Milton is an important presence in ‘An Apology’ and Hill cites him in the last of his three sonnet-within-a-sonnet sequence ‘A Short History of British India’:

Malcolm and Frere, Colebrooke and Elphinstone,
the life of empire like the life of the mind
‘simple, sensuous, passionate’, attuned
to the clear them of justice and order, gone. (2013: 128)

The quoted phrase ‘simple, sensuous, passionate’ is a variant of Milton’s definition of poetry as ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’ in his 1644 tract ‘Of Education’ (1957: 637), and is a touchstone phrase for Hill, with variants repeated through essays, interviews, and poems over the course of his career, especially in his later years. In their vividness and immediacy, these Miltonic adjectives offer an idea of poetry that is apparently at odds with the elaborate Gothic artifices conjured elsewhere in the sequence. Milton himself, severe, Puritan, and republican, seems a potentially unlikely figure to identify with the ‘Tory imperialist’ Hopkins. Hill, however, argues that his Hopkinsian critical terms – “robustious”, “very highly wrought”, “monumentality”, and “bidding” – ‘combine well to describe the vernacular artifice of Milton’s political sonnets’ (2008b: 529). Furthermore, the mix of ‘artifice’ with the ‘vernacular’ is suggestive of the terms in which Milton’s other, non-caudate sonnets might be described. In another interview in *The Oxonian Review*, Hill says that: ‘The change in style between *Mercian Hymns* (1971) and *Tenebrae* (1978) was severe and intentional: from loping prose-poems to reined-back exercises in traditional forms, in particular the English versions of the Della Casa Sonnet (see F. T. Prince’s splendid *The Italian Element in Milton’s Verse*, 1954)’ (2009). Prince’s study traces the influence of the Italian sonnet more broadly, and of Giovanni Della Casa’s ‘Heroic Sonnet’, more particularly, on Milton’s writing. Prince emphasises Della Casa’s balance of complexity and unity, just as Hill does with the caudate sonnet. This version of the form is notable for its ‘extreme artifice of style’ (1954: 25) whose ‘duplex structure dominates the whole shape of the poem and all its parts, including the smallest phrases’ (1954: 92). Such internal complexity is, however, balanced by ‘the impression of a final unity’, which ‘distracts attention from the manner in which the poem is internally divided and balanced’ (1954: 93). This mix of intricacy and unity, whilst not employing caudate or codas, does combine complexity with balance in ways that recall that form, and are continuous with Hopkins’s and Milton’s ‘vernacular artifice’.

For Hopkins and Milton (and Della Casa), then, sonnets weigh unity with division, and complexity with immediacy. Prince argues that important formal strategies for achieving this is ‘complexity of the word order’, which both Della Casa and Milton use in their sonnets: ‘Incomplete phrases and clauses are inverted and interpolated, then completed, in a way...which heightens the reader’s attention and brings out the vigour of every syllable’ (1954: 106). Michael Spiller calls this effect ‘syntactical suspension’ in which the poet ‘delays completing the sense’ by inverting ‘the normal order of words’ and ‘by inserting sub-clauses’, with the result that ‘the reader is aware that he or she has only part of a grammatical or syntactic construction, and reads on looking for the missing part...Milton loved this device, and it is almost a constant of his style in his major poems as well as in his sonnets’ (1992: 193). Spiller cites Milton’s sonnet to Cromwell as a particularly apt example of syntactic suspension, with the entire octave filled with sub-clauses before the appearance of ‘the main clause, “yet much remains”’, at the end of the poem’s ninth line.

Hill, too, adopts a version of this formal strategy in the first stanza of ‘A History of British India (iii)’: ‘the life of empire, like the life of mind, / “simple, sensuous, passionate”, attuned / to the clear theme of justice and order, gone’. Like Milton, he unfurls a series of sub-ordinate clauses and holds back a main verb so as to create an expectation of fulfilment. Unlike Milton, however, Hill thwarts these expectations because his main verb, ‘gone’, resists completion. As Michael Molan puts it in an article on ‘Milton and Eliot in the Work of Geoffrey Hill’, Hill’s language ‘no more than hints at metaphor’ and ‘No sooner is the relationship’ between empire and mind ‘established than it is severed by “gone”, marking a new dissociation’ (2011: 88). Hill’s syntax creates the expectation of unity, whilst also deflecting that unity, rather like the codas in ‘Tom’s Garland’. The effect becomes even more pronounced because Hill repeats ‘Gone’ at the start of the next stanza:

Gone the ascetic pastimes, the Persian
scholarship, the wild boar run to ground,
the watercolours of the sun and wind.
Names rise like outcrops on the rich terrain,

like carapaces of the Mughal tombs
lop-sided in the rice-fields, boarded-up
near railway-crossings and small aerodromes (2013: 128)

‘Gone’ not only marks a dissociation at the end of the first stanza, but at the start of the second, too. Its repetition becomes a sort of pivot the poem turns around, a displaced volta that unexpectedly appears ahead of time between lines four and five and unsettles the form structure. The sonnet becomes ‘lopsided’, and in doing so complicates the meanings it seems to propose. Hill ostensibly charts a narrative of decline, a falling away from a noble vision of empire as cultured scholarship to its practise as crass materialist economic; from ‘ascetic pastimes’ to ‘a peacock-shrine next to a shop’. The repeated ‘Gone’ marks the successive stages of this decline, and whilst nostalgic, this at least has the virtue of implying the two versions of empire are distinct (and perhaps that the falling away from one to the other can be reversed). But the peculiar way in which he positions the word complicates this chronology, with the fantasy of a high-minded empire already being ‘gone’ before it has been imagined. Similarly, the ‘Names’ that ‘rise like outcrops’ are, presumably, designations on a map, but Hill likens these names to features on that landscape, to ‘outcrops’ and ‘Mughal tombs’, and so confuses the relation between the representation and the thing being represented. The representation of the landscape, their names on maps, comes before the landscape itself. As a result, the idea of India seems to precede its reality, so that its cultural grandeur and allure become a retrospective and aggrandized fantasy.

The rest of ‘A Short History of British India’ sonnets are similarly ambivalent about imperial politics. The first claims to ‘Be moved by faith, obedience without fault, / the flawless hubris of heroic guilt’ (2013: 127), and whilst the subject of these lines is ostensibly Indian religious practises, ‘hubris’ is a European term and Hill’s images seem to deliberately recall the medievalising, pseudo-Arthurian ‘trysts and quests’, ‘old hymns of servitude’, and ‘religion of the heart’ (2013: 125) from ‘Quaint Mazes’, the first ‘An Apology’ sonnet. Similarly, ‘be stirred // by all her god-quests, her idolatries, / in conclave of abiding injuries’ draws on a Catholic-inflected vocabulary (‘conclave’ is the body that elects the Pope) that recalls European religious conflict (‘idolatries’ being a common charge made against the Catholic Church by its enemies). Writing India gets helplessly entangled in the projection of long-standing, half-buried English and European conflicts, as though India itself were little more than the stage for unconscious imperial fantasies. The second of these sonnets performs (and lampoons) this grandstanding more directly. Spoken in the voice of a pompous colonial official, the poem’s grandiose delusions are subtly ironised by Hill’s double meanings: ‘Suppose they sweltered here three thousand years / patient for our destruction’ (2013: 127). On first reading this has the sense of ‘the destruction that we bring’, but a prevarication on ‘our’ suggests the alternative ‘the destruction we will suffer’.

Hill’s adoption of a colonial rhetoric undercuts the idea of empire, but it does not dispel the Miltonic ideal of civic poetry, of poetry as public speech, just as the violence in Southwell’s poetry and devotional practise does not altogether undercut his visionary appeal. These tensions demonstrate the ease with which public speech can be compromised, and the constant need to interrogate it, but Hill does not abandon the notion of public speech, or poetry as public speech, because it is fallible. In a late, uncollected essay quoted by Molan, ‘Civil Polity and the Confessing State’, he again tries to imagine what such public speech might look like, suggesting that the eponymous ‘Confessing State’, would ‘be represented by, and in, treatise-poems’, examples of which he says might be ‘sonnets or coda-ed (“caudate”) sonnets’ (2008a:15) such as Milton’s and Hopkins’s, and he directly references several Milton and Hopkins sonnets, including ‘Tom’s Garland’. Treatises purport to be definitive, and Milton’s *A Treatise of Civil Power* (1659) – a crucial context for some of Hill’s later work, especially the 2007 collection of the same name – lays down the relationship between state and ecclesiastical power. Milton, however, needs to write this treatise because the relation of church and state is vulnerable to danger, as he acknowledges at the beginning of his text: ‘It can be at no time, therefore, unseasonable to speak of these things; since by them the church is either in continual detriment and oppression, or in continual danger’ (1957: 840). Treatises are not quite so definitive as their authors might sometimes like them to be, and in the *OED* the term carries an older, now-obsolete meaning of ‘Negotiation, treating, discussion of terms’. The definitiveness of a treatise is complicated by this sense of an on-going mediation, which in turn implies that treatise-poems might also be forms of negotiation. Caudate sonnets make for good treatise-poems because, as James Phelan argued, their

codas are constantly negotiating what lies both within and without the poem; or, as he also phrases it, ‘The urgency of Hopkins’ political sonnets comes from the fact that he is using the form to grapple with and work out his views, not to invest them with a spurious permanence and authority’ (2005: 83). Hill might not use the caudate sonnet directly in *Tenebrae*, but his complex use of historical pastiche and his self-qualifying poetic architecture perform similar work, mediating between what public speech includes and what it excludes.

III. After *Tenebrae*

Aside from the brief interludes of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) and *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* (1982), *Tenebrae* proved to be Hill’s last collection before his much-commented upon period of quiet, and the sonnet has loomed less large in his work since his mid-nineties renaissance. Of the thirteen full length volumes published since that time, all but three – *Cannaan* (1996) *Without Title* (2006) and *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) – are book-length poems, while the last six, collectively titled *The Daybooks* (2007-2012) comprise one long sequence of sequences. Though none of these sequences employ the sonnet, Molan suggests that ‘During this period of absence, Milton’s sonnets have occasionally emerged as thematic concerns in ways that suggest Hill has internalised the lessons of the form’ (2011: 89), and he quotes *The Triumph of Love* (1998), where Hill writes of ‘The struggle / for a noble vernacular’, a struggle that he situates ‘with Dryden, or perhaps, / Milton’s political sonnets’ (2013: 259). The notion of a ‘noble vernacular’ raises questions of public speech and, by extension, public and political identities. Hill’s internalisation of the sonnet is part of his increasingly explicit, extended meditation on such speech. The self-interrogatory nature of these later long poems, and especially *The Triumph of Love and Speech! Speech!*, is an important dimension of this internalisation, and continues formal strategies that Hill initially employed in the sonnet, even if he only uses the form itself intermittently. Prince suggests of Milton’s sonnets that they are ‘essays, on a small scale, in the “magnificent” style’ (1954: 103), implying that Milton used the sonnet as a laboratory in which to develop his later, larger work. Without wishing to imply a similarly conscious, programmatic approach on Hill’s part, I do want to suggest that lessons learned in sonnet writing stood Hill in good stead for his subsequent poetry.

Cannaan, Hill’s comeback collection, actually contains several sonnets, including a sequence, ‘De Jure Belli ac Pacis’, a double sonnet, ‘Mysticism and Democracy’ (one of several poems with that title), and a possible seventeen-line caudated sonnet, ‘To the High Court of Parliament’, the last poem in the volume, whose idiosyncratic layout, comprising multiple indented lines, is suggestive of Hopkins’s caudated sonnets. Like much of the volume, these poems can sound condemnatory, and just plain interrogatory, rather than self-interrogatory. ‘To the High Court of Parliament’ condemns its

addressees as ‘unillumined / masters of servile council’, with Hill’s biting satire pointedly contrasting ‘masters’ with ‘servile’. Ferocious as this is, however, it is balanced by a degree of reverence. Recalling *Tenebrae*’s sonnets, he alludes to the grandeur of Parliament’s Christian architecture – ‘Barry’s and Pugin’s grand / dark-lantern’ – and describes it as ‘None the less amazing’. It remains the institution ‘to whom Milton / addressed his ideal censure’ and that conflicted phrase, ‘ideal censure’ catches something important about these sonnets. Whilst they are savagely critical of contemporary society, the criticism is part of a process of articulating something better. To borrow a distinction that Hill makes elsewhere, these sonnets are sceptical, but not cynical, and their ‘censure’ is a necessary part of imagining what might be ‘ideal’.

Perhaps the best example of this necessary self-critiquing comes in ‘De Jure Belli ac Pacis’, which commemorates Hans-Bernd von Haeften and the other Kreisau conspirators who tried to assassinate Hitler in 1944:

In Plötzensee where you were hanged
they now hang
tokens of reparation and in good faith
compound with Cicero’s maxims, Schiller’s chant,
your silenced verities.
To the high-minded
base-metal forgers of this common Europe,
community of parody, you stand ec-
centric as a prophet. (2013: 201)

This, too, reads like a condemnation, a critique of the ‘base’ present articulated through the terms of a more noble-minded past. Contemporary Europe – Hill here takes aim at the incipient European Union, then emerging from the European Economic Community and still a relatively new entity in the mid-1990s – has betrayed Haeften ‘verities’, his scrupulous and devoted moralism that led him to resist the Nazis, even at the extreme cost of his own brutal death, with a vacuous materialism. Yet Haeften’s marginal status might be the source of his significance. Colin Burrow argues: ‘That splitting up of the word is driven by a characteristic drive towards equivocal truths: a prophet is both off-centre, eccentric, and “centric”, really at the heart of things, because he feels the pressure of conflicting imperatives (kill Hitler; do not kill)’ (2014: 13). Hill’s self-critiquing sonnets enact this taut, conflicted state. They stage the condition of being central and marginal at the same time, both centric and eccentric. One of Hill’s most formally daring moves is to break his line mid word, and this compressing the centric and the eccentric into a single formal gesture. In a similar vein, his sonnets from *Canaan* frequently split their lines in idiosyncratic, eccentric ways, making the reader question if they are really full, independent lines. The fragment ‘they now hang’ could be read as part of the

preceding line, which would make the poem thirteen rather than fourteen lines. In order to see the poem as being fully a sonnet – or at least, more fully – we need to accept a series of internal breaks and ruptures. Just as Haeften’s centrality is subject to a process of marginalisation, so the formal identity of Hill’s sonnets are dependent on its internal breaks and ruptures.

The Triumph of Love (1998) and *Speech! Speech!* (2000) are even more broken and ruptured. Much more extremely than *Tenebrae*’s historical pastiche, these works build tension and fracture into themselves, and ape a welter of disparate voices spoken in wildly different idioms. Still, however, the faint echo of the sonnet remains from earlier in Hill’s career. *Speech! Speech!* begins with: ‘Erudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great / unavoidable work; although: heroic / verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE’ (2013: 289). ‘PEOPLE’ not only indicates a collective identity, but also the dumbed-down pseudo democracy of twenty-first century media-speak. These ‘PEOPLE’ are opposed to ‘heroic / verse’. ‘Heroic’ is the term that Prince uses to characterise the Della Casan sonnet, and R.S. White notes its use in relation to Milton’s sonnet ‘On the Lord General Fairfax at the Siege of Colchester’ (2011: 169). By isolating the word at the end of the line, Hill manages to suggest the faintest hint of a heroic, Miltonic sonnet, a model of ‘vernacular artifice’, or ‘noble vernacular’, only to then swamp that faint outline with the contemporary world’s cacophony. The twelve-line stanza form of *Speech! Speech!*, close enough to a sonnet’s fourteen lines to hint at similarity, but far enough away to register significant distance, also seems to simultaneously imply and deny that the sequence might contain heroic verse of some sort. In the penultimate stanza Hill once again alludes to that crucial Miltonic phrase, ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’ to try and again define public speech and conduct: ‘Dissever sensual / from sensuous, licence from freedom; choose / between real status and real authority’ (2013: 348). Whilst this seems to set up a contrast between its terms, inevitably skewed towards ‘sensuous’, ‘freedom’, and ‘authority’, Hill’s verb ‘dissever’ partially reconnects the binaries. Neither a decisive severance nor a complete break, ‘dissever’ speaks to the impurity of language, and stages the propensity of its meanings to slide into their opposites, both at the level of individual words and of larger structures, like poetic forms. It also stages the significance of foregrounding this slide.

As Molan has suggested, Milton is to the fore in several of Hill’s later works, and *A Treatise of Civil Power* contains a four sonnet sequence of sorts – ‘To the Lord Protector Cromwell’ – in which the process of self-interrogation becomes still more extreme. Hill not only dispenses with rhyme and metre but numbers each new line. The result is a series of exploded poems which, in spite of their injunction to ‘Keep to this strong voice / 11 / like Milton’s sonnet with its signal purpose’ (2013: 571), scatter their attention semi-coherently across a disparate range of subjects: ‘strings / 4 / of synonyms, cramped maxims, anecdotes / 5 / nine-tenths botched in conveyance’ (2013: 571). This scattergun poet and his distended form only dimly recall the exemplary heroic speech of Milton’s sonnets, and end up aping the process of the culture against which they rail:

1

Clue here is *Ireland*, not a conclusive one.

2

Below Times standard (old style). Dublin drug-heads

3

and Drogheda won't fit down or across.

4

Or if they will, then in a different warp. (2013: 573)

'Dublin drug-heads' and 'Drogheda' manages to loosely associate Veronica Guerin, the Irish journalist murdered by the Gilligan drug gang in Dublin in 1996, and Cromwell, who brutally sacked Drogheda in 1649, but it does according to the logic of the cross-word puzzle, whose clues are seldom 'conclusive' and liable to mistake the 'drug-heads' and 'Drogheda'. Such puzzles, which use language as a flat system of inputs and outputs designed for light entertainment, are examples of what Hill in his Haffenden interview termed 'commodity cant' (1981: 86). Such cant, however, 'won't fit down or across', and whilst Hill's numerated sonnet might partially obey the logic of the cross-word it too, 'won't fit'. The line-splitting numbers make the sonnet seem like a cross-word of sorts, but they are also unsettling other, rogue elements difficult to assimilate in to any pattern. In that sense, they might be likened to the codas of Milton's caudate sonnet, even as they seem to make 'heroic / verse a non-starter'.

Other sonnets from *Without Title* and *A Treatise of Civil Power*, are similarly, if less extremely, open-ended. 'On Looking Through 50 Jahre im Bild: Bundesrepublik' tends towards impromptu-sounding speech, observing that 'there's Willy Brandt kneeling at the Ghetto Memorial / on his visit to Warsaw, December of Nineteen Seventy: / I did what people do when words fail them' (2013: 580), as does 'Discourse: For Staley Rosen' – 'As to whether there persists – enlighten me – / a dialectic' (2013: 499) – and 'Improvisations for Hart Crane' – 'Super-ego crash-meshed idiot savant. / And what have you' (2013: 512). 'Holbein', a double sonnet about 'The other Cromwell' – Thomas – is ostensibly more ceremonious, and its account of Cromwell's execution combines manic energy with an almost graceful poise: 'I think of the headsman balancing that / extraordinary axe for a long instant / without breaking the skin'; 'Pray, sirs, remember Cromwell's trim / wit on the scaffold, that saved Wyatt's neck' (2013:565). The pairing of Cromwell and Wyatt, of politics and poetry, gets

re-cast as a contrast between Henry VIII – ‘this king of bloody trunks’ – and that other pivotal early English sonneteer, the Earl of Surrey:

And Surrey, with his hierarchy of verse.
Meticulous the apportioning of time
in its reserve, Virgilian rectitude,
as though a full pavane of the elect
were the ten syllables to which they trod
as to the noblest music in the land,
lovely fecundity of barren heath,
Hillarby Bay, the Alde’s thin-ribboned course;
Sudden clouds harrow the Anglian sky. (2013: 565)

The references to ‘hierarchy’ and ‘rectitude’ re-animate a pre-occupation with idealised orders performed by the ‘full pavane of the elect’ and ‘the ten syllables to which they trod’. Hill does, to an extent, use the apparently privileged form of the pentameter, and most of the lines above can be scanned as such, with a little leeway for metrical variety. But this ‘hierarchy of verse’ is couched in a conditional syntax – ‘as though’, ‘as to’ – that indicates it is an ideal only, and not a reality. The sonnet ends with a series of rougher images whose ‘barren heath’ (recalling *King Lear*) and ‘Sudden clouds’, breaks the poem’s orderly ‘Virgilian rectitude’. By conjuring Wyatt and Surrey, and placing them so vulnerably close to the ‘miswielding power’ (2013: 565) of Henry VIII and Cromwell, Hill makes the sonnet subject to history’s often violent whims, and whatever mitigation it can offer partial and fleeting. And yet there is a touching beauty to ‘the Alde’s thin-ribboned course’ that suggests even fleeting mitigation is a solace of sorts, and not to be disparaged for being less than perfect.

‘Holbein’’s ‘Sudden clouds’ look back to ‘Funeral Music’ and ‘the wind’s / Flurrying’ at the Battle of Towton, and the execution scene recalls John Tifton and the others ‘Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood’ at the start of that sequence. Matthew Sperling suggests that Hill’s career reveals a remarkable consistency, for all its apparent shifts and turns, and ‘Holbein’’s return upon ‘Funeral Music’ suggests his on-going pre-occupations: with violent histories, and especially English histories; with articulating poetry’s possible consolations, whilst also undermining these consolations; and with self-interrogation and self-revision. To put it in the terms that Hill employs in ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, ‘Holbein’ restages the tension between ‘the technical perfecting of a poem’, and history’s ‘quotidian shapelessness’. Indeed, these terms are re-framed in a late essay, ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’. Hill riffs on Auden to argue that ‘A poem re-enters history in a multitude of circumstances’, claiming that ‘whatever historical effects it may produce, or be made to produce, are as collusive with good and ill or as absurd as those of any other historical entity’. Such

historicity is ‘intolerable’ and Hill contrasts it with ‘the true poem’ which ‘is not exhausted by the uses to which it is put’ and is ‘alienated from its existence as historical event’ (2008b: 579-580). What I want to suggest in closing is that Hill’s poetry’s alienation from ‘existence as historical event’ lies precisely in that poetry’s awareness of itself as historical event. It is this awareness that leads Hill time and time again to stage poetry’s historicity and its attendant dilemmas and tensions. The sonnet has been another crucial instance of continuity, occupying a suitably vital but marginal place in Hill’s oeuvre in which he could go on posing questions about poetry, an eccentric, alienated form still ‘not exhausted’ after a lifetime’s writing.

Chapter Two

‘a rustling and twig-combing breeze’: Seamus Heaney

Like Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney wrote sonnets through almost his entire career, and like Hill the form was vital to him at crucial moments, such as in 1979’s ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, which marked a new style after *North* (1975), and 1987’s ‘Clearances’, the elegiac sequence that commemorates his mother. Again like Hill, Heaney has a strong sense of the form’s historicity, most obviously in the subject matter of ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ and ‘Act of Union’, but also in the recurring conversations he conducts with sonnet writers such as William Wordsworth, John Clare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Patrick Kavanagh, and Robert Lowell, to name just a few of Heaney’s most important interlocutors. But Heaney’s sense of history is very different from Hill’s. Describing the genesis of ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ in *Stepping Stones*, his 2008 autobiographical interviews with Dennis O’Driscoll, Heaney says that ‘Glanmore was the first place where my immediate experience got into my work’ and that ‘the stand-off of our situation – the distance from Dublin, never mind from Belfast – produced a kind of empowerment’ so that ‘when the cuckoo and the corncrake “consorted at twilight”, almost two years after we had landed, I gave in. I wrote at that moment, involuntarily, in “smooth numbers” – iambic lines that were out of key with the more constrained stuff I was doing at the time, the poems that would appear in *North*’ (2008: 198). Heaney characterises the sonnet in terms of the personal life (‘my immediate experience’) and aesthetic harmony (““smooth numbers””) that are so frequently missing, or indeed interrogated, in Hill’s work. Heaney also identifies his personal experience and the form’s harmony with ‘distance’ from the historical pressures of Northern Ireland (the Heaneys had moved from Belfast to Glanmore in County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland in 1972).

It is tempting to read Heaney’s characterisation of the sonnet as a form of escapism, a retreat from history into a compensatory aestheticism, but what I want to suggest in this chapter is that Heaney uses the sonnet to articulate what Alan Gillis calls a ‘broader vista’ (2012: 581), in which the sonnet does not so much escape history as reframe it. In his work more generally Heaney has been acutely aware of the question James Longenbach posed, and which I discussed in the introduction, regarding ‘what the social effectiveness or responsibility of poetry might be’ (1999: 102), and in ‘Feeling into Words’ he asks it directly by quoting Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65: ‘the question, as ever, is “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?”’ (1980: 57). Heaney’s veneration and celebration of poetry more generally comes as a response to history, rather than an escape from it. In ‘Joy or Night’, his Oxford Lecture on Yeats and Philip Larkin, he writes that ‘when a poem rhymes, when a form generates itself, when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures, it is already on the side of

life...When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the condition of overlife, and rebels at limit' (1995: 158). Heaney here casts poetry as an active force for good in the world, even if the good that it can do is left unclear. Indeed, that lack of clarity is important, because Heaney is quite clear that although poetry is a participant in the world, that participation is elusive and unpredictable and not to be thought of in direct or instrumental terms. As he puts it in his 1986 essay 'The Government of the Tongue', in a line I shall return to, 'no lyric has ever stopped a tank' (1988: 109). In doing so he proposes two apparently contradictory answers to Longenbach's dilemma: that poetry rises to meet 'the twentieth century's epic challenges', and that it remains strictly within 'a strategically circumscribed world' (1999: 103). The value of the sonnet to Heaney has been that it has allowed him to give both these responses at once, and to keep on re-framing them in subtly different ways as his long career evolved. Wordsworth has been a particularly important influence, and his historical sonnets can be heard in the background of Heaney's 'Requiem for the Croppies'. I argue, however, that Heaney's early sonnets are most fully in dialogue with Patrick Kavanagh, whose bracingly individualistic accents offered Heaney a model for exploring Irish history whilst also emphasising the poet's individual identity and voice, an individualism crucial to another early Heaney sonnet, 'The Forge'. Wordsworth's influence can be most keenly felt in 'Glanmore Sonnets' and Heaney in fact equates the origins of that sequence with Wordsworth in *Stepping Stones*, where he says that 'just after I'd gone to do that BBC programme on Dove Cottage, the sonnets announced themselves' (2008: 198). As I shall argue, the Wordsworthian sonnet's exploration of the scales and scope of poetry's meaning are crossed with *The Prelude* as Heaney tries to articulate a sense of personal identity responsive to, but not constrained by, history. In doing so, Heaney plays out a partial, fragmented version of Wordsworthian internalisation, whereby meaning is displaced from history to the individual, whose identity becomes the main focus of interest for poetry. But this internalisation is, at best, partial and incomplete. It is less a linear progression, moving from history to self (or history and poetry) than a recurrent tension between the two. Versions of this tension play out time and again in Heaney's sonnets.

After 'Glanmore Sonnets', Heaney's engagement with the form takes on more spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, especially in 'Clearances'. But these are qualified by his sense of the ordinariness of the everyday, which to a certain extent undercuts the visionary aspirations of some of his sonnets. This pattern also informs Heaney's later sequences such as 'Glanmore Revisited' (1991) and the several sonnets of *District and Circle* (2006). One of Heaney's most important later influences, especially in terms of his spiritual turn, is the early Italian sonnet writer Dante Alighieri, but in 'The Journey Back', a sonnet of sorts from *Seeing Things* (1991), Heaney crosses Dante's voice with that of Philip Larkin as a way of blunting the transcendent with the (seemingly) mundane. It is a move that Heaney employs several times in his essays, which often consider two writers in a state of partial contrast: Yeats and Wordsworth in 'The Makings of a Music'; Dante and Larkin in 'The Main

of Light'; and Yeats and Larkin in 'Joy and Night'. The result is a sense of conversation, or dialogue, that also informs Heaney's sonnets, which do not purport to find definitive answers, but do keep on asking and re-asking important questions about poetry's relationship to history, even as Heaney's sense of what constitutes these things changes and evolves. The dialogic, or conversational, aspect of Heaney's sonnets also helps to explain their more peaceable tones and textures when considered alongside Hill's sonnets. Hill's sonnets are not just dialogic, but dramatic; and more quarrelsome than conversational, continually sharpening tensions that Heaney tends to hold in balance. The eloquence with which Heaney articulates this balance can sometimes give the impression that he thinks he has resolved these tensions, especially when set alongside the bolder proclamations of his prose, but the value to Heaney of the sonnet has been its open-endedness, and its capacity for internal dialogue between different claims and concerns. It is these processes that I explore in this chapter.

I. 'quick and sudden': Heaney, Kavanagh, and the parochial sonnet

'Requiem for the Croppies' gives an early sense of how Heaney conceives of the sonnet-form. The poem, which commemorates the 1798 Rebellion against British rule by the United Irishmen, begins with the 'barley' the United Irishmen carried in their 'greatcoats', and the sonnet's octave describes the Rebellion as an improvised guerrilla campaign – 'We moved quick and sudden in our own country'; 'We found new tactics happening each day: / We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike / And stampede cattle into infantry' – before its sestet narrates their decisive defeat at 'the fatal conclave' of 'Vinegar Hill', where 'Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon'. As a public elegy, the poem recalls other sonnets on often violent historical events, such as Wordsworth's 'Thoughts of a Briton on the Subjugation of Switzerland' and 'On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic'. It also recalls Milton's 'On the Late Massacre in Piedmont', as well as Geoffrey Hill's sonnets – and Heaney's title may even distantly echo Hill's 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings'. But Heaney's sonnet does not sound especially like these precursors, even if it inevitably echoes them. In contrast to the intricately wrought Miltonic sonorities of Hill's sonnets, 'Requiem for the Croppies' seems ad-hoc and improvised, combining an easily digested syntax – 'We moved quick and sudden', 'We found new tactics', 'The hillside blushed' – with a string of half-rhymes, such as 'barley', 'country', 'day' and 'infantry' (1998: 22), woven into a slightly skewed hybrid Shakespearean-Petrarchan rhyme scheme: *ababccacadedede*. The result is a spoken informality, a mode of plain and direct speech antithetical to Hill's work, and more casual than Wordsworth's lofty tones (specifically the 'Pure', 'majestic' and 'free' (1984: 286) utterance that Wordsworth attributed to Milton in 'London, 1802' and tried to emulate in his own work). Tellingly, the speaker of Heaney's sonnet goes unnamed, and uses the first person collective 'We' to express an anonymous plurality that speaks

back to Milton's and Wordsworth's tendency to address named great men (Cromwell, Fairfax, Toussaint l'Overture, Milton himself). In doing so, Heaney's low-slung, rough-hewn sonnet chafes against the stateliness of its English antecedents. Discussing some of the poems from *Door into the Dark* in *Stepping Stones*, Heaney says that: 'What I was after, even if I wasn't as clear about it at the time, was a way of making the central tradition of English poetry, which we'd absorbed in college and university, absorb our own peculiar eccentric experience' (2008: 90). The sonnet, of course, is one of those central traditions, and giving voice to the Croppies in sonnet form is a way of making those traditions absorb not only Heaney's peculiar experience but his community's history, too.

Yet the poem's political meanings are complicated and ambiguous. In 'Feeling into Words' Heaney describes the poem's final image – 'And in August the barley grew up out of our grave' – as 'an image of resurrection' that carries 'The oblique implication... that the seeds of violent resistance sowed in the Year of Liberty had flowered in what Yeats called "the right rose tree" of 1916' (1980: 56). Heaney's organic metaphor tries to draw a line from 1798 to 1916; but as Jack Hobbs argues, 'the point Heaney hoped to make about the Easter Rising of 1916' and the 1798 Rebellion 'gets lost in the natural simplicity' of the barley image (1995: 39), so that the connection between the two periods remains largely buried. This organic simplicity foregrounds the poem's pastoral dimensions, which absorb historical events into cycles of seasonal change, decay, and renewal. Indeed, the sonnet's final image, sharpened by the almost full rhyme of 'graves' and 'wave', derives a great deal of its emotional charge from the disjunction between natural renewal and human loss: the barley might grow in August, but the Croppies will not. This is a generalised elegiac trope that, whilst powerful, also blunts a little the force of the sonnet's historical particularity. I do not mean to criticise Heaney for this move, or to imply that the sonnet should be more historically precise, but rather to highlight that 'Requiem for the Croppies' tries to do two potentially conflicting things. By recalling the Croppies, his sonnet invokes a particular sense of Irish history and identity at odds with English modes of cultural expression, but the nature-as-rebirth trope also generalises that particularity so that, in a sense, Heaney's sonnet both invokes the past and holds it at a distance.

Heaney here recalls a pattern laid down by one of his early influences: Patrick Kavanagh. Kavanagh, of course, is a crucial figure in the history of the sonnet in Ireland, a poet who in poems such as 'Inniskeen Road: July Evening' used the form as an entry point into literary traditions which, as a self-taught Irish farmer, he felt himself excluded from. At the same time he also talked back to the sonnet and its history, re-directing its currents as way of making it bear the new freight he was launching into it. In 'Epic', the 'important places' the poem begins with famously turn out to be 'half a rood of rock' in 'Ballyrush and Gortin' in 1938, 'the year of the Munich bother'. Though Kavanagh queries 'Which/ Was more important', and says that he 'inclined / To lose...faith' in his homeland, he sets Monaghan in relation to Munich without excluding either as appropriate ground for poetry: 'Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind. / He said: I made the *Iliad* from such / A local row.'

Gods make their own importance' (2005: 184). In his essay 'A Placeless Heaven', Heaney writes of Kavanagh as an assertively Irish voice that 'gave you permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks of your life. Over the border, into a Northern Ireland dominated by the noticeably English accents of the local BBC, he broadcast a voice that would not be cowed by accents other than its own', but his Irishness is of a strongly individualistic temper. In the same essay Heaney notes Kavanagh's hostility to the Irish Literary Revival, and his being 'co-opted' (2001: 140) by explicitly political and nationalist literary projects. Indeed, in an earlier essay, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', Heaney positions Kavanagh as an almost entirely self-created voice without a hinterland in either English or Irish traditions: 'Much of his authority and oddity derive from the fact that he wrested his idiom bare-handed out of a literary nowhere' (1980: 116). Whilst Kavanagh's sonnets are historical in outlook, they also evade a restrictive English-Irish binary.

Instead of England versus Ireland, Heaney (quoting 'The Temptations of the Harvest') argues that 'much of Kavanagh's poetry is born out of the quarrel between "the grip of the little fields" and "the City of Kings / Where art, music, letters are the real things"' (1980: 121). Much of the vigour of Kavanagh's work, he implies, comes from those 'little fields', and the excitement of their unexpected appearance in the literary environs from which they have largely been absent. In 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', Heaney describes Kavanagh's poetry as having 'the air of bursting a long battened-down silence. It comes on with news in the first line – "Clay is the word and clay is the flesh", "I have lived in important places" – and it keeps on urgently and ebulliently to the last' (1980: 116). He represents the work of another great rural sonnet writer – John Clare – in similar terms. In 'John Clare's Prog' Heaney praises the way Clare 'withdrew and dug in his local heels' (1995: 64) against the prevailing urbanity of early nineteenth-century literary culture, and describes Clare's sonnet 'The Mouse's Nest' as 'seven couplets wound up like clockwork and then set free to scoot merrily through their foreclosed motions. He seemed to write this kind of poem as naturally as he breathed' (1995: 65). The idiomatic vigour of these sonnets marks them out from other, perhaps more dominant, elements of the form's history. Helen Vendler, for example, writes that for Yeats the sonnet 'was verse consciously aware of itself as written, not oral; verse from a European court tradition; verse knowing itself to be artifice, and often speaking about its own art' (2007: 147). Heaney, however, seems to frame the form in terms of spontaneity and spokeness, and the first person 'We' and pacey rhythms of 'Requiem for the Croppies' generate a fair amount of ebullience, to use that word with which he described Kavanagh, in spite of the poem's elegiac conclusion. In contrast to Yeats, Heaney's Kavanagh-inspired sense of the sonnet is not so much courtly as it is parochial. Justin Quinn, writing in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry: 1800-2000*, notes Kavanagh's distinction between the parochial and the provincial, in which 'a provincial was someone who defers in matters of artistic taste to a higher, and distant, authority' but 'a parochial writer knows that his own "mile of kingdom", though it is in the back of beyond, is just as authoritative in matters of art as

the metropolitan centre' (2008: 88). The parochial poem undermines the distinction between centre and periphery by insisting on the significance of what is ostensibly 'peripheral'. For Heaney, as for Kavanagh and Clare before him, the sonnet is a way of articulating that significance.

It is in this sense that 'The Forge', another early Heaney sonnet collected in *Door into the Dark*, can be thought of as 'parochial'. Though neither explicitly Irish nor rural, its parochialism derives from the way it questions what counts as central and what as peripheral in quite literal ways:

All I know is a door into the dark.
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,
The unpredictable fantail of sparks
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.
The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,
Horned as a unicorn, at one end and square,
Set there immovable: an altar
Where he expends himself in shape and music. (1998: 19)

Heaney configures his spatial markers so as to lay out a journey from the periphery, from the 'Outside' to the 'Inside', where the anvil indicates 'the centre'. Both anvil and blacksmith become the literal and symbolic heart of this scene, 'an altar' from which 'shape and music' radiate. The trajectory of this journey, however, is complicated. The split between the first-person speaker of the poem and the blacksmith implies a gap that the sonnet cannot quite bridge, as though the speaker would like to be the blacksmith and work the forge himself, but is not able or allowed to do so. All he knows is the door, the point of ingress, not the anvil, the centre. The sonnet's architecture, too, undermines the idea of a stable centre. The word 'altar', which marks out the anvil's special status, comes at the end of line eight and the sonnet's formal 'centre', where it pivots from octave to sestet. But this formal centre is not very secure. The syntax of Heaney's lines spills over the octave-sestet boundary, while the rhymes at the end of the octave dissolve into a run of four half-rhymes around a terminal /r/ sound, in which 'centre' occurs at line six, almost as though it were pre-emptively unsettling the special status of the anvil-as-altar. The result is that whilst the sonnet foregrounds the notion of a centre towards which it is travelling, it is a centre that the poem cannot quite fully inhabit.

Not that the poem sounds especially troubled or anxious about this inability. 'The Forge''s verbal energy, its 'ring' and 'hiss' and 'clatter', suggests that Heaney rather relishes its parochial status. The poem ends with the blacksmith 'lean[ing] out on the jamb' as he 'recalls a clatter / Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows', before returning to his forge 'To beat real iron out, to work the bellows' (1998: 19). The parochial poem might insist on its equal value to the metropolitan poem,

but that does not mean they are the same, and there remains a certain assertion of difference in these poems. It is for this reason that Heaney can represent Kavanagh in such individualistic terms. ‘Epic’ might compare Ballyrush and Gortin to Munich, but it does not identify them with one another, and part of the excitement of these parochial sonnets is the way something important remains partially unassimilated to history, be that a ‘half a rood of rock’ in a Monaghan parish, or the ‘real iron’ of an isolated forge. The marginal status of both poet and blacksmith at the end of the poem is a productive ambiguity, a source of imaginative power, and Heaney seems to acknowledge as much when he says that, as a collection, *Door into the Dark* ‘gesture[s] towards this idea of poetry as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it....in *Door into the Dark* there are a number of poems that arise out of the almost unnameable energies that, for me, hovered over certain bits of language and landscape’ (1980: 52). Part of the force of these energies comes from their being unnamed, from not being wholly released into language. Similarly, Heaney’s sonnets derive part of their power from not being wholly released, so to speak, into the tradition. The rough edges of ‘The Forge’ and even ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ hold them at a partial remove, Kavanagh-like, from the traditions that they invoke.

II. ‘a rustling and twig-combing breeze’. Wordsworth and Glanmore

‘Requiem for the Croppies’ and ‘The Forge’ are early instances of Heaney’s engagement with the question of poetry’s historical and political efficacy and ambition, a question that acquired fresh intensity in 1969. As Heaney recounts in ‘Feeling into Words’, in that year ‘the original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel’ began again, and ‘the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament’ (1980: 56). This, indeed, is a powerful and influential re-statement of the dilemma Longenbach identifies, and that Hill explored so exhaustively: how should poetry respond to historical trauma? Answering this question took Heaney, famously, to the bog-bodies of ancient Scandinavia, the ‘preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland, naked, strangled or with their throats cut, disposed under the peat since early Iron Age times’ (1980: 57). These preserved corpses offered Heaney a way of thinking about the past, and historic violence, that inspired some of his most famous (and notorious) poems, such as ‘The Tollund Man’, ‘Punishment’, and ‘Bog-Queen’, from his collections *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975). These poems have attracted a great deal of controversy and commentary, and I do not propose to rehearse the arguments around them here. What I do want to suggest is that, whatever their initial impulse, these bog-body poems became restrictive for Heaney. He calls the vision of history enshrined in these poems ‘an archetypal pattern’ (1980: 57), and whilst the equation of Iron Age Jutland with twentieth

century Northern Ireland was initially a compelling way of reframing history, the comparison quickly hardened into a rigid schema, with Edna Longley arguing that ‘an obsession with stacking up parallels has replaced flexible “soundings”’ (1986: 157). Formally, too, these poems use an alliterative short line – ‘I could risk blasphemy, / Consecrate the cauldron bog / Our holy ground’ to take an example from ‘The Tollund Man’ (1998: 65) – that is almost claustrophobically constrained. That word, ‘constrained’, is in fact one that Heaney uses of *North* in the *Stepping Stones* interviews discussing his move to Glanmore that I cited earlier.

This tension gets played out in Heaney’s sonnets, as well as his bog poems. There are three sonnets in *North*, ‘The Seed Cutters’, ‘Strange Fruit’, and ‘Act of Union’, and whilst ‘The Seed Cutters’ displays what Alan Gillis calls ‘clarity and translucence’, ‘Strange Fruit’ and ‘Act of Union’ both become ‘an atavistic sounding ground, a pastoral nightmare of psycho-sexual-linguistic torment’ (2010: 589). This is especially true of ‘Act of Union’, which develops an elaborate conceit that conflates landscapes, languages, and bodies. The poem’s speaker declares that he is ‘the tall kingdom over your shoulder’ and ‘still imperially / Male’ (1998: 127), slotting both himself and the poem’s addressee into a complex and rigid system of binaries (male/female, empire/colony, England/Ireland). Even the poem’s language seems to be organised along these lines, with the alliterative hardness of the Irish bog directing the sounds of some lines, and ornate Latinisms filling up others. The first poem, for example, begins ‘the rain in bogland gathered head / To slip and flood: a bog-burst, / A gash breaking open the ferny bed’, but then ends with ‘your half-independent shore / Within whose borders now my legacy / Culminates inexorably’ (1998: 127). The determinism of such binaries leads to stasis at the end of the second sonnet, which concludes with ‘the big pain / That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again’ (1998: 127), a pessimism lent the air of inevitability by the final, fully rhymed couplet. In place of the productively ambiguous manoeuvres of ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ and ‘The Forge’, ‘Act of Union’ hammers out the stacked up parallels that Longley discerned in Heaney’s work of this time, sets of binaries whose over-assertion betrays their brittleness: ‘I am still imperially / Male’; ‘no treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / And stretchmarked body’ (1998: 127-128). The result is a poem that sounds trapped by the historic vision it has summoned. As Bernhard Klein puts it, ‘The most striking deficiency of Heaney’s bog is the inability to invite creative use of the past: there is preservation, no end of preservation, only no change’ (2007: 139).

For Klein ‘The bog is an uninhabitable space, a realm of the dead and not of the living’, and ‘The poetry it has generated is filled with a morbid fascination for the victims killed in the course of history’. Heaney’s bog poems do not so much respond to history as become ensnared in it, but in his later work ‘Heaney more or less renounced his desire to stare at the dead in awe and fascination in favour of the much more difficult task of dialogue’, a task ‘which dominates collections such as *Field Work* (1979) and *Station Island* (1984)’. Poems from these collections are ‘frequently set in a self-consciously liminal, intermediary or transitional location, far away from the bog: the beach, strand or

coast' (2007: 139). What I want to suggest is that Heaney's 'Glanmore Sonnets', though not set along on 'the beach, strand or coast', are also 'self-consciously liminal'. The third sonnet begins not in an intermediary location, but at an intermediary time: 'This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake / (So much, too much) consorted at twilight. / It was all crepuscular and iambic' (1998: 165). Poised partway between day and night, Heaney archly describes the archetypically lyric sound of bird song as 'crepuscular and iambic'. Unlike the restrictive meanings piled up by 'Act of Union', this sonnet is more relaxed, preemptively suggesting that the redundant 'crepuscular' might be 'too much'. Similarly, the consonantal half-rhyme of 'corncrake' with 'iambic' roughens the sonnet's poeticisms without insisting too closely on any Irish/English literary politics.

I suggested earlier that this sonnet, the first that Heaney wrote in Glanmore (though it comes as the third in the published sequence), could be read as an instance of Wordsworthian internalization, in which 'spiritual and cultural enlightenment' take the place of history as the locus of meaning. Heaney turns to Wordsworth directly in the sonnet's sestet:

I had said earlier, 'I won't relapse
From this strange loneliness I've brought us to.
Dorothy and William—' She interrupts:
'You're not going to compare us two...?'
Outside a rustling and twig-combing breeze
Refreshes and relents. Is cadences. (1998: 165)

Not only does Heaney namecheck 'Dorothy and William', but his 'twig-combing breeze' echoes *The Prelude*'s 'corresponding mild creative breeze' (1984: 376), as though to draw on Wordsworth as a steady, healing presence. *The Prelude*, of course, is Wordsworth's account of the 'growth of a poet's mind', an extended lyric autobiography and crucial instance of modern poetry's articulation of the self. As Jerome McGann puts it in his 1983 study *The Romantic Ideology*, Wordsworth's poems perform 'a spiritual displacement' whereby 'the light and appearance of sense fade into an immaterial plane of reality, the landscape of Wordsworth's emotional needs' (1983: 87). The poet 'displaces' history 'into a spiritual economy' in which 'the mind has triumphed over its times' (1983: 88), and indeed the Wordsworthian 'breeze' is 'corresponding', an internal mental and imaginative response to 'the sweet breath of heaven' the poet feels 'blowing on my body' (1984: 376). Heaney's embrace of a more peaceful style following *North*'s abrasions, as well as his change in personal circumstances moving from Belfast to Wicklow in 1972, suggest that he too might be replaying a version of Wordsworth's internalization. Certainly, Heaney's reference to 'strange loneliness' seems to imply a withdrawal that is also fortifying, and a return to the proper ground of both poetry and the self, as do the healing properties of his refreshing, relenting breeze.

Heaney also alludes to *The Prelude* in the opening lines of ‘Glanmore II’: ‘Sensings, mountings from the hiding places, / Words entering almost the sense of touch / Ferreting themselves out of their dark hutch’ (1998: 164). He echoes here Book XI of *The Prelude*, ‘The hiding places of my power / seem open’ (1984: 567), while ‘mountings’ alludes to Book I in the ‘Trances of thought and mountings of the mind’ (1984: 375). In an astute reading of the preceding sonnet, ‘Glanmore I’, Steph Burt notes how Heaney’s sonnet moves ‘From an octave replete with words for sight and sounds’ to a sestet filled with ‘the sense of smell’, which is in turn ‘connected with involuntary memory’. That is to say, Heaney moves ‘From an octave in which “the good life” was something chosen, and “art” something made (as fields are tilled) by choice, to a sestet in which art is something that happens *to* the poet, who becomes less farmer than field’ (2011: 349). Heaney’s sestet ‘does justice to the unconscious parts of art’ and ‘also moves from exterior space he can share – “Our road” – to his past, which belongs to nobody else: “My ghosts”’ (2011: 349). This transition from octave to sestet marks an inward turn, a move from the conscious to the unconscious self which is continued in the opening of ‘Glanmore II’, whose animalistic terms, like ‘Ferreting’ and ‘hutch’, gesture towards an identity that is unknown and beyond articulation, and Burt’s observations of smell in ‘Glanmore I’ could be applied to ‘the sense of touch’ in ‘Glanmore II’. The sonnet does not stay here, however, but emerges out of this unknown, involuntary identity to a clearer, more conscious sense of self:

Then I landed in the hedge-school of Glanmore
And from the backs of ditches hoped to raise
A voice caught back off slug-horn and slow chanter
That might continue, hold, dispel, appease:
Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground,
Each verse returning like the plough turned round. (1998: 164)

The predominant sense changes again, back to the sound that began ‘Glanmore I’. Heaney also switches to a present moment situated in a particular, named place, and introduces an ‘I’ in a poem which had previously been lacking any pronouns. This ‘I’ occurs at the site of the sonnet’s turn from octave to sestet, as though reversing the movement of ‘Glanmore I’. Where that poem went from the conscious to the unconscious self, this sonnet goes from the unconscious back to consciousness. Indeed, to an extent the two sonnets seem like a single poem, a double sonnet to open the sequence as a whole. The repeated line ‘Vowels ploughed into other, opened ground’ also gives this impression, as do the respective poems’ rhyme schemes: where ‘Glanmore I’ has a Shakespearean octave rhyming *ababcdcd* followed by a Petrarchan sestet, *eefggf*, ‘Glanmore II’ starts with a variant on the Petrarchan rhyme scheme, *abbacddc*, before ending with a Shakespearean sestet rhyming *efefgg*. Read in this

way, the two poems embed a Petrarchan sonnet within a Shakespearean one, a structure that enacts both the inward turn to an unconscious self, and the turn back out to consciousness.

In Book XI of *The Prelude* Wordsworth meditates on how ‘The days gone by / Come back upon me from the dawn almost / Of life’ and urges himself to ‘enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration’ (1984: 567). Heaney also uses this temporal structure in the first two ‘Glanmore Sonnets’. Whilst these poems do not make direct reference to Heaney’s childhood (unlike later sonnets in the sequence), the ‘ghosts’ that appear at the end of ‘Glanmore I’ are figures from the past, and ‘the grain’ that ‘Remembered what the mallet tapped to know’ in ‘Glanmore II’ draws on a sense of memory as foundational to identity. Following Wordsworth’s model, Heaney intertwines this past with his present moment, moving from present to past only to then re-emerge, changed and fortified and ready to face the future, back in the present. The internal transitions of the sonnet enable Heaney to stage this process in miniature, as though the opening two ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ were a compressed, concentrated version of *The Prelude*. This, of course, makes big claims for the sonnet, and turns it in to a mini-epic about selfhood and personal identity along Wordsworthian lines. But perhaps just as important is the way the sonnet trims the Wordsworthian epic. The form’s ‘scanty plot of ground’ complicates any notion of internalization and its grander meanings, its ‘narrow room’ restraining assertions of large-scale ‘spiritual and cultural enlightenment’. As I suggested in the Introduction, Wordsworth’s own sonnets thematize this question of scale and restraint. James Phelan’s argument that, in poems like the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’, Wordsworth ‘blur[s] the boundary between engagement and withdrawal’ (2005: 14) is cast in historical terms, and implies that ambitious political meanings – however desirable – are necessarily tempered by the sonnet’s circumscribed mode of expression. What I want to suggest is that this circumscribed mode of expression queries all forms of large-scale meaning, so that the tension McGann describes between history and spirit is overlaid with another tension, that of size. This is not say that the sonnet rejects ambitious, large-scale meanings in either historic or personal terms, but rather that the form becomes for Heaney a space in which these conflicting pressures can be explored.

Certainly, history and ‘the times’ are not absent from ‘Glanmore II’. The emergence of the self at the end of ‘Glanmore II’ is represented in historically loaded terms. The ‘hedge school’ into which Heaney lands is part of a particularly Irish landscape (like Glanmore itself) and a particularly Irish history, while the ‘voice’ that Heaney says he ‘hoped to raise’ is not just ephemeral self-expression but has a particular purpose. He wants it to ‘continue, hold, dispel, appease’, with ‘appease’ carrying especially important historical resonances, and the rest of the sequence also bears the trace of history and violence. The speaker of ‘Glanmore VIII’ asks, ‘What would I meet, blood-boltered, on the road’ (1998: 170), whilst ‘Glanmore IX’ pictures ‘Blood on a pitchfork, blood on chaff and hay, / Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing’ before asking, ‘What is my apology

for poetry' (1998: 171). The sonnet form also begins to fray: in 'Glanmore IX' 'hay' is meant to rhyme with 'poetry' and the octave jostles around 'rat', 'fruit', 'not', 'it', 'this', 'gate', 'silage', and 'inwit', trying to approach the *ababcdcd* of a Shakespearean sonnet but always threatening to disintegrate into a series of overlapping echoes, especially in the repeated /t/ sound. Even the more celebratory sonnets are tempered by their awareness of violence. 'Glanmore V''s idyllic bower is shadowed by the associations of one of Heaney's metaphors, 'Its berries a swart caviar of shot', conjuring up the image of a gun, whose presence can be obliquely detected even in the sonnet's sumptuous closing lines: 'I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch / Where smalls buds *shoot* and flourish in the hush'. Even the most apparently inward, private memories are shadowed by history, however obliquely and distantly.

Thought of in this way, Heaney's 'Glanmore Sonnets' do not withdraw from history into personal memory and identity, but weigh the balance between the two. 'Glanmore VII' is another case in point. The poem imagines the 'North Atlantic flux' around 'Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Irish Sea', its 'Green, swift upsurges' and 'wind-compounded keen' that 'drive the trawlers to the lee of Wicklow' (1998: 169). More than just a depiction of a violent storm, this sonnet carries tense geographic and political undercurrent because, as Adam Hanna points out, 'the island after which the Rockall area is named has been the subject of a territorial dispute between the United Kingdom and Irish governments, while Malin is named after Ireland's most northerly point, a place that is nevertheless politically part of the "south"', while Heaney's 'North Atlantic flux' as invokes 'the flows and ebbs of power among the peoples of the margins of the North Atlantic' (2015: 34). But the sonnet does not stay with these conflicts, and its sestet describes how the trawlers escape the storm and recuperate in Wicklow's harbour:

L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Hélène

Nursed their bright names this morning in the bay
That toiled like mortar. It was marvellous
And actual, I said out loud, 'A haven,'
The word deepening, clearing, like the sky
Elsewhere on Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes. (1998: 169)

The sonnet's turn from octave to sestet enacts a turn from the ocean's clamour to the bay's calm and it is here that the poet makes his first direct appearance, with the poem's 'I' uttering the reassuring word 'haven' in line twelve. Phelan notes the recurrence of 'the motif of ships and seafaring' in Wordsworth's work, suggesting that the sea is 'an emblem of alienation and rootlessness' and representative of 'the largely seaborne war against France' in *Lyrical Ballads*, but Wordsworth makes

‘an overt identification of the sea with British freedom in the “Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty”’. He also notes that, in the sonnet ‘With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh’, ‘the ships are compared to stars, the highest metaphorical honour in Wordsworth’s gift’ (2005: 30). In his selection of Wordsworth’s poetry, Heaney includes the sonnet ‘With ships the sea was sprinkled far and nigh’ in which the poet sees ‘A goodly Vessel.../ Come like a giant from a haven broad’, saying that ‘This ship was naught to me, nor I to her, / Yet I pursued her with a Lover’s look’ (1984: 271). Ships and the sea here occur as a space of personal freedom, a possible release and ‘haven’ from troubled historical times.

Again, though, those troubled times are not completely absent. The sonnet turns away from the storm’s violence, but it does not leave them behind completely. ‘Glanmore VII’’s octave represents this violence partly through the historical references of its place names, but also through its turbulent rhythms. These are generated by heavy repetitions, which include not only the lists of place names but also the stylized Old English epithets ‘eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road’, and the choppy syntax, made up of only partially integrated scraps of phrases: ‘Midnight and closedown. Sirens of the tundra’. These rhythms are still partially present in the sonnet’s sestet, which also lists place names and the names of ships, but they are smoothed out by a steadier pentameter cadence, as in lines ten and eleven: ‘Nursed their bright names this morning in the bay / That toiled like mortar. It was marvellous’. Though hardly regular – the first two feet of line ten are a trochee and a spondee – these lines draw on something of the run and flow of the pentameter line to convey calmer, more peaceable waters. In ‘The Makings of a Music’, his 1978 essay on Wordsworth and Yeats, Heaney remarks on Wordsworth’s habit of composing whilst walking, describing his rhythms as an ‘onward inward pouring out, up and down the gravel path, the crunch and scuffle of the gravel working like a metre or a metronome under the rhythms of the ongoing chaunt’ (1980: 65). The dissonant crunch and scuffle of the gravel become the rhythmic measure of an ongoing rhythmic chant. This chant is not naive or wide-eyed, not a blissfully ignorant enchantment, but rather a mark of survival. Writing in the introduction to his selection of Wordsworth’s poetry, Heaney says: ‘One of the reasons why Wordsworth’s poems communicate such an impression of wholeness and depth is that they arrived as the hard-earned reward of resolved crisis. The steady emotional keel beneath them has known tempestuous conditions’. The Wordsworthian self is not presented here in contrast to history, but as deeply enmeshed in it, and indeed at least partially produced by its tumult. As Heaney spells out, in the early 1790s Wordsworth experienced both ‘emotional crises (the outbreak of war between England and France separated him from his French lover and mother of his child) and political confusions (the Reign of Terror had dismayed supporters of the Revolution)’ (1988b: x). What I want to suggest is that the steadiness of Wordsworth’s, and Heaney’s, rhythms are always heard against a background of this almost-survived tempestuousness, that Heaney’s sonnets bear the trace of

turbulence as a mark of their ‘wholeness and depth’. Neither cynical nor naïve, these poems are marvelous, but they are also actual.

III. ‘A bright nowhere’: ‘Clearances’ and elegy

The sonnet has continued to be a crucial form to Heaney after *Field Work*. Sequences such as 1987’s ‘Clearances’, ‘Glanmore Revisited’ (1991), ‘Sonnets from Hellas’ (2001), ‘District and Circle’ and ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ (both 2006) show Heaney’s on-going investment in the form, as well as the changing ground of his poetry. On the whole these sequences are less preoccupied with historical matters, and display an elegiac, under- and otherworldly turn that shows Heaney’s increasing absorption in more spiritual, metaphysical issues. This is most apparent in ‘Clearances’, an elegy for Heaney’s mother, but they also permeate the ghostly voyages of ‘District and Circle’ and ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’. In contrast to the fecund earthiness of Heaney’s earlier career, these collections increasingly inhabit a more abstracted world. Helen Vendler notes the increasing insubstantiality of Heaney’s work from the late eighties onwards, arguing that he ‘remade the entire earth-world in an airy dimension’ (1995: 209), and Heaney himself speaks of a renewed spirituality in his later work that dates from this time, remarking in an interview that ‘For a poet, the one invaluable thing about a Catholic upbringing is the sense of the universe you’re given, the sense of a light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being. You conceive of yourself [...] as a sort of dewdrop, in the big web of things, and I think that this is the very stuff of lyric poetry’ (2000: 36).

To an extent, this is a continuation of the Wordsworthian internalisation of history, with Heaney increasingly locating poetry in a private world of personal memory and spiritual wonder whose luminescence compensates for, and over-writes, the tensions and complexities of historical experience. Whilst the spiritual dimensions of Heaney’s work do mark a change in emphasis, his later poems do not so much supplant history with religion, as reframe a tension inherent to both. Wordsworth famously called the sonnet (in a letter quoted by Pamela Woof) ‘an orbicular body, – a sphere – or dew drop’ (2002: 21), an image that resonates with Heaney’s sense of ‘a light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being’. Indeed, Heaney repeats Wordsworth’s dew drop image, but in doing so he not only gestures towards a sense of transcendence, but also towards a sense of transience. Dewdrops may be beautiful, but they are also fragile and ephemeral, and invite questions about what is permanent and what is fleeting, about how sustainable large spiritual claims really are in the face of change, decay, and death. At the start of his 1984 essay ‘The Main of Light’ Heaney writes that ‘E. M. Forster once said that he envisaged *A Passage to India* as a book with a hole in the middle of it. Some poems are like that too. They have openings at their centre which take the reader through and beyond’. Citing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 60 as an example, Heaney says:

Something visionary happens there in the fifth line. “Nativity”, an abstract noun housed in a wavering body of sound, sets up a warning tremor just before the mind’s eye gets dazzled by “the main of light”, and for a split second, we are in the world of the *Paradiso*. The rest of the poem lives melodiously in a world of discourse, but it is this unpredictable strike into the realm of pure being that marks the sonnet with Shakespeare’s extravagant genius. (1988a: 15)

This is a supercharged visionary moment that draws together two of European culture’s most potent and influential voices. In doing so Heaney also crosses the sonnet with the terza rima of *The Divine Comedy*, a fusion not just of individual voices but of poetic forms, thereby enabling a ‘strike into the realm of pure being’. This pure being is another iteration of the ‘light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being’, but it does not last. At the end of ‘The Main of Light’ these exuberant, abundant imaginative possibilities give way to a humbler vision as Heaney pairs Dante not with Shakespeare but with Philip Larkin. Heaney observes Larkin’s well-founded reputation for bleakness, noting his ‘anti-heroic, chastening, humanist voice’ that cuts against the visionary impulses of a Shakespeare or a Dante, but also suggesting that ‘there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance’ (1988a: 16). Indeed, he goes further and claims that Larkin ‘had it in him to write his own version of the *Paradiso*’ even if ‘It might well have amounted to no more than an acknowledgement of the need to imagine “such attics cleared of me, such absences”’ (1988a: 22).

Larkin, of course, was notoriously sceptical of the large claims sometimes made for poetry, and Heaney notes his youthful conversion, between *The North Ship* (1945) and *The Less Deceived* (1955), from W. B. Yeats to Thomas Hardy, which is itself another version of the Auden-Yeats quarrel over the scope and scale of poetry’s ambition in the modern world. Heaney calls this, in his essay, ‘the unsettled quarrel which would be conducted all through [Larkin’s] mature poetry, between vision and experience’ (1988a: 16). Tellingly, Heaney characterises this as a debate within Larkin’s own work, not between Larkin and another poet (though Heaney does sometimes write it this way too). The tension between vision and experience is, for the later Heaney, foundational to all poetry, which is why he can compare such historically disparate figures as Larkin, Shakespeare and Dante. It is a tension that occurs within, rather than between, poems and poets, and the sonnet has been crucial to its articulation and exploration. Indeed, Heaney’s conflicted sense of vision and experience chime with one of the key characteristics of the contemporary sonnet identified by Steph Burt, that it ‘register the tension...between prophetic, authoritative language, which gives direction and shape from outside and above, and “the everyday”, the uninflated language of conversation and of diaries’ (2011: 246). In the rest of this section I want to consider how Heaney has used the sonnet to examine both the competition between, and congruence of, these two different modes, frequently intertwining them in a single formal gesture.

This is most apparent in ‘Clearances’ from *The Haw Lantern* (198), Heaney’s sonnet sequence in memory of his mother. As an elegy, the poem cannot help but summon the tension between vision and experience, between the desire for consolation and the fact of grief. ‘Clearances 3’ describes an apparently unvarnished, childhood memory of peeling potatoes:

They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water. (1998: 309)

Heaney’s language is unsentimental. The only ‘weeping’ is that of the soldering iron, a serviceable homespun metaphor employed to visualise the potatoes, while the ‘cold’ in ‘Cold comforts’ hovers between physical sensation and emotional bleakness. These plain images stand in contrast to the Mass mother and son do not attend in order to peel their potatoes, with Heaney drawing an implicit contrast between the official, authoritative language of church services, and his own private unadorned, uninflated speech. This contrast becomes more apparent in the sonnet’s sestet, where ‘the parish priest at her bedside / Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying’ while the son ‘remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives - / Never closer the whole rest of our lives’ (1998: 309). The noisy, showy, hammer-and-tongs prayers only serve to highlight the understated quiet of Heaney’s more intimate recollections, and the sonnet’s last three lines vividly recall a moment of shared intimacy. The phrase ‘Her breath in mine’ not only brings together mother and son as its remembers their closeness during his childhood, but also delicately implies that she might go on being present to him, that her breath might still be in his breathing now. The sonnet’s concluding full rhyme, in a poem largely structured around half-rhymes, seems to sonically affirm this presence, particularly given that the last word is ‘lives’, a powerful strain against the elegiac weight of the subject matter. The concluding couplet carries the suggestion that loss can be offset by the ongoing continuities of memory, that the poem can conjure the presence of Heaney’s mother vividly enough to mitigate her loss in the real world.

Jahan Ramazani, in his influential study of twentieth-century elegy, *Poetry of Mourning*, describes the modern elegy as ‘unresolved, violent, and ambivalent’, arguing that ‘they refuse such orthodox consolations as the rebirth of the dead in nature, in God, or in poetry itself’ (1994: 4). Heaney is an important voice in Ramazani’s study, but as a counter example to such violent irresolution. Ramazani suggests that Heaney’s elegies are not quite as abrasive as their twentieth-century counterparts, that Heaney is one of a number of poets to ‘have reclaimed compensatory mourning’ but only ‘by subduing its potential’ (1994: 30-31). It is only within the poem’s depiction of

‘elegy’s conventional period of idyllic concord between mourner and deceased’ that any form of emotional balm is achieved. In his reading of ‘Clearances 3’ Ramazani argues that whilst the poem enacts a ‘prelapsarian communion between mother and son’, ‘Heaney’s use of formal consolation is rendered more effective by its limitation’ (1994: 353). Communion and consolation are imaginative only, and not intended to suggest any literal truth to traditional salving tropes, such as a religious afterlife. Elegy becomes the preserve of the individual mourner, for whom certain forms of continuity, such as personal memories, can hold back the pressure of grief.

In this sense it is telling that ‘Clearances 3’ should turn away from the parish priest’s prayers to its own private meditations. Poetic form becomes a sort of boundary marker, distinguishing between a private, imaginative terrain within whose confines elegy’s tropes are a powerful force; and a public, empirical world beyond those confines where such consolations ineffectually ebb away to nothing. Heaney’s sonnets are instances of this boundary marking. Whilst the vividness of the final couplet in ‘Clearances 3’ suggests some compensatory power, it is poignantly framed as a negative, with mother and son ‘Never closer’ than that past moment which now lies beyond recovery. Whatever healing the poem might offer is effectual because it is kept within the confines of the poet’s individual reminiscences, and does not become part of the priest’s institutionalised collective cultural ritual. Other poems in the sequence are similarly private. ‘Clearances 5’ remembers another shared ritual, this time folding linen in which mother and son would ‘stretch and fold and end up hand to hand / For a split second’, their closeness a casual, fleeting thing: ‘just touch and go, / Coming close again by holding back / In moves where I was x and she was o’ (1998: 311). As in ‘Clearances 3’ Heaney can relive a kind of contact with his mother, but only within the game of the poem whose moves, paradoxically, come close by holding back. ‘Clearances 4’ represents this in linguistic terms, mimicking the ‘hampered and askew’ speech of Heaney’s mother: ‘I’d *naw* and *aye* / And decently relapse into the wrong / Grammar which kept us allied and at bay’ (1998: 310). The sonnet itself is in some ways askew here, its lines breaking awkwardly between adjective and noun, or ending on unexpected words like ‘too’ and ‘You’, and using his mother’s mispronunciation ‘*Bertold Brek*’ as a rhyme word. This off-kilter utterance honors Heaney’s mother by making her speak again, however faintly, but it also distances her by weaving that speech into the ‘too / Well-adjusted’ form of the sonnet, which becomes a vehicle for uniting them, and keeping them apart.

Heaney’s phrase ‘governed my tongue’ echoes the title of his near contemporary 1986 essay ‘The Government of the Tongue’, in which he examines poetry’s capacities and function in the world. Making a distinction between two different senses of his title, Heaney says that it can mean ‘poetry as its own vindicating force’ in which ‘the tongue...has been granted the right to govern’ and ‘poetic art is credited with an authority of its own’ (1988a: 92). This is a sort of free play of the imagination, ‘the self-validating operations of what we call inspiration’ (1988a: 92) which poetry is at liberty to pursue

free from external, historical factors. The other meaning of ‘government of the tongue’ runs counter to this, and ‘can also imply a *denial* of the tongue’s autonomy and permission’ (1988a: 96). In this sense, poetry is called upon to submit to an authority, be that dictatorial regimes or prevailing cultural orthodoxies, and poetry’s imaginative license is restrained by social pressures. Heaney suggests that the first, positive sense of ‘the government of the tongue’ is not so much a matter of public history and politics, but is located more within a spiritual or metaphysical realm. Towards the end of the essay he concedes that ‘In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank’ (1988a: 107). But he immediately qualifies this by claiming that ‘In another sense, it is unlimited’, and compares poetry to ‘Jesus’s writing as it is recorded in Chapter Eight of John’s Gospel’, in the story of the woman taken in adultery. Heaney argues that this writing

is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase...in the rift between what is going to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves. (1988a:108)

If Heaney in one sense restricts poetry’s influence by keeping it at a remove from history, then in another sense he drastically increases it by making it a matter of universal spiritual or psychic appeal. The ‘our’ in this passage is not delimited by any contextual factors, but is expansive enough to take in just about the entire human race. In a similar vein, the shift from history to religion seems to keep poetry bottled up in an ineffectually ethereal spiritual sphere that has no concrete real-world influence. And yet in making this shift Heaney assigns a great deal of power to the poet. As Gail McConnell points out, in an astute and detailed reading of the influence of Catholicism on Heaney’s poetic practice in her book *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology*, ‘Heaney is, after all, comparing himself to Christ’ (2014: 89).

This is all a far cry from the subdued, limited consolation that Ramazani professes to find in ‘Clearances’, and Heaney’s work more widely. McConnell argues that, to an extent, Heaney uses poetry to supplant religion in ‘Clearances’, writing of ‘Clearances 3’ that ‘It is as though Heaney offers the last rites to his mother in poetic form, in place of the priest’s vehemently expressed prayers’, so much so that ‘the poem itself might be seen to function as a poetic alternative to the sacraments offered within the institutional Catholic Church’ (2014: 65). She also cites ‘Clearances 6’, where Heaney recalls celebrating Easter Week as a child with his mother: ‘Dippings. Towellings. The water breathed on. / The water mixed with chrism and with oil. / Cruet tinkle. Formal incensation’ (1998: 312). McConnell notes the ‘sensual appeal’ of these lines, and suggests that the lush physicality of Heaney’s descriptions turns the poem into a sort of sacrament, that Heaney ‘mirror[s]

the “Formal incensation” in sonnet form’ (2014: 64, 65). Heaney does not simply rebuke religion, or downplay its more expansive claims; rather, he transfers those claims to poetry and goes on making them through the sorts of patterned and semi-ritualized language out of which forms like the sonnet are made. As with the invocation of *The Prelude* in ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, this seems to make poetry a crucial bearer of meaning but, as with ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, this is a complicated move. Heaney cannot simply redirect his poetic language towards religious ends because, as McConnell points out, ‘His acts of devotion...while indebted to Catholicism, are not directed at God or Mary, but to his mother’s memory’ (2014: 65). Whilst Heaney might borrow some of the tropes and images of his Catholic background, his is a secular piety. This takes us back to Ramazani’s point about consolation only being available within strict limits, almost as though Heaney were see-sawing between a poetry of spiritual consolation, and a poetry of everyday skepticism. He limits poetry’s capacity for meaning only to find it overflowing those limits and needing to be restrained again. Heaney is constantly qualifying poetry’s power only to re-assert it, re-qualify it, and then assert it all over again.

This oscillation, between the promise of visionary transformation and its continual absence, gets played out in the two concluding ‘Clearances’ sonnets:

The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (1998: 314)

Heaney’s language of ‘emptied’ spaces and ‘Clearances’ being ‘suddenly...open’ echoes the vocabulary of rifts and gaps at the end of ‘The Government of the Tongue’, whilst the poem’s ‘pure change’ chimes with the essay’s ‘pure concentration’. The sonnet, too, seems to open up a rift within itself, as the sestet increasingly abandons a regular rhyme scheme. Where the poem’s octave includes a smattering of full- and half rhymes – ‘her’, ‘together’, ‘night’, ‘glad’, ‘right’, ‘head’, ‘overjoyed’, ‘dead’ – that suggest a pattern, the sestet disintegrates into a run of sounds that either do not rhyme at all, or are loosely grouped around a terminally /d/ sound: ‘abandoned’, ‘there’, ‘emptied’, ‘penetrated’, ‘open’, and ‘happened’. On the one hand, this disintegration seems to mark a moment of transformation, the point at which ‘a pure change happened’. On the other, Heaney’s vocabulary of emptiness and abandonment complicates such change, suggesting that it might not necessarily be a good thing. There is something peculiarly inert and passive about the poem’s last line. ‘High cries were felled’ is syntactically passive, lacking a subject to do the felling, while the ‘pure change’ is intransitive, an action that floats free of either subject or object, and whose causes and effects are difficult to glean.

‘Clearances 8’, the sequence’s final sonnet, follows a similar pattern. Describing the chopping down of a chestnut tree planted at the time of Heaney’s own birth, the poem again describes a literal moment of withdrawal:

The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high
I heard the hatchet’s differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
Deep-planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for. (1998: 314)

This too articulates a transformation, as Heaney translates what is concrete and particular ('heft and hush') into what is abstract and universal (the 'bright nowhere'). Helen Vendler, writing of this poem and of *The Haw Lantern* more generally, says that 'absence takes on the full freight of what it has replaced' (1995: 209), and that Heaney's 'strong original grounding in earth is persistently sieved upward into the sphere of value, away from fact and history' (1995: 210). As with 'Clearances 7', however, there is a certain reticence about the moment of transcendence. Heaney's octave relishes the sounds of the chestnut tree as it falls, both in terms of the alliterative 'cut' and 'crack' that describe its 'collapse', and also in the acoustic abundance that full rhymes both the plainly monosyllabic 'high' and 'sigh', and the ornately polysyllabic 'differentiated' and 'luxuriated'. The sonnet's sestet, however, mutes much of this abundance. Heaney's 'heft and hush' are a softer alliterative combination than his earlier run of plosives, while he quietens his rhymes down to two barely audible pair of tercets, the first comprised of 'all', 'coeval', and 'hole', and the second of 'nowhere', 'forever', and 'for'. Rather like the frayed rhymes at the end of 'Clearances 7', this 'hush' opens up a rift within the poem, a space of 'pure concentration' where souls are 'ramifying' in Heaney's vision of eternity, but it is not clear in the poem how secure this vision really is. Heaney frames the increasing silence of the sonnet as a growing apprehension of (and about) eternity, but at the same time such silence makes it almost impossible to affirm that eternity. The move out of history and 'into the sphere of value' becomes a thinning-down and an emptying-out, a silence 'beyond silence listened for', and not so much a moment of transcendence as of evacuation.

This sonnet recalls 'The Main of Light', with the gap left behind by the chestnut tree's fall resembling the hole that Heaney said he could hear in Shakespeare's sonnet 60. But where that empty

space is filled with the inrush of Dante's *Paradiso*, this gap is more austere. There is a hint, in the two sets of triple half-rhymes that conclude the poem, of Dante's *terza rima*, which Heaney associates with visionary possibility throughout his prose. In 'Yeats as an Example?' he says of Yeats's late poem 'Cuchulain Comforted', written in *terza rima*, that though it was 'the only time Yeats used the form', it was 'the proper time, when he was preparing for his own death by imagining Cuchulain's descent among the shades', and Heaney describes the poem as 'a strange ritual of surrender, a rite of passage from life into death, but a rite whose meaning is subsumed into song, into the otherness of art' (1980: 113). In 'The Government of the Tongue' Heaney draws on Osip Mandelstam's reading of Dante to claim the form as 'a chain reaction' and 'an event in nature', 'the epitome of chemical suddenness, free biological play, a hive of bees, a hurry of pigeon flights, a flying machine whose function is to keep releasing other self-reproducing flying machines' (1988a: 94, 95). But the end of 'Clearances' does not read like this. The hint of *terza rima* is too sparse, too fleeting and insubstantial, to generate the kind of jubilant formal play Heaney describes in 'The Government of the Tongue', and the poem only holds out the possibility of meaning, not its actuality. Instead, the sonnet becomes as much Larkin as Dante, or at least Larkin as Heaney has him at the end of 'The Main of Light', capable (though not necessarily willing) of writing a version of the *Paradiso*, but a version centred on absence.

Dante is not just the author of *The Divine Comedy* but also of *La Vita Nuova*, a crucial early instance of the sonnet sequence in European literature. In an essay on 'Dante, Petrarch, and the sonnet sequence', William J. Kennedy observes that 'the sonnet in its earliest incarnations tended to celebrate sensual, erotic and often explicitly carnal love' but that Dante 'aspired to more ambitious themes' along 'philosophical, theological and scientific' lines, and that his sequence tends to replace 'love's suffering and contradictions' with 'an exploration of love's congruence with social, moral and spiritual ideals' (2011: 91, 92). In its earliest guises, the sonnet turns on the tension between 'spiritual ideals' and physical, 'carnal' life, between sacred and secular modes, and this tension proved to be foundational for an entire tradition of sonnet writing, most famously in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Whilst 'Clearances' is not an erotic sequence and does not draw directly on *La Vita Nuova* or other early modern sequences, it does turn on this tension, in the sense that Heaney's spiritual vision is persistently qualified by a sense of day-to-day non-sacred reality. As I noted earlier, Heaney links Dante and Larkin in 'The Journey Back' from *Seeing Things* (though not subsequently collected in *Opened Ground*), in which he has Larkin's ghost voice Heaney's own translation of the first five lines of the *Inferno*'s second canto: '*I alone was girding myself to face / The ordeal of my journey and my duty*'. Laid out as a single opening line, followed by four three-line stanzas and finishing with a single line to mirror the first, the poem is a sonnet of sorts that also nods, ever so slightly, to Dante's *terza rima* through its tercets. This unexpected criss-crossing of poetic identities merges the epic Dantean

quest with Larkin's 'heartland of the ordinary', a balancing of the visionary and the everyday summed up in the English poet's self-representation as "A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry" (1991: 7).

It is a balance that Heaney continues to strike in the sonnets of *Seeing Things*, and in the twelve-line sonnet-like form of 'Squarings'. The collection contains a couple of elegies in sonnet form, partly picking up where 'Clearances' left off, though perhaps with less intensity. 'The Schoolbag' is a tribute to John Hewitt, while 'Scrabble', the first of the 'Glanmore Revisited' sequence, is '*in memoriam Tom Delaney, archaeologist*' (1991: 31). Both sonnets draw on their titular, everyday objects as a means of remembering the elegized subject, and both strike a note of continuity rather than loss, with 'The Schoolbag' imagining Hewitt as 'a child on his first morning leaving parents' (1991: 30). As its title suggests, 'Glanmore Revisited' is also invested in continuities, and returns to Heaney's old home and poetic haunt which he and his wife Marie purchased in the late 1980s, having been tenants in the initial early-seventies stay. Several sonnets pitch this return in the near mythic terms of Odysseus returning to Ithaca at the end of the *Odyssey*. 'Scene Shifts' imagines the mark where 'our kids stripped off the bark' from a tree becoming 'thick-eared and welted with a scar – Like the hero's in a recognition scene / In which old nurse sees old wound' (1991: 33), while 'Bedside Reading' 'swim[s] in Homer. In Book Twenty-three. / At last Odysseus and Penelope / Waken together' (1991: 36). The final sonnet in the 'Glanmore Revisited' sequence, 'The Skylight', switches to a biblical rather than a classical frame of reference:

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away. (1991: 37)

This balances the miracle with its everyday surroundings: the astonishing act of healing with the everyday act of departure; and the 'extravagant / Sky' with the house it enters after the installation of the skylight, with Heaney's line break between adjective and noun sharpening the sense of wonder. At the same time, however, the descriptions are increasingly unadorned, with 'had his sins forgiven' and 'Was healed' giving no hint of magic, and the form becoming similarly plain, its rhymes falling from the showiness of 'extravagant' and 'inhabitant', through the serviceable 'open' and 'forgiven' to the barely noticeable 'palsy' and 'away'. Having experienced the miracle Heaney must still, as in 'The Journey Back', return to 'the heartland of the ordinary' (1991: 7).

‘Sonnets from Hellas’, from 2001’s *Electric Light*, also positions itself within a classical framework. The sequence’s first sonnet, ‘Into Arcadia’, affirms that ‘It was opulence and amen on the mountain road’. But Heaney once again balances such opulence with the everyday, and the sonnet ends with a glimpse of a ‘goatherd / With his goats in the forecourt of the filling station, / Subsisting beyond eclogue and translation’ (2001: 38). *District and Circle*, Heaney’s penultimate book, extends this balance across the collection’s many sonnets. As Alan Gillis points out, the form is ‘the backbone’ (2012: 580) of the collection, contributing two sequences – ‘District and Circle’ and ‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ – as well as several individual lyrics. One of these, ‘The Nod’ recounts a childhood memory of Heaney ‘stand[ing] in line / In Loudan’s butcher shop’ on ‘Saturday evenings’ with his father, but conscious of ‘the local B-Men’ as ‘Neighbours with guns’, and ‘Some nodding at my father almost past him / As if deliberately they’d aimed and missed him / Or couldn’t seem to place him, not just then’ (2006: 33). Whilst this returns to familiar Heaney ground in its recollections of personal and public histories, the import of these histories is left deliberately vague, an uncertainty conveyed through the casualness of the sonnet’s construction, its conversation-like tone that generates an auto-rhyme out of the repeated pronoun ‘him’. ‘A Shiver’, meanwhile, distantly echoes ‘The Forge’ in describing swinging a hammer: ‘A first blow that could make air of a wall, / A last one so unanswerably landed / The staked earth quailed and shivered in the handle’ (2006: 5). In Gillis’s words, ‘the poem seems to consist of pure air, yet also generates a palpable solidity, both of which are left shaken’ (2012: 580). Once again, Heaney uses the form to recount a viscerally memorable experience, but also to leave the significance of the experience uncertain and open-ended, a meaning that queries the grounds of its own meaningfulness.

The collection’s title sequence offers perhaps the fullest instance of this paradigm. Using one of the later Heaney’s favoured tropes of voyage through the underworld, but casting the underworld as the London Underground, the sonnets of this sequence throw up partially visionary glimpses which then subside almost immediately back into the run of everyday things. The sequence’s second sonnet describes descending through the Underground’s various levels as being ‘Posted, eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts / Of escalators ascending and descending / To a monotonous slight rocking in the works’, as well as imagining the overland ‘Parks at lunchtime’ as ‘A resurrection scene minutes before / The resurrection’ (2006: 17, 18). Like the sonnets of *Seeing Things* these poems present their innocuous observations as at least potentially miraculous, as being on the cusp of a visionary transformation, but the tone is somewhat more attenuated, as though the expected change is less exultant or ‘extravagant’, to borrow that word again from ‘The Skylight’, than in the past. In ‘District and Circle’’s final sonnet Heaney imagines ‘My lofted arm a-swivel like a flail, / My father’s glazed face in my own waning / And craning...’ (2006: 19). The poem’s syntax manages to blend father and son, so that both seem to be waning and craning in a moment of diminishment rather than transcendence. The sonnet, too, sounds diminished, with ‘waning’ and ‘craning’ the poem’s only full

rhyme, but disguised by a mid-line break. That break unsettles the poem's layout, implying that it might be possible to read it as a thirteen line poem. Indeed, given the way the last six lines are structured, it might be possible to read the poem as twelve lines (and the third poem in the sequence is in fact only thirteen lines long):

And so by night and day to be transported
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict
Of all that I had belonged to, hurtled forward,
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
By blasted weeping rock-walls.

Flicker-lit. (2006: 19)

For all the solidity of the poem's 'galleried earth' and 'rock-walls' Heaney's speaker seems and sounds ephemeral, a snatched reflection in a mirror that is constantly on the move and hard to say is definitely there. Indeed, he seems more ghost than relict, and to have joined the ranks of those he has so movingly elegized. The sonnet, too, has a ghostly and posthumous quality, and its hollowed-out rhymes and scattered line-breaks call into question whether or not the form, too, is definitely there.

The other sequence from *District and Circle*, 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', is similarly ghostly. Spoken in the voice of the eponymous Tollund Man, and so looking back to one of Heaney's most famous earlier poems, the sequence briefly narrates some of his experiences and impressions. These include his retrieval from the bog, and his escape from the archaeological exhibit in which he was displayed. These are resurrections of a sort, and the second sonnet in the sequence describes how 'once I felt the air / I was like turned turf in the breath of God, / Bog-bodied on the sixth day, brown and bare' (2006: 55). Although the religious language – 'breath of God', 'sixth day' – hints at the miraculous, the tread and crunch of Heaney's alliterations embed this miracle – if that is the right word – firmly in the earth. At the same time, Heaney refuses to exaggerate or inflate the importance of the Tollund Man's earthy resurrection, and his language elsewhere is remarkably spare:

'The soul exceeds its circumstances.' Yes.
History not to be granted the last word
Or the first claim...In the end I gathered
From the display-case peat my staying powers,
Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,
My old uncallused hands to be young sward,
The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored
By telling myself this. (2006: 56)

The Tollund Man ‘got restored’ simply through ‘telling myself this’, as though his own voice were enough to bring him back to life. These are unvarnished and straightforward events, and told in an unvarnished and straightforward idiom, as the clumsy repetition of ‘told’ in ‘telling’ suggests. The sonnet is similarly unadorned and built out of slight rhymes such as ‘powers’ and ‘birches’ that, like their counterparts in ‘District and Circle’, are easy to miss. As a result, whilst the poem does stay close to the earth, it also has a slightly disembodied feel, and the last sonnet ends on a ghostly note: ‘I straightened, spat, on my hands, felt benefit / And spirited myself into the street’ (2006: 57).

‘The Tollund Man in Springtime’ revisits, of course, Heaney’s earlier bog poems, as though to re-imagine the bog in terms of the sonnet. As I suggested earlier, the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ were conceived of as a response to the static vision of history encoded in the bog. In writing this late sonnet sequence about the Tollund Man, Heaney in some sense re-excavates the bog and reclaims it as part of the broader vistas, or ‘opened ground’, that the sonnet allowed him to open up. Not that this reclamation is represented as especially visionary or transformative. Heaney might assent to the proposition that ““The soul exceeds its circumstances”” but this excess is not especially liberating. ‘History’ is still present, in the guise of the ‘sixth-sensed threat’ posed by ‘thickened traffic’ and ‘transatlantic flights’ (2006: 55, 56), an environmental awareness that echoes, as we shall see later, Alice Oswald’s sonnets. This history is ‘not be granted the last word / Or the first claim’, and is only lightly drawn, but at the same time the soul that exceeds it does not seem especially liberated. Heaney describes the Tollund Man as ‘an absorbed face / Coming and going, neither god nor ghost, / Not at odds or at one, but simply lost’ (2006: 55). Like the ‘silence’ at the end of ‘Clearances’, that word ‘lost’ seems poised between release and abandonment, emptiness and transformation. Heaney’s syntax in these lines shuttles backwards and forwards between different versions of this split, between being ‘god’ or ‘ghost’, ‘at odds’ or ‘at one’, as if being ‘lost’ were the intermediary state between the two. The sonnet has been a crucial means of articulating this intermediary state from almost the very beginning of Heaney’s career, and he has used the form to continually re-imagine its make-up. From the early commemorative sonnets, especially ‘Requiem for the Croppies’, to the Wordsworthian negotiations of ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, to the uncertain transcendence of ‘Clearances’ and the latter sequences, the sonnet has been an arena for Heaney to weigh and measure the meaning of terms like ‘soul’ and ‘history’, with the form’s shape and music constantly adapting to Heaney’s changing vision.

Chapter Three

‘a compulsion to repeat’: Paul Muldoon

Almost no contemporary poet has had the kind of extreme and long-standing relationship with the sonnet as Paul Muldoon. His engagement with the form has been inveterate, inventive, ambitious, idiosyncratic, transformative and much-remarked upon. Muldoon’s first sonnet, ‘Kate Whisky’ appears in his first book *New Weather* (1973), while *Mules* (1977) ends with his first sonnet sequence, ‘Armageddon, Armageddon’. *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) contains some crucial individual sonnets, including the title poem, while *Quoof* (1983) is, as we shall see, full of sonnets, most noticeably in the forty-nine stanzas of its concluding poem, ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’. Muldoon’s subsequent collections have kept on going back to the form in different guises. Alan Gillis writes that in Muldoon’s hands ‘the sonnet seem[s] to have been innovated, refined, expanded, enriched, coarsened, cheapened, turned inside-out, upside-down, given the run-around, tickled, tormented and terminally left in tatters’ (2012: 568), which catches the scale of Muldoon’s achievement, but also hints at its complexity. The Muldoonian sonnet is, in other words, a restless form that will not settle into any of the adjectives prepared for it, so much so that Gillis is reduced to the barest of bare definitions when he says that the form ‘might best be called, in his hands, the fourteen-line verse unit’ (2012: 568). Peter McDonald uses a similar line when he calls the sonnets of Muldoon’s mid-eighties collections *Quoof* and *Meeting the British* ‘fourteen-line poems and verse-units’ (1994: 145) as though to deny that they really are sonnets.

Responses to Muldoon tend to contrast his forms with their content, often implying that he privileges the former over the later. Helen Vendler argues that, while Muldoon’s poems are ‘impressively constructed’, they ‘too often had a hole on the middle where the feeling should be’ (1997: 58), as though they insisted too much on their life as words, and did not concede enough to the claims of the other life that comes before and after words. Yet Muldoon’s work is full of content of all kinds, and especially histories of all kinds, including those of his own past (to which his work seems to frequently allude, only to then question the basis of the allusion), those of his Northern Irish background, and those wider historical narratives (especially American narratives) to which he has been drawn over the years. But Muldoon’s way of imagining and writing these histories and memories are different to those of Hill and Heaney. As I discussed in the Introduction, Anne Whitehead claims that there are ‘two main ways in which memory has been conceptualized in Western culture’, the first as ‘a system used for storage and retrieval’ in which ‘the object to be located is precisely that which was initially laid down’; and the second as ‘the activity of ceaseless

interpretation' (2008: 48-49). Broadly speaking, Heaney – and Hill – conceive of memory in the first sense, as a system of 'storage and retrieval', with the important caveat that the system is imperfect and in need of repair. Muldoon much more strongly emphasises 'the activity of ceaseless interpretation', in which the past is under almost constant revision, and memories are not so much 'laid down' to be picked up later as they are constructed in the moment of remembrance. The Muldoonian sonnet, with its near constant revision of the form and virtually ceaseless re-interpretation of its boundaries and capacities, has been a crucial site of development and articulation for this re-imagined form of memory.

This alternative construction of memory shows the influence of two important Fs: Robert Frost and Sigmund Freud. Muldoon has long acknowledged Frost as a vital presence in his work, and in an interview with John Haffenden cites Frost's 'apparently simple, almost naive, tone of voice and use of language, underneath which all kinds of complex things are happening' and praises 'his mischievous, sly, multi-layered quality under the surface' (1981: 133, 134). As another twentieth-century master of the sonnet, Frost offers Muldoon a model for inhabiting but slyly and mischievously subverting literary and cultural traditions. Frost's 'multi-layered quality under the surface' resonates with Whitehead's notion of memory as ceaseless interpretation, and I argue that Muldoon's adoption of Frostian poetic strategies – especially to do with voice and narrative – in his early sonnets in particular allows him to articulate this ceaseless interpretation.

Such ceaseless interpretation is of course central to Freud's understanding of memory, which is perhaps better thought of as context rather than an influence. Whitehead observes that 'Freud articulates a version of memory in which the past no longer resides in the original impressions, but in the process of remembering itself', and quotes his 'Screen Memories', an 1899 essay on childhood recollection that argues we may not 'have any conscious memories *from* childhood', but only 'memories *of* childhood' (2003a: 21). Whilst this sense of recollective uncertainty and ambiguity is important to Muldoon's work generally, I argue that his sonnets can be read in terms of two specific Freudian ideas: the uncanny, from Freud's 1919 essay of the same name, and repeating, as described in 1915's 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through'. Freud defines the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (2003b: 124), and as being 'nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed' (2003b: 148), and I will argue that the sonnets from 1983's *Quoof* can be usefully thought of in these terms. The uncanny mixes the familiar and the unknown, or rather describes those moments when the familiar *becomes* unknown, in ways that are often unsettling and even frightening. *Quoof* is one of Muldoon's most sonnet-heavy collections as well as one of his most history conscious, being written in the wake of the hunger strikes and dirty protests in Northern Ireland in the early ninety-eighties, and I argue that the

uncanny's combination of intimacy, fear, and estrangement offers a way of conceptualising the Muldoonian sonnet's often disturbing re-imagining of that history.

Though Muldoon has continued to experiment with the sonnet, the nature of his relationship with the form has changed in his post-eighties work, as Alan Gillis remarks: 'at least since *Hay* (1998), the sense of inevitability and enclosure has markedly been intensified in Muldoon's work, mostly because of his increasingly manic compulsion with repetition' (2012: 586). The repetitiousness of Muldoon's later work can be understood as a version of the repeating Freud examines in 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through' (1915). Freud contrasts repeating with remembering, writing that 'the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather...he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it' (2006: 394). Recollection is never total, but intermingled with forgetting so that the past is frequently and unwittingly repeated over and over again, which is one of the main reasons that memory becomes a matter of ceaseless interpretation. As I argue later, though Freud implies that compulsive repeating can be overcome through psychoanalysis and transition to a more thorough and holistic remembering, his essay implies that this idealised state is almost never reached. I read the sonnets of Muldoon's 2006 collection *Horse Latitudes* as instances of such repetition, in which the form becomes a mode of stasis, aware of its own repetitiousness but unable to change it. In this sense, *Horse Latitudes* is emblematic of Muldoon's late work, written after his exploration of other, larger forms in 1990's *Madoc: A Mystery* and 1994's *The Annals of Chile*, in which the vigour of *Quoof*'s sonnet experiments gives way to a sense of weariness and flat, at times almost pointless, virtuosity.

Horse Latitudes is another historically minded collection, in that it responds – albeit at a distance – to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Both *Horse Latitudes* and *Quoof* therefore invite questions about poetry's relationship to history, about its social responsibility or efficacy, to cite again James Longenbach's formulation. Muldoon, I argue, has not ignored this question, but he has used the sonnet to translate it into different terms. Freud's account of the uncanny emphasises fear, while his notion of repeating is largely pessimistic about the possibility of change and healing. Frost, meanwhile, appears in Longenbach's narrative of modern poetry as a sceptic who doubts poetry's ability to sustain the grand claims that some experimental modernists sometimes made for it. Freud's and Frost's influence on Muldoon's work suggests a similarly sceptical, pessimistic outlook. For Muldoon, poetry is not so much responsible to history, as vulnerable to it, and he has expressed and explored that vulnerability through the sonnet. For all his striking experiments with the form, its persistent return across more than four decades of writing suggests a kind of entrapment, with the poet caught in a past that he cannot change, however wildly he tries to re-imagine it. It is this relationship that I explore in this chapter.

I. ‘ever-receding ground’: the early Muldoonian sonnet

Muldoon’s early sonnet, ‘Why Brownlee Left’, gives an early indication of his relationship with the form:

Why Brownlee left, and where he went,
Is a mystery even now.
For if a man should have been content
It was him; two acres of barley,
One of potatoes, four bullocks,
A milker, a slated farmhouse.
He was last seen going out to plough
On a March morning, bright and early. (2001: 84)

Beneath the surface of this brief vignette, a thumbnail sketch of a life in the moment of its disappearance, there is a whole host of unanswered questions about the nature of contentment, the relationship of individuals to their places, and the transition from past to future. While Brownlee ‘should have been content’, the poem’s implication is that he was not, and that his farm’s meagre holdings proved too narrow a life for him: he upped sticks and left for something better somewhere else, a shift signalled by the sonnet’s last line about ‘gazing into the future’. Unlike his counterparts in Heaney’s poetry, Brownlee is not enriched by being rooted in his home landscape, but rather restricted by it, and decides to try his luck elsewhere. The change in emphasis is played out through the way Muldoon handles the sonnet, quirks and tics that will quickly become identifiably Muldoonian: the loose-limbed lines, which eschew meter and regular lengths, without seeming wilfully arbitrary (most hover around a seven or eight syllable count); the slippery syntax, which seems to say Brownlee was content whilst heavily implying its opposite; the idiosyncratic rhyme scheme and rhymes, which are most striking in the sonnet’s last couplet, that notoriously rhymes ‘foot to’ with ‘future’; the inventive word-play ('foot to / Foot', being run across lines, plays on the literal meaning of enjambment); and perhaps most of all, the combination of a conversational tone with formal complexity. Writing of a much later Muldoon sonnet, ‘Twice’, from 1994’s *The Annals of Chile*, Clair Wills notes the combination of a ‘whimsical, almost throwaway tone’ with ‘the extreme concision of the sonnet’s laconic form’ (1998: 9), and a similar combination is evident in ‘Why Brownlee Left’.

In doing so Muldoon echoes the work of Robert Frost, one of his most crucial early influences. His 1998 essay ‘Getting Round: Notes towards an *Ars Poetica*’ is – amongst many things – a series of readings of Frost’s sonnet ‘The Silken Tent’, and one of Muldoon’s Oxford lectures is devoted to Frost’s ‘The Mountain’, alluded to in Muldoon’s early poem ‘The Country Club’ in *Mules*. ‘Gold’, from *Meeting the British* (1987), also references Frost’s reading at John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Presidential Inauguration. Rachel Buxton, in her essay on Muldoon and Frost, ‘Never Quite Showing His Hand’, argues that ‘Muldoon has been drawn to the unpredictability, the playful discrepancy between surface and subterranean in Frost’s poetry’, and that what appeals to him about the American poet is ‘the alternative readings...within a single poem’, the idea of ‘alternative realities, of paths not taken but nevertheless hinted at’ (2004: 33). ‘Why Brownlee Left’ is built around this notion of alternative realities and as the poem highlights, why he leaves remains ‘a mystery’. Even more directly, ‘Immrama’, the sonnet that follows ‘Why Brownlee Left’ in *Why Brownlee Left*, imagines how the poet’s father, in youth, ‘took passage, almost, for Argentina’ (2001: 85), a counterfactual further complicated by Muldoon’s comment (in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* introduction to the collection) that ‘I seem to remember my father telling me that he determined once to emigrate to Australia. Now he tells me it was a hen’s yarn. Either he, or I, must have made it up’ (2003b: 192). This, too, is sly and mischievous and multi-layered, and as Tim Kendall, writing in his book *Paul Muldoon*, suggests, ‘Whatever its inspiration, the story is carefully crafted to reflect the poet’s preoccupation with alternative lives. Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” is the ur-poem for this account as for so much of Muldoon’s later work’ (1996: 65).

Muldoon’s sonnets from this period bear Frost’s imprint, even if there are few direct allusions. Peter Howarth observes the ‘easy-going tone, story-telling and naturalistic language’ of Frost sonnets like ‘Mowing’ and ‘Design’, poems ‘sounded like real people talking’ (2011: 232), and argues that Frost

experimented a great deal with the sonnet’s form, running sentences across the nominal boundaries of quatrains and tercets, or making novel rhyme patterns that pull against the syntax, because this push-and-pull of talk against the sonnet’s form was a scaled-up version of the ‘strained relation’ Frost liked between speech and metre, and the strained relations he also thought made good art itself. (2011: 232)

These are strategies that Muldoon also employs. ‘Why Brownlee Left’, to take just one example, uses a series of run-on lines to complicate the surface of the poem, and its rhyme scheme idiosyncratically cuts across the boundary of octave and sestet (‘bullocks’ and ‘farmhouse’ from the former rhyme with ‘black’ and ‘famous’ in the latter). The Muldoonian sonnet, too, has frequent recourse to idiomatic speech: not only the ‘March morning bright and early’ of ‘Why Brownlee Left’, but also ‘Lull’,

another sonnet from the same collection, which begins ‘I’ve heard it argued in some quarters’, and includes the colloquial – and satiric – line, ‘As your man said on the Mount of Olives’ (2001: 81). Tale-telling is also vital to these sonnets, and it is in ‘Immrama’ where Muldoon narrates his father’s putative migration ‘From the mud-walled cabin behind the mountain / Where he was born and bred’ to ‘A building site from which he disappeared / And took passage, almost, for Argentina’ (2001: 85). The sonnet’s first line – ‘I, too, have trailed my father’s spirit’ – is another example of everyday speech in Muldoon’s sonnets, with that ‘too’ hinting at an ongoing conversation, as though the speaker were responding to something someone else had said. The result is a foregrounding of narrative and narration that ends up subtly destabilizing the events being narrated.

All this is in marked contrast to Seamus Heaney’s reading of Frost. In ‘Crediting Poetry’ Heaney praises Frost’s ‘farmer’s accuracy and his wily down-to-earthness’ (1998: 450), while in the introduction to his Oxford lectures, *The Redress of Poetry*, he says of Frost’s narrative poem ‘Directive’ that it ‘provides a draught of the clear water of transformed understanding and fills the reader with a momentary sense of freedom and wholeness’ (1995: xv). Heaney emphasises Frost’s groundedness and rich sense of place, values that resonate with Heaney’s work, but Muldoon sees in Frost an evasiveness and elusiveness that translates into his own poems. Clair Wills, in her 1993 book *Improprieties*, characterises this uncertainty as ‘Dubious Origins’, the title of her chapter on Muldoon: ‘Muldoon’s poetry is fundamentally bound up with an investigation of the nature of origins, whether biological, familial, “tribal”, or national’, and ‘can be read as a thorough-going rejection of the notion of stable or univocal origins’ (1993: 194). Muldoon sonnets become sites of such dubious origins: Muldoon’s father did not, in fact, migrate to Argentina; we are not sure why Brownlee left. In ‘October 1950’ he returns to the primal scene of his parents having sex (indeed, of his own conception, to judge from the date in the title, nine months before Muldoon’s birth in June 1951), with the sonnet beginning ‘Whatever it is, it all comes down to this: / My father’s cock / Between my mother’s thighs’. This is in some ways the most dubious of origins, as it is a memory Muldoon cannot have actually had, and the sonnet is none the wiser for conjuring it:

Cookers and eaters, Fuck the Pope,
Wow and flutter, a one-legged howl,
My sly quadroon, the way home from the pub –
Anything wild or wonderful –

Whatever it is, it goes back to this night,
To a chance remark
In a room at the top of the stairs;
To an open field, as like as not,

Under the little stars.

Whatever it is, it leaves me in the dark. (2001: 76)

Though coarser than anything in Frost, this also employs a Frostian spokeness and emphasis on narrative to increase, rather than remove, uncertainty. The colloquial ‘as like as not’ not only foregrounds the presence of a particular speaking voice, but also the presence of chance, and sheer dumb luck. ‘Whatever it is’, the poem is unlikely to get to the bottom of it. Wills notes how ‘Muldoon’s suspicion of the traditional lineaments of family, community, and nation is paralleled by his refusal to respect the outlines of traditional poetic form’, and cites ‘his “deconstruction” of the sonnet form’ (1993: 194) as a prominent example. ‘October 1950’’s lurid portrayal of parental sex certainly disrupts the boundaries of family, and we might also think of the poem as a partially deconstructed sonnet. Muldoon’s preference for half rhymes – ‘Pope’ and ‘pub’; ‘night’ and ‘not’; ‘stairs’ and ‘stars’ – deflect or submerge the form’s outline, as does his constantly varying line-lengths. Taken together with the idiomatic, speech-like phrasing, the sonnet reads as though it were an off-the-cuff yarn spun up by the speaker.

At the same time, of course, the poem is clearly not improvised, but rather patterned to give the impression of improvisation. As Wills also notes, alongside Muldoon’s deconstruction of the sonnet, ‘the underlying shape remains as the foundation of the poem’ (1993: 194). The form never quite goes away, but hovers uncertainly around the edges of ‘October 1950’ and other early Muldoon poems. It is in this sense that his sonnets become uncanny, as Freud defined that term, that they join ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’ (2003b: 124). The uncanny combines familiarity and strangeness to striking, unsettling and often outright scary effects, as do Muldoon’s sonnets, whose warped versions of the form can be disturbingly elusive, and imply that the histories and memories they recount are also disturbingly elusive. Indeed, there is an even more particular sense in which Muldoon’s sonnets are uncanny. Freud notes the etymology of the word in German, highlighting how ‘*Heimlich* thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimlich*, “the unhomely”) is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, “the homely”’) (2003b: 134). The uncanny is bound up with ideas about, and complexities of, home, and so resonates with Wills’ sense of Muldoon’s dubious origins. Not simply the opposite of ‘homeliness’, the uncanny emerges out of, and speaks back to, the idea of homeliness. ‘October 1950’, ‘Why Brownlee Left’ and ‘Immrama’ all represent home as elusive, constrictive or even frightening; they all also keep coming back to it, or keep failing to leave it, as though it can neither be inhabited or rejected. Muldoon’s scepticism of stable origins, his Frost-derived investment in counterfactuals and interpretative ambiguities, of murky depths below smooth surfaces, all speak to an ambivalence about the question of home. It is an ambivalence that gets staged time and time again through Muldoon’s

partially inhabited, partially rejected sonnets. The extremity of his innovations with the form suggest a desire to break free of its conventions and traditions, but the equally extreme insistence on using it in the first place betrays an inability to do so. In Muldoon's hands the form becomes uncanny, neither completely strange nor completely familiar, but a volatile, exciting, frightening mix of the two.

Perhaps the uncanniest of Muldoon's books is *Quoof* (1983), and some of its poems mirror precisely the examples compiled by Freud in his essay. Freud's claim that 'To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts' (2001: 148) is answered, for example, by 'The Mirror', whose last section is a sonnet eccentrically split between nine and five line stanzas. The poem's speaker imagines his dead father 'breathing through' the eponymous mirror: 'I heard him say in a reassuring whisper: / *I'll give you a hand, here*' (2001: 109). 'The Hands', meanwhile, tells the story of 'the farmer Sebastian' whose 'far-fetched hands / would stir at night' even after they had been chopped off and he had died, so that 'the villagers heard / the fists come blattering on their windows, looking for home' (2001: 110). Freud cites 'Severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm...feet that dance by themselves' as having 'something highly uncanny about them, especially when they are credited, as in the last instance, with independent activity' (2003b: 150). Muldoon's 'far-fetched hands', whose adjective puns on the implausibility as well as the physical activity of severed limbs, are a direct instance of 'independent activity'. *Quoof* is replete with non-human creatures displaying human-like agency, from the 'flapping' rain and 'wood-pigeon's concerto' of 'Gathering Mushrooms' to Gallogly, the central figure in the 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants', the long poem that concludes the collection, who is characterised as 'a baggy-kneed animated / bear drawn out of the woods / by an apple pie' (2001: 132). Tim Kendall notes the cartoonish quality to the description, especially evident in the word 'animated' (1996: 108), as well as its roots in "the Trickster cycle of the Winnebago Indians" (1996: 109). Both these sources emphasise 'the anthropomorphic potential of animals and the bestial characteristics of humans' (1996: 108), undermining the distinction between human and animal and suggesting what Freud calls 'the old *animistic* view of the universe, a view characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with human spirits'. In blurring the boundary between the human and the non-human, Muldoon's sonnets constantly hint at such an animistic view, suggesting that the world is comprised of such half-hidden presences.

Quoof is also dominated by the sonnet. There are thirteen stand-alone sonnets, with two fourteen line sections forming part of another poem, 'The Mirror'. The collection also opens with the five fourteen-line stanzas of 'Gathering Mushrooms' and, most eye-catchingly, ends on the forty-nine fourteen-line stanzas of 'The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants'. Gillis says that Muldoon's 'initial efforts reached a crescendo' with the book, while it is this collection that Peter McDonald has

in mind when he refers to ‘the profusion of sonnets (or, at least, fourteen-line poems and verse-units)’ (1997: 148-149). As these comments suggest, Muldoon’s poems do not always look and feel like sonnets. If, as Michael Spiller argues in *The Development of the Sonnet*, the sonnet is primarily known through three features – ‘it has proportion, being in eight and six, and extension, being in ten- or eleven-syllable lines, and duration, having fourteen of them’ (1992: 3), then Muldoon’s versions in *Quoof* frequently only meet one of the criteria, that of duration. Poems like ‘The Salmon of Knowledge’, ‘Beaver’, ‘Sky-Woman’, the third section of ‘The Mirror’, ‘The Right Arm’ and ‘From Last Poems’ play fast and loose with the sonnet’s proportion and extension. Each virtually ignores the eight-six division, with the first three being structured as couplets, and the others using unusual, uneven stanzaic division, and each varies their line-lengths considerably, sometimes contracting down to four syllable lines, and sometimes overflowing the pentameter in twelve syllable lines. Rhyme, too, is only minimally present, and Andrew Osborn has written persuasively of what he terms Muldoon’s ‘fuzzy rhyme’ (2000: 326-238), structured around sequences of consonants rather than terminal vowel sounds, which give (amongst many others) the unlikely rhyme-pairs of ‘Rupert Brooke’ and ‘motor-bike’ (2001: 48) from ‘Ma’ in 1977’s *Mules*, and ‘B-Specials’ and ‘bicycle’ in *Quoof*’s ‘The Sightseers’. Osborn describes this as ““fuzzy rhyme” because Muldoon’s unique variation, like fuzzy logic, spurns all-or-nothing dichotomies in favour greater and lesser probabilities. ... The term "fuzzy" also appropriately combines suggestions of granularity and blur’ (2000: 328). Far from helping to secure and anchor the outlines of the sonnet, Muldoon’s rhyming only makes them more ambiguous, and more blurred.

Osborn calls the sonnet ‘Muldoon’s most powerful artillery in his formally expansionist campaign’ and argues that ‘To test rhyme’s ductility – how much can one bend or draw out rhyme before it doesn’t? – he depends on the sonnet’s fourteen lines and immediately recognisable stanza patterns to signal his intention to rhyme’, a tactic he calls ‘baiting and switching’ (2000: 328-329). We could argue this the other way around, and say that Muldoon uses the minimal presence of full rhyme to hint at the sonnet’s presence, even in poems that do not look or sound especially like them. ‘Gathering Mushrooms’, for example, stages a sort of drama of misrecognition in which the form is only ever partially present. The opening stanza employs a series of loosely rhyming couplets, apart from lines five to eight, which rhyme ‘wide’ with ‘formaldehyde’ and, more obliquely, ‘trays’ with ‘Troy’ in the *abab* pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet. In what will become a familiar move throughout *Quoof*, Muldoon uses a partial fragment of a recognised rhyme scheme to gesture towards the sonnet, but refuses to go on and use that rhyme scheme in its entirety. Even when the last stanza of ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ seems to employ a Petrarchan-Shakespearean hybrid rhyming *abba cddc efef gg*, the tentative integrity of the form is undercut by its being written italics and – within the fiction of the poem – spoken by a hallucinated version of the poet-as-part-horse:

*Come back to us. However cold and raw, your feet
were always meant
to negotiate terms with bare cement.*

*Beyond this concrete wall is a wall of concrete
and barbed wire. Your only hope
is to come back. If sing you must, let your song
tell of treading your own dung,
let straw and dung give a spring to your step.*

*If we never live to see the day we leap
into our true domain,
lie down with us now and wrap
yourself in the soiled grey blanket of Irish rain
that will, one day, bleach itself white.*

Lie down with us and wait. (2001: 106)

There are more full rhymes here than in the preceding stanzas. The opening quatrain, and the ‘domain’ ‘rain’ rhyme at lines ten and twelve, brings the poem more audibly within the orbit of the sonnet, but this new-found fullness is counterbalanced by most of the other rhymes being less than full, and often muffled by the varying line lengths and run-on syntax. This last stanza may be the most fully rhymed sonnet in the poem, but only relative to the other, incredibly slight sonnet-variants that Muldoon offers in the preceding four stanzas. It is also, in some respects, the most extravagantly unreal of the poem’s stanzas, given that it is spoken as part of the hallucination in which the speaker of the poem thinks he has the head of a horse. The italics mark the stanza out as different from the rest of the poem, as do the non-naturalistic, oneiric details, such as the inverted and duplicated ‘wall of concrete’ that is ‘beyond this concrete wall’. This radical disjunction between form and content prevents us reading the progression of the form as a sort of master-narrative through which to interpret the poem. Indeed, the very extremity of the disjunction, counterpointing the poem’s most fully realised sonnet with its most delusional fantasy, enacts a fundamental uncertainty about perception and interpretation. If the growing outlines of the sonnet seem like a solid, stable platform on which to found perceptions and from which to make interpretations, then the resultant confusion is all the greater when the poem’s last stanza removes that apparent stability. The sonnet becomes, in the words of the speaker of ‘Gathering Mushrooms’, ‘ever-receding ground’ (2001: 106).

Muldoon’s ‘ever-receding ground’ recalls – and inverts – Heaney’s ‘opened ground’, turning the homely (Freud’s *Das Heimlich*) into its opposite, the unhomely or uncanny (*Das Unheimlich*). Where Heaney’s sonnets strive to imagine home, even if this proves difficult in practise, Muldoon’s subvert such imaginings, and one of Quoof’s crucial instances of the uncanny is its treatment of home.

‘Gathering Mushrooms’ begins with an overcast memory of childhood home (‘The rain came flapping through the yard / like a tablecloth that she hand embroidered’) that hints at contemporary political violence, not only in its allusion to ‘the Gates of Troy’ but also in the ‘Barley straw. Gypsum. Dried blood. Ammonia’ that fill the mushroom shed. In a different vein, ‘The Sightseers’ describes a family trip to ‘the brand-new roundabout at Ballygawley’ instead of to ‘some graveyard’ (2001: 110). Ballygawley, however, is the site of an encounter between Uncle Pat and the B-Specials, who ‘stopped him one night somewhere near Ballygawley / and smashed his bicycle / and made him sing the Sash and curse the Pope of Rome’ (2001: 111). Pat’s story turns a familiar setting into a frighteningly violent one, suddenly and vertiginously exposing everyday reality to the menacing depths of history. Muldoon’s last two lines describe how the B-Specials ‘held a pistol so hard against his forehead / there was still the mark of an O when he got home’ (2001: 111), and so ending the sonnet on the full rhyme of Rome with home. The fullness of this rhyme is heard against a background of only partially heard half- or fuzzy rhymes, (‘B-Specials’ and ‘bicycles’, for example), almost as though the sonnet itself were half-hidden and only comes into view at the last minute, like an ambush sprung by the poet to snare the reader. Even here, however, Muldoon further complicates the poem by placing an ‘O’ in between ‘Rome’ and ‘home’. This strange, unanchored sound ghosts both words, and by appearing between them blunts the force of the closing rhyme, as if the sonnet’s rhyme scheme had already been completed in the ‘Rome’ ‘O’ pair, and ‘home’ become redundant. What might otherwise have been a forceful closure sounds much more ambivalently open-ended in light of that ‘O’. The historical experience the sonnet narrates might now be out in the open, but that does not mean it is any more comprehensible. Indeed, although Muldoon uses the ‘O’ to mark a visual image – the impress of a gun muzzle on Pat’s head – it also doubles up as a cry, a sudden exclamation whose inarticulateness resists explication.

‘The Sightseers’ begins with a trip to ‘the brand-new roundabout at Ballygawley, / the first in mid-Ulster’ (2001: 110), which the Muldoon family favour over visiting ‘some graveyard’. That is to say, the family prefer to inspect an example of burgeoning modern transport and infrastructure – however comically parochial – than return to a site of the past. The choice does them little good, in the sense that they end up back in the past anyway, via Uncle Pat’s recollections, but it does highlight the complex temporality that lurks underneath the surface of the sonnet, the ways in which it gets caught between past, present, and future. In *Improprieties* Clair Wills has written insightfully and persuasively of the tension in Muldoon’s work between ‘a putatively authentic rural Ireland’ and ‘the ultramodern world of the United States’ (1993: 196), and that ‘Muldoon sets up an opposition (which he then undercuts) between the securities of a rural Irish childhood, and the arbitrary and violent quality of personal relations in the modern, international, and metropolitan world’ (1993: 197). As Wills’ observations suggest, Muldoon not only destabilises the notion of Ireland as home, but considers how all constructions of place are impure and how all memories unsettlingly intertwine past

and present. Wills writes that ‘a fragmented and discontinuous history’ has resulted in a ‘hybridity’ that ‘not only affect[s] a culture such as that of Ireland’ but also ‘the “centre”, whether Britain or America’, which ‘contains within it the fragmented signs of other cultures, both because of modern processes such as immigration and tourism, and as the result of the history of colonialism (though these processes cannot be separated)’ (1993: 195-96). This is most apparent in ‘Quoof’:

How many times did I carry our family word
for the hot water bottle
to a strange bed,
as my father would juggle a red-hot half brick
in an old sock
to his childhood settle.
I have taken it into so many lovely heads
or laid it between us like a sword.

A hotel room in New York City
with a girl who spoke hardly any English,
my hand on her breast
like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti
or some other shy beast
that has yet to enter the language. (2001: 113)

The octave’s memories of Muldoon’s father, and of a shared familial language, are suggestive of ‘a rural Irish childhood’, whilst the generic ‘hotel room’ and unnamed ‘girl’ places the sestet in the New York metropolis. The sharp division between the two stanzas, located at the sonnet’s traditional turn, also gives the impression of a substantial gap between these two sites. Muldoon, however, subtly intertwines them. The ‘strange bed[s]’ of the octave, the sonnet implies, are scenes of the speaker’s sexual exploits and so similar to the New York hotel room. Similarly, although Muldoon glosses the ‘family word’ so we know what it means, it is not English, and anticipates the non-English speech of the girl in the sestet. These thematic symmetries are also articulated through a series of formal symmetries in which octave and sestet, in spite of the volta, partially mirror one another. Indeed, both stanzas contain an internal mini-volta, as it were, constructed out of similes that try to make sense of their initial questions and declarations: at line four we have ‘as my father’, drawing a comparison between the speaker and his father, between ‘a strange bed’ and ‘childhood settle’, and at line twelve we have ‘like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti’, which is compared to ‘my hand on her breast’. These comparisons do little to clarify the poem: the ‘as’ in line four, for example, could mean ‘at the same time as’ or ‘in the same way as’, or both, whilst ‘my hand on her breast / like the

smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti' could be comparing the yeti to the hand, to the breast, or to the hand on the breast. Nevertheless, the two similes suggest certain similarities, as though octave and sestet were duplicate structures that question just how far the sonnet has travelled when it makes its jump to New York City.

This is a matter of historical, as well as geographic distance. The co-incidence of 'enter' and 'language' brings together the poem's sexual and linguistic concerns, suggesting that language is a body to be penetrated, which in turn brings into view the long history of colonialism, and Wills notes how 'The poem hints at the way language is used to colonize' and that it 'can be read as another version of the traditional trope in which the female represents the land to be colonized by the male' (1993: 199). She seems to suggest that Muldoon conjures this history in order to counter it, arguing that 'the woman resists – the poem ends still lacking a verb, the "entering" unaccomplished' (1993: 199). This reading, however, misses the darker undercurrent in 'enter'. Though Muldoon's sestet is ambiguous, the temptation is to equate the 'shy beast' with the girl, as it is her non-English speech that 'has yet to enter the language'. But the gendered sexual connotations of the verb heavily imply it is the male speaker doing the entering. This inverts the meaning of the last lines to suggest that it is the English language that will 'enter' the girl's language, and not as a 'shy beast' but as an agent of colonisation. Thought of in this way, the rhyme of 'English' with 'language' imposes the former on the latter, as though to assert the dominance of English over other languages. Indeed, Andrew Osborn goes so far as to suggest that the fuzzy rhyming that produces the 'English' and 'language' pair is 'sometimes no more evident to the untrained ear than contagion is to the unaided eye', and that ignorance of such rhymes is akin 'to the vulnerability of a new world to the diseases of the old' (2000: 324). Thought of in this way, even the form of Muldoon's poem repeats the violent colonial past.

The appearance of the crucial, multi-valent word 'enter' in the poem's last line gives the sonnet's conclusion the kind of twist often associated with a terminal Shakespearean couplet, even though Muldoon does not rhyme his last two lines. As in 'The Sightseers', the form builds, unbeknown to the reader, to a conclusion that suddenly opens out onto long, unsettling family and political histories to which the poem had initially seemed only tangentially related. This is especially disconcerting in 'Quoof' because the New York metropolis is supposed to represent a break with history or at least a break from a certain kind of history. America is new and modern, and a place for figures like Brownlee to cast off old lives and an outmoded past, but the past ends up being repeated here as well so that even the attempt to escape history leads straight back to it. We can think of Muldoon's formal experiments in a similar way. At the start of his article Osborn quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'wish to write such rhymes as shall not suggest restraint but contrariwise the wildest freedom', and argues that fuzzy rhyme offers 'a new perspective' (2000: 324). Yet as his rhyme-as-disease metaphor suggests, these experimental rhymes can have complex, unexpected consequences.

Formal innovation does not automatically lead to ‘the wildest freedom’. We might think of Muldoon’s vertiginous experiments with the sonnet as resisting the weight of tradition, as turning the form into something contemporary, but the compulsive repetition of the fourteen-line shape also suggests a past that cannot be escaped, which keeps coming back even in the act of trying to evade it.

Such compulsive repetition is another of the ways in which Freud defines ‘The Uncanny’. He writes that ‘In the unconscious mind we can recognize the dominance of a *compulsion to repeat*, which proceeds from instinctual impulses. The compulsion probably depends on the essential nature of the drives themselves. It is strong enough to override the pleasure principle and lend a demonic character to certain aspects of mental life’ (2003b: 145). Freud represents this compulsion to repeat as a primal force that stems from the unconscious and is bound up with ‘instinctual impulses’. I do not mean to suggest that the sonnet is a comparably primal or unconscious form, or that Muldoon uses it in this way. What I do want to argue is that Muldoon’s representation of history can be thought of as compulsively repetitious, and that the sonnet has been central to his articulation of these repetitions. His sonnets keep rehearsing different versions of the past, even when they seem to determinedly look away from it, as in ‘Quoof’ and ‘The Sightseers’, which tries to avoid the past in going to a roundabout rather than a graveyard. The eruption of history into these poems can seem ‘demonic’, to use Freud’s word, given the suddenness with which they appear, and the violence they often convey. At the same time, the invention and imaginative force released by these repetitions, such as the ‘O’ of ‘The Sightseers’, or the unexpectedly coherent rhymes of ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ last stanza, is itself very compelling. As a consequence, Muldoon’s sonnets have a dark allure that might be described as ‘demonic’, and generate a transgressive excitement out of their often disturbing, unsettling formal moves.

Perhaps the best example of this demonic compulsion to repeat comes in ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’, the forty-nine stanza poem that concludes *Quoof*, which recounts the adventures of Gallogly, a mercenary terrorist, and his pursuer, the Native American Mangas Jones. The nightmarish setting makes contemporary Belfast frighteningly strange, as do the fractured and often satiric references to (amongst others) Ovid, Shakespeare, Frost, Heaney, *Treasure Island*, and the Trickster cycle of the Winnebago. Like the comparison between the Irish family home and the New York hotel room in ‘Quoof’, the presence of so many disparate cultural traces in nineteen-eighties Northern Ireland makes what we might have thought familiar appear uncannily strange. Muldoon says that ‘In the aisling or “dream-vision” which forms the middle section of the poem, Gallogly muses on his own mercenary past. He has made an abortive trip to the United States to buy arms, in the course of which he imagines himself to have killed a girl. That, for him, is the root cause of his present plight, the reason for his being pursued by an avenging Indian’ (2003a: 193). In amongst the variety of historical and cultural traditions that Muldoon subtly animates here, the past remains elusive and unknown. Gallogly only ‘imagines himself to have killed a girl’, which calls into

question the accuracy and validity of his memory and blurs the boundary between imagination and reality that Freud offered up as one example of the uncanny. There is a fundamental uncertainty at work that prevents any definitive judgements or even statements about the past, and in their absence a range of different possibilities – aisling, dream vision, revenge quest, to cite the few Muldoon mentions – suggest themselves, but extend rather than decide the original confusion, complicate rather clarify ‘the root cause’ of the ‘current plight’.

The poem also obsessively turns and returns to the sonnet, in a repetitiousness that, as Kendall argues, ‘almost seems ... specifically designed to show off Muldoon’s apparently infinite technical resources’ (1996: 108). As with ‘Gathering Mushrooms’, the poem stages a cat-and-mouse (or bait-and-switch) game of identification in which the form seems to be both everywhere and nowhere. Stanza eleven’s octave, for example, has hints of a Petrarchan rhyme scheme in its half-rhyme of ‘frost’ and ‘mist’ at lines two and three (2001: 131), while stanza twenty-seven rhymes ‘larger’ and ‘lager’ at lines two and three, and then ‘Moy’ and ‘Boy’ in its sestet (2001: 137). Stanza thirty-seven, meanwhile, offers glimpses of a Shakespearean pattern, with ‘bright’ and ‘sight’ at lines two and four, and ‘up’ and ‘ketchup’ at six and eight (2001: 141); and most startlingly of all, stanza ten mixes an almost full Shakespearean rhyme scheme with a hammed-up demotic stage-speak:

‘I’ll warrant them’s the very pair
o’ boys I seen abroad
in McParland’s bottom, though where
in under God –
for thou art so possessed with murd’rous hate –
where they come from God only knows.’
‘They were mad for a bite o’ mate,
I s’pose.’ (2001: 131)

Like the concluding hallucinogenic stanza of ‘Gathering Mushrooms’, the sudden materialisation of the form disrupts rather than affirms the reader’s sense of the poem as sonnet sequence, asserting the sonnet’s presence without clarifying its status. Cloaked in an exaggerated demotic and undercut by other formal irregularities like line-lengths and rhythms, the stanza reads nothing like a Shakespearean sonnet, whilst also insistently, uncannily echoing one.

Kendall also observes how ‘the fifth line of the tenth stanza – “*for thou art so possessed with murd’rous hate*” – happens also to be the fifth line of Shakespeare’s tenth sonnet’ (1996: 108). The precision of the allusion suggests that Muldoon is not only ghosting Shakespeare, but also doubling him. In the rest of this section, I want to consider how Muldoon’s sonnet sequence stages a particular

species of the Freudian uncanny, that of the doppelganger or double. Freud defines the doppelganger as ‘the appearance of persons who have to be regarded as identical because they look alike...a person may identify himself with another and so become unsure of his true self; or he may substitute the other’s self for his own. The self may thus be duplicated, divided and interchanged’ (2003b: 141-2), and there is more than a hint of such divisions and interchanges in ‘The More A Man Has’. Kendall suggests that Gallogly and his comparably violent, obsessive, and protean Native American pursuer Mangas Jones, are doubles of one another, suggesting that ‘The obvious correspondence between the two characters even causes a fusion of identities’ (1996: 113), and he also notes how in the poem more generally ‘characters merge, comeback to life, shift from continent to continent and timescale to timescale, even transform themselves into animals to evade capture’ (1996: 114). This doubling is a matter of form, as well as story:

All a bit much after the night shift
to meet a milkman
who’s double-parked his van
closing your front door after him.

He’s sporting your
Donegal tweed suit and your
Sunday shoes and politely raises your
hat as he goes by.

You stand there with your mouth open
as he climbs into the still-warm
driving seat of your Cortina
and screeches off towards the motorway,
leaving you uncertain
of your still-warm wife’s damp tuft. (2001: 130)

The stanza is a kind of doppelganger of the sonnet, rhyming milkman and van at lines two and three, and rhyming ‘your’ with itself at lines six and seven, where a Petrarchan sonnet would call for full rhymes. ‘[Y]our’ is then repeated a third time in line eight, forming a triple auto-rhyme in the middle of the stanza, which replicates a doppelganger-like identity theft in which the third person Gallogly, the ‘he’ of the stanza, invades and occupies the second person ‘you’ of the milkman (tellingly, there is no first person ‘I’) by making off with his clothes and car. Identity is something material and superficial, concentrated in objects like clothing and cars that can be shared by, or swapped between, different individuals, much as Freud said the self could be ‘duplicated, divided or interchanged’. Muldoon’s strategy of using fragments of the sonnet tradition to indicate without fully inhabiting the form here morphs into a series of repetitions that enact a doubled, divided sense of identity. It is a

move that he uses elsewhere in the poem. In stanza eleven, for example, Muldoon imagines Gallogly grasping himself ‘as if, as if’ (2001: 131) he were a character (or characters) in *Treasure Island*, whilst stanza thirty-seven puns on his name: ‘otherwise known as Golightly, / Otherwise known as Ingoldsby, / otherwise known as English’ (2001: 142). These formal doublings stage moments of doppelganger-like identity transfer, or transformation, in which Gallogly shape shifts into new roles and new names.

Muldoon has written of ‘The More a Man Has’ that ‘I hoped to purge myself of the very public vocabulary it employs, the kennings of the hourly news bulletin. In so far as it’s about anything, the poem is about the use, or abuse, or the English language in Ireland’ (2003a: 192-193). One important way in which Muldoon does this is through comedic, or satiric, doubling that re-inhabits public language in order to mock it:

Such is the integrity
of their quarrel
that she immediately took down
the legally held shotgun
and let him have both barrels.

She had only wanted to clear the air. (2001: 132)

Edna Longley points out the media clichés of ‘legally held shotgun’ and ‘clear the air’ (1986: 209-210), to which we might add the more idiomatic ‘let him have both barrels’. Tim Kendall also notes the poem’s continual recourse to ‘terrorist hardware and terrorist street-talk’ (1996: 115). The point that I want to stress is that Muldoon critiques – if that is the right word – these forms of speech by inhabiting and distorting them in his own outrageously distorted sonnet forms. Gallogly himself, as a mercenary terrorist on the run, is a prominent instance of the language of the news bulletin, but in representing him (in the stanza I quoted earlier) as a milkman who may have had sex with another man’s wife, Muldoon also makes him a stock figure from soft porn films. Muldoon exaggeratedly doubles a public language of violence in order to de-familiarise it, to make what is well known seem strange and unfamiliar, to go back to the terms of Freud’s uncanny. At one point in the poem Muldoon imagines a Northern Irish Catholic girl ‘hog-tied / to the chapel gates’ (2001: 130) and tarred and feathered for going out with British soldiers (a scene Heaney alludes to in ‘Punishment’ from *North*). He describes how ‘Her lovely head has been chopped / and changed’ (2001: 130), an image that Longley observes ‘not only darkens the light slanginess of an everyday cliché, but visualises what it might mean’ (1994: 197). The technical resources of the sonnet are crucial to the poem’s excavations of these clichés: it is the unexpected line break that shifts the meaning of ‘chopped / and changed’.

These are bold, exciting experiments with language and prosody, and Gillis writes that Muldoon's early sonnets had a hugely liberating, electrifying effect' (2012: 585), especially as they were 'written within the Troubles' stasis of malevolence' (2012: 585). But as the above examples suggest, Muldoon's formally virtuosic parodies do not just mock the language of violence, they also start to repeat it. The poem's linguistic spoofs are not straightforward satire, but sometimes become a cruel re-enforcement of the violence they initially parody. It is in this sense that Freud's notion of doubling is important, as it shows how something that begins as a protective measure can also become self-defeating and self-destructive. In his account of the doppelganger Freud argues that 'The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self' and 'the "immortal soul" was the first double of the body', but that 'these ideas arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and the primitive man, and when this phrase is surmounted, the meaning of the double changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death' (2003b: 142). The meaning of the double is itself doubled, and begins as a form of protection before turning into a mode of destruction. In one sense, Freud's vocabulary of death and immortality is a long way from Muldoon's more immediately historical concerns, but what I want to suggest is that Muldoon's formal doublings have a similarly ambivalent function. Like Freud's doppelganger, they are a defence mechanism that has gone awry and now embodies the threat it was meant to guard against (in Muldoon's case, 'the use, or abuse of the English language in Ireland'). Muldoon's parodies are meant to ward off the insidious language of conflict, but the gap between such a language and its parody can be difficult to discern, so that instead of deflecting or purging 'the kennings of the hourly news bulletin', Muldoon ends up repeating them.

This is a crucial point for Muldoon's sonnets. Tim Kendall calls 'The More a Man Has' 'a homage to the sonnet and an act – or series of acts – of organised violence against it' (1996: 108), and whilst Muldoon's formal inventiveness in some ways renovates the form, just as he renovates clichés, he does so at the cost of some brutality (again, as with his handling of cliché). When Muldoon describes the blown-up body of a Belfast councillor as being 'just shy of a foot' (2001: 138), the metrical pun makes it difficult to think he is not talking about the sonnet, too. Comparably, it is difficult to not hear a self-reflexive critique when he writes:

A hole in the heart, an ovarian
cyst.
Coming up the Bann
in a bubble.
Disappearing up his own bum.
Or, running on the spot
with all the minor aplomb

of a trick-cyclist. (2001: 133)

This describes Gallogly, but it also describes the sonnet. The form is a ‘trick cyclist’, a possibly elaborate but ultimately low-key entertainment that fails to offer real solace or mitigation. These sonnets are forever ‘running on the spot’, and their ceaseless invention achieves not very much. Indeed, the form does worse than simply not help, it actively propagates the violence it ostensibly distracts from. Muldoon’s other figure for Gallogly in this stanza is a cancerous cyst and, in a trope that he will return to with increasing frequency in subsequent decades, the ‘ovarian / cyst’ yokes together fertility and death, re-imagining procreation as a disease. Cancer is, in a way, of form of doubling and duplication, or what Iain Twiddy (in a comment I shall return to) calls ‘replication’ (2015: 144), but it is also a destructive doubling. Thought of in this way, Muldoon’s formal doublings do not ‘purge’ the violence of his contemporary moment, but end up duplicating and furthering it, especially when ‘cyst’ is re-inscribed into the poem through the rhyme with ‘cyclist’.

In his comments on ‘The More a Man Has’ Muldoon notes that Gallogly’s pursuer Mangas Jones ‘would seem to have a lot of time for the poems of Robert Frost – particularly “For, Once, Then, Something”’ (2003a: 193), and the ‘The More a Man Has’ begins with the ‘pebble of quartz’ (2001: 128) that concludes Frost’s poem. It also ends with a version of that pebble, with one of the poem’s unnamed comic voices commenting on ‘a lunimous stone’ in ‘a drowneded man’s grip’ (2001: 147). As I noted in the introduction, Longenbach reads the ambivalence with which Frost describes this pebble as indicative of a sceptical attitude towards poetry’s relation with history. Muldoon’s poem, and his sonnets more generally, are similarly sceptical, and his extravagant formal experiments seem designed to hold history at bay. ‘The More a Man Has’, in particular, ducks any notion of historic responsibility and assumes not only a sceptical but also an irreverent attitude to the crises of its contemporary moment. Muldoon’s exciting, striking formal experiments with sonnets give voice to this irreverence, and in doing so can have the ‘liberating’ effect that Gillis discerns, by breaking the strict, restrictive terms of the past. Yet they also qualify the value of that irreverence, which too easily slips into duplicating the language and histories it sets out to mock. They are not only sceptical about history, but in a further twist, sceptical about the value of scepticism, which is unable, finally, to maintain any distance from the histories it tries to hold at bay. It is in this sense that Muldoon’s sonnets can be thought of as uncanny. Their highly innovative forms enact the vertiginous otherness of the past, the strangeness that lurks within its ostensible familiarity. But the sonnet’s constant return also enacts the past’s profound, on-going and inescapable persistence, a compulsive repetition than cannot be broken. If there is a certain thrill in the past’s uncanny recurrence, then this thrill is balanced by the persistence of that repetition. As Muldoon’s career has evolved, he has continued to write of (and perhaps in) the grip of this compulsion to repeat, but the emphasis has

fallen much more on the repetition than the compulsion, and it is this changing emphasis that I explore in the next section.

II. ‘all conclusions were foregone’: *Horse Latitudes* and beyond

Muldoon’s engagement with the sonnet, whilst hardly disappearing, does slacken a little, and begin to change, as the 1980s gives way to the 1990s. *Meeting the British* (1987) is as replete with sonnets or ‘fourteen-line verse units’ as *Quoof*, and stages comparable debates around history and memory. The concluding long poem ‘7 Middagh Street’, set in the early 1940s Brooklyn residence of W. H. Auden and his circle, offers a range of perspectives on the relationship between poetry and history, including a re-articulation of Yeats’s question from ‘Man and the Echo’ (1938): ‘Did that play of mine send out certain men the English shot’, to which Muldoon’s speaker (in this case ‘Wystan’) retorts: ‘certainly not’ (2001: 178). This takes us back to the question of historical efficacy. The apparent confidence of the poem’s assertion is complicated by being voiced not by Muldoon himself but Muldoon’s Auden, who is one of a number of artistic voices reanimated (or indeed satirized) in the poem. Muldoon’s evasiveness is further compounded by his oblique forms. As Gillis notes, ‘a fourteen-line verse unit is the backbone’ (2012: 585) of ‘7 Middagh Street’, but it is far from obvious that all or even most of these are sonnets. While the ‘Gypsie Rose Lee’ section reads more-or-less clearly as a sonnet sequence, the ‘Wystan’ section is comprised of strings of couplets and quatrains and tercets that sometimes combine to suggest sonnets, but at other times seem to hold the form at bay. Such shifting and unstable formal ground undercuts even the most strident of utterances.

After *Meeting the British* Muldoon’s collections moved away from long sequences structured around the sonnet. The most extreme instance is ‘Madoc: a Mystery’, the massive, and massively disorienting sequence that lends its name to Muldoon’s 1990 collection. Whilst there are some sonnets in the sequence, these are only one of a vast array of different formal processes in a work so large as to resist explication, or even partial framing, through any one formal manoeuvre. *The Annals of Chile* (1994) is less bewilderingly vast, and centres on two long elegiac poems, ‘Incantata’ and ‘Yarrow’. ‘Incantata’ is written in a series of *aabbcdcc* rhyming stanzas derived from Yeats, who uses it ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’ (1919) and section II of the ‘The Tower’ (1928), while Muldoon notoriously described ‘Yarrow’, in an interview with Lynn Keller, as ‘intercut exploded sestinas’ (1994: 9). These poems signal the growing importance of other forms to Muldoon, and especially circular forms. His first sestina, ‘Cauliflowers’, appears in *Madoc: A Mystery*, and his first villanelle, ‘Milkweed and Monarch’, in *The Annals of Chile*, and these forms recur throughout subsequent collections. 1998’s *Hay* includes a sestina, ‘The Wire’, and a double sestina, ‘Green Gown’, while

2003's *Moy Sand and Gravel* features two more sestinas, 'The Misfits' and 'The Turn', as well as a version of the Yeatsian 'Incantata' stanza in 'At the Sign of the Black Horse'. *Horse Latitudes*, meanwhile, has a villanelle, 'As Your Husband Looks Up to Our Window', and a double villanelle entitled 'Soccer Moms'.

This is not to say that the sonnet has dropped out of view – far from it, as sequences like 'The Bangle: Slight Return', from *Hay* (1998), suggest – but rather than the nature of the engagement with the form has shifted. To go back to the Gillis comment that I quoted earlier, 'the sense of inevitability and enclosure has markedly been intensified in Muldoon's work, mostly because of his increasingly manic compulsion with repetition', and his work has been 'more and more drawn to repeated words, phrases, lines, refrains, stanzas, and identical rhymes'. This is apparent in 'Hedge School', from 2006's *Horse Latitudes*, a sonnet and prospective elegy for Muldoon's sister Maureen, who died (like his mother) from ovarian cancer:

– all past and future mornings were impressed

on me just now, dear Sis,
as I sheltered in a doorway on Church Street in St. Andrews
(where, in 673, another Maelduin was bishop),

and tried to come up with a ruse
for unsealing the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* back in that corner shop
and tracing the root of *metastasis*. (2006b: 94)

The rhymes here are not only full, but as Gillis points out, 'identical', including the 'ruse' in 'St. Andrews'. Whilst there is an element of Muldoon's wit and humour here (the notion of the 'ruse' undercuts whatever religious authority might inhere in 'St. Andrews') it does not carry the same innovative charge as the sonnets from *Quoof*. Indeed, 'Hedge School' dimly and distantly recalls the 'ovarian/ cyst' of 'The More a Man Has', in part because Maureen Muldoon (like their mother) died from ovarian cancer and in part because of the dim echo between the 'Sis' '*metastasis*' rhyme, and the 'cyst' 'cyclist' pair. In 'Hedge School', however, the sense of the uncanny, the frisson of difference and uncertainty, has gone. Lacking the demonic energy of its earlier counterparts, the repetitions of this later sonnet ring somewhat flat and hollow; they are instances of the 'mimesis of boredom' and Gillis, alluding to that 'ovarian / cyst' stanza, insightfully observes how '[t]he enigmatic hole in the heart, the secret missing centre, over and around which the sonnets proceed' has deepened into 'a great vacuity, a pervasive emptiness, over which the sonnets chatter and repeat' (2012: 586).

This is not to say that these later sonnets are any less important or interesting (or successful) than those of Muldoon's earlier writing. But the textures of the form have changed, and the nature of their repetitions is different. Gillis's 'compulsion with repetition' echoes the Freudian 'compulsion to repeat', which he uses not only in 'The Uncanny' but also 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through'. In that essay Freud writes that a patient 'remains in the grip of this compulsion to repeat for as long as he remains under treatment' (2006: 394-395), and draws a distinction between remembering and repetition, which I alluded to earlier: 'the patient does not *remember* anything at all of what he has forgotten and repressed, but rather *acts it out*. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it' (2006: 394). Repeating is a negative condition to be overcome on the way reaching the healthy condition of memory, with 'The goal', as Freud says, 'to fill the gaps in the patient's memory; in dynamic terms, to overcome the resistances brought about by repression' (2006: 392). Repetition is type of resistance, and the trajectory of analysis moves away from repeating and towards the ideal condition of remembering. Not that this goal is easy to achieve, and Freud devotes the bulk of the essay to the various forms and guises that repeating might take. His concluding paragraphs assert that such repeating is a 'purely preliminary phase', elaborating that 'One has to give the patient time to familiarize himself with the resistance now that he is aware of it, to *work his way through it*', and that 'This process of working through the resistances may in practise become an arduous task for the patient and a considerable test of the physician's patience' (2006: 399-400). What should be an intermediary stage ends up consuming the bulk of Freud's attention and analysis, so that the hoped-for goal of remembering remains largely unachieved, and beyond the horizon of the essay's end. The result is a wearily interminable intermediary state that Freud does not seem confident of departing.

Iain Twiddy touches on this condition in his book *Cancer Poetry*, where he notes the 'tension between linearity and circularity' in Muldoon's work, and highlights the particular problems of elegy, 'the genre that perhaps more than any other requires the poet to get somewhere, to make emotional progress' (2015: 144). Emotional progress implies a narrative of the sort Freud suggests, but fails to fulfil, in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', but Muldoon's recurrent formal circularity blocks this progress. This is especially true of the two long elegies, 'Yarrow' and 'Incantata', that dominate *The Annals of Chile* and which use 'large-scale circular structures, with repeated rhyme words', and 'were formed in response to the deaths from cancer of Muldoon's mother and a former girlfriend, the artist Mary Farl Powers' (2015: 144). But these poems also employ the 'structural principles' of cancer – 'replication, invasion and metastasis' – so that 'Incantata', for example, 'replicate[s] from a central stanza or cell, where the rhymes of the first cell are bound to those of the last, the rhymes of the second are shared by the second-last, and so on, as they assess predestination and whether art can redeem amongst the wreckage of death' (2015: 144-145). Muldoon's formal repetitions are, like the Freudian patient's repetitions, a sort of acting out that poem

and poet never quite overcome in order to reach the end of elegy's (and therapy's) trajectory in memory and healing. Indeed, Muldoon's elegies are further complicated by being formed out of the 'structural principles' of cancer, in the sense that they are modelled on the destructive, corrosive force they set themselves to resist. As Twiddy puts it, 'Muldoon's cancer elegies are equivocal, supremely balanced between the creative and the destructive, the consoling and the desolating' (2015: 145).

What I want to suggest is that this blocked process is even more pronounced in Muldoon's sonnets. 'Yarrow' and 'Incantata' are long poems, with a large canvas across which to spread their repetitions, but in the fourteen lines of a sonnet the stasis of repetition is intensified and concentrated still further. To a certain extent, this was the condition in *Quoof*, whose speakers frequently found themselves trapped or restrained in some way (such as Uncle Pat bearing the mark of a gun, or the speaker of 'Gathering Mushrooms' luridly imagining concrete prison walls). But this condition was usually uncovered over the course of the poem, whereas in Muldoon's later sonnets it seems to be a given, with stasis already acknowledged from the start:

I could still hear the musicians
cajoling those thousands of clay
horses and horsemen through the squeeze
when I woke beside Carlotta.
Life-size, also. Also terra-cotta.
The sky was still a terra-cotta frieze
over which her grandfather still held sway
with the set square, fretsaw, stencil,
plumb line and carpenter's pencil
his grandfather brought from Roma.
Proud-fleshed Carlotta. Hypersarcoma. (2006b: 3)

The poem opens with an image of imprisonment, as the speaker remembers dreaming about the Terracotta Army of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. Not only is the army a collection of statues – and hence immobile – but it also confined within the Emperor's tomb, and the sonnet moves through other comparably static images, such as the sky like 'a terra-cotta frieze' and the rigid shapes of Carlotta's grandfather's carpentry tools, before alighting on the devastating one-word sentence, 'Hypersarcoma'. In a sense, therefore, 'Beijing' offers a working model of the therapeutic narrative that Freud posits in 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through'. The poem moves through various repetitions that bear the trace of the repressed memory – Carlotta's cancer – before realising the repression and articulating the real trauma. Muldoon's poem, however, does not complete the narrative. Rather than map a journey from sickness to health, the poem's exhausted ending – 'For now our highest ambition / was simply to bear the light of the day / we had once being planning to seize' –

enacts the stasis that I suggested was the real subject of Freud's essay, in which patients remain trapped in an intermediary state of repeating. The sonnet's form also enforces a kind of entrapment, with the full rhymes and the circular rhyme scheme (the last three end words match the first three) generating an almost inescapable echo chamber, an echo chamber further buttressed by the foregrounded repetition of words within lines: most obviously 'terra-cotta' but also 'still' and 'grandfather'.

'Beijing' is a sort of catalogue of failed repressions, in which just about everything initially distracts but eventually reminds the speaker of Carlotta, a combination played out in Muldoon's mix of intricately patterned form and disparate subject matter. Even by Muldoon's standards, 'Horse Latitudes' is ornately wrought, with the rhymes often full and following an idiosyncratic but regular *abcdcbeeddabc* scheme. Perhaps most striking is the smoothness and polish of the metre whose 'syllabic pattern', as Twiddy points out, 'is 8, 8, 8, 8, 10, 10, 10, 8, 8, 8, 10, 8, 10, 8' (2015: 147), a regularity that Muldoon almost never employs in his other books. 'Beijing' uses these polished repetitions to jump from China to Italy by way of a few phrases, and other sonnets in the sequence follow a similar pattern:

Age-old contradictions I could trace
from freebasers pretending they freebase
to this inescapable flaw
hidden by Carlotta's close-knit wet suit
like a heart-wound by a hauberk. (2006b: 4)

The relation between these phoney freebasers (freebasing is a method of preparing cocaine) and Carlotta's cancer remains unclear, though the repetitions of the poem – not only its metre and rhyme but also heavy internal alliterations such as 'Carlotta's close-knit' and 'heart-wound by a hauberk' – create the illusion of a connection. That wet-suit looks forward to 'the long-sleeved, high collared / wet suit whereof...whereof...whereof...whereof / I needs must again make mention' (2006b: 6), where its association with Carlotta's cancer seems to cause something of a breakdown in Muldoon's assured utterance. Freud writes of psychoanalysis's 'rigorous technique...whereby the physician no longer focuses on a specific factor or problem, but is quite content to study the prevailing surface-level of the patient's mind, and uses his interpretative skills chiefly for the purpose of identifying the resistances manifest there' (2006b: 391-2). We could think of this moment of extreme repetition, which breaks the polished surface of the sonnet's form, as one such moment of resistance, but it does not go anywhere. Freud's account suggests a surface-depth model, in which analysis moves from the former to the latter as it attempts to do its healing work, but there are no depths, no underlying, therapeutic narrative, for Muldoon to reach down to, only further repetitions.

Fran Brearton characterises this moment and others like it as ‘Frostian rhythmical canters’ (2015: 59), almost as though they were relaxed strolls through the world of the poem. Muldoon is not going to drive his poem into a frenzied gallop seeking some sort of consoling breakthrough, because there are no breakthroughs to be achieved. In this sense, Brearton’s reference to Frost is doubly apt because it hints at another version of scepticism, in which poetry and memory are unable to bring about change. Freud’s model of surface and depth is flattened out to become all surface, with Muldoon removing the deep-lying position of conscious, curative memory.

It was as if a fine silt,
white sand or silicate, had clogged
her snorkel, her goggles had fogged,
and Carlotta surfaced like flot
to be skimmed off some great cast-iron pot
as garble is skimmed off, or lees
painstakingly drained by turning and tilts
from a man-size barrel or butt. (2006b: 14)

Muldoon imagines Carlotta as a waste product and, more specifically the kind of waste product – ‘white sand or silicate’ – that might be found on holidays. The tone of the poem does not register shock or disapproval or even (as it might have done had it appeared in an earlier collection) humour, bleak or otherwise. Instead it stays on an even tonal key, its repetitions – ‘had clogged’, ‘had fogged’, ‘to be skimmed off’, ‘is skimmed off’ – moving the poem at a measured pace through a host of disparate objects. Freud envisioned the psychoanalyst skimming the surface of a patient’s mind in order to encounter resistances that would then be broken down, but in Muldoon’s sonnet sequence such resistances keep repeating themselves as the mind continues to canter, only partially remembering the traumas it can only partially forget.

One of the central planks in Twiddy’s interpretation of *Horse Latitudes* is the ways in which cancer functions as politically charged metaphor for the post 9/11 War on Terror, and in particular for the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. ‘Horse Latitudes’ directly references the Iraq War in ‘Blackwater Fort’, where Carlotta and the poem’s speaker watch a journalist ‘embedded with the 5th Marines / in the old Sunni Triangle’ try to ‘untangle / the ghastly from the price of gasoline’ (2006b: 9). The sequence as a whole is also preoccupied with war, and as Stephen Regan notes in his article on ‘The Sonnet and its Travels’, Muldoon ‘maps a variety of places, all beginning with B, where major battles have taken place: Bannockburn, Bosworth Field, Blenheim, Bull Run, Burma. The missing place, which also happens to be the fourteenth in what would otherwise be a sonnet of sonnets, is Baghdad’ (2017: 17). In Twiddy’s reading, Muldoon’s poem is a critique of the Iraq War, and most especially the language used to justify it, and he argues that the sequence makes a ‘protest

against misleading discourse' (2015: 154), partly by examining inhabiting and exaggerating instances of such misleading discourse. Twiddy highlights the fussy, pernickety grammar of Carlotta's grandfather, who corrects 'give their position away' to 'give away their *position*' in the sequence's last sonnet (2006b: 21). He suggests that the revision, which is 'Formally different but semantically the same... is representative of insidious circular logic and discourse', of the kind which was used to justify the Iraq invasion: 'we may not have found any weapons of mass destruction to validate the original reasons for the invasion, but we know they must have been there, otherwise we would not have invaded'.

But it is far from clear how successful this poetry is as a protest. The repetitiousness of Muldoon's sonnets mean that they, too, are circular, and their intense formal patterning is in some ways as pedantic as Carlotta's grandfather's grammar. In this sense, the poems are continuations, rather than critiques, of a bogus political language, and Twiddy seems to acknowledge as much when he argues that 'To complete its flawless structure, the operation of the poem cannot allow a syllable or rhyme word to be out of place, just as cancer treatment cannot allow a single cell to pose a threat, and the military operation cannot allow a single person or mule to jeopardize it'. The result is a sense of stasis, in which the poem's various components parallel each other without affecting any change. In particular, Muldoon does not suggest that either Carlotta's cancer or the Iraq War is the sequence's dominant frame, so they repeat each other, in Freud's sense: military conflict seems to act out the personal trauma of cancer treatment, while cancer treatment seems to act out the public trauma of military conflict.

Horse Latitudes is full of such repetitious sonnets. 'The Outlier', for example, is a double sonnet whose two parts repeat their first two lines – 'In Armagh or Tyrone / I fell between two stones' and 'I had one eye, just one, / they prised and propped open' (2006b: 47) – in each stanza. The three poems of 'At Least They Weren't Speaking French' are comprised of three four line stanzas and a refrain, repeated twice to give fourteen lines, of '*fol-de-rol fol-de-rol fol-de-rol-di-do*' (2006b: 35-37). 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003', meanwhile, is also distantly suggestive of the Iraq War by way of the date in its title. The sonnet imagines 'the welts and weals' inflicted on the eponymous starlings by 'condoms or chewing gum', and their song obscured 'by dint of the din' made 'in a chop shop', although Muldoon does more optimistically find space for 'all-night revellers at reveille' (2006b: 82). Looking in a slightly different direction, 'The Procedure' continues the collection's obsession with illness, contrasting the carelessness of youth with the diseases of old(er) age:

I

One still wore a wristband from the disco
where we'd flattered each other through the strobe
long before she was of an age to boast

as many tongues as many-tongued Rumor.

II

It dawned as it dawns on San Francisco
on another who rummaged in her robe
and varied the standard-issue tea and toast
with a grapefruit the size of a tumor. (2006b: 31)

This sonnet is not as internally repetitious as ‘Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003’, though it does still use some repeated words (‘tongues’ and ‘tongued’; ‘dawned’ and ‘dawns’). Its rhyme scheme, however, repeats across stanzas, so that the sonnet’s octave rhymes *abcd abcd*. This gives the impression of a certain kind of freedom, as though the quatrains were not part of the overall pattern of the poem, only to then more crushingly shatter that impression as the recurrence of rhyme becomes apparent, especially in the ‘Rumor’ ‘tumor’ rhyme, which has echoes of the ‘Roma’ ‘Hypersarcoma’ pair in ‘Horse Latitudes’.

Arguably the most repetitious sequence in *Horse Latitudes*, however, is ‘The Old Country’, whose thirteen sonnets not only repeat rhymes and words but entire phrases, many of which are themselves already the repetitions of tired clichés:

I

Where every town was a tidy town
and every garden was a hanging garden.
A half could be had for half a crown.
Every major artery would harden

since every meal was a square meal.
Every clothesline showed a line of undies
yet not house was in dishabille.
Every Sunday took a month of Sundays

til everyone got it off by heart
every start was a bad start
since all conclusions were foregone. (2006b: 38)

This skein of inherited, time-out-of-mind idioms enacts a kind of stasis in which language is in thrall to a past written into even the most casual phrases, that governs the outlook of the present and

determines that ‘every start was a bad start’ and ‘all conclusions were foregone’. The sequence’s title, ‘The Old Country’, suggests a expatriate’s nostalgic yearning for a romanticised ancestral homeland, a yearning expressed through stock phrases like ‘tidy town’ and ‘square meal’ and ‘month of Sundays’, but Muldoon’s insistent return to these phrases satirizes their use, and satirizes an inward-looking provincial mentality that becomes imprisoned in distorted, idealised versions of the past. This is, then, a parody of idle nostalgia and the sequence’s sonnets, and especially its refrain-like first and last lines, are an expression of that idle nostalgia.

At the same time, Muldoon is deeply attuned and responsive to the place he is describing, including its speech rhythms, picking up on the long /e/ in some pronunciations of ‘Sundays’ to rhyme it with ‘undies’. In a similar vein Muldoon writes, later in the sequence,

Every flash was a flash in the pan
and every border a herbaceous border
unless it happened to be *an*
herbaceous border as observed by the *Recorder*

or recorded by the *Observer*. (2006b: 45)

The switch from ‘a herbaceous border’ to the mannered ‘*an* / herbaceous border’ pokes fun at the pretensions of newspapers such as the *Observer*, whilst employing the overstated ‘*an*’ as a rhyme word, like using the ‘Sundays’ ‘undies’ pair, allows Muldoon to celebrate local speech rhythms (and thumb his nose at prescriptivist approaches to language) by incorporating it into the overall pattern of his sonnet sequence. Indeed, the use of familiar phrasing, often repeated and part of relatively straightforward syntax, allows Muldoon to steadily lighten the load of the shared past. The old country may be in thrall to its history but the clichés that encode and transmit that history also enable the poem’s limber, nimble rhythms as it cycles through its repetitions, even when the content is potentially bleak: ‘Every time was time in the nick // just as every nick was a nick in time’ (2006b: 41).

But like the bolder formal experiments of *Quoof*, these good humoured clichés are unequal to the burden of the histories they unknowingly repeat. The wry and witty account of the ‘herbaceous border’, for example, may look back to the troubled border between Northern Ireland and the Republic in earlier decades, while elsewhere in the poem it is possible to see and hear the traces of earlier conflicts.

Every dime-a-dozen rat a dime-a-dozen drowned rat
except for the whittrack, or stoat,

which the very Norsemen had down pat

as a weasel-word

though we know their speech was rather slurred. (2006b: 41)

There is some degree of confusion here as to what the words being used actually refer to. ‘Weasel’, ‘whittrack’ and ‘stoat’ might be thought of as interchangeable, though it is a situation complicated by the fact that stoats are called weasels in Ireland, where weasels themselves do not occur. The Scots origin of whittrack further muddies the etymological waters, intertwining language, history and politics to the point where establishing secure definitions becomes nigh-on impossible. ‘Whittrack’, ‘stoat’ and ‘weasel’ seem to function as a marker of regional identities that is being manipulated by the Norsemen, possibly for nefarious ends. Muldoon calls the whittrack – or stoat – a weasel word, which the *OED* defines as ‘an equivocating or ambiguous word which takes away the force or meaning of the concept being expressed’, implying deception on the part of the Norsemen, who are perhaps trying to pass themselves off as natives to the area. Muldoon’s sonnet, then, might be understood as a fragmentary recollection of an earlier period of historical conflict, or the projection back in time of twentieth-century conflicts, in which the poem’s language obliquely marks who belongs to – and who is excluded from – particular tribal identities.

‘The Old Country’ does not answer to a particular event in the way that ‘Horse Latitudes’ seems to answer to Carlotta’s cancer diagnosis or, more obliquely, the Iraq War, although there are hints of a particular timeframe in some of the poem’s references. Rather, Muldoon’s sonnets stage a clichéd language of the past that, in spite of moments of wit and humour, goes on perpetuating itself with almost no reference to the reality of that past. These are not just sonnets of clichés, but the sonnet as a cliché and it is again hard to tell how far Muldoon is critical of this process and how far he is complicit. The process has continued and, if anything, expanded still further in his two most recent collections, 2010’s *Maggot* and 2015 *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, both of which contain multiple sonnets and sonnet sequences. In ‘A Hummingbird’, from *Maggot*, Muldoon imagines how ‘a ruby-throated hummingbird remakes / itself as it rolls on through mid-forest brake’, splicing its song with idle party-going tittle-tattle: ““I’m guessing she’s had a neck lift *and lipo.*” / “You know I still can’t help but think of the *Wake* / as the apogee, you know, of the typo”” – before cycling back round to the hummingbird, ‘Like an engine rolling on after a crash, / long after whatever it was made a splash’ (2010: 91). Like the clichés of ‘The Old Country’, both the birdsong and the gossip seem self-generating, and only very lightly anchored in their real world referents. The collection’s title sequence is similarly self-perpetuating, and cuts between a variety of disparate scenes, ranging from the ‘moonless night’ during which the speaker is ‘parachuting in’ (2010: 42), to ‘the dawn raid / where gloom gave way to glim’ (2010: 43) and ‘the pretty pre-med / who proved to be such a

pushover / now she'd passed her prelims' (2010: 47). The sequence repeats a refrain, 'where I'm waiting for some lover / to kick me out of bed / for having acted on a whim' (2010: 42), whose apparent whimsy and arbitrariness is counterbalanced by its precise recurrence at lines nine to eleven in each of the sequence's sonnets. Similarly, 'Dirty Data', the long sonnet sequence that ends *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, combines disparate material – 'An explosive charge fitted to the spokes / of one wheel will as readily put paid to the Ford Cortina as the Roman quadriga' (2015: 110) – with full rhymes that follow the same hybrid Petrarchan-Shakespearean rhyme scheme, *ababcdcdefgef*g, throughout. As ever, this yields striking and unexpected connections, with Muldoon intertwining the narrative of Lew Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* with its author's history, its translation into Irish, and his own childhood memories. 'The cover of An Gúm's edition of *Ben Hur* sets it firmly in the Third Reich. / My childhood bedroom was divided by an earthwork fosse / that connected it to the Black Pig's Dyke' (2015: 111). At the same time, the startling co-incidence of a rhyme 'Reich' and 'Dyke' is partially offset by the irregularity of Muldoon's lines, some of which are so swollen as to overflow the right-hand margin of the page on which they appear, while others contract down to a few syllables: 'Dense, too, the fog when each Halloween Ben ducks in an enamel basin // for an enamel apple' (2015: 101). The result is at once strict and arbitrary, or what Alan Gillis calls 'the mimesis of boredom' (2012: 586), as though any poem, filled with enough disparate material and allowed to grow to sufficient length, might turn out to be a fully rhymed sonnet sequence.

Steph Burt, in an essay on 'Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003', suggests that 'For all his formal explorations' Muldoon 'almost always return to the same few ideas. They praise trickiness, incompleteness, and ambiguity, and treasure the ways in which words, people, and emotions escape definition' (2011: 410-411). This neatly catches many of Muldoon's preoccupations over the course of his career, but it underestimates the way they have shifted. 'Dirty Data's intertwining of history and fiction, as well as its direct address to Wallace – the phrase 'That's right, Lew' punctuates the poem at intermittent intervals – speaks to Muldoon's abiding concern with narrative and voice, with the processes by which the past is represented and shared. In that sense, 'Dirty Data' looks back to some of Muldoon's earliest sonnets, such as 'Why Brownlee Left' and 'Immram'. But 'Dirty Data' does not sound like these poems, and its trickiness, incompleteness, and ambiguity is not quite as celebratory as Burt implies (or indeed as Muldoon himself suggests in his earlier sonnets). That is to say, ambiguity is itself ambiguous, and not always a matter of praise, but sometimes also a matter of inertia and 'boredom', to go back to Gillis's word again. Similarly the ceaseless, restless re-imagining of memories and histories is not always a free or open-ended process, but sometimes wearingly interminable. The sonnet, relentlessly experimented with but also obsessively repeated, is the crucible in which Muldoon has developed, explored, deconstructed and remade this species of self-

undermining, self-subverting memory, and as the example of ‘Dirty Data’ indicates, it continues to be as elusively central to his work now as it was when he first took up the form forty years earlier.

Chapter Four

‘Absence and aftermath’: Don Paterson

Don Paterson’s relationship with the sonnet is a long but strained one. His engagement with the form has been broad and on-going. As a poet, his collections are intermittently littered with sonnets, with several appearing in his collections *Nil Nil* (1993) and *Landing Light* (2003), and an entire book of *40 Sonnets* published in 2014. He has edited an anthology, *101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney* (1999), published a commentary, *Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (2011), and translated two of the great twentieth-century European masters of the form, Antonio Machado in *The Eyes* (1999) and Rainer Maria Rilke in *Sonnets for Orpheus* (2005). And yet at times he seems to actively despise the form. ‘I promise I won’t actually thump the next person who mentions “my love of the sonnet form”’ he menaces at one point, ‘but I will attempt some kind of big flounce’ (2011: 485). And, indeed, his engagement with the form comes with a degree of reluctance, as though he were writing them in spite of himself (while as a translator he has also written them as not himself). *God’s Gift to Women* (1997) and *Rain* (2009) contain only two sonnets a-piece, and the form is sometimes overshadowed by longer sequence poems like the multi-book ‘The Alexandrian Library’, which is spread across *Nil Nil*, *God’s Gift*, and *Landing Light*. Similarly, Paterson’s critical observations about the sonnet have tended to come through his editorial work rather than in his more explicitly theoretical pieces, such as the two-part essay on ‘The Lyric Principle’ (2007), or his recently published tome *The Poem* (2018). There are some clear and provocative parallels between his thinking about the sonnet and his thinking about the lyric, but he does not make these explicit and, as a result, the form occupies an ambivalent place in his oeuvre, managing to be both central and yet only marginally acknowledged.

This chapter will consider this ambivalence in relation to two crucial contexts in Paterson’s work: his Scottish background, and his metaphysical, philosophical interests. The sonnet, I want to argue, has been a vital arena for exploring these contexts. His first two books – *Nil Nil* and *God’s Gift to Women* – are particularly drawn to ideas of Scottishness, and the sonnets of *Nil Nil* preoccupied with questions of history and memory. The pre-occupations are, however, frequently played out in oblique terms that suggest the influence not of a Scottish poet, but a Northern Irish one: Paul Muldoon. Like Muldoon in the Irish context, Paterson uses the sonnet to examine his Scottish inheritance, using reframed versions of an inherited form to consider the complex patterns of distance and belonging, of forgetting and remembering, that constitute the present’s relationship with the past. And like Muldoon, he also draws on the form to probe the intersection of particular cultural histories and traditions within a homogenizing, globalized modernity. This is not to say, however, that Paterson

simply repeats Muldoon's experiments in a new key. Partly as a response to the differences between late twentieth-century Scotland and Northern Ireland, Paterson's sonnets are rather starker and emptier than their Muldoonian counterparts, disembodied poems that I argue respond to an early nineties spectral turn that is especially resonant with post-industrial sites like Paterson's native Dundee.

Spectrality, of course, has metaphysical dimensions, and beginning with *The Eyes*, his version of Machado, Paterson's sonnets have become more explicitly philosophical, and less historical, in orientation. Commenting on the title *Nil Nil*, Edward Larrissy notes that 'Paterson's work has often investigated the various time-honoured games that can be played with numbering, scoring and duplicating, and frequently turns its attention to paradoxes that surround the use of quantifying terminology such as "nil", "zero" and "double"' (2014: 49). Such paradoxes have tended to give Paterson's work the veneer of a-historicity, of speaking from a position that is somehow outside history, but his metaphysics are worked out in opposition to any notion of transcendence, and he has poured scorn on religious accounts of eternity. The sonnet is crucial to his thinking here in two different ways: firstly, the influence of Rilke and Machado, whose philosophical ideas of absence and the *via negativa* have had a profound impact on Paterson. Hugh Haughton suggests that 'It would be hard to over-estimate the influence of Machado on Paterson's later work, including his developing notion of the sonnet as a metaphysical genre' (2014: 39). Secondly, and more directly, the resources of the sonnet form itself give Paterson a way of staging his ideas, a way of writing nothingness. Larrissy's "nil", "zero" and "double" are articulated through the form's mathematical properties, its inner geometries of parts – couplet, sestet, octave – to fourteen-line whole. At times Paterson frames these geometries as a subtraction, as though the sonnet were counting down to nothing, but this almost always generates a countermove of addition or multiplication, a double to match the zero, that means nothingness is never quite reached, that it remains imagined rather directly inhabited.

Such metaphysical (and mathematical) speculations take the sonnet away from historical considerations, and place it at a remove from the Miltonic-Wordsworthian context that I have been arguing is such a crucial context for contemporary British and Irish sonnet writers. Yet *40 Sonnets*, his most recent collection, though still invested in metaphysical pre-occupations, is not a-historical but situated among the spaces of the contemporary world, its guesthouses, public libraries, and train platforms, and especially amongst its technologies, in photographs, telephone calls and TV programs. These are instances in his work of what Marc Augé calls the non-place, which offer a different version of history to that envisaged by Longenbach. For Longenbach, history is comprised of events, the 'epic subject' like the French Revolution, the First and Second World Wars and the Northern Irish Troubles to which poets might more-or-less adequately respond in their work, and in their different ways Hill, Heaney, and Muldoon have responded to some of these events. Partly as a result of his working-class Dundonian heritage, however, Paterson responds to a different sense of history, one

that is not constituted by political events but rather by economic systems and technological process. This reframes history as a matter of absence, as ghostliness, and in doing so considers how big the gap is between history and metaphysics, and whether or not the two might not morph into each other. This is not to say that Paterson's metaphysics are straightforwardly an offshoot of contemporary history, but rather that the different timescales involved in the two terms are not easily separable, and intersect in complicated ways. The crucial value of the sonnet lies not in its being either an historical or metaphysical form, but in its capacity to probe the interaction of the two.

I. 'a hiccup in history': *Nil Nil* and Scotland

Scottish poets have been writing sonnets for a long time. Mark Alexander Boyd's 'Sonet of Venus and Cupid', for example, dates from the sixteenth-century, and makes it in to *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet* (2001: 21). Robert Burns also wrote them, his 'A Sonnet upon Sonnets' contributing to the romantic vogue for sonnets about sonnet-writing. More recently, Matt McGuire and Colin Nicholson observe how Edwin Morgan's 'Glasgow Sonnets' 'rub pure Petrarchan form in the gutter of urban dereliction and then raise it high', and foreground the way *Sonnets from Scotland* imagines 'the country from a number of perspectives including the prehistoric, the Neolithic, the biblical, the Enlightenment, the Victorian and the futuristic' (2009: 101). Sonnets summon the past not as a burden but as a site of re-invention, and whilst Morgan cautions in 'Glasgow Sonnets' that Glaswegian 'stalled lives never budge' he also asserts that 'A multi is a sonnet stretched to ode' (2000: 86). The generally expansive, witty and playful aura of Morgan's sonnets speaks to a sense of the form that does not come freighted with quite the same historical baggage as the sonnet acquired in Ireland, even if the weight and make-up of that baggage had changed somewhat by the time Heaney and Muldoon came to the form.

Morgan's multiple perspectives reflect the imaginative energy latent in Scotland's particular historical circumstances, that its doubled and divided identity might be a liberating hybridity that fuels the kind of radical imaginative experiment not found in more conservative English writing. To an extent, we might think of Paterson as following Morgan's example, as his own sonnets explore what Gerard Carruthers calls '*place in general*'. According to Carruthers, in Paterson's work 'Scotland is not portrayed as beaten down or seen as more in the cultural gutter than anywhere else', and he 'does not treat the Scottish poet as being in a specially marginalised "predicament" in terms of nationality, language or identity' (2014: 94). Yet if Scotland is not especially marginalised politically and socially, nor is it especially privileged artistically, and Paterson generally strikes a more ambivalent tone than Morgan. One of Paterson's earliest sonnets, 'Heliographer', is about his father. It begins: 'I

thought we were sitting in the sky', and imagines his father 'decod[ing] the world beneath: / our tenement, the rival football grounds, / the long bridges, slung out across the river' (1993: 7), before ending with the younger Paterson 'tilt[ing]' his lemonade 'bottle towards the sun / until it detonated with light, / my lips pursed like a trumpeter' (1993: 7). The poem lightly invokes a Scottish, late twentieth-century urban landscape, but its import is unclear. The sonnet's speaker only thinks he and his father are sitting in the sky, a provisional claim that invites the counter-thought that they are not. Similarly, the ritual of lemonade drinking might point to a darker world of adult alcohol consumption into which the child has now been initiated, or it might be a moment of shared childhood intimacy. In both cases, the sonnet hints that this Scottish city – possibly Dundee – is a site of especially profound meanings, both positive (sitting on a tenement is a visionary experience) or negative (father is preparing son for a life structured around alcohol), but does not say so directly. The poem handles its subject with sufficient discretion that we cannot draw firm conclusions, a tentativeness played out through its subtle and open-ended form, which employs a variable line length and only intermittent rhyme.

Paterson's circumspection implies distance from, and wariness toward, his homeland, and in doing so shows the influence not so much of Edwin Morgan as of Paul Muldoon. What I want to consider in this first section are the ways in which Paterson's adoption of the sonnet responds to Muldoon's. Like Muldoon, Paterson is interested in the intersection of local and global identities, so that whilst Paterson is invested in his Scottish heritage it is frequently thrown into relief by a wider sense of history. Both poets are also interested in the fraught intersection of the private and the public. Paterson, too, ventriloquizes an aggressive and predatory male sexuality, with Alan Gillis suggesting the 'misogynistic sexual violence' (2009: 180) of Muldoon's *Quoof* as Paterson's most immediate model. Perhaps most importantly, both poets share what Edward Larrissy calls a 'virtuoso and craft-conscious mastery of form' (2014: 51), as well as 'a preoccupation with experience as narrated' which destabilises the idea that there is a 'grand narrative that can act as source of truth' (50-51). Whilst both have a strong interest in poetic and literary strategies, such as sonnets and narratives, and offer extravagant performances of such strategies, they are also deeply sceptical about the worth of their performances, which come to have a self-questioning dimension. Paterson's habit of self-questioning articulates, I would suggest, a comparable view of memory to Muldoon's, in which forgetting is deeply intertwined with remembering. In one sense this is liberating as it allows the poet to distance himself from the past. But it is also restrictive because ultimately that distance turns out to be illusory, and forgetting to be another form of remembering, or as Freud has it, repeating.

These preoccupations come together in *Nil Nil* sonnets like 'Restitution' and 'Obeah', where Paterson's disregarded male speakers obsessively try to rid themselves of the memory of former lovers, only to find that the effort perpetuates the very memories they wanted to exorcize. 'Obeah'

begins: ‘My life became one long apostrophe – / muttering the three ur-syllables of her name, / doodling her initials to a cryptogram’ (1993: 12), and when his obsessive behaviour – ‘Chain-smoking and “the slavery of tea and coffee”’ – becomes too much, the protagonist decides to ‘hit out west’ as a means of escaping his tormented personal memories, only to end up outside ‘her house’, staring at rows of nearby cars and ‘the dawn scried in each polished screen, / the gibbeted mascots as I drew in closer’ (1993: 12). Paterson’s ‘gibbeted mascots’ mark a sudden and startling irruption of violence, less explicit but no less forceful than that at the end of Muldoon’s ‘Blewits’, where the female protagonist is ‘fist-fucked all night / by blewits, or by chanterelles’ (2001: 125). And like Muldoon, Paterson subtly interweaves the personal and the historical. ‘Chain-smoking and “the slavery of tea and coffee”’ might be intended by the speaker as a private spell to ward off grief, but they also obliquely invoke historical narratives of trade and consumption, as does the poem’s title, which the *OED* gives as ‘the practice of a kind of sorcery, witchcraft, or folk medicine originating in West Africa and mainly practised in the English-speaking areas of the Caribbean’. What looks like a matter of individual choice is frequently ghosted by some underlying historical narrative, which is more or less unconsciously repeated in the present, so that even the escapist westward journey he describes comes freighted with historical baggage, being a well-worn path for Scottish migrants, and a well-established part of imperial expansion.

The past continues to exert a pervasive influence on the present, and even when individuals in the present actively try to shed that influence they frequently end up staging another inherited narrative, as we can see when Paterson returns to the notion of failed migration in ‘Pioneer’:

It’s here I would have come to pass away
the final hour before the boat’s departure;
the bluff side of the Law, between the harbour
and the dark, cetacean barrow of Balgay.

Twin trains of headlights inched across the river –
the homebound day-shift – trail-blazing cars
like angels on a starry escalator
of the bridge’s tapering, foreshortened spar.

I tried to see it as a burning lance
angling for the slicked, black shoals of Fife
or a bowsprit, swung and steeved against the south

to help ride out her hellish afterlife:

the stubborn, rammish sap still on my hands,
the taste of her, like a coin laid up in my mouth. (1993: 36)

For Paterson as for Muldoon, the sonnet stages both a remembering and a forgetting. The poem's speaker plans to leave Dundee because of a breakup, and his departure is an act of willed forgetting that will enable him to 'ride out her hellish afterlife'. At the same time, however, the poem's title and details suggest his leaving would be a repetition, of economic and political migrations. The glamorous image of 'the homebound day-shift' as 'angels on a starry escalator' points to a prosperity that the speaker feels excluded from, while his effort to re-imagine the bridge 'as a burning lance / angling for the slicked, black shoals of Fife / or a bowsprit, swung and steeved against the *south*' hints at political allegory, as though his failed relationship paralleled that of Scotland to England. Both the remembering and the forgetting come together in the subjunctive syntax of the lines that begin 'Pioneer''s octave and its sestet: 'It's here I would have come' and 'I tried to see' both strongly suggest that what comes next did not actually happen, that the sonnet's protagonist did not leave Dundee, and that he was not able to see the bridge 'as a burning lance'. In that sense, Paterson's sonnet echoes the counter-factual aspects of Muldoon's own work – such as his father's unrealised South American emigration in 'Immrama' – as well as some of his syntactic tics, like the speculative 'I had been meaning to work through lunch', which begins 'Trifle' (2001: 120). Both poets say one thing whilst meaning another, a sleight-of-hand that evidences Larrissy's 'virtuoso and craft-conscious mastery of form' (2014: 51), in which the virtuosity keeps on undercutting the mastery.

And yet for all the similarities, there are important differences. Paterson uses a much more regular line than Muldoon, in length if not always metre, and the bulk of his sonnets, unlike Muldoon's, stick to something approximating the pentameter ('Heliographer' is an outlier). He also eschews the fuzziness of Muldoon's rhymes for a more conventional mix of full- and half-rhyme, and tends to favour an octave-sestet stanzaic split (though again there are interesting exceptions, such as 'Graffitto''s four-six-four division). As a result the form's external frame is more sharply, and even starkly, drawn than in a Muldoon sonnet. At the same time, however, its internal dynamics are less varied. Paterson's syntax shuts down possibilities that Muldoon's holds open, at least in his early work, and at least for a little while. 'It's here I would have come to pass away' lets the reader know immediately that the outbound trip did not take place, whilst introducing a ghostly aspect to the poem: the speaker has 'pass[ed] away' and become posthumous because he cannot change. In *101 Sonnets* Paterson calls Muldoon 'one of the contemporary masters of the sonnet' and writes that 'The symbol of unity that the form supplies chimes well with Muldoon's great project, which is to prove that everything is everything else by demonstrating the interchangeability of all terms, no matter how disparate' (1999a: 115). This does not quite work as an appraisal of Muldoon's work – he has a strong investment in the particularity of things, and the way that everything is not quite interchangeable with

everything else – but it does give a sense of how Paterson wants to see Muldoon's work, and especially how he wants to see the sonnet. In editing out Muldoon's particularities he foregrounds structure and pattern, and it is telling that he prefers for his anthology Muldoon's nightmarishly reworked fairy-tale ‘The Princess and the Pea’ to more heralded, but also more historically situated sonnets such as ‘Why Brownlee Left’, ‘The Sightseers’, or ‘Quoof’.

This shift in emphasis from Muldoonian specificity can best be seen and heard in ‘The Alexandrian Library’. The poem is set in a fictionalised version of the ex-coal mining town ‘COWDENBEATH’, which is now comprised of a ‘closed theme-park’, a ‘blighted nine-holer’ and ‘stadium built for a cancelled event’ and is populated by ‘beaky degenerates’ who ‘silently moon at the back of the shops’ (1993: 26). ‘The Alexandrian Library’ ostensibly charts the journey of its speaker through this run down city to ‘*Harry Sturgis: Remaindered and Second-Hand Books*’ (1993: 28), where he finds the manuscript of an ancient, apparently lost text:

A tongue of dust, tasting of naphtha and pollen,
creeps out from the little vault, licking your hand
as it swims to the back and starts faking around;
from the scrips and the ashes you manage to fish out
a short monograph on the storage of turnips,
two bloodstained scytalae (wound round your arms
they read something about reinforcements); the Gospel
According to Someone Who Once Shagged the Sister
of St James the Less; Chaldean star charts
mistaken for blotter, glutted with star-showers
and fat supernovae; The Lost Book of Jasper,
who could barely predict his own lunchtime.
Lastly, two scrolls trundle out to present themselves;
the name on the tag leaves you gasping for air:

Φρύνιχος

Divine Phrynicus, Lost Lord of Lost Hope,
of whom almost nothing survives but reports
of his greatness; Phrynicus, whose plays stuffed *Medea*
into third place in the Tragedy Contests,
one of the them leaving the crowd so distressed
the authorities punished the man for his hubris.

But as you read on, your jaw falls even further
as you learn the real reason they fined him...

Mercifully, only the first act of *Battus*,
though *Myndon*, in all its woeful entirety,
unfurls to the floor with no flourish of trumpets
but a strangled toot, forlorn and wanky
like something some arsehole might blow in your face
at the end of a terrible party. (1993: 30-31)

At this moment of narrative climax Paterson shapes his poem into a double sonnet, its twin blocks of fourteen lines flanking the mysterious, untranslated and untransliterated Greek name. In some respects this is a classic Muldoonian move, with Paterson's two fourteen-line verses suggesting, without affirming, the form's presence. There is also the remnant of a rhyme-scheme, as there is in 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants': 'hand' and 'around' form a half-rhyme in lines two and three (the first *bb* couplet of a Petrarchan sonnet), while 'air', 'Jasper', and, a little more distantly, 'star-showers', comprise a triple half-rhyme in the sestet. The second sonnet follows a similar pattern, rhyming 'Contests' with 'distressed' at lines four and five (an *aa* couplet in a Petrarchan scheme), and 'entirety', 'wanky', and 'party' in the sestet. Like Muldoon, Paterson approximates the sonnet form, offering the reader flashes of proscribed rhyme-schemes that flicker just long enough to hint at the form, but never quite long enough to draw it completely into play.

Unlike Muldoon, however, he only performs the trick once, and there is not the same obsessive repetition of the form we find across the forty-nine stanzas of 'The More a Man Has'. Paterson's sonnet therefore seems, if possible, even more thinned out and pared down than Muldoon's. At the same time, however, its longer lines make the form appear more imposing, a doubled sonnet that also doubles up as two dense slabs of poetic text. As a result the form, whilst only just registering as a sonnet, is also unsettlingly restrictive, a constraining absence whose constraints are all the more binding for being barely perceptible. In using the sonnet in this way, Paterson responds to his rather different cultural context. If Muldoon's Belfast is saturated with history, as a site of various proliferating and contested narratives about political ownership and identity, then Paterson's Cowdenbeath 'is a land with no history, / there being no victors to write it' (1993:26), defined by what is gone, in this case the old coal mining industry: 'Now the line curves / over pitheads and slagheaps, long towns with one street / where only the kirk strains much above ground-level' (1993: 26). Unlike the on-going and intractable histories that haunt Northern Ireland, it seems Scottish history is comprised of absences. As Matt MacGuire notes, 'Under the aegis of modernisation, successive British industries, the backbone of working class labour for two centuries, were denationalised and in some cases simply discontinued' (2009: 92). The resultant evacuated,

derelict post-industrial landscapes inform much Scottish fiction, and they also lie behind Paterson's surrealist version of Cowdenbeath, as well as the sparse urban setting of 'Heliographer'.

The 1993 publication date of *Nil Nil* coincides with large shifts in political and economic ideologies, including the end of the Cold War, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union. These shifts have been examined by texts as different as Frances Fukuyama's 'The End of History' (1989) and Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), and Derrida's influence is particularly important to what María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Pareen, writing in 2013's *The Spectralities Reader*, call a spectral turn in early-nineties cultural discourse. This spectral turn takes the 'liminal position' of 'ghosts and haunting' as a crucial conceptual tool for 'theoriz[ing] a variety of social, ethical, and political questions', such as 'the intricacies of memory and trauma, personal and collective; the workings and effects of scientific processes, technologies, and media; and the exclusionary, effacing dimensions of social norms pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class' (2013: 2). Blanco and Pareen identify the spectral turn with 'the present day spread of particular economic models (most prominently, neoliberal capital)' whose processes are 'only partially material' and 'accelerated to the point of disappearance' (2013: 92). This neoliberal capital is an evacuated, invisible phenomenon that hollows out and dematerialises particular geographic and historic traditions, including those of working-class, industrial Scotland, leaving behind the kinds of abandoned landscapes that feature in 'The Alexandrian Library', and find articulation in its evacuated, abandoned version of the sonnet.

Muldoon, too, has his spectral moments – Blanco and Pareen point to Freud's 'The Uncanny' as an important text for thinking about spectrality (2013: 3-5) – but Paterson's version is starker and emptier, played out in sonnets that lack Muldoon's narrative vigour and more quickly narrow their range of possibilities (we know from the first line of 'Pioneer' that the speaker will not leave Dundee). Perhaps most significantly, Paterson's sonnets have a disembodied, immaterial element that is largely absent in Muldoon. Where Muldoon's love of the particular situates his sonnets within multiplying networks of reference and allusion, Paterson's emptier forms sometimes have the opposite effect of lifting his poems out of context. Dundee's old industrial sites, for example, do not loom especially large in Paterson's *Nil Nil* sonnets, which rather inhabit the apparently dehistoricised, depersonalised places-in-general that succeeded them (precursors to Augé's non-places, which I will consider more fully later). This is particularly the case with Paterson's four sonnet suite, 'Exeunt', which is comprised of snapshots of everyday contemporary life, partially decontextualised vignettes stalked by the shadow of death. 'Bird', for example, listens to 'the disembodied voices' (1993: 5) at a wake, while 'The Electric Brae' ends with the optical illusion named in the title: the strange disembodied perceptual riddle of a car rolling uphill (1993: 5-6). More sinisterly, 'Curtains' narrates a casual liaison during an off-season European holiday in which the glamour of the foreign locale

(‘Aubeterre’) is muted by ‘everything’ being ‘boarded up till spring’ and the weather’s ‘unbroken drizzle.’ It ends with a bleak view of the encounter:

She leads you to her room
but gets the shivers while you strip her bare;
lifting her head, you watch her pupils bloom
into the whole blue iris, then the white. (1993: 4-5)

I say ‘partially decontextualised’, because Paterson almost always invokes some kind of setting or backstory, however sparse or oblique. ‘Bird’, for example, sketches a brief outline of the events that preceded the funeral, and ends in Scottish dialect: *‘Ach, there was nothin’ o’ her. She was nae mair / than a sparra, nae mair than a wee bird’* (1993: 5). The suite’s first sonnet, ‘Drop Serene’, suggests that place-in-general is in fact the product of a particular history.

He poured the warm, clear guck into the mould
in which he’d already composed, with tweezers,
dead wasps on an everlasting flower
or ants filing over a leaf. When it was cold
he slaved at the surface, softening the camber
till it sat with the row of blebs on his mantelpiece,
each with its sequestered populace
like a hiccup in history, scooped out of amber.

As if it might stall the invisible cursor
drawing a blind down each page of his almanac
or the blank wall of water that always kept pace,
glittering an inch, half an inch from his back.
He was out in the garden, digging the borders
when it caught him, in a naturalistic pose. (1993: 4)

Whilst this sounds like an innocuous pastime, it acquires darker meanings in light of the phrases ‘sequestered populace’ and ‘hiccup in history’, which hint at analogies with a larger history of forcibly detained or displaced populations and communities, and also in light of the implicit contrast the poem makes between the protagonist and his wasps and ants. Just as the insects are ‘composed’, so the protagonist is ‘caught...in a naturalistic pose’, as though he were also constructed like a work of art. The sonnet thus implies that making insect-ornaments is not a neutral, innocent pastime, but analogous with more culpable histories. Indeed, Paterson’s doubled perspectives are suggestive of

certain aspects of Scottish history, for whilst Scotland has been subject to violence at different periods in its history, during the Jacobite Rebellion, for example, or the Highland Clearances, it also been a perpetrator, in its central role within Empire (of the four colonial officials in Hill's 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' – 'Malcolm and Frere, Colebrook and Elphinstone' – three are Scottish) and Randall Stevenson, in his 2004 article 'A Postmodern Scotland?', notes that Scotland was 'a primary agent in the construction of the British Empire, and on the whole one of its beneficiaries,' and 'so cannot be assumed to share uncomplicatedly in the condition of colonies or former colonies abroad' (2004: 224). The sonnet's changing representation of its unnamed protagonist as both possible perpetrator and victim of violence resonates with this wider duality, as though his situation in the sonnet were an unconscious and displaced repetition of an occluded historical narrative.

This switch in perspective occurs in the sonnet's passage from octave to sestet, and this also marks a transition from an embodied perspective to a disembodied one. The octave, although written in the third person, is largely aligned with the perspective of the poem's protagonist, and is mostly taken up with physical actions. In the sestet, however, the protagonist is the subject of observation, rather than being the one doing the observing, and is framed in the closing lines, camera-like, as 'out in the garden, digging the borders'. The sonnet does not, however, introduce another persona through which to watch him, so it is not clear whose point of view it now occupies. The scene is also hard to visualise, and its details – 'the invisible cursor', 'the blank wall of water' that are only 'an inch, half an inch from his back' – are reminiscent of a dream rather than a real experience. That 'invisible cursor' is of course redolent of the digital technologies which were on the rise in the early nineties, and another instance (not dissimilar to the camera) of the poem's disembodiment. Paterson, in fact, juxtaposes the cursor with the more physical and archaic 'almanac', presenting the former as a deletion of the latter. The cursor is described as 'drawing a blind down each page of his almanac' as though not merely to deny the almanac, but actively erase it, as if a spectral modernity were trying to sever its connections with the past. This, however, is only partially successful. The sestet might be disembodied, but it is not abstract or immaterial. There is a grim relish in the way the sestet's opening line knowingly says 'As if it might stall', another syntactic construction that means the opposite of what it says, and a suspenseful menace to the repeated 'inch' and 'half an inch' of water the poem pictures catching the protagonist. That is to say, there is a strong sense of voice in the sestet, even if this cannot be located in an identifiable persona.

Writing in the introduction to his 2001 selection of Robert Burns' poetry, Paterson claims that 'Burns found a way of assuaging his terminally fragmented personality by projecting it into a vast and partly anonymous work. It was, in a way, a natural move; from being all things to all men, it's a fairly short step to being no-one at all' (2001: xiv). Whilst this points to Paterson's later metaphysical

concerns, it also helps to understand the more historical dimensions of his earliest sonnets, and his subliminal dialogue with Muldoon. Muldoon offers a model of almost endless division (his engagement with the sonnet might also be profitably thought of as ‘terminally fragmented’), and to an extent Paterson follows his example. But where Muldoon seems happy for the process to continue endlessly, Paterson tries to take the ostensibly ‘short step’ into nothingness. This is the move ‘Drop Serene’ makes in its turn from octave to sestet, but where Paterson’s comments on Burns imply this is a seamless process, ‘a natural move’ that is ‘a fairly short step’, in *Nil Nil* it is complex, and difficult. Fragmented histories leave traces of themselves behind to trouble the desired anonymity so that it can never be fully achieved. In ‘Drop Serene’ Paterson uses the turn from octave to sestet to stage this convoluted process, and throughout *Nil Nil* he plays the form’s external frame against its internal dynamics, with the former never quite resolving the later.

II. ‘frayed and framed’: Rilke and Machado, translation and metaphysics.

From the late 1990s, Paterson’s engagement with the sonnet – and, indeed, his poetic voice more generally – has developed in more theoretical terms, and been conducted as much through criticism, editorial work and, crucially, translation, as it has in his own poetry. In these works, Paterson develops an almost geometric sense of the sonnet, and locates its formal identity in its mathematical properties, relating the form’s frequent octave-sestet split to the golden section, that ‘mathematical ratio’ in which ‘the ratio of the smaller part to the larger is the same as that of the larger to the whole’ (1999a: xviii). Though he notes that ‘the more accurate division...would have been 8:5, rather than the 8:6 we find in the sonnet’, he suggests that ‘there’s just a *rightness*’ (1999a: xix, xx) to the broad structure of asymmetrical splits: ‘The reason we have the turn is that we just can’t help it. The human brain craves disruption and variation just as much as it craves symmetry and repetition’ (1999a: xvii). The sonnet’s well-balanced spatial and mathematical properties appeal to the human brain because they are easy to memorise, and he goes on to argue that ‘what the sonnet *is*, first and foremost: a small square poem. It presents both poet and the reader with a vivid symmetry that is the perfect emblem of the unity of meaning a sonnet seeks to embody...It has the added advantage of being small enough to be easily memorised, which is the whole point of the poem – that it should lodge itself permanently in our brains’ (1999a: xvi). In a telling switch, he moves from sonnets in particular to ‘the poem’ more generally, and identifies both with memory, but defines memory idiosyncratically in terms of the ‘human brain’. In contrast to the various political and psycho-analytic models of memory that underpin the sonnets of Hill, Heaney, and Muldoon, Paterson embraces its cognitive and neurological foundations and processes. Memory and poetry are a matter of the brain, which tends to subsume individual histories, communities and traditions.

Being rooted in the biology of the human brain, poetry in this account occupies a different level of time to what we conventionally call ‘history’, and Paterson goes back to poetry’s function as ‘a mnemonic system of information storage and recovery’ in ‘pre-literate cultures’, arguing that ‘it was a “magical” art that could conjure from thin air the location of water-holes, hunting grounds and food stores, the sequenced appearance of plants and flowers, the cycles and lore of weather, seasons and animal husbandry’ (2018: 3). This opens poetry up to timescales substantially greater than even the most longstanding historical communities and their traditions, but Paterson is resistant to the idea that memory is permanent, or immutable. He consistently contrasts his scientific, materialist outlook with a religious sensibility that trades in the eternal, and in *The Poem* he takes aim at what he calls ‘the “theistic fallacy”’ (2018: 107) – not just belief in God, but the assumption ‘that “things mean something”...that material objects, processes or events can somehow possess immaterial truths’ (2018: 107). He goes on to argue that ‘In poetry, this is manifested in the oddly persistent belief that there is a meaning or interpretation which is *intrinsically* “right”, or at least “more correct” than another’, a notion which Paterson derides:

Given its demonstrable absence, this truth must reside (we unconsciously presume) in the mind of some remote third party who either can or will confirm the accuracy of our brilliant exegeses at some point in the future, possibly come the Rapture. It doesn’t, they won’t; there’s nobody here but us chickens, and for that reason no human can ever know what *anything* means – least of all a poem, whose sign is deliberately and necessarily unstable. “Meaning” just isn’t in residence anywhere. All the meaning we ever have is decided by context and consensus. (2018: 108-109)

There is no immutable layer of time, no eternity from which meaning might flow into our own transient histories. At the same time, however, Paterson’s scientific theorising continually invokes large time-scales that feel as if they might be immutable, at least from the perspective of an individual human life. As a result, there is a tension between the scepticism of Paterson’s argument, and the superb self-confidence with which that scepticism is articulated. The demystification risks acquiring its own mystique, as though Paterson half-wanted the immutable authority he says does not exist. When he declares ‘there’s nobody here but us chickens’ he assumes a certainty that, strictly speaking, we chickens do not possess.

Nor is Paterson just content to identify this condition. He calls this state a ‘cosmic orphanhood’ (2018: 108), a term so loaded that it cannot help but impute some meaning – however barren – to our apparently meaningless existence. In doing so Paterson highlights a tension between the strictly material, and scientific, and more speculatively metaphysical concepts. Crucially, this

metaphysics is developed under the auspices of two of his most important poetic influences (who were also great twentieth-century sonnet writers): Antonio Machado and Rainer Maria Rilke. It is in translating Machado and Rilke that many of Paterson's most important ideas first get an airing. In his 'Afterword' to *The Eyes* Paterson describes translation as 'nothing more than a commitment to a process – what Machado everywhere refers to as "the road"', claiming that 'it is the principal lesson Machado has to teach us: our faith should be directed only towards the unalloyed fact of the present moment, and therefore only towards means, and not to beginnings or ends' (1999b: 56). Just as there is no inherent meaning, Paterson argues that there is no abstract 'original' poem that, like a ghost in a machine, can be resituated from one language to another. This leads him (in a typically intellectual leap) to emphasise 'the unalloyed fact of the present moment' at the expense of 'beginnings and ends', just as he later affirms that 'there's nobody here but us chickens'. The appendices to *Orpheus* are even more expansive. Here he alludes to his own 'long and sometimes painful conversion to scientific materialism' (2005: 65) and argues that Rilke's 'Sonnets are a strongly non-religious work' which refute 'religious errors', including the notion 'of truth as being in the possession of an inscrutable third party' when in actuality 'Truth...is not determined (a subtle error, which posits its alternative residence) but sensibly, unilaterally, and provisionally *decided*. Science proceeds not on certainty, but on the basis of best-working and falsifiable hypothesis' (2005: 66-67). These religious errors are early versions of the theistic fallacy, and to correct them Paterson draws on Rilke's sonnets, which he argues 'insist on sheer wondering enquiry as *the* central sane human activity, a way of configuring our most honest propositional stance towards the universe' (2005: 67).

Rilke and Machado also supply one of Paterson's key metaphysical terms: absence. Paterson's 'Siesta', a translation of the Machado poem of the same name that appears in both *God's Gift to Women* and *The Eyes* is addressed 'To the God of absence and of aftermath, / of the anchor in the sea, the brimming sea.../ whose truant omnipresence sets us free' (1997: 56). Rilke has perhaps an even stronger investment in absence than Machado. Robert Hass notes Rilke's late turn to French poetry, saying that 'The only explanation for it he ever offered was to say that he found the language useful, since there was "in German no exact equivalent for the French word *absence*, in the great positive sense with which Paul Valéry used it"' (1987: xvi). He also argues that for Rilke art was a 'cessation of desire; a place where our inner emptiness stops generating that need for things which mutilates the world and turns it into badly handled objects, where it becomes instead a pure, active, becalmed absence' (1987: xxix). What I want to suggest is Paterson's speculations, developed in conversation with Rilke and Machado, can be characterised in terms of the ideas that Domick LaCapra explores in his 1999 essay 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', where he distinguishes between absence and loss as distinct types of trauma. Put at its crudest, this distinction sees loss as historical, and pertaining to specific events (whether these are personal or public), while absence is transhistorical, and a matter less of specific events and more of conceptual, perhaps even

philosophical, structures. For LaCapra absence occurs ‘on a transhistorical level’ and ‘is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)’ (1999: 700). Absence occurs ‘at a “foundational” level’, and cannot be changed. Historical losses, by contrast, are related to specific events, like the Holocaust or Apartheid (two important examples that LaCapra discusses) and involve ‘specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future’ (1999: 700). Losses can be re-imagined, even though specific histories can seem so traumatic as to preclude this, but absence is immutable. Another term that LaCapra relates to absence is ‘structural trauma’, which is similarly generalised and unchanging. For LaCapra, ‘Historical trauma is specific’ (1999: 722) but ‘Everyone is subject to structural trauma’ (1999: 723), which he calls ‘untranscendable’. Paterson’s ‘cosmic orphanhood’ can be thought of as an instance of such untranscendable absence, an expression of structural trauma, and it is noticeable that several of the examples LaCapra gives of structural trauma crop up in Paterson’s prose: ‘the separation from the (m)other, the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-oedipal or presymbolic in the symbolic, the entry into language, the encounter with the “real”’ (1999: 721). The various fall myths that Paterson alludes to in his criticism are versions of some of these examples: ‘the fall into time and category’ which is ‘brutally reinforced by the acquisition of language’; ‘the distinction between self and other, mother and breast’ (2018: 21). Absence emerges as a crucial, but conflicted concept. It gives voice to a potent, indeed inescapable, state of being, which is difficult to articulate directly, and is most often characterised by negation and paradox: it is not historical, though nor is it a-temporal; it is foundational but elusive; it is traumatic, but not associated with specific instances of trauma. In this sense, it corresponds to LaCapra’s claim that absence is ‘deeply ambivalent’ and can seem ‘both shattering or painful and the occasion for jouissance, ecstatic elation, or the sublime’ (1999: 724).

Machado and Rilke are not only important voices for conceptualising absence, but their sonnets offer models for writing it, too. Strikingly, it is through his engagements with them that Paterson really becomes immersed in the sonnet as a numerical, philosophic form. Alan Trueblood, in the introduction to his translation of Machado which Paterson acknowledges as an important source for *The Eyes*, suggests that Machado’s interest in the sonnet – developed in his collection *New Songs* – ‘is indicative of a new interest in formal schemes correlated with conceptual substructures’ (1982: 14). Paterson himself compares translating Machado to ‘tak[ing] a leisurely stroll down the *via negativa*’ (1999b: 59), and in ‘The Road’, a thirteen-line near-sonnet, writes ‘wayfarer, there is no way, / there is no map or Northern star, just a blank page and a starless dark’ (1999b: 38). *Orpheus*, meanwhile, is shot through with the metaphysics of absence, or an absent metaphysics, from the third sonnet’s assertion that ‘True singing’ is ‘A breath of nothing. A sigh in a god. A wind’ (2005: 5), to the sequence’s conclusion: ‘should the world itself forget your name / say this to the still earth: *I flow.* / Say this to the quick stream: *I am*’ (2007: 59). Such moments hint at transformation without ever realizing the visionary change they seem to promise. No sooner has Orpheus appeared than he is

gone, and his presence always poised on the cusp of absence, like those moments of breath or wind through which Rilke and Paterson imagine him. Rilke, indeed, conceives of the sonnet itself in terms rather like these, saying (in a letter quoted by Thomas Martinec in his article on Rilke) that ‘transforming the sonnet, lifting it, in a sense carrying it whilst “on the run” without breaking it – this was a peculiar trial or task for me’ (2010: 107). The form itself is ‘A breath of nothing’, or ‘A wind’ that can never be fully inhabited, that is constantly slipping away from the reader.

The ambiguities and paradoxes emerge with particular force in the thirteenth sonnet of the *Orpheus* sequence’s second part, ‘The Passing’. The poem urges the reader to ‘Die, die through Eurydice – that you might pass / into the pure accord’, a state of existence akin to ‘the glass / that shatters in the sound of its own ringing’. Paterson’s and Rilke’s image catches something of LaCapra’s ambivalent absence that is simultaneously ‘shattering’ and ‘ecstatic’. The sonnet’s sestet continues this ambivalence.

Be; and at the same time know the state
of non-being, the boundless inner sky,
that this time you might fully honour it.

Take all of nature, its one vast aggregate –
jubilantly multiply it by
the nothing of yourself, and clear the slate. (2005: 43)

The sonnet intertwines being and non-being, and stages their complex relations as a collision of opposites, from the sky that is both boundless and inner, to the multiplication of ‘vast’ nature by the ‘nothingness’ of the self. In an astute reading – of both this poem, and Paterson’s Nothings more generally – Michael O’Neill notes how the sonnet ‘concludes with a mathematical conundrum, where multiplying any figure by zero makes the final outcome – in this case – a positive nothing’, so that ‘The multiplication sum is not an exercise in futility but a means of erasing barriers between world and self’ (2014: 67). Multiplying anything by nothing leads back to zero, but for O’Neill Paterson re-imagines the process as a positive one, something ‘akin to the miracle of loaves and fishes’, rather than the emptiness and nullity we might usually associate with nothingness. Certainly, Paterson’s sonnet imagines the process of multiplying by nothing with vigour and buoyancy: his full rhyme of ‘sky’ and ‘by’ is augmented by multiply, which supplies an internal rhyme to thicken the sonnet’s verbal texture. This sends an additional lyric charge running through the mathematical process of multiplication, so that it is no longer a neutral, numerical process, but a vital and exuberant imaginative act.

There is a danger here, however, in that the jubilation of the process ends up venerating nothingness as a version of presence. O'Neill's loaves-and-fishes comparison suggests how easily Paterson's metaphysical language can slip into the religious – and even Christian – terms and idioms he is so hostile to, and some of his poems do sound straightforwardly visionary, as though seduced by the notion of absence as a version of presence. Perhaps the most joyful of his own sonnets are the beautifully weighted pair for his twin sons, 'Waking with Russ' and 'The Thread', from 2003's *Landing Light*. The first of these addresses Russ directly, saying:

Dear son, I was *mezzo del cammin*
and the true path was as lost to me as ever
when you cut in front and lit it as you ran.
See how the true gift never leaves the giver:
returned and redelivered, it rolled on
until the smile poured through us like a river.
How fine, I thought, this waking amongst men!
I kissed your mouth and pledged myself forever. (2003: 5)

Haughton observes how 'The poem sets up an alternating *ababababababab* rhyme-scheme that generates a wave-effect, oscillating between masculine and feminine rhymes' (2014: 41). This wave-oscillation, when taken in conjunction with Paterson's allusion to Dante – strategically placed at the end of line seven, the mid-point of the poem – creates a sonnetized version of the terza rima form, so that were the poem to be broken up into tercets, the middle line of the first stanza generates the rhyme words for the first and third lines of the next stanza, and so on. 'Waking with Russ' affects its own multiplication, turning a pair of rhymes (mirroring perhaps Paterson's twin sons) into a tripartite rhyme scheme that, following the Dantean example, could theoretically go on 'forever', the word on which the sonnet ends. In his own way, Paterson repeats the formal moves that Heaney makes in 'Clearances', where his sonnets become crossed not only with a version of terza rima but also inflected – as so much of Heaney's later work is – with the ghostliness of Dante's travels through the afterlife, not too dissimilar to those of Orpheus. Heaney in fact recurs intermittently as a lyric ideal in Paterson's prose. In addition to an admiring reading of Heaney's 'The Underground' – one of Heaney's most Orphic poems, in which the London Underground is re-imagined as the underworld – Paterson also praises Heaney in his *101 Sonnets* anthology. Describing Heaney's 'poetic scales' as 'so finely calibrated you could weigh air and light in them', Paterson calls 'The Skylight', Heaney's concluding sonnet from 'Glanmore Revisited', 'a wonderful Italian sonnet about no more than the thing it describes – things being where most of the deepest mysteries are, and where most of the best poets find them' (1999a: 120). 'Waking with Russ', too, could be thought of in such terms, with its well-weighed form balancing both the immediate moment and 'the deepest mysteries'.

The Heaney-esque and Dantean shades of ‘Waking with Russ’ suggest an atemporal metaphysics, a version of absence-as-presence but even at his most optimistic, Paterson’s jubilation is more tempered and measured than this. ‘Waking with Russ’’s expansive elements are balanced by its specificity, so that whilst the poem might theoretically run on to eternity, its gaze is firmly on the here and now of a father waking next to his son. Such moments are not the norm in Paterson’s work (which is one of the reasons this poem is so moving). Most of his other sonnets are much more ambivalent, such as ‘To the Great Zero’, his version of Machado’s ‘To the Great Nought’, which ends ‘let’s rise, and make this toast: a border-song / to forgetting, amnesty, oblivion’ (1999b: 54). Whilst the sonnet imagines ‘The zero integral’ and ‘the miracle of non-being’ it cannot inhabit them, but only address them, an address complicated by the possible historical and political resonances, in the Scottish context, of ‘a *border-song*’. Paterson’s final couplet is only a ‘toast’ to nothingness, and so remains at a remove from nothingness itself, as the calculated awkwardness of its half-rhyme makes clear. The muffled echoes of ‘song’ in ‘oblivion’ stage a dissonance between the two concepts, meaning the poem’s song is unable to finally articulate oblivion. In a similar vein, Paterson’s translation of Rilke’s ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, also from *Landing Light*, ends ‘there is nowhere to hide, nothing here / that does not see you. *Now change your life*’ (2003: 61). The doubled negatives of Paterson’s syntax imply that there is something there that does see you, a presence in the nothingness, an implication strengthened by the italicised closing injunction to ‘*change your life*’, which sounds as if it has been issued by this unseen presence. The result is an unsettling, even sinister sort of haunting in which nothingness and something uneasily combine, in contrast to the serene vision of ‘Waking with Russ’.

This process, of imagining but not inhabiting nothingness, is perhaps most clearly articulated in ‘The Light’, from *Landing Light*, in which Paterson imagines a religious disciple whose duplicitous master has just cruelly declared that ‘*all* is illusory’ and that ‘There is no light, fool’. The sonnet’s sestet describes the disciple’s response:

I went back to my room to pack my things,
my begging-bowl, my robe and cup; the prayer-mat
I would leave. It lay there, frayed and framed
in a square of late sun. And out of pure habit –
no, less, out of nothing, for I was nothing –
I watched myself sit down for one last time. (2003: 71)

Hugh Haughton argues that ‘in its account of intellectual vocation and the *via negativa*’ ‘The Light’ ‘reads like a poem by Machado’, and like Machado Paterson can only observe, and not inhabit

nothingness. Whilst the sonnet's speaker affirms that 'I was nothing', the manner of the affirmation suggests that, as with Paterson's other sonnets, such nothingness is not finally attainable. The emphasis on looking in the last line – 'I watched myself sit' – introduces a split within the perspective of the poem's speaker similar to that in 'Curtains' or 'Drop Serene', and this split complicates the purity of the nothingness the speaker claims to embody. Similarly, the past tense 'was' and the qualifier 'for one last time' suggest that this nothingness was a fleeting state that can now only be experienced in recollection. Paterson's claim, made in relation to Burns, that it is 'a short step' from a 'terminally fragmented personality' to 'being no one at all' is refuted in this poem, where the step proves incredibly difficult. Some residual aspect of the self remains undissolved in nothingness, just as the *via negativa* always remains incomplete, unable to finish its work of infinite negation. The sonnet, too, stages the complexities of nothingness. Like the prayer mat, its form is 'frayed', being comprised of a series of thinned out and pared down rhymes ('mat' and 'habit'; 'framed' and 'time'), but however ephemeral something of its shape persists, and the poem continues to be 'framed' by its ghostly outline.

'The Shut-In', another *Landing Light* sonnet, is comparably 'frayed'. Beginning with a less bitter version of the post-break up meditations that comprise so many *Nil Nil* sonnets, 'The Shut-In' moves from the private to the philosophical in its turn from octave to sestet:

Good of them, all told to leave me locked
inside my favourite hour: the whole one early
I came to wait for one I loved too dearly
in this coffered snug below the viaduct
with my dark vernacular ale, Stevenson's
short fiction, and the little game I played
of not thinking of her, except to thumb away
the exquisite stitch that gathers at my breastbone.

The minute hand strains at its lengthening tether
like Achilles on the hare; the luscious beer
refills; the millionth page flowers on the last
of *The Bottle Imp*...O Fathers, leave me here,
beyond the night, the stars, beyond the vast
infinitesimal letdown of each other! (2003: 39)

Paterson alludes here to Zeno's paradox, in which Achilles cannot overtake the hare in spite of being demonstrably faster. Having given it a head start, when he reaches the point where the hare has started, the hare will have moved a little further on, and this process is true for all future points, even though the distances involved get smaller and smaller. A thought experiment on the divisibility of time and space, the paradox has an analogue in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1891 short story 'The Bottle Imp', which the poem refers to. The eponymous bottle-imp is an enabling but corrupting influence that gives its owner the things they most desire, but also consigns them to damnation in hell unless they sell it on to someone else before they die, with the proviso that it must be sold for less than it was purchased (1996: 73-76). In Stevenson's narrative, the bottle imp is initially purchased for very little, and so it is almost impossible to reduce the price any further, and part of the action of the story is driven by this conundrum (1996: 90-102). As the bottle imp gets sold for increasingly small subdivisions of currency, the story can be read, like Zeno's paradox, as a meditation on infinite division, in which absolute nothingness can never really be attained, only ever increasingly small levels of minuteness.

The paradox has an analogue, too, in the way Paterson uses the sonnet. His octave is made up of a series of barely perceptible, heavily 'frayed' rhymes, like those from 'The Light': 'locked', 'viaduct', 'dearly', 'early', 'Stevenson', 'breastbone', 'played' and 'away' are so slight as to almost slip beneath notice, as though the rhyme scheme of the sonnet were slowly erasing itself. In the poem's sestet, however, the process is reversed rather than continued. Although 'tether' and 'other' is still a half rhyme, 'beer', 'here', 'last' and 'vast' are much more strident full-rhymes that audibly bring the sonnet back into earshot. Far from being frayed down to nothing, the sonnet becomes more insistently framed in its sestet. This tension mimics, I would suggest, the tension of Zeno's paradox, and 'The Bottle Imp', in which nothingness can never quite be reached, and the effort to do so can make it seem ever further away. The subdivisions of time and space (for Zeno's paradox) or currency (for Stevenson) become so endless as to be another form of multiplication. Rather like 'The Passing', where multiplication was a multiplication by zero, Paterson is ambivalent as to what counts as subtraction and what as addition. The lyric phrase 'frayed and framed' seems to enact this ambiguous process, suggesting a decline that might also become a benefit. Indeed, even other resonant alliterative phrases like 'headless and halved' and 'absence and aftermath' sound as if they make poetic gain out of the fact of loss, turning an account of reduction into a moment of increased lyric enrichment.

III. Hiding in Full View.

‘The Bottle Imp’ is not just a spiritual fable but also, like much of Stevenson’s fiction, a studied and often ironic meditation on the contemporary world, and particularly the complexities of European colonial presence in the Pacific. The bottle imp itself is embedded in the circulation of people, wealth, and disease at the end of the nineteenth century. A good example of what Penny Fielding calls the ‘economic metaphors’ through which Stevenson ‘describe[s] adventure fiction as a type of speculation on an uncertain future... the parabolic tale “The Bottle Imp” threatens to set the cost of the satisfaction of desire at eternal damnation’ (2010: 4). Stevenson intertwines the historical and metaphysical, and I want to consider in this final section of the chapter how Paterson’s most recent collection, *40 Sonnets* (2015), also explores the relationship between these two different strands.

Whilst there are a significant number of metaphysical speculations, such as ‘The Air’, which ends wondering ‘Will it all / come to nothing, if nothing came to this?’ (2015: 5), other sonnets address historical subjects directly, such as ‘The Foot’, about a child mutilated during a military attack in Gaza, and ‘The Big Listener’, an excoriation of Tony Blair. For the most part, however, the historicity of the collection is not a matter of contemplating large scale public events. Rather, Paterson’s collection divides between metaphysical parables and what we might think of as occasional poems. Stephen Regan, in ‘The Sonnet and its Travels’, suggests that ‘Several of the poems are existential musings (“Souls”) or ontological riddles (“Seven Questions about the Journey”), but these are grounded and relieved by mordant satirical reflections on social institutions (“To Dundee City Council”) and on poetry itself (“Requests”)’ (2018: 14). These satirical reflections are prompted by particular, if low-key, occasions, such as a trip back to Dundee and a poetry reading, in the cases Regan cites. What I want to consider are the ways in which these occasional sonnets frequently – and unsettlingly – morph into ontological riddles, and how such existential riddling shifts back into the occasions of the everyday.

‘Occasional’ verse is a peculiar category, and not always meant in a complimentary sense. A poem can seem limited by being tethered to a particular context, as though the ephemerality of the occasion means that the poem, too, becomes ephemeral. ‘Requests’, in particular, reads like an ad hoc, throwaway performance. Aping the preamble poets give their poems at readings, the sonnet flippantly toys with the border between poem and non-poem. Paterson’s off-the-cuff examples – ‘O tell us more about your dad, / or why your second wife went mad’; ‘produce a boiled egg from your pocket, / a flageolet from your jacket’ (2015: 30) – suggest that the poem as a whole has only just popped into his head, and could quite easily have gone in a different direction. Similarly, ‘To Dundee City Council’ – occasioned by a less-than-happy trip back home – stylises Paterson’s home town as ‘ringroad, bombsite, rape tunnel and skip’, pours scorn on ‘the library where poor folks go to die / or download porno on the free wifi’ before ending by ‘setting sail / for that fine country called the fuck away’ (2015: 28). This, too, sounds as though it could have been made up on the spot, an impromptu

performance made to meet the demands of the passing moment, and Paterson's generic-yet-particular details have the same feel of well-rehearsed spontaneity as those in 'Requests'. Formally, both poems are similar too. Their mostly monosyllabic (or else comically contrived) rhymes, and direct mode of address imply a certain artlessness, abetted by the couplet rhyme scheme that eschews the Petrarchan or Shakespearean form's more intricate patterning. In these sonnets Paterson sounds as though he were delivering a stand-up routine whose appeal partly rests on its apparent improvisation, even if the material itself is often well rehearsed in advance of performance.

What I want to suggest is that, for all their humour, these poems make an important point about the imagination of place, or rather the imagination of what Marc Augé calls the non-place. For Augé, 'If a place can be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place', and offers some powerful examples, including 'the transit points and temporary abodes...proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity)', as well as the 'dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces' and 'the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself' (2008, 62-3). *40 Sonnets* is replete with such non-places. The Dundee library occupied by 'poor folks' who 'download porno on the free wifi' is both a temporary abode – a squat, almost – and enclosed in 'the complex skein of cable and wireless networks'. At the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum, the 'silent retreat' whose 'yogic agony' begins 'The Eyes' is a rather more 'luxurious' temporary abode, and there are several sonnets that occupy transport hubs, from the 'winter train' that begins 'A Calling' (2015: 38), to 'Kings Cross at rush hour' (2015: 39), where the speaker of 'Sentinel' nearly loses his child; as well as multiple references to digital technology: not only Dundee's 'wifi', but also the 'datastream' alluded to in 'The Air' (2015: 5), the 'download bar' in 'Apsinthion' (2015: 36), and the 'bright aerial' in 'Mercies' (2015: 43). The sonnet, too, feels like the poetic equivalent of a non-place in many of these poems. Paterson's particular habits in the collection, such as full but also plain rhyme, and especially his mode of vague-but-personal address, tend to flatten the form into a sort of conversational speculation that could happen anywhere and be about anything.

The empty mind you finally display
ten weeks into the yogic agony
of your silent retreat, you will discover
in the latter stages of a gin hangover. (2015: 6)

The poem's informal spoken register ('All I mean'), colloquial terminology ('pretty trance', 'ape'), and run-on rhymes partially disguise that this is a sonnet, as though to mute the poem's formal

identity and detach it from its past. It becomes a sort of non-sonnet, displaced from any relation to history. This is an effect only: when noticed, the form is solidly wrought and a palpable element of the poem's meaning, but one aspect of its construction is the ease with which it might not be noticed, the way in which its sonnet-ness is simultaneously obvious and elusive.

These non-places, however prosaic, in many respects extend the early nineties spectral turn that I discussed in relation to *Nil Nil*. This is not surprising, given that many features of the spectral turn – some of its associated political and economic ideologies, and its media and technology – have grown exponentially in the decades between *Nil Nil* and *40 Sonnets*, and that Augé – whose book was initially published in 1995 – argues that ‘supermodernity produces non-places’ (2008: 62). What I want to suggest is that, for Paterson, such non-places also become sites of his more metaphysical exploration, and that his occasional sonnets are overlaid with philosophical conundrums. Whilst ‘Requests’ and ‘To Dundee City Council’ are largely played for laughs, ‘The Eyes’ evinces an intellectual earnestness and speculative intensity that seems in part to come from Paterson’s earlier engagement with Rilke and Machado. In the sonnet’s sestet he differentiates between ‘that pretty trance you might know twice a year / when the ape is somehow home enough or mind / is lost enough for both to disappear’, and the real meaning of ‘soul’, which he defines as ‘what it leaves unguarded and unblind. / Its holocaust. Its vast solicitude’ (2015: 6). As in his translations and *Landing Light* sonnets, Paterson emphasises absence, which is articulated by the negatively prefixed adjectives he attaches to the soul (‘unguarded’ and ‘unblind’) and its yawning, chasm-like solicitude. What begins as a lightly satiric portrait of first world problems rapidly escalates to an unsettling meditation on profound ontological questions.

Arguably the most compelling instances of this switch from occasional to metaphysical sonnet are the two poems ‘Francesca Woodman’, and ‘On Woodman’s Photography’, about the late twentieth-century American photographer Francesca Woodman. The first of these reads:

iv

Ghost-face. Not because I turned my head,
But because what looked at me was dead.

v

– *We don’t exist – We only dream we’re here –*
This means we never die – We disappear –

vi

We’d met ‘in previous lives’, he was convinced.

Yeah, I thought. And haven't spoken since.

vii

All rooms will hide you, if you stand just so.

All ghosts know this. That's really all they know. (2015: 17)

This picks up and expands upon Paterson's obsession with ghostliness and spectrality. These ideas have been implicit, to an extent, in Paterson's translations and throughout his career, and the interest in photography recalls some of his camera-like sonnets from *Nil Nil*. But here ghostliness is much more thoroughly woven into the fabric of everyday existence than in those earlier works. The emphasis he places on the room, as a sparse and non-descript non-place, makes ghostliness a recurrent, and even inescapable issue, a matter of all bodies in all forms of space, rather any specific body in more particularised spaces. The poem, too, becomes ghostly, with the rhyming couplets positioned 'just so', so as to hide within the room of the sonnet, with Paterson playing on the well-worn pun of the Italian 'stanza' being room in English. Just as Woodman places herself within her photographs only to slip out of them, so too these mini-two line poems get swallowed up and subsumed by the larger frame of the sonnet.

Or perhaps it might be the other way around, with the sonnet disappearing into the sequence of couplets. Natalie Pollard describes how many of these couplets began life in *Hiding in Full View*, a 2012 publication based on an Edinburgh art-exhibit of the same name in which fourteen single-line poems, written by Paterson, appeared alongside paintings by the artist Alison Watt. Pollard records that the book is made up of 'each of Paterson's lines...printed in alternation with images of Watt's monumental canvases' (2014: 115), and that: 'the sequence of fourteen poems distributed throughout *Hiding in Full View* is to be revised and compacted as a single sonnet [in *40 Sonnets*]. I haven't seen that version. But we can gather the unrevised poems on to one page now, and see a hidden sonnet peering out' (2014: 119). Pollard was writing before the publication of *40 Sonnets*, and this is not quite how the work evolved – the fourteen single-line *Hiding in Full View* poems became two sonnets, 'Francesca Woodman', and 'On Woodman's Photography', with small revisions to most, and complete re-writing of a couple. Nevertheless, the presentation of 'Francesca Woodman' on the page in *40 Sonnets* is similar to the way that Pollard gathers Paterson's earlier lines, assembling a frame from which a sonnet can be glimpsed 'peering out'. This construction asks us to consider if the sonnet or the couplet is the main unit of formal identity, and the extent to which these couplets' prior existence as independent works might still ghost the sonnet. It also raises a question as the extent to which the poem is haunted by the occasion (in this case, an art exhibit) that sparked it into being.

Pollard's essay explores the ways in which photography might function as a model for Paterson's own art, and draws on Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* to argue that 'photography's dependence on light and time gestures to its reliance on their absence: darkness and loss' (2014: 115). As Pollard insightfully relates in her essay, the apparent opposites of light and dark are deeply intertwined with one another, but what I want to emphasise here are the comparably deep, though deeply fraught, connections between the opposites of specificity and abstraction. Barthes writes that although 'What I want, in short, is that my mobile image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) "self"' in actuality "'myself' never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and "'myself' which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, "'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar'. Although he yearns for 'a neutral, anatomic body' he is 'doomed by (well-meaning) Photography always to have an expression: my body never finds its zero degree' (1981: 12). For Barthes photography is about an abstract metaphysical sense of self, a self that yearns for the neutrality of nothingness, but can never find it, being also akin to a restless bottle-imp. Like Stevenson (and Paterson) Barthes employs the bottle imp as a figure for metaphysical exploration, but the terms in which he describes it – 'light, divided, dispersed' – are also those used to describe his 'mobile image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age'. These ephemeral images suggest that photography is not just metaphysical, but occasional, and a matter of transient images circulated around society and its collection of would-be observers. Barthes' bottle imp (again like Stevenson's) implies a connection between these two contexts, the metaphysical and the social, but suggests it is an unstable, fluctuating connection, the bottle imp itself being unstable and fluctuating. Not only do these two things, self and image, not coincide, but they often switch roles. Sometimes it is the self that is elusive and evades the occasions, the images and bodies, which try to catch it and hold it some kind of permanent shape; and sometimes it is the image that is restlessly 'mobile' and fails to encompass the inert and unchanging self. In a similar way, the contours of Paterson's sonnets keep slipping: looked at and listened to in one way and they seem like a series of solidly wrought couplets, with a 'light, divided, dispersed' sonnet hovering within or around them. Looked at and listened to in a slightly different way, however, it is the sonnet that is solidly wrought and the couplets that do not hold still, giggling (or at least whispering) in the jar of the sonnet.

There is a tension in Paterson's work, then, between the metaphysical sonnet and the occasional sonnet, which jostle against one another without forming an orderly or harmonious relationship. Paterson makes a similar point in relation to another everyday technology, the telephone. 'An Incarnation' riffs on the contemporary phenomenon of cold calling,:

Hello? Yep Uh huh Speaking This is he

The householder, aye	Uh huh	Yeah I'm free
to speak right now	How long'll this thing be?	
What sort of message?	From what agency?	
Yes No	No I can't 'confirm my identity' –	
I know I'm me –	Eh? Hang on you called <i>me</i> ,	
so you tell <i>me</i> my name, and then we'll see –		
Yeah This is he	Aye Donald	Just one t
No, no middle name	Yep	DOB –
October thirtieth nineteen sixty-three		
Macalpine Cougan	Never naw	Dundee
I guess White British? None	No	I agree
Agree Agree		I strongly disagree
You what me? Hold?	For how long?	Seriously?

Jesus. Speaking speaking This is he (2015: 29)

As the poem's unusual and scattered spacing suggests, Paterson plays games with the notion of identity, and its speaker gets scattered across the snippets of information his one-sided conversation yields, listing different aspects of himself. The sonnet, too, sounds as if it might get lost amongst these fragmented details, with its shape strung along the repetition of the long /e/ that ends each line. It makes fun of a characteristically empty kind of telephone conversation but also plays with many of the assumptions about the poetics of identity and the relationship between the sonnet and autobiography. Viewed from one perspective, this is a densely wrought and intricately contrived pattern that shapes even the smallest detail into an overarching form; viewed from another and it is wildly arbitrary, and its coherence a fortuitous accident. Formal and personal identity are light, divided, and dispersed, to go back to Barthes words; but at the same time they are heavy, motionless, and stubborn. The fact that Paterson generates these contradictory effects out of the same formal gesture – the repetition of a single sound – only heightens the ambiguity.

Photography and especially telephone calls are part of Auge's 'complex skein of cable and wireless networks', instances of 'a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself'. They are examples, if not quite of non-places, then of the systems that enable non-places, and in 'An Incarnation' the one sided nature of Paterson's conversation and the manner in which he talks about himself give the impression that he is also talking to himself, though in some sense, in public. There is, however, another voice lurking in the background that the sonnet might also be tuning in to, and that is Edwin Morgan, whose 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' from *Sonnets from Scotland* bears some striking resemblances to Paterson's poem. Beginning '– Knock knock. – Who's there?', nodding to Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde (amongst other things), and concluding '– Listen! – Is there anybody there?' (2000: 140), Morgan's sonnet offers a model of discontinuities and fractured personal, cultural, and poetic identities, and is almost as diffuse

as Paterson's. At the same time, however, Morgan's presence hints at a more clearly articulated sense of national literary traditions, balancing the doubled and divided pairs of Jekyll and Hyde and Burke and Hare with a specifically Scottish provenance that is also signalled in his title, taken from Hugh MacDiarmid. Drawing partially on Morgan's example, 'An Incarnation' plays out the complex interaction of history and metaphysics, or – to go back to Augé's terms – between place and non-place. Augé, indeed, asserts that non-place 'never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it', and that 'Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten' (64). Paterson's lingering sense of Scottishness, sharpened through his allusion to Morgan, partially reconstitutes place, but this partial reconstitution is scrambled by his on-going perception of ghostliness. Caught between these two poles, the sonnet becomes a palimpsest, 'never completely erased' but also 'never totally completed'.

This is especially apparent in the case of Paterson's more experimental examples of the form, but also applies to those more conventional-looking sonnets like 'Requests', which never quite sound fully completed because of their presentation as occasional, spontaneous speech, as ad hoc performance rather than densely wrought artifice. These sonnets, too, are palimpsestic, and are poised between the specific and abstract. Nor is the specific always conceived of in terms of national and literary traditions. Just as frequently it is a low level matter of individual rooms and scenarios, like art exhibits or poetry readings, or even the simple material presence of the body, as in the first poem of *40 Sonnets*, which centres on 'my heart' (2014: 3). In 'A Powercut', the specific is imagined as a lift:

This is what we've come to, this damn lift,
this blackout, this airlock, this voiceless stop,
this empty set, this storm cave, this dead drop,
this deaf nut, this dumb waiter, this blind drift,
this Necker cube, this coalshed, this Swiss bank,
this iron lung, this hide, this diving bell,
this pseudocoma, priesthole, holding cell,
this meatlocker, this isolation tank,
this, since I'm too lazy for the stairs in
this airless guesthouse in the Dales, so went for
this jackscrew for the old or lame spent for
this two-second trip between two floors, this
this-way-up box to sweat and say my prayers in,
this six-foot night, this theatre of doors: this. (2014: 12)

This poem is about as specific as a sonnet can get, a fourteen-line catalogue of items listed to explicate the poet's predicament, his entrapment in that 'damn lift' in an 'airless guesthouse in the Dales'. It is also a metaphysical poem, with the lift's dimensions unsettlingly akin to those of a coffin – 'this / this-way-up box to sweat and say my prayers in, / this six-foot night' – and prompting thoughts of that final state of nothingness that comes with death. These two different types of poem are disconcertingly played out through the same formal moves. Paterson's repeated 'this' begins as an instance of specificity, with each repetition adding still further examples to the chain of particularity through which Paterson tries to catch his sensation of enclosure. 'This' becomes increasingly thick and dense as the aggregated particulars pile up, as Paterson tries to shove so many disparate details under the umbrella of the single word. At a certain point, however, the actual content of these details ceases to matter. They are not important as themselves, but as examples of what Barthes, writing of photography, calls 'the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph and not Photography)' (1981: 4). The details on Paterson's list are not chosen for the patterns they form, they are not parts contributing to an ordered whole. They are instead instances of an extreme and intractable specificity, which is not really specific at all, but abstract and generalised, not rooted and precise but wayward and indistinct. The relentless repetition of 'This', after a certain point, strips the word of meaning, so that whilst Paterson can add different referents to it, it loses any connection with those referents and becomes an empty counter pointing to nothing except itself.

The poem moves in two different directions at the same time, trying to be both as particular as possible, and as generalised as possible. Like 'An Incarnation', it both wants to inhabit a specific moment, and imagines dissolving into nothingness. And like 'An Incarnation', the sonnet seems to be simultaneously there and not there. Paterson not only uses a strict Petrarchan rhyme scheme, but he goes so far as to ensure that even his multi-word rhymes, 'went for' and 'spent for' and 'stairs in' and 'prayers in', are full rhymes, as though to tighten the grip of the form. Thought of in this way the form is as tightly restrictive as the lift it describes, and another narrow box-like shape to trap the poet in, not unlike his description of the sonnet as a 'square' poem, perhaps. Just as the tolling 'this' weighs the poem down, so too does its claustrophobic form. Approaching the form from a different angle, however, yields an almost entirely different reading, in which the repeated 'this' overshadows the sonnet's presence so that it is barely there at all. 'This', indeed, supplies two of the sonnet's rhymes, as though the logic of the list had taken over the poem's formal identity, and we might miss the fact that it is a sonnet. Paterson's rhymes, for all their fullness, are insistently run-on and comprised of the same idiomatic and monosyllabic speech that makes up so many of the *40 Sonnets*, making them easy to skip over. The sonnet, to go back to Augé's terms, is never fully completed, but then neither is it completely erased.

In playing these formal games, ‘A Powercut’ conjures two different time frames: firstly the particularised time of the incident it describes, the eponymous power cut that leaves Paterson stranded in the lift, but also more broadly a sense of metaphysical time, that is preoccupied with mortality and ghostliness. These two time frames, as I have suggested, recur throughout *40 Sonnets* and are one of the collection’s central tensions. Paterson’s ‘guesthouse in the Dales’ is another of Augé’s twenty-first century non-places to go alongside the silent retreat, art exhibit and Dundee library. But it is also a metaphysical non-place, a metaphoric coffin that situates the poem in a different, ghostlier space to that of its historic moment. Indeed, these contrasting time scales look not only to the preoccupations of *40 Sonnets*, but the whole of Paterson’s oeuvre. The scenes described within his sonnets frequently, and vertiginously, open out on to much longer time spans. In *Nil Nil* these time spans were largely those of Scottish history, and the present’s unwitting repetitions of the past. The metaphysical turn initiated by his translations of Rilke and Machado partially supersede this historical perspective, in the sense that Scotland is a much more oblique presence, but they also expand his sense of time to encompass a vast metaphysics lurking below the surface of the everyday, ideas examined in his prose. This metaphysical depth can be glimpsed beneath the surface of ‘A Powercut’, much as the depths of Scottish history can be glimpsed below the surface of ‘Pioneer’, and whilst Paterson sometimes characterises this depth as a visionary transformation, in the manner of Rilke, it is more often ambivalent, and even menacing. In the ‘Afterword’ to *Orpheus* Paterson asks ‘How in heaven’s name are we to live, now the soul we have bred into ourselves no longer has a heaven to ascend to?’ (2005: 72). This also cuts between an immediate present, a ‘now’ suddenly juxtaposed to a long but opaque history, and the sonnet has been a crucial form for articulating the shifting meanings of these twin senses of time. Whilst the sonnet is not ultimately able to answer ‘how we should live’, it has been vital to Paterson as an arena in which to keep on asking the question.

Chapter Five

‘the river’s cord unravelled by the tide’: Alice Oswald

Alice Oswald is fond of using ‘Sonnet’ in her titles. Her first book, 1996’s *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, includes two poems called ‘Sonnet’, three called ‘Sea Sonnet’, and an ‘Estuary Sonnet’, while *Woods etc.*, from 2006, also includes two ‘Sonnet’ poems. Some of these poems look like fairly conventional, straightforward instances of the form, and others are more wayward and experimental, so that Oswald’s penchant for flagging the sonnet-ness of some of her poems is difficult to gauge. In one sense, she draws attention to the constructed nature of these texts, their standing as poetic artefacts, but in another she also questions what the status of such artefacts might be, given that ‘Sonnet’ can refer to so many different things. The explicit literariness of ‘Sonnet’ also stands in some tension to those topographical features pointed to by some of her titles, such as ‘Sea’ and ‘Estuary’. And whilst not all of the sonnets from *Woods etc.* contain the word ‘Sonnet’ in their titles, several use single word geographical markers – ‘River’, ‘Field’ and ‘Leaf’ – whose real-world referents also contrast the poetic constructedness of the sonnet.

As these titles suggest, the form has played an important role in her work from almost the beginning of her career, though it has tended to be overshadowed by longer, more ambitious seeming poems, such as the book-length *Dart* (2002) and *Memorial* (2011). *Dart*, in particular, established her reputation as an ecological poet, whose work takes as its main subject the natural world and Sam Solnick notes how Oswald, alongside John Burnside, ‘is probably the most popular living British or Irish poet for ecocritical study’ (2016: 23). In addition to her own poetry, Oswald has also edited *The Thunder Mutters*, an anthology of *101 Poems for the Planet* and in the introduction to that anthology she writes that ‘The knack of enervating nature (which starts in literature and quickly spreads to everything we touch) is an obstacle to ecology which can only be countered by a kind of porousness or sorcery that brings living things unmediated into the text’ (2005a: x). Yet there is a tension between wanting to have ‘living things unmediated’ in the text, and foregrounding the heavily mediated structure of the sonnet in the titles of poems. What I want to suggest in this chapter is that, for Oswald, the sonnet is less an instance of mediation, and more an example of porosity. The term itself is a strange one, because it implies boundaries, but that it is desirable to be able to cross boundaries, and that they are about contact as much as they are division. The sonnet, I argue, is a vital instance of boundary crossing in her work, and she has frequently adopted the form only to adapt it to her own idiosyncratic concerns.

In particular, I consider how she has adopted and adapted the romantic sonnet. To an extent, it is not surprising that Oswald should have strong investments in a romantic legacy given, as Timothy Morton notes in his 2007 book *Ecology Without Nature*, ‘the literature of the Romantic period...still influences the ways in which the ecological imaginary works’ (2007: 1). In several of the sonnets of her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, Oswald revisits one of the recurrent scenarios of the romantic sonnet, that of a speaker contemplating a landscape, and especially a river. But where those late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sonneteers, including Wordsworth, turn on the reciprocal balance of mind and nature, Oswald uses the sonnet to probe the tensions between them, to examine the gaps and breaks between the human and the non-human. As Hugh Haughton observes, ‘Wordsworth and Coleridge are notable absentees from Oswald’s anthology *The Thunder Mutters*’ (2013), and they would seem to be the figures she has in mind when she writes, a little later in the introduction, that ‘No prospects, pastorals or nostalgic poems are in here, no poem that mistakes the matter at the end of the rake for a mere conceit’ (2005a: x). Oswald’s language of conceits and nostalgia suggests that she thinks Wordsworth and Coleridge too invested in the human at the expense of the non-human, that their poems present a too-heavily mediated vision of the natural world. By way of contrast, the title *The Thunder Mutters* draws on a John Clare poem, and in an interview with the Poetry Society quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* Oswald says that ‘If I’m writing about the natural world, I like to use the form that John Clare discovered, where you’ve got a series of couplets, and closure between each pair’ (2011: 19). As we shall see, she uses this couplet form in several of her own sonnets and to an extent seems to conjure Clare as an alternative to Wordsworth, but this is more complicated than a dichotomy between the two. ‘Another Westminster Bridge’, from *Woods etc.* takes off from Wordsworth’s ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’, and rather than favour one romantic poet over another, she has explored the tensions implicit in the romantic sonnet more generally to probe representations of the environment and the place of human beings within it, an exploration that has been complicated and deepened by engagement with one of the very earliest English sonnet writers, Sir Thomas Wyatt, a selection of whose poems Oswald edited in 2008.

If, as I have been suggesting throughout this thesis, the contemporary sonnet is bound up with history and memory, then Oswald would seem to be an outlier whose environmental concerns place her at a remove from the work of, say, Hill or Heaney or Muldoon. History and memory, in Geoff Cubitt’s words, ‘are grounded in human consciousness’ (2007: 9), and ‘the study of memory is the study of the means by which a conscious sense of the past, as something meaningfully connected to the present, is sustained and developed within human individuals and human cultures’ (2007: 9). Certainly, Oswald does not equate memory with events, either public or personal, and her poems do not tend to obviously speak to or from particular cultural or political communities. Yet much contemporary eco-critical thinking has queried the absoluteness of the distinction between the human

and the non-human. Timothy Morton, for example, argues that nature is not other to history or the humans who make it, but rather is deeply intertwined with both. The title of his 2007 book, *Ecology Without Nature*, hints at this expanded, complex understanding of the non-human world, and some of his ideas (as we shall see) resonate with the sense of environment Oswald imagines in her work. This sense of the environment, I argue, is inflected by a ‘sense of the past, as something meaningfully connected to the present’, but the past has shifted and expanded, to encompass time spans on a different scale to that of the human, and her sonnets look outward to evolutionary, geological and even cosmological time, especially in *Woods etc.* This is not to say that she overwrites or abolishes a sense of human time, but that these different frames intersect one another at sometimes oblique angles and tangents. The significance of the sonnet to Oswald’s work has been its capacity to articulate and explore these intersections.

I. ‘a space performed on by a space’: *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*

In their introduction to *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival* (1999), Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson note the preponderance of rivers in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century sonnets. Beginning with Thomas Warton’s ‘To the River Lodon’, they observe how ‘Warton’s symbolic use of the river reappears as a major device in Charlotte Smith’s sonnets to the river Arun; in William Lisle Bowles’s numerous river sonnets...in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Sonnet to the River Otter”; and in Wordsworth’s sequence *The River Duddon*’ (1999: 9). They argue that ‘To the River Lodon’ ‘is a descriptive meditative poem that anticipates many later Romantic poems in its emphasis on a specific locale and the power of memory acting through poetry in the present’, and Warton indeed addresses his eponymous river directly in musing on the ‘weary race my feet have run, / Since first I trod thy banks’. Coleridge, too, addresses the River Otter by asking ‘How many various-fated years have passed, / What happy and what mournful hours, since last / I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast’, and Wordsworth makes comparable appeals to the Duddon. Feldman and Robinson’s tag, ‘descriptive meditative poem’, recalls M. H. Abrams much earlier essay, ‘Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric’ (1965), in which he suggests, but dismisses, the phrase as the name for a particular type of romantic poem – the Greater Romantic Lyric of his title – that uses the landscape as a crucial means of imaginative and intellectual expression. In these poems ‘The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, though, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene’. As a result of the change in the landscape, and its closely related change in mood and feeling ‘the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic

loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem' before 'the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation' (1965: 527-528). The river's ceaseless flow is a symbol for this process – hence 'Warton's symbolic use' of the Lodon – and though Abrams does not mention sonnets, Feldman and Robinson's account of the form suggest that it might be thought of as a precursor to such Greater Romantic Lyrics, that poems like 'To the River Lodon' are 'almost a prospectus for Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"' (1999: 9).

Rivers and their banks have been an important feature in Alice Oswald's work, from her book length work *Dart*, to the littoral settings of 'Another Westminster Bridge' and 'River' in *Woods etc.*, and her many other river poems. Shorelines have also been crucial locales, and several of the sonnets from her first book, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, have coastal locations. 'Sea Sonnet' is a case in point, and might be thought of as a descriptive meditative poem. The sonnet begins 'Green, grey and yellow, the sea and the weather / instantiate each other and the spectrum / turns in it like a perishable creature', and pictures how 'The wind japans the surface. Like a flower / Each point of contact biggens and is gone'. As the sonnet turns from octave to sestet these details are supplemented with a speaking 'I':

So I have made a little moon-like hole
with a thumbnail and through a blade of grass
I watch the weather make the sea my soul,
which is a space performed on by a space;

and when it rains, the very integer
and shape of water disappears in water. (1996: 19)

In one sense this draws on the processes of the descriptive-meditative sonnet by articulating a sense of self through the landscape, rather as Warton and Coleridge do. But Oswald departs from their example, and in some ways seems to be sceptical of it. Her sonnet is not set on a riverbank, but by the sea, whose vast scale dwarfs the rivers of the romantic sonnet. She also dispenses with geographic markers, deals in generalisable details about the weather, and deploys the key word 'space' in the same line, as though to excise any references to specifiable place. Perhaps most importantly, Oswald's 'I' appears much later than Warton's or Coleridge's, at line nine and after the sonnet's volta, as though to indicate there are important gaps between the speaker and the landscape. The poem's last four lines explore these gaps. 'I watch the weather make the sea my soul, / which is a space performed on by a space' makes a series of distinctions, only to almost immediately deflect or deny them. The first line has two sets of nouns that differentiate between self and environment – 'I' and 'weather',

‘sea’ and ‘soul’ – but the order of their occurrence complicates the relationship, matching ‘I’ to ‘sea’ and ‘weather’ to ‘soul’. The syntax of the line also places ‘sea’ and ‘soul’ together, so that either could be the referent of the pronoun ‘which’, which begins the next line, an ambiguity that is heightened by the alliterative ‘s’ that begins both words. This ambiguity then becomes the ‘space performed on by a space’, which differentiates between two types of space, but does not give the reader any way to work out what that difference might be.

In Abrams’ account the Greater Romantic Lyric, which ‘rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding’, is balanced and harmonious, but ‘Sea Sonnet’ does not achieve a comparable resolution. What Abrams characterises as a ‘repeated out-in-out process, in which the mind confronts nature and their interplay constitutes the poem’ (1965: 528-9), is more elusive in Oswald’s work. Where sonnets like those by Warton and Coleridge and Wordsworth tend to see landscapes as expressing human feeling, Oswald’s asks how far this identification can be sustained. The concluding couplet of ‘Sea Sonnet’ is tentative and hesitant, its slender half rhyme of ‘integer’ and ‘water’ suggesting connections too fragile to be durable, as though the equations the sonnet has floated between sea and soul might not last for long. It is a gap that Oswald explores in her subsequent ‘Sea Sonnet’ poems. The second of these imagines ‘an island flirting up and down / like a blue hat’ (1996: 20), with the whimsy of the simile pointing to a human presence to perceive (or impose) the particular image on the water, and later describes how ‘The sea crosses the sea, the sea has hooves’, this time balancing the fanciful metaphor of horse-like waves with the more literal-minded repetition of ‘sea’. That repetition resembles its equivalent in the first ‘Sea Sonnet’, the ‘space performed on by a space’, and Oswald ends this second poem in a similar fashion, with ‘nothing but the sea-like sea beyond’ (1996: 20). These repetitions seem designed to minimise the influence of human observers, to force home the point that the sea is itself and nothing else, but even as Oswald makes that gesture she undercuts it by inserting the connection-making term ‘like’ to differentiate between the sea at different places, between here and ‘beyond’.

In the third and last of her ‘Sea Sonnet’ suite, Oswald introduces a more overtly human dimension by way of the romantic relationship between the poem’s ‘You and I’ who ‘walk light as wicker in virtual contact’ in the sonnet’s opening quatrain. The relationship appears to be either failing or finished, with the speaker of the poem saying ‘I have looked under the wave, / I saw your body floating on the darkness’ at the end of the sonnet’s octave, and concluding the poem with the hypothetical ‘if I love you this is incidental / as on the sand one blue towel, one white towel’ (1996, 21). These towels can be read as emblematic of the relationship between the poem’s ‘I’ and its ‘you’, of that relationship’s possible fragility and possible endurance, and of its potential to attach itself to even the most innocuous of objects. That is to say, the towels are imprinted with the memory of the relationship, and their significance is at least partially derived from that imprint. Although Oswald’s

sonnet seems to suggest that they can be understood in this way, its formal processes complicate such an interpretation. The two towels, like love, might be merely ‘incidental’. The slight half rhyme of ‘towel’ with ‘incidental’, like that of ‘integer’ and ‘water’, blurs the solidity of the sonnet’s shape, posing questions about pattern, incident, and co-incident. Coming as it does after three largely unrhymed quatrains, the softness of this half-rhymed couplet implies that such patterns are not decisive and long-lasting, but tenuous and ephemeral.

One of the crucial aspects of Abram’s Greater Romantic Lyric is its particularised location, and he suggests that the genre has its origins in the local poem. The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century vogue for river sonnets also draws on specific, named rivers: Lodon, Itchin, Otter, Duddon. The idea of place is therefore crucial to these sonnets, but it is a notion of place that provokes strong, and sometimes contradictory, feeling. Jonathan Bate, in his influential study *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), is enthusiastic about place. He argues that ‘we live and die as part of the body politic, but we also live and die in place’ (1991: 85), and, writing of *Home at Grasmere*, says that what ‘Wordsworth has produced here is a *logos* of the *oikos*, the home. Man has come home to nature and the place takes on a wholeness, a unity that is entire’ (1991: 103). The contrast that Bate makes between history and geography draws on a submerged hierarchy of values in which history is transient and fractured, a terrain of conflict and ugliness, but the land is permanent and unchanging and beautiful. More recent scholarship is more cautious. In his 2017 article ‘The Local Poem in a Global Age’ Jahan Ramazani notes how individual places are often marked by other places, and the contours of the local defined, at least partially, by the horizon of the global: ‘The local isn’t a pre-given fact that exists only in relation to itself; it’s a relational construct, the microcosmic obverse of the global, on which it obliquely depends’ (2017: 676). ‘Place’, Timothy Morton observes, ‘and in particular, the local, have become key terms in Romantic ecocriticism’s rage against the machine’ (2008: 179), but as he notes, ‘Ideas such as “place” and “the local”, let alone “nation” entail subject positions – “places” from which Romantic ideas of place make sense’ (2008: 179). In his 2007 book *Ecology Without Nature* Morton writes that

Every time I teach a class on ecological language, at least one student asserts that “place” is what a person makes of “space,” without reference to the outside. Even when it is external, place has become something people *do*, or construct; a space that, as it were, *happens to* someone. Despite the rigidity of the student response, I am suggesting here that subjectivity and objectivity are just a hair’s breadth (if that) away from each other. (2007: 48-49)

Place becomes space when it is marked by the presence of human beings. Feldman and Robinson emphasise ‘the power of memory acting through poetry in the present’ (1999: 9), and it is telling how

many late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sonnets identify their littoral setting with their writers' youthful past, as in the examples from Warton and Coleridge that I mentioned earlier. Though he does not assent to this idea Morton does not dismiss it either, does 'not throw the baby of place out with the Romantic bathwater' (2008: 179), but rather seeks to complicate the idea, and to draw our attention to the way that place is constantly dissolving into, and emerging out of, its ostensibly antithetical other term, space.

Oswald's 'Sea Sonnet' mini sequence draws on a similarly complex, Mortonesque sense of place. Though her poems are deeply attuned to their environments, they are also hard to situate, and lack the geographically specific markers of many romantic sonnets, especially in their titles. Those sonnets foreground, or try to foreground, balance and harmony, and stress the reciprocal relationship between a sense of place and a sense of self. Wordsworth, as I have already touched on, thought of the sonnet in terms of the 'intense Unity' he perceived in Milton's sonnets, and characterised the form as 'an orbicular body, – a sphere – or dew drop' (2002: 21). Pamela Woof, in her introductory essay for a 2002 commemorative collection of sonnets marking the two-hundredth anniversary of the composition of Wordsworth's 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', a collection co-edited by Alice Oswald, argues that Wordsworth thought of the sonnet as 'a perfect mathematical shape, formal, intellectual and technically coherent...a clear form not quite perfectly spherical, a natural form that appears and disappears without man's calculation, that comes and goes of itself' (2002: 22). Something of this 'perfect mathematical shape' can be discerned in Wordsworth's choice of 'orbicular' to describe the sonnet, with the *OED* giving '*Bot. Esp. of a leaf: approximately circular in outline*' as one of its meanings. In a similar vein, Stuart Curran, writing of the Wordsworthian sonnet more generally argues that 'Wordsworth shows an extraordinary capacity to conceive the Petrarchan form with the eye of a geometrician, first reducing it to its abstract relations before imagining it a new' (1986: 43). This re-imagined sonnet 'balances...here and there, finite and infinite, micro- and macrocosm' (1986: 43).

Oswald herself sometimes uses this kind of mathematical language in her sonnets from *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, such as the 'fractal' of 'Sonnet' (1996: 12), or, more extremely, the 'last zero of the millionth day' in another poem called 'Sonnet' (1996: 11). She also uses 'integer' in 'Sea Sonnet', which as the *OED* notes, means 'A number or quantity denoting one or more whole things or units; a whole number or undivided quantity'. But this meaning is complicated by the manner in which Oswald uses it. Her integrity of her integer is destabilised by the way it subsequently 'disappears in water', and also by its half rhyme with 'water', a less than secure acoustic pairing further obscured by the fact that water actually appears twice in the sonnet's last line. In one sense, Oswald hints at the sonnet's geometric proportions by using a Shakespearean rhyme scheme, which whilst not quite as internally symmetrical as the Petrarchan form favoured by Wordsworth,

nevertheless appeals to a notion of the sonnet as a series of balanced proportions, as Don Paterson sometimes understood it. But Oswald's version is more frayed and uncertain, its outline partially obscured by half rhymes like 'integer' and 'water', or 'grass' and 'space', as well as internal repetitions (both 'water' and 'space' occur twice within the same line, in spite of being rhyme words). As a result, her 'Sea Sonnet' poems gesture towards a version of the unity apparently enacted by romantic sonnets, but keep on querying and complicating that unity.

What I want to suggest is that the partial dissonance in Oswald's sonnets picks up on, and reframes, a dissonance already latent in the romantic sonnet. Joseph Phelan, in the *Nineteenth Century Sonnet*, notes how the well-worn narrative of Wordsworth resurrecting the sonnet in the early nineteenth-century after over a century of disuse following the death of Milton has been largely exploded by recent criticism, which has unearthed a burgeoning sonnet tradition in the second half of the eighteenth-century largely centred on a culture of sensibility, or what he calls the elegiac sonnet. Sonnets written in this vein by poets such as Warton, Charlotte Smith, and William Bowles are expressive of extreme emotion, and Phelan notes both Wordsworth's interest in Charlotte Smith, and how his very earliest sonnet, 'On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' is 'an exemplary elegiac sonnet' (2005: 11). The later elision of this part of his sonnet-writing inheritance suggests that by 'turning to Milton Wordsworth is not making small-scale distinctions between elegiac sonnet writers but retrospectively feminizing and rejecting them all (his earlier version of himself included)' (2005: 12). But it is not clear how decisive this change is. In the 'Preface' to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth criticised Thomas Gray's 'curiously elaborate....poetic diction', whilst advocating a 'natural and human' (1988: 286, 287) poetic language. The Gray poem in question is a sonnet, 'On the Death of Mr. Richard West', posthumously published in 1775, though written in 1742. Wordsworth's hostility to its perceived over-elaboration is of a piece with his later account of how he himself took the form up under Milton's influence, but some of his own sonnets do not necessarily adhere to the Miltonic template: have a 'curiously elaborate...poetic diction', such as the first of the 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', from *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807):

How sweet it is, when mother Fancy rocks
The wayward brain, to saunter through a wood!
An old place, full of many a lovely brood,
Tall trees, green arbours, and ground flowers in flocks;
And Wild rose tip-toe upon hawthorn stocks,
Like to a bonny Lass, who plays her pranks
At Wakes and Fairs and wandering Mountebanks,
When she stands cresting the Clown's head, and mocks
The crowd beneath her. (1984: 268)

This sonnet stresses fancy over the more exalted category of the imagination, and James Phelan flags up ‘The highly fanciful image of the wild rose as a young girl looking down at a crowd from behind a clown’s head at a country fair’ (2005:20). In a similar vein, some of his verbs – ‘rocks’, ‘saunter’, and ‘mocks’, for example – imply a degree of frivolity that runs counter to the earnestness with which Wordsworth usually presents the sonnet. If he does not quite approach the elegiac sonnet, he nonetheless is some way away from the grandeur of the Miltonic sonnet in which he professed to find a ‘dignified simplicity and majestic harmony’.

Oswald has her own share of fanciful images in the ‘Sea Sonnet’ poems, such as that of ‘an island flirting up and down / like a blue hat’, and what I want to suggest is that she re-inhabits the tension between the elegiac and Miltonic strains of the romantic sonnet, and that she reframes this tension in terms of the interaction of human and non-human. She does this not by going to Charlotte Smith or any of the other elegiac sonneteers, but rather by drawing on the rhythms of a different romantic sonnet writer: John Clare. We have already seen Clare’s importance for Seamus Heaney, for whom he was a defiantly local poet working against the grain of early nineteenth-century literary taste. Oswald, too, seems to figure Clare as something of an outsider. In the interview with the Poetry Society (quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*) that I alluded to earlier, she says that

When I’m writing about the mind or the heart I use a Shakespearean or a Miltonian form, a more entangled version, because that’s more how the mind feels to me. If I’m writing about the natural world, I like to use the form that John Clare discovered, where you’ve got a series of couplets, and closure between each pair, so it’s not all entangled together. The natural world is made of differences and new beginnings, so in a way the sonnet is quite alien to that, but I think Clare discovered a way of using it. (2011: 19)

This is a typically idiosyncratic observation. Although Oswald makes her contrast sound balanced, the distinction between Clare on the one hand and Shakespeare and Milton on the other, is an unexpected one. The conjunction of Shakespearean and Miltonic sonnets covers a substantial bulk of the sonnet tradition in English, much more so than the type of writing she attributes to Clare, so he stands alone as a more peripheral, experimental figure, especially as his innovations allow the form to encompass ostensibly ‘alien’ material.

Not that the relations Oswald maps are clear, or stable. The distinction between mind and nature is slippery, and elusive: the mind is ‘entangled’, but then the natural world, with its ‘differences’ balancing its ‘new beginnings’ can seem at times to be no less entangled. In terms of her own poems ‘Sea Sonnet’ is, as we have seen, a finely calibrated Shakespearean sonnet and as much about the points of contact between the mind and the natural world, as it is exclusively about either

category alone. As a Shakespearean sonnet, ‘Sea Sonnet’ also places great emphasis on its final couplet, though the couplet is the formal feature that Oswald singles out in Clare’s sonnets. The contrast that she implies, between an ‘entangled’ form and a form of ‘closure’ is less to do with specific formal shapes, and more to do with different rhythms. And although Oswald does not name him, what I want to suggest is that Wordsworth is another crucial point of contrast with Clare, another poet in the Shakespearean-Miltonian line for whom the sonnet’s entanglements are a portrait of the heart or mind. John Kerrigan, in his 1985 article ‘Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking’, contrasts Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘The Wild Duck’s Nest’ with the ‘Mouse’s Nest’, writing that ‘[Clare’s] sonnet deals with inconsequential events and the sheer oddness of things; Wordsworth’s, by contrast, tries to weave into its Miltonic form something of the homeliness envied in the wild duck’s “hollow crown”’ (1985: 48-49). Kerrigan here seems to anticipate Oswald’s contrast, but frames it as a criticism of Clare, suggesting that his sonnet is transient and even frivolous: ‘Clare’s poem runs on with characteristic prodigality from one observation to another, and it can only be concluded by a shift of focus away from the mouse’s nest to “broad old cesspools” glittering “in the sun”’. The dense, interlocking structure of Wordsworth’s ‘Miltonic form’ is in some sense a rebuke to the more nimble and flighty Clare, whose poem ‘runs on’ and is ‘inconsequential’ and odd and prodigal. Where Wordsworth offers firm conclusions and an intricate form, Clare ends with the somewhat marginal, seemingly arbitrary (and not very pretty) ‘old cesspools’, and his run of couplets gives the impression that the poem could be extended indefinitely.

What Kerrigan represents as a criticism, Seamus Heaney praises as a virtue, and in his essay on ‘John Clare’s Prog’ he describes ‘Mouse’s Nest’ as ‘seven couplets wound up like clockwork and then set free to scoot merrily through their foreclosed motions’, and claims that Clare ‘seemed to write this kind of poem as naturally as he breathed’ (1995: 65). Oswald, too, embraces Clare’s rhythms as liberation, not triviality, especially in ‘Estuary Sonnet’, the sonnet that immediately follows the three ‘Sea Sonnet’ poems and thus acts as a sort of coda for them:

As much as I walk by and see the water
up to the second line, I skim a slate
and in the time it sinks my feet are wet
and there are huge boats lifting in the harbour.

And then as far as I have time to wander,
I wander back and there’s a heron’s foot
lofting the water which is now a mud-flat
and some old shipwreck gnawn to its vertebrae.

Touch me the moment where these worlds collide,
the river's cord unravelled by the tide...

and I will show you nothing – neither high
nor low nor salt nor fresh – only the skill
of tiny creatures like the human eye
to live by water, which is never still. (1996: 22)

The sonnet's octave employs the Petrarchan rhyme scheme favoured by Milton and Wordsworth, but Oswald's deft half-rhymes lighten its potentially oppressive load, while the whimsical description, which exaggeratedly has the boats as 'huge' and then as 'some old shipwreck', plays with riverside memories of stone-skimming such as Coleridge's in 'To the River Otter'. Oswald's poem is not so much the description of a genuine place, as the staging (and parodying) of a particular (romantic) way of describing place, in which the poet is unable to close the gap between him- or herself and his, or her, environment. The parodic element comes through the poem's light and skipping rhythms, which owe something to Clare's 'Mouse's Nest', the opening quatrain of which runs:

I found a ball of grass among the hay
And progg'd it as I passed and went away
And when I looked I fancied something stirred
And turned agen and hoped to catch the bird (1984: 267)

Though roadside rather than waterside, Clare too walks and looks and returns, and his proggng resembles Oswald's skimming. The accumulation of co-ordinated clauses – 'And...and.../ And.../ And...and' – in the 'Mouse's Nest' gives the sonnet lightness and flightiness that Oswald also cultivates, and through similar syntactic means, with the repeated co-ordination being foregrounded, as with Clare, by occurring at line breaks. Oswald's nimble lines do not settle long enough to cultivate the memories and desires that sprout up in the speakers of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poems, even if the scene she sketches is a recognisably romantic one.

To an extent, then, Oswald's Clare-like syntax subverts the frame of the sonnet, and her run-on lines fray its well wrought shape. In her book *On Form* – which I discussed briefly in the introduction – Angela Leighton suggests that form can be thought of as a 'distribution of space caused by edging one thing against another, so that each calls attention to the other'. Form 'is not so much a dispensable holder of content, as a line, perhaps a very fine line, between two alternatives which are actually two ways of looking at a work', and suggests that 'it looks two ways: to the shape it keeps in and the shape it keeps out' (2007: 16). 'Estuary Sonnet' also 'looks two ways', to the separate

‘worlds’ that ‘collide’ as ‘the river’s cord’ is ‘unravelled by the tide’. Oswald’s setting also asks what is inside and what is outside, as she describes the incoming tide, and her sonnet is positioned at the point of contact between river and sea. Indeed, more particularly, lines nine and ten are positioned at this point of contact. Marked off within the sonnet as a separate verse paragraph and placed at the turn from octave to sestet, these lines divide the first half of the sonnet from the second. This division is especially pronounced as lines nine and ten comprise a fully rhymed couplet. The couplet, of course, was the feature that Oswald singled out in Clare, but it is also the device with which Shakespeare ends his sonnets, with its heavy co-incidence of sound implying a strong degree of formal and thematic completion (even if the epigrammatic wit of these couplets often subverts such completion). By foregrounding a couplet in the middle of her sonnet, as opposed to the end, Oswald destabilises the boundaries of her sonnet, a destabilization signalled by ‘unravelled’ in the sonnet’s ninth line. If, as I have suggested, the river is in some ways identified with the sonnet, at least in a romantic tradition, then the unravelling of the river’s cord here parallels a partial unravelling in the sonnet, with the displaced couplet and Clare-like syntax disrupting the form’s shape.

This disruption turns the poem’s attention to ‘the shape it keeps out’, to borrow Leighton’s words. Just as the river is unravelled by the incoming tide, Oswald’s sonnet is unravelled by the presence of those ‘tiny creatures’ that are ‘never still’. The subsequent quatrain’s restless listing – ‘neither high / nor low nor salt nor fresh’ – bears their imprint, even though they are elusive, and only appear through a series of denials. Read in this way, the sonnet becomes a point of contact with the world beyond itself, and its unravelled frame open to the presence of other beings. Morton notes ‘Minimalist experiments with empty frames and also with frameless and formless “found objects” or installations’ in which ‘art collapses into non-art. Hence the infamous stories of janitors clearing away installations, thinking they were just random piles of paintbrushes and pots of paint’ (2007: 51). Oswald’s sonnet imagines collapsing, at least a little, the human into the non-human. Her ‘human eye’ bears the vestigial trace of a human ‘I’, and in comparing this eye/I to ‘tiny creatures’ that ‘live by water’ Oswald is reducing the gap between the human and the non-human. In doing so, she disrupts the equilibrium between mind and nature that Abrams argued was a key feature of romantic poetry: ‘Romantic writers, though nature poets, were humanists above all, for they dealt with the non-human only insofar as it is the occasion for the activity which defines man: thought, the process of intellection’ (1965: 528). This is not say that Oswald dispenses with human perspectives altogether and immerses the human entirely in the non-human, but rather that she explores a sense of the complex and fraught position of human beings in a world that exceeds the boundaries of the human. The sonnet, in *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*, is crucial to her early articulations of this fraught position, but to an extent the ‘Sea Sonnet’ poems operate within the parameters of the descriptive meditative poem, a restraint signalled by their fairly solidly wrought forms. Whilst they query the make-up of the descriptive meditative lyric, they do so in a subtle, unobtrusive manner, but in *Woods*

etc. Oswald more fully draws on the Clare-like rhythms she uses in ‘Estuary Sonnet’ to break open the surface of the sonnet and turn out towards the non-human environment.

II. ‘forms of ecstatic water’: *Woods etc.*

‘Estuary Sonnet’, then, marks a shift in emphasis, in which Oswald increasingly upsets the balance of the romantic descriptive-meditative sonnet in favour of more dissonant, restless and expansive rhythms. These rhythms are increasingly attuned to non-human presences – or, at least, what Oswald imagines non-human presences might be like – and the sonnets of *Woods etc.* in some ways try to sound out timescales both smaller and vaster than those of human perception and human lives. Indeed, we can see and hear this process at work in *Dart*, Oswald’s extraordinary 2002 book length poem exploring the river Dart. Peter Howarth, in his essay “‘Water’s Soliloquy’: Soundscape and Environment in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*”, describes how the poem is ‘sensitive to the river’s flow at multiple, simultaneous scales’ (2014: 191), that its ‘movement...always involves its surroundings, as the river moves around the bodies of those who swim in it or fish in it, and flows in to their language, memory, and thoughts, often unconsciously’, and the ways in which it ‘use[s] shape, syntax, and spacing to present itself to the mind as experience rather than data, and allowing us to sense the Dart’s plural and overlapping senses of location through these multiple attentions to sound’ (2014: 191). According to Howarth, ‘the poem will never stay within its banks, any more than a river can flow through an area without being part of the continual circulation of water through plants, soil, and rocks, shaping and being shaped by the landscape and its ecosystems’ (2014: 191). The image of the river, with its eddies and its overflowing banks, is a good image of poetic form, and Howarth asserts that ‘The geography of *Dart*, in other words, cannot be thought except through its form’ (2014: 191).

One aspect of that form, though Howarth does not acknowledge it, is the sonnet. At almost the half-way point of *Dart* Oswald has embedded, like a vortex or an eddy in the flow of a river, a rhymed, fourteen-line sonnet, set off typographically from the rest of the poem:

This is the thirst that draws the soul, beginning
at these three boreholes and radial collectors.
Whatever pumps and gravitates and gathers
in town reservoirs secretly can you follow it rushing
under manholes in the straggle of streets
being gridded and channelled up
even as he taps his screwdriver on a copper pipe

and fills a glass. That this is the thirst that streaks
his throat and chips away at his bones between lifting
the glass and contact whatever sands the tongue,
this draws his eyehole to this space among
two thirds weight water and still swallowing.
That now and then it puts him in a stare
going over the tree-lit river in his car. (2002: 25)

This embedded sonnet revises the romantic sonnet's riverside origins, as well as revising, more particularly, the first of Oswald's 'Sea Sonnet' poems. She repeats 'soul' and 'holes' and even 'space' from the earlier poem, and the lines 'draws his eyehole to this space among / two thirds weight water' rewriting the moment where the speaker of 'Sea Sonnet' made 'a little moon-like hole' through which 'to watch the weather make the sea my soul'. The abstractions of the earlier poem are supplanted in *Dart* by a dense and intractable materiality. Oswald embeds the river within its surrounding environment, within networks of pipes and channels and reservoirs, much as she embeds the sonnet within the wider flows of her poem. These mechanical, constructed networks stand in complex relation to the water itself. We know, from the preceding verse-paragraph, that the river is filled with 'Tiny particles of acids and salts' and 'Cryptospiridion smaller than a fleck of talcum powder' (2002: 25), and the speaker of the poem appears to be tasked with purifying its water. There is a certain degree of irony in the notion of humans cleaning water, when the relationship is traditionally figured the other way around, but Oswald's poem calls in to question ideas of cleanliness and purity. The naturally occurring 'tiny particles of acids and salts' can hardly be thought of as intrusive alien elements in the water; rather, like the 'tiny creatures' at the end of 'Estuary Sonnet', they recast and resize our sense of nature, reminding us of its many and disparate scales and components. The result is a less a finely-calibrated, geometric 'space performed on by a space', and more of a visceral 'space among / two thirds weight water and still swallowing'.

In his remarkable meditation *Water and Dreams* Gaston Bachelard argues that water 'is a special type of imagination', it is '*a type of intimacy* that is very different from those suggested by the "depths" of fire or rock' and 'an essential destiny that endlessly changes the substance of the being' (1948: 6). Though deeply and profoundly material, water embodies change and flux: 'One cannot bathe in the same river twice because already, in his inmost recesses, the human being shares the destiny of flowing water. Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential, ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux' (1948: 6). Oswald's embedded *Dart* sonnet enacts these processes. It is a poem that brims with movement, and bristles with verbs: 'draws', 'pumps', 'gravitates', 'gathers', 'follow', 'rushing', in the first quatrain alone, and not including the insistent opening phrase, 'This is the thirst', that initiates the sonnet's

forward drive and is picked up and reconfigured close to its turn, becoming ‘That this is the thirst’. Several of these verbs are rhyme words, so that even the friction and drag generated by the form’s own internal chimes and echoes – ‘streaks’ rhyming with ‘streets’, for instance – is counterbalanced by a forward leap. These verbs create the impression of churning and chafing against the limits and bounds of the form, like a river’s eddies and currents might its banks; but in many cases these verbs are the very things that establish the limits and bounds, as though the overflowing water were also what created the river’s banks.

In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard distinguishes between ‘a *formal imagination* and a *material imagination*’, between ‘mere perishable forms and vain images’ on the one hand, and on the other ‘images of matter’ that ‘are dreamt substantially and intimately’, images that ‘have weight’ and ‘constitute a heart’ (1948: 1). The formal imagination is, he says, a ‘perpetual change of surfaces’, but then ‘Even the most fleeting, changing, and purely formal reverie still has elements that are stable, dense, slow, and fertile’ (1948: 1-2). Conversely, the material imagination is not static and immovable. Its fertility makes it susceptible to new and profound shifts and mutations: ‘In the depths of matter there grows an obscure vegetation; black flowers bloom in matter’s darkness’ (1948: 2). What I want to suggest is that in his own lyrical manner, Bachelard has anticipated what we might think of as a materialist turn in twenty-first century thinking about the environment, seen in recent studies such as *New Materialism* (2010) and *Vibrant Matter* (2009). In the introduction to *New Materialism* Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue that these new accounts of matter ‘often discern emergent, generative powers (or agentic capacities) even within inorganic matter, and they generally eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate’, and attribute ‘agency to inorganic phenomena such as the electricity grid, food, and trash, all of which enjoy a certain efficacy that defies human will’ (2010: 9). Matter is not inert stuff lacking the capacity for thought and action that humans possess, but rather has an agency all of its own, and one that sometimes runs counter to human agency.

Oswald frequently articulates a sense of vibrant matter in her sonnets, and especially in relation to water. According to R. Murray Schafer, the musician and environmentalist whose book *Soundscape* Oswald quotes in her introduction to *The Thunder Mutters*, ‘All roads lead to water’ (1977: 16). *Dart*’s littoral setting means water is absolutely central to that collection, whilst *Woods etc.* also carries several sonnets taken up with water. Most strikingly, Oswald’s collection contains another riverside sonnet, ‘Another Westminster Bridge’, in which she playfully revises Wordsworth’s famous rumination, ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’:

go and glimpse the lovely inattentive water
discarding the gaze of many a bored street walker

where the weather trespasses into strip-lit offices
through tiny windows into tiny thoughts and authorities

and the soft beseeching tapping of typewriters

take hold of a breath-width instant, stare
at water which is already elsewhere
in a scrapwork of flashes and glittery flutters
and regular waves of apparently motionless motion

under the teetering structures of administration (2005b: 38)

The river seems to have a mind of its own, and Oswald contrasts its elusive flow with the human activity of ‘bored street walker[s]’ and ‘teetering structures of administration’. Branching out from the river, Oswald’s sonnet also transgressively suggests that ‘the weather trespasses’ into offices, which are another version of teetering administration. That is to say, the river has an agency that is not quite the same as human agency, and the mobile Thames eluding any single perception by onlookers who are themselves not singular but multiple and divided. The poem’s horizon is always receding before us, and never quite comes in to view, much as the aesthetic frame of the sonnet is blurred and smudged by Oswald’s irregular lineation, tendency toward enjambment, and understated, mobile half-rhymes. In doing so the poem implies a different way of conceptualising and representing the environment, which is no longer orderly and permanent, but rather imagined as dynamic and changeable, and modelled along the fluid lines of water.

This is all in marked contrast to the lofty, sonorous harmony of Wordsworth’s ‘Composed Upon Westminster Bridge’, balancing as it does the City’s ‘Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples’ with nature’s ‘valley, rock, or hill’, ‘the beauty of the morning’ both ‘like a garment’ and ‘silent, bare’, and the elements of ‘Earth’, ‘air’, and water all building up to the closing line, ‘And all that might heart is lying still’ (1984: 285). The Thames is said to ‘glideth by its own sweet will’, but its steady progress, conveyed through the stately rhythms of Wordsworth’s masterfully composed sonnet, could not be more different from the agile, restless movement of Oswald’s poem. Indeed, in her introduction to *The Thunder Mutters* Oswald says she has favoured ‘restless poems, poems that keep filling up with fresh looks; in particular those that follow the structure of oral poetry, which tends to be accretive rather than syntactic...At their best they work like little lists, little heaps of self-sufficient sentences that keep the poem open to the many-centred energies of the natural world’ (2005a: x). ‘Another Westminster Bridge’ is a poem brimming with ‘fresh looks’, from its opening

injunction to ‘go and glimpse the lovely inattentive water’, to ‘the gaze of many a bored street walker’, and on to the ‘glance’ of ‘a million shut-away eyes’. A poem, too, of ‘little lists’, of ‘tiny thoughts and authorities // and the soft beseeching tapping of typewriters’, and ‘of flashes and glittery flutters / and regular waves of apparently motionless motion’ (2005b: 38). These lines are not just self-sufficient but self-generating, propelled forward by whatever chance sights and sounds they happen to come across.

The accretive syntax through which Oswald builds these lists recalls the insistently co-ordinated clauses of ‘Estuary Sonnet’ and, behind them, the brisk rhythms of John Clare. When allied to the irregularly paced stanzas, which break up the fourteen line block of the sonnet, the effect is what Morton calls, in ‘John Clare’s Dark Ecology’, ‘an inbuilt questioning quality’ (2008: 185). Writing of Edward Thomas’s ‘Adlestrop’, Morton argues that the poem ‘cannot present *place* as solid without relying on *other places*’, that ‘Adlestrop’ ‘expands outward into space’ and that its place ‘is potentially endless’ (2008: 185). Oswald is not much interested in place as solid – hence her attractions to water and rivers – so what is partially effaced or occluded in Thomas, all those other places that need recuperative readings like Morton’s, occupies the centre of her poem, and the formal strategies that lie half-buried in ‘Adlestrop’ are here worn quite openly. Morton says that ‘the objective correlative in the poem for this sense of tentative exploration is the list. We cannot help wanting to expand this list into infinity’ (2008: 185). That is, when poems (and their writers, speakers, and readers) try to establish a definite place they get caught up in a regress that involves them in lots of, perhaps even all, other places. We might think of certain poets, such as Edward Thomas, as wanting to bring this regress to halt, but Oswald embraces it, hence the vigorous and enthusiastic listing that ‘Another Westminster Bridge’ undertakes.

Of course, the poem cannot literally go on forever, but the relative arbitrariness of its stopping-point gestures beyond itself and towards a wider world: ‘count five, then wander swiftly / away over the stone wing-bone of the city’ (2005b: 38). This is a departure, but also a new beginning, to go back to the terms in which Oswald described the natural world when discussing different species of sonnets. In a further riposte to Wordsworth, or at least certain Wordsworthian constructions, ‘Another Westminster Bridge’, is largely (though not entirely) written in the couplet form that she associates with Clare, a form that threatens to run on endlessly without the sonnet’s fourteen-line limit to reign it in. This raises, again, the issue of frames and framing, of how forms can look both inward and outward, to return to Angela Leighton’s formulation. In ‘Another Westminster Bridge’ Oswald orients the form to look outwards, towards the rest of the city, and other sonnets in *Woods etc* are similarly positioned. Another aqueous poem, ‘River’, echoes the imperative tone of ‘Another Westminster Bridge’:

put your ear to the river you hear trees

put your ear to the trees you hear the widening
numerical workings of the river
right down the length of Devon (2005b: 41)

Oswald again employs the process of the list, with the parallel phrases carrying us from ear to river to trees and thence to the entire ‘length of Devon’. There are echoes here of *Dart*, with the poem opening out from a single perspective to encompass a variety of expansive vistas, not just geographic but technological, economic, and cultural (‘the widening / numerical workings of the river’) as well.

In ‘Field’ Oswald writes

I could feel the earth’s
soaking darkness squeeze and fill its darkness,
everything spinning into the spasm of midnight

and for a moment, this high field unhorizoned
hung upon nothing, barking for its owner

burial, widowed, moonless, seeping

docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires (2005b: 25)

A field is, in one sense, a solidly framed and identifiable place, but the catalogue of elements with which this sonnet concludes undercuts such solidity. These ‘seeping / docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires’ complicate any notion of the ‘high field’ as an image of the state of nature. The line break after seeping gives the impression that the items listed in the poem’s last line are waste or discharge seeping out of the field, especially ‘weepholes’, a gap built into a wall for water to drain away. Like ‘River’, this sonnet is unrhymed and irregularly structured. Its aesthetic frame is not decisively drawn, but is rather ‘unhorizoned’, and so does not imagine a bounded and definite place (the field) but rather a patch of matter permeated with other patches of matter (the field as it is overgrown with docks, grasses, and windflowers). And even though Oswald is ostensibly writing about an earthy ‘Field’ she represents it in notably liquid terms: not just ‘seeping’ but also ‘soaking’, a wetness that encompasses ‘the earth’s / ...darkness’ and expands to include ‘everything’. Indeed, the lines ‘the earth’s / soaking darkness squeeze and fill its darkness’ imagine liquidity to be intensely physical and visceral, replacing empty space with the splash and flow of a liquid materiality.

The ‘everything’ in ‘Field’ is balanced by the ‘nothing’ on which the titular field is perceived to momentarily hang, a palpable absence that leaves the poem ‘unhorizoned’, an unhorizoning that opens the particular place of the poem to the potentially infinite list of other places, other things. This unhorizoning is comparable, I would suggest, to the unravelling that occurs in ‘Estuary Sonnet’, where the poem’s frame becomes stretched and frayed and so opens it up to previously effaced or ignored perspectives. In the poems I have considered so far, Oswald tends to achieve this stretching and fraying through a fast-paced rhythm that unsettles the contours of the sonnet, a briskness suggestive of both Bachelard’s account of water, and of the heaps of list-poems that Oswald contemplates in *The Thunder Mutters*. Sometimes, however, she suggests that poems come much more slowly, that they ‘come in drifts...Their work is to tinker with our locks, thereby putting our inner worlds in contact with the outer world – a deep, slow process that used to be the remit of the rake’ (2005a: x). Her restless and accretive poems, ‘like little lists, little heaps’, contrast her drifting poems, which are deep and slow. What I want to suggest is that Oswald’s sonnets sometimes use a slower, drifting rhythm, and that she associates this rhythm with another foundational sonnet writer, Sir Thomas Wyatt. In her edition of Wyatt’s poetry, Oswald discusses his work in terms of the “‘pausing’ tradition” (2008: xiv), or ‘the “stopping” verse of old English poetry’ (2008, xiii). Oswald contrasts this pausing or stopping tradition to the ‘iambic pentameter, whose regular repetitions of soft and strong stresses gives the line a sliding, narcotic quality, which is why it became known as “flowing” or “riding” verse’ (2008: xii-xiii), and situates Wyatt between these two rhythmic forms: ‘Wyatt used “riding” verse in his psalms and satires and in most of his epigrams. But the dissonant, disrupted tone of his sonnets is closer in spirit to the “stopping” verse of old English poetry, whose pattern depends on the use of the caesura in the middle of each line’ (2008: xiii). Unlike the prodigious vernacular rhythms of Clare’s work, Wyatt is a slower, more hesitant figure. Reading him involves attending to ‘the echo and opposition of real sounds within one line’ and requires readers ‘proceed much more slowly, because the centre upon which the meanings converge lies outside the language, in the pauses’ (2008: xiv).

Some of Oswald’s sonnets seem to be written, and ask to be read, in this way as well. ‘Rachel Raynor’, for example, the last of ‘Three Portraits for a Radio Audience’ mini sequence, begins:

Who is Rachel. What is she. Not she.
Not what she says she is. Not her expression
Of routine touchiness. Not what you see,
Not the substantial substance of a woman.
Not her opponent eyes, not her concealed
And self-deceiving voices, not her heart’s
Trampled-on dampness, not its four-inch field

Of nerves and shadows and night-wandering thoughts. (2005b: 37).

This is a sonnet constructed around pauses: ten of its fourteen lines contain heavy, syntactically medial breaks, and eight of these are followed by ‘not’. Its negatives try to find a way of articulating Rachel Raynor’s identity through listing the things she is not in a manner not dissimilar to the *via negativa* Don Paterson took from Antonio Machado. Such is the poem’s repetitions that, whilst Rachel Raynor is represented as being absent, that absence acquires a weight and density and becomes a substance in its own right. When Oswald describes Rachel’s ‘heart’s / Trampled-on dampness’ as a ‘four-inch field / Of nerves and shadows and night-wandering thoughts’, that ‘four-inch field’ not only refers to the heart as organ, but also opens out on to a much larger space. ‘Field’ gestures towards an external geography, as though the heart were its own landscape, and in her Wyatt introduction she characterises him as a poet of ‘the distorted topography of the heart’ (2008: xii). Wyatt’s poems, she implies, render as concrete what had seemed abstract and immaterial. Her own sonnets create similar effects. The poem’s ‘nerves’, for instance, might be read as ‘nervous’, an emotional or psychological state, but in establishing the heart as a physical ‘four-inch’ object Oswald materialises these mental states, and the subsequent ‘shadows and night-wandering thoughts’ have a substance that belies their apparent ephemerality.

Later in the same poem Oswald writes ‘Not her incomparable soul, not its unique / Fidelity to failure, not the churr / Of its thin birdthroat, struggling to speak’. The nearly onomatopoeic ‘churr’ renders ‘soul’ as sound, and not any idealised notion of bird song, but concrete, material noise. Indeed, Oswald substitutes the expected birdsong with ‘birdthroat’, as though to emphasise the physicality of sound by stressing its origins in the body. Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature*, describes what he calls ‘The timbral voice’ (2007: 40), which ‘is about sound in its physicality, rather than its symbolic meaning’ (2007: 39), and which ‘is vivid with the resonance of the lungs, throat, saliva, teeth, and skull’ (2007: 40). ‘Rachel Raynor’ might usefully be thought of as a ‘timbral’ sonnet, which is about not only voice but also identity ‘in its physicality, rather than its symbolic meaning’. All of Oswald’s representations of Rachel Raynor turn around her materiality, but this still does not explain her, or define her. Rather, the breaks and pauses in the sonnet, especially when framed by the repeated ‘Not’, depict the materiality of the body as something strange, and even alien. Morton writes that ‘What is closest to home is also the strangest – the look and sound of our own throat’ (2007: 40), and Oswald’s stop-start, oddly paused and poised sonnet seems to agree with him.

Oswald describes Wyatt’s poems as ‘complex treatises with this pause’ in which ‘something other than language, something unsayable, is given space’ (2008: xvi). Wyatt’s pausing rhythms become another way of disrupting the frame of the sonnet, of turning it towards ‘something other’, and a way of voicing what is outside the poem, to go back to the terms that Angela Leighton uses.

This outward turn encompasses a strong sense of materiality, but it is a different kind of materiality to that articulated in Oswald's more Clare-like moments. Bound up with the rhythms of the pause, this materiality is deeper and slower, and gestures towards timescales that are deeper and slower, as in 'Sonnet':

towards winter flowers, forms of ecstatic water,
chalk lies dry with all its throats open.
winter flowers last maybe one frost
chalk drifts its heap through billions of slow sea-years;
rains and pools and opens its wombs,
bows its back, shows its bone.
both closing towards each other
at the dead end of the year – one
woken through, the others thrown into flower (2005b: 21)

Chalk is long-lasting where water flowers are ephemeral, and its endurance is marked by a much slower pace. In contrast to the agile, run-on 'little lists' that comprised sonnets like 'River' and 'Field', 'Sonnet' inches through the viscous long vowels of 'rains', 'pools', 'opens', 'wombs', 'bows', 'back', 'shows', and 'bone', its sedentary movement further held up by some internal half-rhymes and the fact that 'rains' and 'pools' can be read, at least initially, as either verbs or nouns. Oswald's 'chalk drifts' is similarly ambiguous, and also caught part-way between being an object and a process. The result is a sense of slow-moving but deep-lying change, as though what seems at first to be relatively stable is actually mutable and subject to profound, if often imperceptible, change. It is this sense of change that Oswald alludes to in her 'billions of slow sea-years', an invocation of deep evolutionary time that stretches back to the origins of life in the planet's primordial oceans and is performed through the drift of her sonnet's rhythms.

The close proximity of 'drifts' and 'heap', those two words that I suggested demarcate Oswald's different senses of rhythm, implies that they are not easily separable. Though they initially seem to be figured as opposites, with chalk dry and the flowers wet, Oswald draws out the chalk's buried association with water, and seems to imagine that the perennial winter flowers emerge out of 'the billions of slow sea-years' that chalk has accumulated through. Seen in this way, the relationship between the two can be understood in terms that Coole and Frost set forth in *New Materialism*: 'the physical world is a mercurial stabilization of dynamic processes. Rather than tending toward inertia or a state of equilibrium, matter is recognized here as exhibiting immanently self-organizing properties subtended by an intricate filigree of relationships' (2010: 13). Matter, be it 'Tumbleweeds, animal

species, the planetary ecosystem, global weather patterns' (2010: 13), is not conceived of in terms of discrete objects but as

emergent systems that move with a superficially chaotic randomness that is underlain by processes of complex organization and development. Such systems are marked by considerable instability and volatility since their repetition is never perfect; there is continuous redefining and reassembling of key elements that result in systems' capacities to evolve into new and unexpected forms. (2010: 14)

There is something 'unexpected', and perhaps even 'mercurial', about winter flowers as Oswald describes them: 'forms of ecstatic water' at the start of the poem, and then 'smelling of a sudden entering elsewhere' at its end. Similarly we might think of eons-old, sedimentary chalk, with its 'billions of slow sea-years' behind it, as a 'continuous redefining and reassembling of key elements', albeit one whose 'repetition is never perfect', and tending to 'drift' into surprising new shapes and patterns. Indeed, Oswald's sonnets in *Woods etc* could all be thought of in this way, from the 'mercurial stabilization' of 'Another Westminster Bridge', whose tripping rhythms precociously drop in to couplets for the brief moment of the sonnet, to the 'subtended' motions of chalk in 'Sonnet'.

'Leaf', follows a similar pattern, and describes (and mimics) the eons-old processes that go in to producing something as apparently throwaway as the eponymous leaf:

the slow through-flow that feeds
a form curled under, hour by hour
the thick reissuing starlike shapes
of cells and pores and water-rods
which builds up, which becomes a pressure,
a gradual fleshing out of a longing for light,
a small hand unfolding, feeling about.
into that hand the entire
object of the self being coldly placed,
the provisional, the inexplicable I
in mid-air, meeting the wind and dancing (2005b: 8)

The poem draws (again, like 'Sonnet') on an underlying, slow moving rhythm generated by long vowels and internal rhymes ('slow' and 'flow'), repeated phrases ('hour by hour', 'which builds up, which becomes'), and by caesuras, which break the forward movement of the lines. The result is a patient, cumulative rhythm that conjures the slowness of evolutionary time, whose depth and scale

believes the smallness of the leaf that is its outcome, much as the water flowers belied the ‘slow sea years’ of the chalk in ‘Sonnet’. Oswald imagines the leaf as a hand, and in a further moment of transformation shifts from hand to self, to ‘the provisional, the inexplicable I’, almost as though to suggest a narrative of progress in which the poem moves from cell and pores to leaves and then culminates in humans. But Oswald’s quirky, off-beat formal structures resist this linear movement. The occurrence of the self comes at lines eleven and twelve, after a full stop at line ten which marks a turn of sorts, but it is a delayed turn which queries the sonnet’s proportions. The sonnet only intermittently half-rhymes, and eschews usual conventions around spelling by declining to capitalise the start of the sentence that begins in line ten. As a consequence, the sonnet has an unfinished quality that implies any transitions articulated in it are, at best, speculative and ‘provisional’.

Oswald’s reference to ‘thick reissuing starlike shapes’ alludes not only to evolutionary time spans, but also to the distant origins of the elements necessary for life in supernovae, and the sonnet seems to see the remnants of these ‘starlike shapes’ in even apparently innocuous objects like leaves. This move opens up the poem to dizzyingly vast scales of cosmic time, as though merely drawing on evolutionary frameworks were not sufficient to explain the emergence of the leaf. She returns to these cosmic scales in the final poem of *Woods etc.*, another ‘Sonnet’:

Spacecraft Voyager 1 has boldly gone
into Deep Silence carrying a gold-plated disc inscribed with whale-song
it has bleeped back a last infra-red fragment of language
and floated way way up over the jagged edge
of this almost endless bright and blowy enclosure of weather
to sink through a new texture as tenuous as the soft upward pressure of an elevator
and go on and on falling up steep flights of blackness with increasing swiftness
beyond the Crystalline Cloud of the Dead beyond Plato beyond Copernicus
O meticulous swivel cameras still registering events
among those homeless spaces gathering in that silence
that hasn’t yet had time to speak in that increasing sphere
of tiny runaway stars notched in the year
now you can look closely at massless light
that is said to travel freely but is probably in full flight. (2005b: 56)

The sonnet’s ‘last infra-red fragment of language’ invokes an Einsteinian universe, with ‘infra-red’ recalling the red-shifted light that allowed scientists to discover the universe was expanding from an initial point of origin. The poem describes this expansion, with Spacecraft Voyager 1 travelling ever

further into deep space, crossing the ‘jagged edge’ between the earth’s atmosphere (‘enclosure of weather’) and space, and then journeying ‘beyond Plato beyond Copernicus’ to the farthest fringes of the universe and ‘those homeless spaces gathering in that silence / that hasn’t yet had time to speak’. Not that it is a journey that can ever be completed. Bill Bryson, in his helpfully domestic and non-specialised introduction to science, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, also imagines this voyage, asking ‘what would happen if you travelled out to the edge of the universe and, as it were, put your head through the curtains? Where would your head *be* if it were no longer in the universe? What would you find beyond?’ (2003: 26). These are, however, the wrong questions, because ‘you can never get to the edge of the universe...even if you travelled outward and outward in a straight line, indefinitely and pugnaciously, you would never arrive at an outer boundary. Instead, you would come back to where you began’. In Einstein’s cosmology ‘space curves, in a way that allows it to be boundless but finite’ (2003: 26).

The result is a curious mix of movement and stasis, in which, for all its outward thrust, the sonnet does not seem to go anywhere. The poem is a series of rhyming couplets, and at times employs the rhythms that she hears in Clare, and used in ‘Estuary Sonnet’. The poem’s progression gives the feeling of moving ‘outward and outward in a straight line, indefinitely and pugnaciously’, a feeling heightened by Oswald’s habitual use of enjambment and repetition (‘way way up’, ‘go on and on’; ‘beyond...beyond...beyond’; ‘in that silence / ...in that increasing sphere’). This forward momentum is, however, deflected by the length of the lines in these couplets and their internal half rhymes, in particular ‘texture...pressure...weather’ in line six, and ‘blackness...swiftness’ in line seven. These internal half-rhymes split their swollen lines, creating unmarked caesuras and thereby pausing in the sonnet, in the manner that Oswald later attributes to Wyatt. Even more strikingly, she inserts a gap in line eleven before the phrase ‘in that increasing sphere’, marking it off from the rest of the preceding line and, given the similarities in construction between ‘in that silence’ and ‘in that increasing sphere’, creating the impression that the poem is in some sense beginning again. The result is a peculiar feeling of circularity, as though the sonnet, for all its expansiveness, keeps turning back on itself. If the allusion to an ‘ever-increasing sphere / of tiny runaway stars’ seems to place us in the most distant points of space, then ‘tiny’ collapses the poem’s scale down to that of minute observation, of peering at tiny dots of light through a telescope.

I have been trying to argue that Oswald has increasingly embedded herself and her sonnets in matter, but here she counter intuitively launches herself into the most sparsely materialised corners of the universe by journeying out into deep space, or as her poem has it, ‘Deep Silence’. But Einstein’s cosmology seems to preclude the notion of an absolute nothingness. Bryson, writing of the Big Bang, says that although ‘you will wish to retire to a safe place to observe the spectacle...there is nowhere to retire to because outside the singularity there is no *where*. When the universe begins to expand, it

won't be spreading out to fill a larger emptiness. The only space that exists is the space it creates as it goes' (2003: 28). Time and space only exist within the boundaries of the universe, and there is no place beyond its edge to which we might travel. Even the 'place' of nothingness, the vacuum of space, only comes into existence as the universe expands. In one sense, then, even nothingness is something. Whilst in strict terms the nothingness of empty space is immaterial because it does not contain any matter, in a more speculative and imaginative sense such space is not just empty but created, and a part of the universe that began with the Big Bang. It is this strange situation that Oswald describes when she writes of the 'homeless spaces' in the 'silence' at the edge of the cosmos that haven't 'yet had time to speak'. These spaces are elusive and even fugitive, characterised by their absence as much as their presence. Not only are they 'homeless', but they have not 'yet had time to speak', as though they were waiting on some future event (like the arrival of Voyager 1, perhaps). But the spaces at the edge of the universe are the oldest, being the first to emerge at the moment of the Big Bang. If they are still waiting to speak, the implication seems to be that they never will, that they occupy an attenuated present that is unlikely to ever come to an end and are, as the sonnet's last line has it, in 'full flight'.

Oswald's notion of 'homeless spaces' takes us back to where we began, to notions of place and space. The phrase seems to imply Morton's point about there being a hair's breadth between space and place, as though space both acquired and lost its place-like qualities, the things that might have made it a home, in the same instant, and that instant might be so fleeting as to be non-existent. Such transience is at odds with how Wordsworth imagined the world. In his first 'Essay Upon Epitaphs', from 1810, he also ponders infinity:

Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: "Towards what abyss is it in progress? What receptacle can contain the mighty influx?" And the spirit of the answer must have been, though the word might be sea or ocean, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a map, or from the real object in nature – these might have been the *letter*, but the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably, – a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; – nothing less than infinity. (1988: 324-5).

This takes us back to the riverside setting that is so important to Oswald's, and Wordsworth's sonnets, but his emblem of infinity sounds less secure today than it did two hundred years ago, given what we know now about water and water systems. What Wordsworth calls 'never-wearied sources' are in fact highly sensitive to change and disruption, and not infinite. Wordsworth perhaps presumes too much on a principle of correspondence when he moves from 'sea or ocean' to 'infinity', assuming that things stay the same when they are scaled up to different orders of magnitude. In doing so he imagines

nature as a closed system. Water flows to and from the ‘receptacle’ in an endless circuit, not unlike the interwoven rhymes of Wordsworth’s favoured Miltonic sonnet in which connections offer unity but also, potentially, stasis. Oswald, by contrast, uses a series of inflated and expanding couplets that strike out, however unpromisingly, for the edge of the universe.

I began this thesis by suggesting that, in an important sense, the contemporary sonnet begins with Wordsworth, and Wordsworth’s ‘perpetual current’ offers one way of thinking about the sonnet, with Feldman and Robinson noting how the river was ‘one of the most common symbols in the eighteenth century sonnet’ and ‘a prevalent symbol of the flow of human life’, as well as ‘represent[ing] the sonnet tradition’ (1999: 16). But, to an extent, the balance and harmony of this model belies other conceptions of the Wordsworthian form. Like the Thames in ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ which ‘glideth at its own sweet will’, the imagined river in ‘Essay Upon Epitaphs’ is shadowed by those other, more ambivalent figures through which Wordsworth imagined the sonnet and its complex meditation of discipline and freedom, figures like the ‘narrow room’ and ‘scanty plot of ground’ from the ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ in *Poems in Two Volumes*. It is this version of the sonnet that has resonated most fully with twentieth- and twenty-first century poets, even when their concerns have not been immediately historical, and Oswald’s example is especially instructive in that regard. In turning ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’ into ‘Another Westminster Bridge’ she transforms structure and order into change and flux, and repeats the move in her many other sonnets that take off from romantic environs. So, too, do Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon and Don Paterson, though in very different contexts and to very different effect. Hill’s self-lacerating ‘belated witness’; Heaney’s uncertain visionary aspirations; Muldoon’s obsessive drive to repeat, and Don Paterson’s self-defeating metaphysical games all come to, and emerge from, a sense of the sonnet as a site of tension, not well balanced harmony.

As a site of tension, the form has kept on uncovering new ground over the second half of the twentieth century, and on in to the twenty-first, and opening up fresh terrain along the way. James Longenbach’s assertion, to which I have returned several times, that modern poetry is particularly invested in questions of ‘social effectiveness or responsibility’ (1999: 102) has been an important point of departure for Hill and Heaney in particular, but each poet has used the form to approach the idea of history in a variety of ways, to inhabit, explore, and refashion what ‘history’ might mean, both in public and private terms. I say ‘used the form’, but this process has hardly been a conscious, controlled procedure. None of the poets I have considered have employed the form as a vehicle for pre-existent ideas; rather, the sonnet has been a crucible within which histories and memories have been and transformed. Unlike the passive ‘receptacle’ that Wordsworth describes in his ‘Essay upon Epitaphs’, the sonnet has been an active agent, and some of the ways in which Hill, Heaney,

Muldoon, Paterson and Oswald have conceived the form reflect this activity, demonstrating a powerful but also elusive sense of poetic agency: Hill's fractured and eccentric voices; the hard-won productivity of Heaney's 'opened ground'; the disturbing mutations initiated by sex and disease in Muldoon; Paterson's sometimes claustrophobic, sometimes expansive geometries; and Oswald's wayward, vibrant, fugitive matter, most obviously represented through her obsession with never-still water. The sonnet has been a crucial means through which each poet has articulated these concerns, with the articulation also in some measure helping to shape the nature of the concern. Thought of in this way, the form is not so much a river, as Oswald's space probe, which does not merely travel into empty space but, poised on the cusp of an ever-expanding universe, is caught up in the unfolding process of creation. It is from this exposed, vertiginous but also thrilling position, in 'full flight', that some of the strongest and most influential sonnets in contemporary British and Irish poetry have been written.

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