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‘Poetic form’, said Seamus Heaney, ‘is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and centripetal in mind and body’.<sup>1</sup> His comments, made at the pinnacle of his fame, during his receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, reflect both his lifelong investment in poetic form, and his particular understanding of the term. Form, for Heaney, is always about more than the arrangement of words on the page. It is an expansive term capable of encompassing such opposites as ‘buoyancy’ and ‘holding’, ‘centrifugal’ and ‘centripetal’ and ‘mind’ and body’; it represents the most fundamental and defining aspects of poetry, those things that make the poetic ‘ship’ sail, but also poetry’s relationship to the world beyond its borders, the ‘anchor’ that tethers it to other elements. In *The Redress of Poetry*, his series of Oxford lectures, Heaney 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 is enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the

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<sup>1</sup> *Opened Ground: Poems 1966 – 1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 466

condition of overlife and rebels at limit'.<sup>2</sup> Form is at once self-contained and self-sufficient, 'generat[ing] itself', but also relational, capable of acting and even rebelling in the world outside of language.

Given this understanding of poetic form it is hardly surprising that Heaney's oeuvre reveals a sustained fascination with the sonnet. In his recent essay, 'The Modern Irish Sonnet', Alan Gillis describes how '[t]he sonnet is poised between image and discourse. On the page, as a spatial grid, it looks like it could be held at once in the mind, yet it can't, it needs to be temporally passed through: the diachronic and synchronic are held in delicious flirtation'.<sup>3</sup> The sonnet's capacity to simultaneously invoke aesthetic otherworldliness and historical engagement, to be both 'a spatial grid' and a 'pass[ing] through', enacts the duality of Heaney's concept of form as whole. Jason David Hall observes that 'sonnets – whether on their own or in sequences – have been very much central to [Heaney's] mature output',<sup>4</sup> and argues that they are central to the identity of many of Heaney's books: 'of the seven stand alone collections he has published in the three decades since 1979, at least five...contain a distinctive (and more or less volume orientating) sonnet sequence'.<sup>5</sup> Less noticeable, but just as influential, almost all of the poetic mentors name-checked in 1974's 'Feeling into Words', are notable sonneteers: Patrick Kavanagh<sup>6</sup>, Gerald Manly Hopkins,<sup>7</sup> Sir Philip

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<sup>2</sup> *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 158

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 569

<sup>4</sup> *Seamus Heaney's Rhythmic Contract*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 97

<sup>5</sup> *Seamus Heaney's Rhythmic Contract*, p. 106

<sup>6</sup> *Preoccupations*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 47

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 44

Sidney,<sup>8</sup> Robert Frost<sup>9</sup> and William Wordsworth<sup>10</sup>, and the essay quotes from Shakespeare's sonnets when considering poetry's relationship to history, a relationship that assumed central significance in light of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in the late sixties and seventies: 'The question, as ever, is "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?" And my answer is, by offering "befitting emblems of adversity"'.<sup>11</sup>

This is an important moment: the inter-relation of Shakespeare's sonnets ('How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea' is from sonnet 65<sup>12</sup>) with Yeats's self-invented ten line 'labyrinthine'<sup>13</sup> stanzaic form ('befitting emblems of adversity'<sup>14</sup> is from 'Meditations in Time of Civil War') suggests that the cultural politics that influenced Yeats's handling of the sonnet are dictating Heaney's approach as well, that in Heaney's work, just as much as Yeats's, the form represents 'verse (although of Italian origin) associated with the essential English lyric tradition, from Wyatt and Surrey through Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Keats. Precisely because of its centrality to English literature, the sonnet compelled from Yeats both his literary allegiance and his nationalist disobedience'.<sup>15</sup> And yet the question-and-answer structure of Heaney's two allusions, and the rhyme of 'plea' and 'adversity', seems to model a

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 48

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 49

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 41

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 57

<sup>12</sup> *William Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 511

<sup>13</sup> Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 72

<sup>14</sup> *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1990), p. 248

<sup>15</sup> *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 147

complementary, rather than conflicting, relationship between Shakespeare and Yeats, and to suggest of vision of poetry and poetic form that is not determined by politics. Thomas O’Grady, drawing on Heaney’s own distinction between ‘craft’, defined as ‘the skill of making’, and the more expressive notion of ‘technique’, which ‘involves not only a poet’s way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality’,<sup>16</sup> argues that Heaney’s earliest and most political sonnets, poems such as ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ and ‘Act of Union’, are instances of ‘craft’, that the sonnet is ‘an occasionally viable “formal ploy”’<sup>17</sup>, and that it is not until the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’, in 1979’s *Field Work*, that Heaney achieves the true mastery of ‘technique’. These later ‘sonnets engage the reader in the same way that Shakespeare’s do – by establishing a dramatic tension that demands some sort of satisfying (even if tentative) resolution’.<sup>18</sup> Heaney’s little rhyming couplet, embedded in the midst of ‘Feeling into Words’, enacts this ‘satisfying’ but ‘tentative’ ‘resolution’ and suggests, in its appropriation of Shakespeare, a terrain beyond the political ground of the Yeatsian sonnet: it is this territory that I intend to explore.

At the start of ‘Feeling into Words’ Heaney articulates a vision of ‘poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself’<sup>19</sup>. This optimistic manifesto, written in 1974, coincides with the transition from one kind of poetry to another, from the thinned out quatrain poems

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<sup>16</sup> *Preoccupations*, (London: Faber and Faber), p. 47

<sup>17</sup> ‘The Art of Heaney’s Sonnets’, *Dalhousie Review*, 80 (Autumn 2000): p. 355

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 357

<sup>19</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 41

that comprise most of *Wintering Out* (1972) and *North* (1975) to the longer, steadier pentameter lines of *Field Work*:

when the cuckoo and the corncrake ‘consorted at twilight’, almost two years after we 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*. But that musical shift meant that I had a definite stake in the Glanmore ground.

*In what sense?*

Glanmore was the first place where my immediate experience got into my work.

Almost all the poems before that had arisen from memories of older haunts; but after a couple of years in the cottage, it changed from being just living quarters to a locus that was being written into poems...then, the following May, just after I’d gone to do that BBC programme on Dove Cottage, the sonnets announced themselves.<sup>20</sup>

This ‘musical shift’, away from the short line of *North* and towards the iambic pentameter, is, for Hall, as much a political as a poetic act: ‘coming as it does in the wake of the metrical disruption of his 1970s “verse”, asserted by many (including Heaney himself) to be a determined political act, this re-instatement of metre – and of the sonnet as metrical metonym – carries a political valence as well. It can be read...as an extension of the desire to open lines of communication’.<sup>21</sup> Glanmore becomes a place of both public as well as personal healing, and Heaney associates it with William Wordsworth. The sonnet in which ‘the cuckoo and the corncrake “consorted at twilight”’ explicitly compares

<sup>20</sup> *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 198

<sup>21</sup> *Seamus Heaney’s Rhythmic Contract*, p. 109

Heaney to Wordsworth, and in addition to his critical prose from this time, Heaney also presented the BBC programme mentioned in *Stepping Stones*. Hugh Haughton has persuasively argued that ‘it was [Heaney’s] instinctive, tactical identification with the major inventor of English Romanticism that played the crucial part in his critical self-creation at this time’,<sup>22</sup> and in particular the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, which Haughton characterises as a ‘mesmerically rumbling, rambling conversation poem of homecoming, the longest ode to childhood in the language’,<sup>23</sup> and a poem that establishes ‘that our first ground rules the rest of our lives’.<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth’s investment in, and cultivation of, personal memory at a time of public crisis imagines a space for poetry beyond the determinations of political and historical conflict, and in doing so provides Heaney with an alternative to the violent poetics of *North*.

Heaney’s Wordsworthian ‘critical self-creation’, however, does not amount to a wholesale rejection of Yeats. He has written ‘that I did my serious reading of Yeats in the 1970s, which was when I needed him most’<sup>25</sup> and both the English and the Irish poet feature prominently in Heaney’s prose of that time: ‘Feeling into Words’ is perhaps more Wordsworthian, opening as it does with *The Prelude*, ‘The Makings of a Music’, from 1978, explicitly compares the two figures, and Yeats then gets an essay to himself, ‘Yeats as an Example?’, also from 1978. Yeats, as we meet him in Heaney’s prose, is a disruptive figure, filled

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Power and Hiding Places: Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney’, *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Romantic Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. 63

<sup>23</sup> *The Monstrous Debt*, p. 63

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 63

<sup>25</sup> *Stepping Stones*, p. 192

with ‘the music of energy reined down, of the mastered beast stirring’,<sup>26</sup> a characterisation that to some extent anticipates Vendler’s interpretation of the Yeatsian sonnet, particularly the later ‘monstrous’<sup>27</sup> sonnets such as ‘The Second Coming’, ‘Leda and the Swan’ and ‘High Talk’, but the violence of Heaney’s Yeats is less political and more strictly imaginative: ‘In fact we can sense a violence, an implacable element in the artistic drive as Yeats envisages and embodies it’.<sup>28</sup> Yeats licenses a poetic violence that is not disqualified by the pressures of contemporary political violence and it is this discovery, as I hope to show, that transforms the sonnet in Heaney’s work. At certain specific moments in the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ Heaney takes on a Yeatsian voice that disrupts and disturbs the presence of Wordsworth and in doing so transports his sonnets to ground rather different from that of Glanmore.

The first of the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ opens in a Wordsworthian vein:

Vowels ploughed into other: opened ground.  
 The mildest February for twenty years  
 Is mist bands over furrows, a deep no sound  
 Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors.  
 Our road is steaming and the turned-up acres breathe.  
 Now the good life could be to cross a field  
 And art a paradigm of earth new from the lathe  
 Of ploughs. My lea is deeply tilled.  
 Old ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense  
 And I am quickened by a redolence  
 Of the fundamental, dark unblown rose.  
 Wait then...Breasting the mist, in sowers’ aprons,  
 My ghosts come striding into their spring stations.  
 The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 73

<sup>27</sup> *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 170

<sup>28</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 99

<sup>29</sup> *Field Work*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 33



The ‘opened ground’ of the first line looks back to ‘Act of Union’ from *North*, where it was a mark of pain both the domestic and political spheres: ‘No treaty / I foresee will salve completely your tracked / And stretchmarked body, the big pain / That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again’.<sup>30</sup> Here, however, ‘opened ground’ is agricultural, and refers to ground ready to be seeded. The ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ replace public and personal strife with linguistic and agricultural harmony, and an apprehension of violence with a spirit of reciprocity. In ‘The Makings of a Music’ Heaney imagines ‘Wordsworth on the gravel path, to-ing and fro-ing like a ploughman up and down a field, his voice rising and falling between the measures of his pentameters’.<sup>31</sup> For Hall, this ‘invocation of the metrical ploughing of *versus*’<sup>32</sup> is ‘the most explicit evidence of the end of Heaney’s phase of formal “wintering out” – of his living off of lean strophes and metreless lines – and of the beginning of his return to the nourishment found in accentual-syllabic versification’,<sup>33</sup> and the sonnet’s language is indeed mimetic of such agricultural rhythms. Consonantal half rhymes such as ‘years’, ‘tractors’, ‘breathe’, ‘lathe’, ‘field’ and ‘tilled’, create a steady but unobtrusive continuity, and the arched pattern of the Shakespearean rhyme scheme – ababcdcd – suggests the back and forth of ploughed furrows. Indeed, the repetition of vowel sounds in the first line - ‘Vowels’, ‘ploughed’ and ‘ground’ - is itself a sort of ploughing in which the poem turns over the physical material of language. There is a curious lack of agency about this activity, with neither ‘vowels’ nor ‘other’

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<sup>30</sup> *North*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 43-44

<sup>31</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 65

<sup>32</sup> *Seamus Heaney’s Rhythmic Contract*, p. 108

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p. 107

actually doing the ploughing. The vowels themselves are ploughed, and the ‘other’ is the thing they are ploughed into, but neither is the sentence’s subject and Heaney’s elision of ‘are’ seems to deny the need for one. Had he written ‘Vowels are ploughed into other’ we would feel the presence of an unknown subject; as it is the activity of ploughing seems to continue of its own accord. This syntactic move establishes the poem’s peaceful, harmonious demeanour in which its various elements – vowels and consonants, metre, rhyme and syntax – both work and are worked on.

The poem’s ‘acoustic environment,’ according to Stephen Burt, ‘remains softly friendly: sibilants and *th*-sounds dominate, and “hard” consonants such as *b*, *d*, *g*, *k* and *t* almost never collide’.<sup>34</sup> This characterisation is just, but omits moments of phonic density such as ‘Old ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense / And I am quickened by a redolence’, where the /g/ of ‘gorge’ follows hard on the heels of the /k/ in ‘ploughsocks’, and /k/ recurs in ‘quickened’. These “hard” consonants’ are more common than Burt’s description suggests, but their potentially violent impact is tempered by those ‘softly friendly’ sounds and the poem’s consistent deployment of the pentameter, whose steady rhythms embrace and responsibly disperse consonantal energies, which in turn contribute to the pentameter’s momentum. Similarly, the potentially conflicting demands of metre and syntax are harnessed as imaginative resources. In lines three and four, for example, the line break forces the speaking voice to revisit and re-stress ‘a deep no sound’. Initially, without knowing what the next line will bring, it is possible

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<sup>34</sup> *The Art of the Sonnet*, ed. Stephen Burt and David Mikics, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), 2010, p. 347

to assume that ‘deep no sound’ is two distinct nouns, ‘deep’ followed by ‘no sound’, and that the next line will describe their inter-relation: ‘a deep no sound / Could penetrate’, for example. However, the next line does not describe their interrelation but their connection to something outside themselves: they are ‘Vulnerable to distant gargling tractors’ and this transforms ‘a deep no sound’ into one entity and forces the reader to stress ‘no’ as one of its defining attributes. The poem’s ‘softly friendly’ manner is created by the capacity of its constituent parts for reciprocity, their willing to both changed and be changed, to work and be worked, to plough and be ploughed.

This reciprocity, however, is only partially Wordsworthian, and a more forceful Yeatsian voice begins to assert itself in the poem’s verbs and rhyme scheme as it moves from octave to sestet. Bernard O’Donoghue has written of the significance of verbs in *Field Work*: ‘The distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs is the most recurrent aspect of classification. It can be seen as part of a “chain of being” in verbs, from the finite-active-transitive at the top to non-finite and passive constructions at the bottom’,<sup>35</sup> and the sestet opens with an active, transitive verb: ‘Old ploughsocks gorge the subsoil of each sense’. The poem moves back to the passive voice with which it opened in the next line – ‘I am quickened’ – but the presence of the ‘I’ continues to the foreground a sense of agency that the poem’s first line had so deftly eschewed, an agency that leads us to ‘the fundamental, dark unblown rose’, which has decidedly Yeatsian associations. O’Donoghue argues that

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<sup>35</sup> *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 1994, p. 80

The distinction between transitive and intransitive, as a matter of controlling or not, is implicit but crucial in Heaney's distinction between Wordsworth and Yeats. The Wordsworthian child is free because it simply *is*; like any creature in nature, plant or animal, it "has its being", intransitively. Yeats's natural world, by contrast, is always under control.<sup>36</sup>

The intransitive Wordsworthian syntax, representing peace and harmony, can be found in Wordsworth's own sonnets: in the concluding line, 'her rights are these',<sup>37</sup> from 'I grieved for Buonaparte', which contrasts 'true Sway' with the 'personal ambition'<sup>38</sup> of Napoleon Bonaparte, and in 'The river' that 'glideth at his own sweet will'<sup>39</sup> in 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', and it also occurs in phrases like 'Is cadences', from the end of 'Glanmore III' and 'Vowels ploughed into other'. The Yeatsian syntax is quite different. Heaney himself, in 'The Makings of a Music', characterises it as 'the compelling element that binds the constituent elements of sense into active unity',<sup>40</sup> and it is this active unity we can hear in the speaking 'I' and the 'dark unblown rose'. This 'active unity' is buttressed by the sestet's move to fuller, vowel-based rhymes – 'sense' and 'redolence', 'aprons' and 'stations', 'rose' and 'snows' – and a change in rhyme scheme. Heaney's willingness to hybridise sonnet variants recalls similar moves by Yeats, most famously in 'Leda and the Swan', and the switch to a Petrarchan (eefggf) rhyme scheme - tighter and more strident than the consonantly rhymed, Shakespearean octave – is an instance of how the Yeatsian 'voice muscles its way

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<sup>36</sup> *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, (Oxford: OUP, 1984, rpt [with revisions], 2000), p. 267

<sup>38</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, p. 195

<sup>39</sup> *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, p. 285

<sup>40</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 76

over the obstacle course of the form and flexes like an animated vine on the trellis of its metric and rhyme scheme'.<sup>41</sup> It is this muscular flex we can hear in the sestet, and in particular the last line: 'The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows'. The verb 'whirls', though intransitive, is Yeatsian rather than Wordsworthian. Not only is its frenetic energy at odds with Wordsworth's peaceful rhythms, but it echoes lines from Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen':

So the Platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and new wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.<sup>42</sup>

Heaney has praised the transformative power of Yeats's imagination, his 'gift for beating the scrap metal of the day-to-day life into a ringing bell',<sup>43</sup> but the imagination of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' creates a 'barbarous clangour' rather than 'a ringing bell'. Yeats stands for dissonance and disruption, rather than continuity and harmony. Indeed, that dissonance threatens to run riot at the end of 'Glanmore I', with the recurrent /r/ consonants miming the frenzied activity of 'whirls'. However, this activity is restrained by the heavy beat of the repeated long /e/ vowel in 'dream', 'freakish' and 'Easter', which indicates the hard physical labour the poem applies in order to hold chaos at bay. If Yeats's poetry is 'the music of energy reined down, of the mastered beast stirring', then

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73-74

<sup>42</sup> *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman), 1990, p. 254

<sup>43</sup> *Stepping Stones*, p. 193

we hear the beast stirring in the verb ‘whirls’ but also being mastered by the tread of the vowels.

Rather than see the Wordsworthian and Yeatsian voices as antithetical, however, Heaney sets about intertwining them. There are hints of this in ‘Feeling into Words’ when Heaney discusses Wordsworth’s ‘The Thorn’ in terms of the Yeatsian ‘mask’,<sup>44</sup> but it is in ‘Glanmore II’ that the relationship really begins to flourish

Sensings, mountings from the hiding places,  
 Words entering almost the sense of touch,  
 Ferreting themselves out of their dark hutch -  
 ‘These things are not secrets, but mysteries,’  
 Oisín Kelly told me years ago  
 In Belfast, hankering after stone  
 That connived with chisel, as if the grain  
 Remembered what the mallet tapped to know.  
 And 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 verse turned round.<sup>45</sup>

The first line invokes Wordsworth - ‘the mountings of the mind’<sup>46</sup> and ‘the hiding places of my power’,<sup>47</sup> both from *The Prelude* and the latter the quotation that begins ‘Feeling into Words’ - but the octave has a decidedly Yeatsian flavour.

The restless participle enact the same disruptive movements as ‘whirls’, the rhymes continue with the same Petrarchan scheme as the sestet of the preceding

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<sup>44</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 50

<sup>45</sup> *Field Work*, p. 34

<sup>46</sup> *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, p. 375.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p. 567

sonnet, and the expansive syntax, which is rounded out by the full rhyme ‘ago’ and ‘know’ and follows the Yeatsian demand for a ‘complete coincidence between period and stanza’,<sup>48</sup> distances the poem from the agricultural harmony that Heaney attributes to Wordsworth. And yet the allusion to *The Prelude* keeps this world in play, and indeed the poem returns to it more explicitly in its sestet, where Heaney lands once more in Glanmore and resumes, in the sonnet’s concluding couplet, the motions of ploughing, a switch that is re-enforced by the return to a Shakespearean rhyme scheme. Indeed, the formal symmetry in which Glanmore I’s Shakespearean octave is followed by a Petrarchan sestet, then the Petrarchan octave of Glanmore II which is in turn followed by a Shakespearean sestet, invite us to read the two poems as a single structure in which Heaney passes from a Wordsworthian voice to a Yeatsian voice and back again.

In ‘Yeats as an Example?’ Heaney describes how Yeats ‘emphasised and realised the otherness of art from life, dream from action, and by the end he moved within his mode of vision as within some invisible ring of influence and defence, some bullet-proof glass of the spirit’,<sup>49</sup> but this otherworld of art is not positioned outside and beyond the world of nature, but rather within and beneath it. The ‘ploughsocks’ of ‘Glanmore I’ ‘gorge the *subsoil* / of each sense’ (my italics), as though the Yeatsian voice were digging down into deeper territory, while the ‘Sensings’ with which ‘Glanmore II’ opens are ‘mountings’ that come up from ‘the hiding places’. In Yeats, ‘the imagination can disdain happenings

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<sup>48</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 76

<sup>49</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 99

once it has incubated and mastered the secret behind happenings'.<sup>50</sup> If the Wordsworthian voice opens up the natural world, then the Yeatsian voice goes deeper, to the animating principle that breathes life into nature. Direct contact with this principle is a risky business as it activates the 'implacable element in the artistic drive', and at various points in 'Yeats as an Example?' Heaney tries to frame this violent drive: 'For all the activity and push of the enterprise, the aim of the poet and of the poetry is finally to be of service, to ply the effort of the individual work into the larger work of the community as a whole';<sup>51</sup> 'the finally exemplary moments are those when this powerful artistic control is vulnerable to the pain and pathos of life itself';<sup>52</sup> 'we have a deeply instinctive yet intellectually assented-to idea of nature in her benign and nurturant aspect as the proper first principle of life and living';<sup>53</sup> 'the affirmative wilful violent man, whether he be artist or hero...must merge his domineering voice into the common voice of the living and the dead, mingle his heroism with the cowardice of his kind, lay his great head upon the ashy breath of death'.<sup>54</sup> Whatever cause or principal the Yeatsian imagination gives itself to – and the range of alternatives that Heaney proposes perhaps reflects the diversity of interests that Yeats espoused over his long career – it is always, for Heaney, about more than itself.

Of the causes that Heaney imagines Yeats serving, the last two stand out as particularly pertinent to his own concerns in the 'Glanmore Sonnets'. The 'benign and nurturant' nature may be thought of as the redemptive agricultural

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 112

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113



terrain of Wordsworth that frames the Yeatsian voice in ‘Glanmore I’ and ‘Glanmore II’, and that pre-occupies many of the subsequent sonnets in the sequence.

This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake  
 (So much, too much) consorted at twilight.  
 It was all crepuscular and iambic.  
 Out on the field a baby rabbit  
 Took his bearings, and I knew the deer  
 (I’ve seen them too from the window of the house,  
 Like connoisseurs, inquisitive of air)  
 Were careful under larch and May-green spruce.  
 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.<sup>55</sup>

There is the light trace of self-mockery, of puncturing poetic self-importance, about this exchange, and the poem as a whole (‘So much, too much’, Heaney had cautioned himself in the second line). The poem’s shape and form are the consequence of ‘surrender’ to other sounds and voices. Marie Heaney’s interjection, including the very word ‘interrupts’, balances Heaney’s own assertions and forms one half of the third quatrain, while the final couplet not only gently rhymes ‘breeze’ with ‘cadences’ but absorbs the soft hissing of the wind as a series of repeated /s/ sounds. In ‘The Makings of a Music’ Heaney describes Wordsworth’s poetics ‘as listening, as a wise passiveness, a surrender to energies that spring within the centre of the mind, not composition as an active pursuit by

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<sup>55</sup> *Field Work*, p. 35

the mind's circumference of something already at the centre',<sup>56</sup> and Heaney seems to have this type of writing in mind in this poem: the sonnet listens, in its quatrains, to a space beyond itself and finds that space internalised in the final couplet. And yet the poem's self-consciousness distances it from the natural world it seeks to represent. We are aware that the 'breeze', which in Wordsworth is 'a corresponding, mild, creative breeze'<sup>57</sup> inside himself, reflecting the breath of nature, is 'Outside'. The poem balances presence with absence, but as the sequence progresses absence begins to dominate. The poems become acts of listening that are increasingly divorced from the things they are listening to. 'Glanmore IV' begins with an attempt to catch 'an iron tune / Of flange and piston' that the young Heaney 'never' hears, instead finding that the crash and noise of railways, their 'Struck couplings and shuntings', produce invisible, subterranean movements

Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook  
 Silently across our drinking water  
 (As they are shaking now across my heart)  
 And vanished into where the seemed to start.<sup>58</sup>

From the world of transport and travel the poem contracts to the house, to the silent drinking water and finally to the poet's own heart, the sounds becoming ripples whose circles are mirrored by the concluding couplet, a 'verse turned round'. Similarly Glanmore V, whose concluding couplet reads 'I fall back to my

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<sup>56</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 63

<sup>57</sup> *William Wordsworth: The Major Poems*, p. 376

<sup>58</sup> *Field Work*, p. 36

tree-house and would crouch / Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush',<sup>59</sup> enacts a journey backwards, and inwards, towards the 'tree-house' where the /sh/ sound, like the sibilance at the end of 'Glanmore III', marks out a space separate from the poet, a fertile ground whose creative presence we can hear breathing through the phonic repetitions of the poem, but which the poem itself is unable to directly and fully occupy. Just as the 'rustling and twig combing breeze' remains 'outside', and the water ripples disappear 'into where they seemed to start', Heaney again frames and distances the space he approaches: 'I...would crouch' leaves the action, the act of residence in 'the hush', imagined only, rather than actualised. The poet remains outside, listening in.

This achievement of distance re-animates a desire for contact, and Heaney resumes a Yeatsian mode, initially in 'Glanmore VI': "I will break through", he said, "what I glazed over / With perfect mist and peaceful absences..."<sup>60</sup> but principally in Glanmore VII.

Dogger, Rockall, Malin, North Irish Sea,  
 Green swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux,  
 Conjured by that strong, gale-warning voice  
 Collapse into a sibilant penumbra.  
 Midnight and closedown. Sirens of the tundra,  
 Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale road, raise  
 Their wind-compounded keen behind the baize  
 And drive the trawlers to the lee of Wicklow.  
*L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Helene*  
 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

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid*, p. 37

<sup>60</sup> *Field Work*, p. 38

Elsewhere on Minches, Cromarty, the Faroes.<sup>61</sup>

This poem is perhaps the most Yeatsian of the entire sequence. We hear his controlling, compelling voice in the verbs ‘Conjured’, ‘Collapsed’ and ‘drive’; in the grid-like arrangement of the full-ish rhymes ‘penumbra’ / ‘tundra’ and ‘raise’ / ‘baize’; and in the ‘eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road’ whose kenning recalls, as Bernard O’Donoghue points out, ‘the “horseback, assback, muleback” of Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli”’.<sup>62</sup> But it’s the poem’s proper nouns that most forcefully establish its Yeatsian identity. In ‘Feeling into Words’ Heaney remembers ‘the beautiful sprung rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast: Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre’, as one of his first encounters with poetry. ‘I still recall them with ease, and can delight in them as verbal music’.<sup>63</sup> To delight in verbal music is to use the terms in which Heaney describes Yeats, to delight in art, not life, and dream, not action. However, the particular status of proper nouns as referring to unique objects gives the poem weight and density as well: to string together the words Dogger, Rockall, Malin, North Irish Sea is to make song, but it is also to summon a world, and the poem acquires the power of an incantatory magic spell. It is this power that Heaney taps into in the poem’s sestet: “‘A haven,” / I said out loud, the word deepening, clearing’. Language not only suggests the idea of a haven, but becomes the thing itself. Words have their own existence, their own spatial dimensions –

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>62</sup> *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, p. 82

<sup>63</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 45

‘deepening, clearing’ – and are as valid as ‘the sky / Elsewhere’, they are both ‘marvellous / And actual’.

This power is different from the power of the Yeatsian voice in ‘Glanmore I’ and ‘Glanmore II’, whose ‘active unity’ was disruptive, even violent, because it is rooted in different ground. ‘Glanmore VII’ is not, after all, set on a farm, but at sea, and this change takes the sequence away from Wordsworth’s nature and into the world of the dead. The poem is filled with disembodied voices and unseen presences – the ‘gale-warning voice’, the ‘wind compounded keen’ – just like Atlantic storms and indeed the shipping forecast itself. Several of *Field Work*’s elegies place their ghosts either at sea or on lakes: Robert Lowell, for example, in the poem ‘Elegy’, is ‘thudding in a big sea’,<sup>64</sup> and the eel fisherman Louis O’Neill is imagined out on a lake in ‘Casualty’, which Heaney consciously modelled on Yeats’s ‘The Fisherman’, a poem that he cites as an instance of Yeats’s artistic otherness, ‘his achieved and masterful tones’ before affirming, however, that ‘the finally exemplary moments are those when this powerful artistic control are vulnerable to the pain and pathos of life itself’.<sup>65</sup> A little further along, towards the end of ‘Yeats as an Example?’ Heaney describes one of Yeats’s very last poems, ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ as ‘a rite of passage from life into death, but a rite whose meaning is subsumed into song, into the otherness of art.’<sup>66</sup> The journey out of nature does not end in extinction, but in an alternate mode of existence, an

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<sup>64</sup> *Field Work*, p. 32

<sup>65</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 109

<sup>66</sup> *Preoccupations*, p. 113

existence through language and song, through Yeatsian art and dream. The last of the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ performs this change.

I dreamt we slept in a moss in Donegal  
 On turf banks under blankets, with our faces  
 Exposed all night in a wetting drizzle,  
 Pallid as the dripping sapling birches.  
 Lorenzo and Jessica in a cold climate.  
 Diarmuid and Grainne waiting to be found.  
 Darkly asperged and censed, we were laid out  
 Like breathing effigies on a raised ground.  
 And in that dream I dreamt – how like you this? –  
 Our first night years ago in that hotel  
 When you came with your deliberate kiss  
 To raise us towards the lovely and painful  
 Covenants of flesh; our separateness;  
 The respite in our dewy dreaming faces.<sup>67</sup>

The lovers are inanimate: they are ‘laid out’, rather than moving themselves and sleep in spite of the ‘wetting drizzle’, and this lack of movement, coupled with their ‘pallid’ complexion gives them the appearance of corpses. Indeed the sonnet’s half-rhymes, turning around soft /s/ and /l/ sounds – ‘Donegal’ / ‘drizzle’, ‘faces’, ‘birches’, ‘this’, kiss’ ‘hotel’, ‘painful’ ‘separateness’ and ‘faces’ – are themselves pallid, as if the form were inanimate. But the poem comes alive in its sestet. The phrase ‘in that dream I dreamt’ takes the static noun ‘dream’ and converts it into the animate verb ‘dreamt’ and the ‘pallid’ sibilance between ‘birches’ and ‘faces’ in the octave becomes the full rhyme ‘this’ and ‘kiss’. There is a greater sense of movement, of presence, that endows Heaney’s recollections with a life of their own. He is not simply remembering his relationship with his wife, he is re-living it. This erotic element is important: it gives the dream a

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<sup>67</sup> *Field Work*, p. 42

solidity and substance, much as the place names at the start of ‘Glanmore VII’ provided weight and density to its ‘verbal music’. Again, the imagined world has its own life and validity and the poem a ritual act of resurrection by which the lovers are raised up from death to this new life.

This faith in the restorative powers of poetry brings us back to where we started, to the opening of ‘Feeling into Words’, where Heaney affirmed poetry ‘as divination’ and ‘revelation’ and ‘restoration’. Yet the ghostly terrain of the last of the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ is a long way from the archaeological and agricultural ground he was digging in 1974 when the sequence began. Instead of looking back it looks forward, to later sequences such as ‘Station Island’, from 1984, and ‘Clearances’, another sonnet sequence, from 1987, that deal with death and the dead. Looks forward, too, to later essays such as ‘The Main of Light’ and ‘Joy or Night’ in which Yeats’s critical double is not Wordsworth, but Philip Larkin, and the contrast not between art and nature but life and death. Heaney’s assertion that ‘When language does more than enough, as it does in all achieved poetry, it opts for the condition of overlife’,<sup>68</sup> claims for poetry more forceful and transformative powers than ‘restoration’ and ‘continuity’, and the sources of that power can be traced back to the Yeatsian moments in the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’.

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<sup>68</sup> *The Redress of Poetry*, p. 158

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### **First Response**

As Helen Vendler has argued, one of the distinctive formal achievements of W.B. Yeats was to modernize the sonnet and at the same time make it distinctively Irish. The sonnet claims both the literary allegiance and the nationalist disobedience of the Irish poet, prompting some daring formal innovations, most memorably in the fractured lineation of 'Leda and the Swan'. The example of Yeats is strongly evident in Heaney's poetry, and especially potent in 'Glanmore Sonnets', as this fine essay reminds us, declaring itself in the compelling power of verbs like 'Conjured' and 'Collapsed'. Where the essay excels, however, is in its subtle and persuasive account of a dialogue or interaction between the Yeatsian voice and its Wordsworthian counterpart. Wordsworth's presence is made explicit in Heaney's sonnet sequence, sometimes comically so (as when Sonnet III archly denies the comparison between the poet's domestic circumstances and those of William and Dorothy), but the real force of that presence, so the essay claims, is to restore and reinvigorate Heaney's poetic potential after the sapping of energy in the troubled poetry of the 1970s. The point is well made and well illustrated. Alongside Wordsworth's assuaging presence, however, we are continually reminded in 'Glanmore Sonnets' of another Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, who in his late, brilliant sonnets outrageously rhymed 'red' and 'incred / ible', 'marshes' and 'catharsis', and even 'God' and 'bog', setting the bar high for poets who would follow, among them Heaney and Paul Muldoon. We are reminded, as well,

of Robert Frost, whose sonnets Heaney praises highly in *Homage to Robert Frost*, and sometimes the circumspect pastoralism and verbal deftness of ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ recall the great achievements of ‘Mowing’, ‘Design’, and ‘Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same’.