DEATH MATTERS: LYRIC, AFFECT, AND ETHICS
IN BRITISH AND IRISH ELEGY, 1960-2012

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The elegy is a poetic genre situated between personal and public spheres. The critical literature of the genre often privileges one sphere over the other, whether it be the personal work of mourning undertaken by the elegist in writing the poem, or the public and cultural work of memorialization that is fundamental to the genre. My project examines the work of five poets – Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Denise Riley – whose elegies require a distinct critical apparatus, one that considers the personal and the public jointly because these poets’ elegies trouble the very distinction between the two. In the ethical concerns voiced by the poets – which range from the aestheticization of death and violence to the potential profit motives (artistic, commercial) of writing elegy – as well as in the formal techniques that can either mitigate these ethical concerns or, in some cases, generate them, these elegies betray the inextricability of private and cultural modes of grief.
In order to bring disparate parts together – the personal and the private, the ethical and the aesthetic – I implement a critical methodology that uses as its central tool the notion of “linguistic affect,” which I define (slightly modifying Riley’s own definition) as “the force of language on the body,” a force made possible through language’s historically rich materiality. The scholarly turn to affect has begun to collapse distinctions between cultural networks of affect and the human bodies they influence; my analysis focuses on the lyric as one particular linguistic site in which to discern this intersection of the cultural and the somatic, attending specifically to what Mutlu Konuk Blasing refers to as the “affective materials of language”: its affectively charged sounds and rhythms, and the poetic techniques that harness these affective charges through prosody, form, and poetic convention. The ethical dilemmas conveyed in the work of these five elegists are thus symptomatic of the challenge of articulating a private grief that always speaks beyond itself.
To my parents
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INTRODUCTION

ON LYRIC, AFFECT, AND THE ETHICS OF ELEGY

1.1 Elegy’s Ethics

The elegy is a poetic genre with dual obligations. On the one hand, it is tasked with the personal work of mourning, with responding to the grief of the elegist who writes his or her poem as a means of coming to terms with loss. On the other hand, it is tasked with the public work of memorialization, with the act of preserving in cultural memory whomever or whatever it elegizes, whether it be a person, a group of people, or some abstract concept like “civilization,” as is the case with a poem like T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. In the field of elegy studies, scholars often tend to privilege one of these sides of elegy over the other, with an eye either to the dynamics of consolation and literary mourning that have as their basis various tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis, or to the public dynamics of death and memorial that often tap into larger issues surrounding the representation of gender, race, disease, and a slew of other important cultural debates. My project begins, in part, by posing a relatively simple question: what happens

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1 See, for instance, Sandra M. Gilbert, “‘Rats’ Alley’: The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 179-201, in which Gilbert reads Eliot’s landmark work of the twentieth century within the framework of elegy.

2 Although I touch on the work of both groups of elegy scholars in more depth below, for the interested reader, David Kennedy offers a helpful primer on each; see chapter three, “The Work of Mourning,” and chapter four, “The needs of ghosts”: Modern Elegy,” in Kennedy, *Elegy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 35-56, 57-83.
when one considers the two – the personal and the public, mourning and memorial – jointly, in relation to each other? Such is a necessary consideration, I argue, if one is to fully contend with the work of those elegists that comprise this project: Geoffrey Hill, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Denise Riley. Theirs is a poetry that requires a unique critical apparatus.

These five poets require this unique apparatus because, as the reader will see, their elegies trouble the very distinctions that are often made between the personal and the public, between the elegist in mourning and the public materials of language and culture through which the poet mourns, and through which the dead are memorialized. This collapse between personal and public spheres is nowhere more evident than in the ethical dilemmas that surround the elegies of these poets, dilemmas which in some cases provide the thematic core of their poetry and which inform their poetic styles as they seek to write elegy in the awareness of its potential ethical import, and which in other cases arise out of their particular poetic techniques, the specific modes of writing elegy that generate their own unique ethical challenges. There already exists in elegy studies a rich body of scholarship devoted to the relationship between elegy and ethics, ranging from critiques like Melissa Zeiger’s that the predominant psychoanalytic approach to elegy favors masculinist interpretations of the genre, to examinations like that of R. Clifton Spargo in which he believes elegy to espouse an ethics of alterity, in which the genre’s turn towards the dead enacts a more significant turn towards the “other,” in a Levinasian sense. If it is true that, as David-Antoine Williams has argued, the recent ethical turn in

3 See Melissa Zeiger, Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997), and R. Clifton Spargo, The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004). Other texts that significantly engage the question
literary studies has largely ignored poetry, then the genre of elegy is the exception that proves that rule. My project intersects at various points with this wider body of ethically engaged critical literature, at those times when, for example, Geoffrey Hill frets over the narcissistic impulses of writing elegy that would trade an honest account of the atrocity of the Holocaust for his own personal consolation; or when Seamus Heaney fears that tapping into poetic tradition will “cushion” the painful realities of Northern Irish sectarian violence; or even when Medbh McGuckian’s idiosyncratic compositional technique provides a potential model for a feminist elegiac aesthetic that recalls Zeiger’s own critique of psychoanalytic approaches to the genre. But what this project throws into sharp relief is the way these ethical issues are the specific consequence of these poets’ more profound interest in and concern for the coincidence of the private and the public, the personal and the cultural – a coincidence that transpires at the site of affect.

The meaning of affect – or, more specifically, of linguistic affect – and how it bears on the study of elegy and its ethics constitutes the primary work of this introductory chapter. Suffice it to say, however, it is in affect that the personal and the public conjoin; it is out of the entanglement of the personal and the public made possible through affect, in language, that the ethical predicaments faced by these poets first arise. The shorthand


4 See David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16-19. See, however, ibid., 20-22 for some of the recent scholarly inroads he observes have been made into the question of poetry and ethics.

5 For more on Hill, see chapter one of this project, but also Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 7-8; for Heaney, see chapter two of this project, but also Seamus Heaney, “The Impact of Translation,” in *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 43, as well as Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 338; for McGuckian, see chapter four of this project, but also Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation*, 2-3.
definition of linguistic affect I adopt for this project is “the force of language on the body,” a phrase that derives, in slightly modified form, from one of Denise Riley’s own theoretical engagements with affect, *The Force of Language*;\(^6\) and while in part that “force of language” stands for an *emotional* force, a force enabled by language’s historically rich materiality, it is also an *ethical* force. If, as I will illustrate in the pages ahead, language exerts an affective force on the body – if, that is, the personal (in the form of the body) is susceptible to the affective claims of the public (in the form of language) – then the personal is also susceptible to the ethical claims of that public, to the ideologies and values that are perpetuated within and by an affectively vibrant language. This, then, is the ethical challenge elegy poses to the poets of this project: in the personal work of mourning, they seek to employ language rich in affective energies, but in doing so, also risk drawing out and furthering the potentially unethical claims that echo through and within affect.

I return to the role of ethics in my project at later stages in this introduction, primarily with regard to its role in studies of affect. A quick note here, however, on the definition of ethics as it pertains to this project: I generally understand “ethics” to mean that which is concerned with social values and moral conduct. It should not, however, be assumed that, in its interest in “values” and “morals,” the project in some way withdraws from concerns of a political or cultural nature. If, again, the reader is to take David-Antoine Williams at his word when he notes that the ethical turn in literary studies has been met with some vocal opposition because, quoting John Guillory, “The turn to ethics

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is a turn away from the political,”7 then my project does not quite square with other ethics-driven scholarship. Time and again, ethics collides with the political and with the cultural in a multitude of ways for the five poets that make up this project, from Hill, invested as he is in the importance of language to notions of the “democratic,” to Riley, for whom the ethico-political stakes of affect are of primary concern. And so, my project is primarily interested in an ethics that transpires at the level of language, of history, and, most importantly, of affect. In point of fact, my turn to affect is – as will be made clear shortly – motivated by a desire to attend more closely to the historical, to the linguistic, and thus to an ethical that is also political and cultural. It is because of these historical and linguistic features of affect that it provides, for example, an important corrective to the psychoanalytic approach to the genre of elegy, an approach that has largely dominated the field of elegy studies, and one, therefore, to which I now turn.

1.2 Elegy Studies: Certain Limitations in the Critical Literature

In turning to recent theories of affect as a means to consider the relationship between the public and the personal that informs the elegiac aesthetics of Hill, Heaney, Muldoon, McGuckian, and Riley, this project also acquires a means by which to revise previous scholarly approaches to elegy and, in turn, to offer a new methodology for critical accounts of the genre – one, certainly, that bears a direct impact on this dissertation, but which also has, I believe, broader implications on the field of elegy studies. It takes as its primary target the Freudian psychoanalytic approach that has dominated elegy studies, but which, I argue, bases its chief claims on a notion of the

7 In Williams, Defending Poetry, 15; originally, Guillory, “The Ethical Practice of Modernity,” in The Turn to Ethics, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 29-46.
relationship between the personal and the public, the body and language, that is now outmoded, a notion to which current theorists of affect, cognition, and neuroscience no longer ascribe. And while students of elegy, myself included, owe a great deal to the important observations made by way of this psychoanalytic approach, nevertheless I wish to highlight the potential drawbacks of adhering to its outmoded notion of the personal and the public – namely, a tendency to read onto elegy fixed psychological narratives of mourning that, at best, can miss (or misread) the complicated linguistic dynamics at play in a poem, and, at worst, can espouse a universalizing, structuralist conception of grief that ignores historical and cultural difference. In so doing, however, I wish also to note where some insights within the field of elegy studies have already paved the way for an approach that takes into specific account linguistic affect – namely, insights into the performative nature of elegiac writing, and the cultural work of the genre that is enabled by that performativity.

The reason for elegy studies’ turn to psychoanalysis is far from surprising and not without value. The two fields had flirted with each other before 1985, but that year bore witness to the publication of Peter Sacks’s seminal study, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, which brought elegy and the psychoanalytic into lasting dialogue. Articulate, theoretically savvy, and incredibly well-versed in both the Classics and English literature spanning four centuries, the accomplishment of the study cannot be overstated, offering an exhaustive explication of the relationship – one that now seems obvious in the wake of Sacks’s book – between Freud’s theory of the work of mourning and the elegy as the linguistic figuration of that work. But there is more at work in Sacks’s text than merely a mapping of Freud’s theories onto the genre of elegy;
specifically, by reading Freud into elegy, Sacks procures himself a means by which to contest then-pervasive – and still fairly influential – philosophies of poststructuralism, philosophies that contend that human subjecthood is itself constituted in and by language and culture. Writing in the midst of 1980s-era High Theory, Sacks takes particular aim at deconstruction, and at the political work of critics like Marxist Louis Althusser, who he claims, disapprovingly, “conducted [his] attempt to dismantle the bourgeois ideology of the self by attacking traditional notions of the authorial subject.”

For Sacks, then, elegy is a way to reassert that authorial subject; for him, the genre serves as evidence of a singular experience of loss that reaffirms a subject who encounters the world from a position prior to language. As he claims at the text’s opening, “the elegist’s language emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss.”

This claim for an originary feeling of loss is the foundational step upon which he builds his larger dynamic model of elegiac consolation, one in which linguistic figuration wrangles with a private, thoroughly nonlinguistic emotional experience of loss – an experience that affirms the singular, authorial subject – and which results in the “successful” transition from an undesirable state of melancholy to that of proper mourning. Sacks so names this wrangling of language and private emotion as the “working through” of elegy, in deference to Freud’s notion of “the work of mourning,” which first describes that transition from melancholy to mourning.

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At its most helpful, Sacks’s psychoanalytic approach recognizes some of the defining features of elegy, features that figure prominently in my own analyses, including the performative nature of the genre – that the elegist does something with language in writing his or her poem (for Sacks, he or she “works through”) – and the centrality of the emotional, of affect, in the poem. Even while an interest in the emotional is to be expected in any study of a genre for which grief plays such a pivotal role, nevertheless, there is an undeniable shrewdness on the part of Sacks to call on psychoanalytic theory in order to grapple with elegy’s linguistic manifestations of grief in all its expansive emotional geography. With the possible exception of Spinoza, Freud is among the most important theorists of affect and emotion for twentieth- and twenty-first-century engagements with the topic. Moreover, in an essay like “Mourning and Melancholia,” he planted the seeds of inquiry for the study of the specific affective components of loss and grief – from, among others, sadness and anger, to guilt and self-reproach; and these seeds of inquiry have since developed within disciplines across the sciences and the humanities, even if only to result in the drastic revision or debunking of Freud’s initial claims. In this regard, both Freud’s and Sacks’s works are unimpeachably beneficial, providing, among other things, valuable taxonomies of affect for those with a vested interest in the question of grief and the way it manifests in poetry.

At its least helpful, however, Sacks’s psychoanalytic approach reduces the elegy to a psycho-biographical narrative that ignores the linguistic and formal elements of the poetry, that forgets the performative dynamics of the genre, that does not fully account for public shapes of grief, and, perhaps most egregiously, that assumes all grief takes the same shape, enacts the same movement from melancholy to mourning. For example,
during his explication of St. Peter’s monologue from Milton’s *Lycidas* – in which the saint, among other things, decries certain unfit clergymen of the Church of England – Sacks argues that Peter functions as a voice box for the bereaved Milton, remarking that,

> Here is the controlled release of rage that we have seen to be so crucial to the work of mourning. Once again, it involves the locating of a target for a wrath that must be turned outward; the shifting of the burden of pain; the reversal from the passive suffering of hurt to the active causing of it; and above all, the assumption of the power to hurt, a power that we have studied in its relation to the totemic force associated with a metaphoric sexual immortality.¹¹

Affect clearly pervades Sacks’s analysis: within a couple sentences, he addresses Peter’s various articulations of rage, wrath, pain, passive suffering, hurt, and feelings of empowerment. But this extensive show of affect is, for the most part, reduced to the symptoms of a psychological narrative, as the poet works his way from melancholy to proper mourning. Sacks notes Milton’s curious implementation of a rhetorical device in which he speaks through the voice of a saint, but this, too, is narrowly understood to illustrate the “controlled release of rage” that characterizes a person in grief; only later, and without explicit attention to affect, does Sacks consider the ecclesiastical critique that is enabled by this rhetorical device.¹² And, by the end of the passage, Sacks has firmly couched the role of affect in Peter’s (or Milton’s) monologue within a kind of mythopoetic structuralism for which the metaphoric sexual energies rooted in a desire for immortality are revealed by the lyrical “assumption of power to hurt.” Were it Sacks’s interest to simply draw connections between elegies that exhibit such sexual energies alongside the poet’s clear desire for immortality, all the better for the study of affective forces in elegy; but by couching such observations in the “totemic,” Sacks plunges these


¹² See ibid., 111.
observations into a structuralist, essentializing narrative which understands them as aspects of universal patterns of mourning. At moments such as these – again, that is, in its worst moments – the limitations of the psychoanalytic approach – its inattention to the linguistic and formal dynamics of poetry, its near-blindness to affect’s performative function within cultural (or, in this case, ecclesiastical) critique, and its implicit rebuff of any consideration of culturally and historically distinct modes of mourning – are abundantly clear.

In each case, the limitation of the psychoanalytic approach is, I would argue, a consequence not only of Sacks’s failure to fully embrace the performative dynamics of elegy as a hermeneutic mode but also of a weakness in his notion of the “working through” enacted by elegy, a weakness which itself inhibits Sacks from fully embracing the performative dynamics of the genre. In other words, if the “working through” of elegy is founded on a notion of “originary,” nonlinguistic loss, and if, being so founded, that “working through” is always patterned after the same structuralist, universal psychological movement from melancholy to mourning, then the dynamics between private grief and public language are no dynamics at all. The narrative remains the same. Each elegy can be understood to follow a similar pattern. Language can be relegated to a secondary concern, its force hardly a force at all. Poetry becomes merely a “figuration” of mourning, a reflection of the psychological “work of mourning” that it represents. That particular figuration changes, of course, from poem to poem and over time, as tropes develop, as familiar imagery loses potency, as conventions stale – in the way it traces

13 For more on sexual power and its relation to death and immortality – as well as its illustration of totemic structuralism – see chapter one of Sacks, “Interpreting the Genre: The Elegy and the Work of Mourning,” in The English Elegy, 20-21, 26-32.
these particular developments, Sacks’s work excels masterfully. But, as he even notes – in a passage where he again considers the relationship between sexual power and immortality – “however much the contents of this process of figuration may have been altered or supplied with different meaning, our dominant mode of consolation still depends on detaching from the deceased (or assimilating them to) a special potency or virtue that we regard as eternal.”14 In other words, no matter how language is differently figured within the “working through” of elegy, its differences are insubstantial to the psychological patterns of mourning for which consolation is the end-goal. If elegy performs a “working through,” that performance is largely reduced to mimicry.

Subsequent psychoanalytic approaches to the elegy perpetuate some of these interpretive shortcomings, even as they otherwise seek to develop and expand upon Sacks’s work. Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning: Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994), for example, picks up historically where Sacks leaves off, at the turn of the twentieth century, and determines that that century’s elegy is defined by a resistance to consolation: as the social and literary “protocols of bereavement”15 are no longer sufficient to the historical circumstances of the twentieth century, he argues, poets no longer use the elegy as “a guide to ‘successful’ mourning but a spur to rethinking the vexed experience of grief in the modern world.”16 In support of his argument, Ramazani draws from, for one, the psychoanalytic work of Melanie Klein, who revises Freud’s model of “the work of mourning” in order to consider manic depressive states and to

14 Ibid., 28.


16 Ibid., ix.
make a distinction between what she observes as “normal mourning” – that is, mourning as Freud understood it – and “abnormal mourning,” a mourning which has not quite fully disengaged from melancholia. Along similar lines – and while opting to use the phrase “melancholic mourning” as opposed to “abnormal mourning” – Ramazani argues that the twentieth century bears witness to the “anti-elegy,” a subgenre of the elegy characterized by its turn against consolatory tropes, and one which, in its turn against such tropes, reveals a broader historical narrative of elegiac writing for which “melancholic mourning” is the predominant psychological condition of loss. In melancholic mourning, the poet is inconsolable, often self-critical, angry, and generally satisfied to linger in his or her pain – attributes of the melancholic, of one unwilling to “let go” of the pain of loss. On the one hand, the distinction Ramazani makes regarding mourning in the twentieth-century elegy reveals his sensitivity to the cultural and historical specificities of grief that are largely lacking in Sacks’s predominately structuralist approach. On the other hand, in its further implementation of psychoanalytic methods – however dramatically revised – Ramazani’s analysis falls prey to some of the failings that are endemic to such an approach.

His analysis falls prey because, even as he revises Sacks’s model of “working through” in order to suit twentieth-century modes of mourning, that model still depends on a psychological narrative of consolation that drives the reading of the poem. In other words, even if twentieth-century elegists are, as he argues, defined by the psychological


18 See ibid., xi, 4-8.
state of “melancholic mourning” for which “successful” consolation is unachievable, poetry still operates in a descriptive role, as a reflection of some nonlinguistic psychological process. In his analysis of Thomas Hardy’s *Poems of 1912-13*, for example, Ramazani’s examination of the structural dynamics of Hardy’s collection – a collection which might easily be considered an extended elegy to Hardy’s wife Emma, with whom he had a tumultuous relationship – culminates in an examination of the psychodynamics of the poet. “Many critics, he argues, “have schematized the temporal structure of the sequence – ultimately the familiar present-past-present/future pattern of elegy – but they have stopped short of explaining the psychological work accomplished by this structure, namely its supplanting of the guilt-ridden present with an idealized past.” Of primary concern for Ramazani, here, is the pattern of “self-deception” that is exhibited by the structural sequencing of the poems. Such patterns of self-deception are not conducive to the successful achievement of consolation, and thus, as a modern writer, Hardy differs from the poets of focus in Sacks’s study. But no matter: the figuration of poetry, the sequencing of his elegies, is still relegated to playing a reflective role, mirroring the psychological work of mourning – here, “melancholic mourning” – that precedes language. “Elegy is a mimesis of mourning,” claims Ramazani; but what the genre gains in its mimetic function, it loses in its performative function.

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20 Although Sacks does devote a later chapter of his study to Hardy. Still, his interest in that chapter is in drawing out the conventional tropes of elegy that link Hardy to other poets in his text. “These poems,” Sacks argues, “enact familiar [elegiac] tasks”; see Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 235.

21 Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 28. I would be remiss, as well, in not addressing Ramazani’s own explicit reservations with the psychoanalytic method. He states, “Although psychoanalytic accounts of
Not that all approaches to elegy allow the performative features of the genre to suffer as they do within the psychoanalytic approach at its most egregious. And it will come as no surprise that these other approaches often attend to these performative features by explicitly critiquing psychoanalytic methodologies. Melissa F. Zeiger’s appropriately titled *Beyond Consolation* (1997), for example, has made strides towards thinking of elegy in cultural and political terms, towards considering elegy in relation to gender, illness, and the body; and by way of doing so, it has also lodged a critique of the psychoanalytic approach to the genre based on the gendered perspectives it considers throughout. To that end, Zeiger not only lays bare the elegy’s prevalent use of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which the male Orpheus’s ultimate survival in opposition to the female Eurydice’s restoration to death presents a highly masculinist paradigm of consolation, but also condemns psychoanalysis’s masculine perspective that reads male suffering in terms of an almost estimable melancholia whilst relegating female suffering to the much less respectable conditions of hysteria and depression. Additionally, Zeiger’s examination of AIDS and breast cancer elegies similarly grapples with the cultural work in which these poems are forced to participate, the result, in part, of various mourning help us to abstract and recognize the psychic tendencies of the modern elegy. I subordinate them to detailed readings of the poetry because their theoretical vocabulary is inevitably reductive”; see Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 30. Since my larger critique is with the psychoanalytic approach that would, in distinguishing the psychical and the linguistic so cleanly, disempower (as it were) the affective force of language, I think it fair to point out how such an approach can even trip up Ramazani.

Melissa Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 6. In other words, Zeiger is drawing out psychoanalysis’s own performative act, the gendering of grief that privileges a masculine mode of mourning over what is understood to be a feminine one. Diana Fuss’s article “Corpse Poem” – recently reprinted in her book *Dying Modern* (2013) – also suggests an alternative to the Orpheus-based elegy, for which a Eurydice-based elegy, or corpse poem, speaks from beyond the grave in order to lay waste to the notion that “what the dead really want is to return to the living”; see Fuss, *Dying Modern*, 71, and Fuss, “Corpse Poem,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 1-30. In this way, Fuss is another scholar of elegy who, in her focus on the political and ethical dynamics of the genre, is attentive, too, to its performative aspects.
kinds of fear and disgust that the sick body engenders – fear of contamination, for example, and disgust of a primarily homophobic variety.\textsuperscript{23} In both cases, Zeiger’s move to the political is a move, as her title suggests, \textit{beyond consolation}, outside of the parameters set by the psychoanalytically determined elegiaie dynamics of “working through.” But it is also a move towards the performative, and, in particular, to the function of affect within that performative – the way AIDS and breast cancer elegies, for example, must contend with a cultural discourse for which such diseases are the catalyst for affective responses like fear and disgust. These elegies perform a cultural work – and an ethical work – by entering into a cultural dialogue, by assuming a force of language that does not merely reflect culture or mirror its debates, but can actually enter into conversation with that culture and in those debates.

Over the following pages, then, I turn to affect in order to consider, in part, the performative nature of elegy in greater depth. Whereas Zeiger’s concern – alongside the concern of other culturally and politically minded scholars of elegy – is primarily with the public work of elegy as it relates to the performative, my ultimate concern is with those elegies that take up both the personal work and the public work of elegy, those elegies for which the ethical issues that arise do so as a result of that double-sided work. Affect provides the lens through which to consider both in relation; affect is that which acknowledges the closeness of the two, that which observes the public in the private, the linguistic on the somatic. In that regard, affect is the means by which to reconceptualize the relationship between language and a private experience of grief that, in its notion of

\textsuperscript{23} Zeiger, \textit{Beyond Consolation}, 22. Zeiger’s political concerns over representations of the dying or deceased body is also shared by David Kennedy in the later chapters of his study of the genre, \textit{Elegy} (2007), in which he discusses the nature of the body in relation to the foundation of law; see, in particular chapter six, “After Mourning: Virtual Bodies, Aporias and the Work of Dread,” \textit{Elegy}, 105-26.
“working through,” psychoanalytic methods have wrongly understood. A consideration of affect draws out the much more intricate and profound relationship between language and the body – affect which itself is not part of some nonlinguistic, psychical experience but which is the very link between language and the body, the public and the private. I turn first, then, to a consideration of recent cognitive and neuroscientific theories of affect that demonstrate the body’s capacity to be in relation with language, followed by a brief examination of the ethical implications of these particular theories. Afterwards, I turn to a consideration of recent linguistic and lyric theories that consider affect from the other side, from the side of language’s capacity to impact the body, to exert various affective forces on it. By way of concluding this introduction, I briefly consider how theories of linguistic and lyric affect fit within other recent developments in the field of lyric studies, before concluding with an overview of the project as it progresses over the course of its five chapters.

1.3 Affect and the Affective Turn

The scholarly turn to affect has, in its relative youth, already produced a vast catalog of cross-disciplinary applications, differing theoretical methodologies, and opposing sides.24 This dissertation, for example, is primarily interested in the notion of linguistic affect, and the ways language, in poetry, exerts a force – emotional, ethical – on the body. But certain theories of affect consider the study of language and culture to be

retrograde topics of concern in relation to the affective forces that occur below the level of meaning and signification. These same theories make a clean distinction between the terms “emotion” and “affect,” with the former being that which can be named in language, that which culturally signifies, and the latter being that which, again, supposedly slips the nets of signification; but being that my dissertation is interested in the relationship between language and “affect” (and as I do not believe anything slips the nets of signification), I use the terms interchangeably, opting instead for a distinction – usefully and eloquently articulated by Sianne Ngai – for which “affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; less ‘sociolinguistically fixed,’ but by no means code-free or meaningless.” Additionally, some theorists of affect oppose the work of neuro- and cognitive sciences with which I engage below, again believing affect to function distinctly from that which is cognizable; and, moreover, there are some who draw from the work of these sciences – in fact, from the work of Antonio Damasio, as I do below – but who do so selectively, and thus with questionable fidelity to the science from which they draw. And, still others attack the turn to affect more generally for the way, as they perceive it, such methods flatten poststructuralist attempts – in the shape of feminism, and postcolonialism

25 See the final chapter of this dissertation for a more thorough engagement, and ultimately critique, of the views of this particular cluster of affect theorists; but see, here, the principle voice in this cluster, Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

26 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 27. See also chapters four and five of my project for further elaborations on why I choose to use the terms interchangeably.

27 See Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 440-41, not because Leys believes affect to be “outside” cognition, but because she offers a brief summary of those affect theorists who do.

28 See Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, “Biology’s Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect,” Body and Society 16, no. 1 (2010):29-56, again, not because own their engagement with these scientific approaches are questionable, but for the critique they lodge on those affect theorists whose engagements are questionable in their selectivity.
to counter potential hegemonic powers by way of touting affect as a kind of universal panacea to the woes of cultural theory.²⁹

My project is decidedly poststructuralist in approach, and in its specific interest in linguistic affect, it places historical concerns – if not of the “hegemonic,” then surely of the ethical and the political – at the center of its analysis. It, too, holds certain reservations, therefore, about some of the claims of the neurosciences and cognitive sciences from which it draws below, claims which can at times tend towards the universalizing, or towards the reductive in their appeals to evolutionary biological determinism, to human and animal behaviorism, and to various research into the ways synapses fire off in the brain. But these biologically-based observations also offer important insights into the nature of the embodied mind, the way the body is, in a sense, “primed” to be in relationship with language. So, while even though my own poststructuralist, constructivist perspective places more value on the influences of language and culture on the body than, say, those of Antonio Damasio’s evolutionary neurobiological perspective for which the parameters of subjecthood are necessarily fixed at birth, nevertheless, his insights into affect and the collapse of a mind-body dualism that is predicated on those insights are no less pertinent to the work I undertake here. Such insights, in fact, provide one side of a theoretical model of linguistic affect from which to both consider the work of the five elegists in this project specifically, and to reconsider the relationship of the linguistic and the somatic, the public and the personal, within the genre of elegy more generally. And thus, in its intention to break down divisions between language and the body, the social and the private, my project shares at least one

commonality with broader affect studies, in spite of our more subtle differences – namely, the belief that it is through the lens of affect that we must consider the public and the personal in relation. It is in affect that the two coincide.

The work of the aforementioned Antonio Damasio has been of particular interest to affect theorists for the way he develops, through neuroscientific methods, the philosophies of seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, who has himself been an important figure to more contemporary philosophers of affect, primarily Gilles Deleuze.\textsuperscript{30} Spinoza, according to Damasio, anticipated developments in the field of affective neurobiology, not least of all by suggesting that affect – a term under which he grouped human “drives, motivations, emotions, and feelings”\textsuperscript{31} – makes clear the human body’s innate capacity to make discernments at the emotional level. This belief informs Spinoza’s distinction – the first time such a distinction had been made – between “feelings” and “emotions,” and his particular understanding of the relationship between the two provides a window into just how revolutionary his thinking was. As Damasio describes it, the philosopher contended that “Living organisms are designed with an ability to react emotionally to different objects and events. The reaction is followed by some pattern of feeling and a variation of pleasure or pain is a necessary component of

\textsuperscript{30} See, for one, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 253-60, et. al. But see also Papoulias and Callard, “Biology’s Gift,” 39-41 for the ways Damasio has been used, and misused, by affect theorists like Brian Massumi. In my pointed attempt to respect Damasio’s hardened biological determinism, even as I wish to draw out the ways his work opens a door for more constructivist readings of language’s affective force on the body, I hope my engagement with his work is responsible in the very ways others have not been.

feeling.” Damasio suggests that one of Spinoza’s greatest contributions to the study of affect was to argue that emotion preceded feeling, even as conventional perspectives would understand the two to function in reverse. The conventional perspective, in other words, would argue that the body and its sensations inform the mind of its state of being, that feelings inform emotional cognition—the way, for example, a child who touches a hot surface feels pain and in that feeling responds emotionally, whether it be in sadness, fear, anger, embarrassment or otherwise. Spinoza argues—and Damasio’s neurobiological observations would so support—that the inverse is true, that the child was predisposed emotionally to respond to that hot surface, to “feel” it, in a particular way.

This particular claim about the body’s emotional predisposition—touted by Spinoza, championed by Damasio—is significant to my project for the way it suggests that the body possesses an innate emotional literacy. For Damasio, however, these claims are predicated on wider principles of evolutionary biology, principles which have only limited value to this dissertation. When Damasio observes, for example, that emotions “are highly specific and evolutionarily preserved repertoires of behaviors whose execution the brain faithfully calls into duty, in certain circumstances,” it is helpful to consider that, in the notion of “repertoire,” the body is equipped with a vocabulary of affect through which emotional comprehension is made possible. It is less helpful to

32 Ibid., 11.
33 Ibid., 205.
consider, however, that, within the parameters of Damasio’s evolutionary biological
determinism, he believes that repertoire to be fixed, called “faithfully […] into duty” by
the brain. Such a reductive perspective not only recalls the fixed psychoanalytic
narratives of the “working through” of elegiac mourning, but also ignores the
development of emotional vocabularies that occurs within and without the body, in the
cultural and linguistic networks through which affect travels. I will return to this latter
notion of extra-bodily networks of affect towards the end of this section; for now, though,
I only wish to note that, however valuable a notion of an emotionally literate body is
towards conceptualizing an affect that collapses distinctions between body and mind,
between the personal and the linguistic, such a notion is less useful if it cannot
accommodate the possible development of that affect, a development that occurs over
time, and as a consequence of external forces.

And, in fairness to Damasio’s work, it does accommodate a certain kind of
developmental capacity for bodily emotion, even as his primarily deterministic stance
depends on the notion of, what he elsewhere calls, the body’s “innately set regulatory
actions.” As he lays out a “working hypothesis” of emotions, he allows for the influence
of what he names, “emotionally competent stimuli,” or “ECSs,” that trigger emotional
response. With regard to these ECSs, Damasio entertains the possibility of emotional
flexibility within his set repertoire, of the mind-body’s capacity for appraisal, such that
the “real value of emotions” is “their largely intelligent connection between the
emotionally competent stimulus and the set of reactions that can alter our body function
and our thinking so profoundly,” wherein the emotions are brought “in line with the

34 Antonio Damasio, The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of
requirements of a given culture.”

This allowance for emotional intelligence, for its “appraisal” function, accommodates a more dynamic model of the emotions, of the body in more supple relation with its “given culture.” “The brain is prepared by evolution to respond to certain ECSs with specific repertoires of action,” Damasio argues. “However, the list of ECSs is not confined to those prescribed by evolution. It includes many others learned in a lifetime of experience.”

In bestowing this educative ability to the mind-body’s emotional literacy, Damasio grants the pull and influence of language and culture in an otherwise rigid model of bodily emotionality. Not only is the body primed with an emotional literacy, but that literacy is responsive. And so, while I go on in this chapter to demonstrate an affective relationship between language and the body for which the “repertoire” of emotion is more historically based than it is biologically based, nevertheless, Damasio sets some of the basic terms by which to understand the intimate relationship between the body and language, a relationship made possible through affect, through a body that is primed in accordance to its emotional, responsive literacy.

If the body is literate in this way, however, it performs its acts of “reading” in ways of which the self is not always conscious. Damasio explicitly positions his affective neurobiological work in opposition to Cartesian models of the mind and body – see, for one, the title of his book, Descartes’ Error (1995) – and in the way he allows for a bodily cognition that occurs without mental recognition, without conscious awareness of these affective processes, he rebuffs the notion of a selfhood founded upon the cogito. To that end, and describing the nature of emotional response, Damasio remarks, “Even when the

35 Damasio, Looking for Spinoza, 54.

36 Ibid., 53.
emotional reaction occurs without conscious knowledge of the emotionally competent stimulus the emotion signifies nonetheless the result of the organism’s appraisal of the situation. Never mind that the appraisal is not made clearly known to the self." In other words, these are affective appraisals that do not require the conscious observation of their procedures to be made meaningful, to stake a claim on the body. As an example of this non-conscious process of affective appraisal, Damasio imagines the intuitive discomfort an adult might feel upon entering a house that, as a child, had provided the location for an experience of intense fear. The adult might not have a clear sense of the source of that fear, but its setting, perhaps its lighting or even the objects in the room, trigger an affective response in him or her. The full implications of affect’s ability to function on a non-conscious, if no less meaningful, plane will be made explicit later in this chapter as I turn to the work of lyric theorist Multu Konuk Blasing, and then again later in the project as I consider the highly allusive and intertextual poetics of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian. For now, however, it is enough to note that affect can operate below conscious recognition, and as such, suggests the more furtive dynamics of affect at play in the mind-body’s appraisals of language and culture.

Much of the work of cognitive science and linguistics furthers this understanding of an embodied mind that carries out meaningful operations outside of the realm of human consciousness. And like Damasio through the lens of affective neurobiology, cognitive scientists connect such operations to overwhelmingly deterministic notions of the body that often appeal to reductive claims of human nature and universality. So I turn

37 Ibid., 55.
38 Ibid.
to the work of these theorists of cognition with reservations similar to those with which I considered Damasio’s, but also with an earnest desire to draw from their insights regarding embodied cognition, to understand the body’s relationship with language from the perspective of the body. Such is my approach to a claim like that made by cognitive theorists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal text, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), in which they argue that “the mind is not merely embodied, but embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in. The result is that much of a person’s conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures.” While I find convincing the idea articulated in this statement that our conceptual systems largely draw upon our embodied experience (of which more shortly), I cannot help but also note the qualification they must make that such a system “is either universal or widespread,” and gladly infer from that “or widespread” that some room exists for amendment or complication of their inductive claims – that, perhaps, a stronger consideration of the force of language and culture in relation to embodied cognition may not be an entirely futile task, nor one fully at odds with their conclusions. This particular task I reserve for the final section of this introduction, in order to first give further consideration to the notion of embodied cognition below. But, to clearly articulate my position here: if my project espouses a “universal human nature,” it does so only in as much as to suggest that the embodied mind has an innate capacity to register and experience affect as it circulates through language and culture, and within the body. It is this capacity of the body that

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neuro- and cognitive scientific approaches can help explicate in order to better understand how language and culture might stake their own claims on the body.

To that end, Lakoff and Johnson’s work is particularly valuable for the way it expounds on the nonconscious operations of the embodied mind and considers what bearing those operations have on the relationship between the body and language. For them, and for myself, one important intervention of the cognitive sciences in modern thought has been its demonstration of how, “to understand even the simplest utterance, we must perform […] incredibly complex forms of thought automatically and without noticeable effort below the level of consciousness.”

Understanding that “simplest utterance,” for example, requires more than just consciously knowing what the series of words that make up that utterance mean, but also, as they list, “comprehending a stream of sound as being language,” “framing what is said in terms relevant to the discussion,” “constructing mental images where relevant,” “filling in gaps in the discourse,” “noting and interpreting your interlocutor’s body language,” and “planning what to say in response,” among many other things. These processes largely happen without one being aware that they are happening, certainly not while they are happening, and rarely if ever after they have happened. But each contributes to the hermeneutic rendering of the utterance: being told “I love you” while your interlocutor looks you in the eye and smiles reads very differently from being told “I love you” in a mumble while your interlocutor gazes past you into the distance.

40 Ibid., 11.

41 Along with these seven cognitive tasks, Lakoff and Johnson note an additional five, and acknowledge moreover that the list is incomplete. See ibid., 10-11.
Among Lakoff and Johnson’s most well-known contributions to those theories of cognition that seek to account for embodied, nonconscious processes (and their relation to language) is the notion of “conceptual metaphor” as argued originally in their book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Although their examination of conceptual metaphor is extensive, for my intentions it is notable not only for its specific contention that the body itself informs the character of these conceptual metaphors, but also for its demonstration of how, in turn, these metaphors are reproduced in language. One subset of the conceptual metaphor – what Lakoff and Johnson term the “orientational metaphor” – configures itself, for example, around somatic experience, according to the body’s orientation in relation to the world. Metaphors around the concept of health and sickness are particularly instructive; as Lakoff and Johnson note, according to this conceptual construct, “Health and life are up,” and “Sickness and death are down.”42 And while such concepts are reproduced variably within language in phrases such as “He’s at the peak of health” and “He’s in top shape,” or, conversely, “He fell ill,” “He’s sinking fast,” and “His health is declining,” nevertheless they all tap into a bodily experience in which sickness is associated with lying down and vice versa.43 Through conceptual metaphors such as these, the body thus cognitively negotiates with language in ways that are not immediately apparent on a conscious level, but which derive from – and, in turn, appeal to – felt, bodily experience. Moreover, being that such metaphors bear out in language, they are also inevitably value-laden. Disability studies, for example, might surely have some concerns surrounding the notion of sickness as “downness” or “decline,” being that

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43 Ibid.
such positions in society are rarely considered favorable. Or, to take another example, the conceptual metaphor that “Time is money” – born out in language through phrases like, “You’re wasting my time” and “It is worth your time” – not only configures time in economic terms and thus ascribes values to it, but also entrenches those values within the body, in the felt experience of urgency that it engenders. (Perhaps we have hit on an explanation for the profound popularity of the notion, “Seize the day,” from its manifestation in carpe diem poetry to the more widespread appreciation it has garnered, regrettably or not, through a film like Dead Poets Society.) And while specific conceptual metaphors do not figure prominently in my readings of elegy throughout this project – I have turned to them here chiefly to demonstrate, once again, the embodied mind at work, the way the body is already primed for affect carried out, below the level of consciousness, through and by language – nevertheless, one particular conceptual metaphor provides the foundation for much of the ethical concern around elegy, voiced collectively, if separately, by each of this project’s five poets; this conceptual metaphor I designate as “elegy is exchange.” Within this economic conception of elegy, the poem is said to “trade off death,” to “gain emotional, if not commercial, purchase from death,” or in Heaney’s phrase, to “strike it rich.” And in the way these poets are, to varying degrees, conflicted about a conception of elegy as exchange, they expose the value-laden nature of the metaphor. Within the narrative of consolation, the emotional purchase elegy gains out of death is “good,” a sign of the passage from melancholia to mourning; but outside this narrative, ethical dilemmas develop around, for example, the aestheticization of violence, the (honest) depiction of atrocity, and the narcissism behind any attempt to seek consolation. In their attempts to expose and/or to write against this conceptual metaphor,
the elegists of this project thereby confront the affective pull of that metaphor, a pull that, within a narrative of consolation, would promise them only the “good.”

In the way Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of conceptual metaphors thus gestures – whether intentionally or not – to the intimate relationship between the embodied mind and value-laden language, it also suggests why the study of affect is often invested in questions of an ethical and political nature. Indeed, if what the work of Damasio and Lakoff and Johnson both illustrate is that the body is primed to register affect at a not-always conscious level, then their work also implicates the ways in which the body is prone to affect – that is, it is susceptible to the influences of an affect that traffics between bodies, through the language and culture that carries it. Neither Damasio nor Lakoff and Johnson are themselves particularly invested in the question of an affect that travels externally from the body, but the question is a significant one within a certain contingent of affect studies, and it is one that starts to round out my own analysis that began with Damasio’s neurobiological observations and Lakoff and Johnson’s cognitive insights. It does so by telling the other side of the story, so to speak, by observing the ways in which affects are not simply experiences felt in the body, interiorly, but that which – to quote Sara Ahmed, whose book, The Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004), is foundational to this particular argumentative line – “circulate between bodies, [that] ‘stick’ as well as move.” For Ahmed, emotions are not something “we ‘have,’” but something that moves between us; we feel them when they “stick,” but otherwise, they circulate independently from the bodies which have conventionally been understood to

possess them. In bestowing emotions and affect with this autonomy, Ahmed thus begins to suggest the ways affect might exert its own force on primed – or prone – bodies, and thus also the ways it might potentially be employed along politically and ethically dubious lines.

Two examples in particular help illustrate how affect circulates outside of the body, and along political and ethical lines; I briefly engage them here, before turning, finally, to the relationship of language and lyric to affect, specifically. For John Protevi, for example, fear and empathy provide the catalyst for action, inaction, and ultimately conflict in the wake of the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina to the city of New Orleans in 2005. Following Katrina’s destruction, Protevi notes that rumors began to circulate of looting, murder, and rape within the city of New Orleans – rumors, he notes, that were particularly racialized. They were also largely unfounded rumors, but they nevertheless, at the time, incited fear and panic within the government, which consequently delayed relief efforts until that time when those efforts were deemed to be sufficiently militarized, equipped to handle the “turbulent” conditions in New Orleans. In the meantime, the delay in relief efforts from “above” resulted in a wave of rescue efforts that began on the ground, amongst the people of New Orleans, and motivated, Protevi believes (not unreasonably), by empathy. The narrative demonstrates, for Protevi, and for my purposes, the influence of affect towards group formation – on the one hand, the racialized and politicized fear that spread, like a contagion, within the government and led to the delay of action on the part of one group; and on the other hand, the

45 See Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 10-11.

46 John Protevi, Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 176-7.
empathy that spread between a community facing similar conditions. The conclusion of the narrative – that, as Protevi describes it, “Perverely enough, the militarized response [once it had arrived] first had to stop the community response that led the people of New Orleans to rescue themselves and their neighbors”\textsuperscript{47} – only solidifies one's sense of the crystallization of groups that occurred by way of affect, of an affect that spread between bodies, and along racialized and politicized lines.

In an example more directly pertinent to this dissertation, Judith Butler’s recent theoretical work on the notion of “grievability” examines the way grief itself is culturally determined, and determining.\textsuperscript{48} At the center of her analysis is the question of who is deemed worthy of grief, and why; what are the cultural frames that determine where grief is allowed to circulate? She notes the strange double-standard in the way death is represented in America, a double-standard which betrays a cultural “hierarchy of grief.” As she notes,

We have seen [this hierarchy] already, in the genre of the obituary, where lives were quickly tidied up and summarized, humanized, usually married, or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, monogamous. But this is just a sign of another differential relation to life, since we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favorite hobbies, slogans by which they live?\textsuperscript{49}

The glibness of her commentary is potent – how trite the recounting of hobbies and slogans in obituaries seem against the context of violent cultural conflict. But her point is

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 163.


\textsuperscript{49} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, 32.
clear: grief – affect – is not our own. It is determined for us, given parameters, directed
towards some, directed away from others. “What is real?” Butler asks. “Whose lives are
real? How might reality by remade?” These are the ethical questions faced by elegy, by
an elegy that knows it, too, traffics in affect. It is the ethical question Hill poses to
himself as he writes in the wake of the atrocities of the Holocaust, just as it is the ethical
question Heaney poses to himself as he writes in the midst of Northern Irish sectarian
violence. It is an elegy that is responsive to its own performativity, that is aware that it
acts within cultural and linguistic networks, through and in affect. And thus it is an elegy
that requires a theoretical methodology that is similarly responsive to the performativity
and affect of its language. Therefore I turn to the work of Denise Riley and Multu Konuk
Blasing to unpack language’s specific affective relationship with the body, and to tease
out a means by which to consider affect and ethics through the lens of language, lyric,
and elegy.

Before I do, however, I must briefly consider one more topic out of cognitive
linguistics in order to clear a path from which to consider it within the framework of
poetics: that topic is the materiality of language, namely – at this juncture – in the form of
sound. In Steven Pinker’s The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human
Nature (2007), Pinker, among his many other language-oriented interests, details some of
the cognitive insights into the notion of “phonesthesia,” a particular occurrence in
language “in which families of words share a teeny snatch of sound and a teeny shred of

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50 Ibid., 33.
meaning.” What he describes here as “a teeny shred of meaning” is synonymous, I believe, with what I have described already in this project as the nonconscious meaning registered by the body, the sense that our body comprehends meaning even when we are not aware of it. Under the category of this phonesthetic language is, for example, onomatopoeic language – language that is by all accounts nonsensical but which, in its attempt to sonically echo the thing it represents, makes a “shred” of sense. But the relationship between these sounds of language – these materials of language – and the body is more extensive than even onomatopoeia suggests. In their very materiality, in their thingy-ness, they enact a force on the body that is palpable. Pinker further demonstrates palpable materiality at work in phonesthesia through the example of the combination letter-pair “sn-,” which he rightly, if surprisingly, identifies as often coming at the beginning of words that are somehow related to the nose: so, for instance, “sneeze, sniff, snivel, snore, snort, snot, sniff and Snuffleupagus.” To speak these words aloud is to feel them lodged in the nasal cavity, to make their materiality felt. And Pinker further illustrates that this “sn-“ letter-pair is also often used in words that suggest “looking down your nose at someone (snarky, sneer, snicker, snide, snippy, snob, snook, snooty, snotty, and snub).” Once again, what begins merely as an affective, bodily experience of language – one made possible through its very materiality – takes on value-laden cultural resonances, the pejorative connotations of “snob” and “snooty” being hardly concealable. But Pinker’s cognitive linguistic observations offer this project one further pearl of

51 Steven Pinker, The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature (New York: Penguin, 2007), 301. But see also chapter two of this dissertation for further elaboration of these particular ideas in relation to Heaney’s poetry.

52 Ibid.
wisdom: it suggests the potential usefulness in focusing on the materiality of language in order to observe the collapse of the private and the public, to draw out the particular characteristics of the ethical as they play out in the elegies of these five poets, to consider affect in language and in lyric.

1.4 Language, Lyric, and Affect

In the previous section, I turned to recent affect theory – drawing from neuroscience, cognitive science, and, latterly, cultural theory – to suggest the ways that the body is innately primed for affect, a kind of fertile soil in which the affective forces of culture and language might seed, and grow. I suggested the ways more culturally inclined theorists of affect umoored affect from the body in order to suggest its more autonomous force along cultural, political, and ethical lines. And finally, in my considerations of conceptual metaphor and linguistic materiality, I hinted at the ways language itself could be a vessel for and a generator of affect. I take the perspective now, through the works of Denise Riley and Mutlu Konuk Blasing, of poststructuralist linguistic theory in order to further suggest how language exerts an affective force on the body, as well as how it may be observed in lyric, with special attention to what it means to the study of elegy in this project.

Denise Riley presents of theory of language that positions affect at its center. Like the cultural theorists of affect above, she too bestows to affect an autonomy in language that is untethered from the body. “Language as a speaking thing,” she argues, “neither my master nor my instrument, is amiably indifferent to me.” 53 Language as affect functions independently, such that it never fully has a hold over the subject, but nor does that

subject have any hold over it. If language is a “speaking thing,” it is because it is “robust, and fat with history.”\(^{54}\) In other words, language’s history gives it its own voice, thick with the meaning it has gathered – like a snowball gathering snow as it descends down a hill – through time, over that history. It hums with meaning. That history gives language its autonomy.

And yet, while language is “amiably indifferent” to the subject, in its history and autonomy it becomes “thing-like” and enjoys a materiality through which it exerts an affective force that strikes at the very level of the body, at the very level of the personal. As Riley argues, “Language is impersonal: its working through and across us is indifferent to us, yet in the same blow it constitutes the fiber of the personal.”\(^{55}\)

Language’s history provides, through its affective force, the very foundation of the personal. The first chapter of her book, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (2005), offers an illustrative example of how language constitutes the personal in its examination of malediction.\(^{56}\) The narrative she spins in the chapter conveys both the nature of language’s historical autonomy and its ability to impress on the subject. Her account is that of the accuser and the accused, the speaker of a malediction and the person towards whom that malediction is directed. For the accuser, Riley emphasizes the unoriginal nature of accusatory speech. Without exculpating the accuser, she highlights the inherited nature of verbal injury: “[r]age speaks monotonously,” she argues.\(^{57}\) Malediction is that

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 1.

\(^{56}\) I return to Riley’s discussion of malediction in greater detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 17.
which we all have heard before. There is nothing particularly inventive in name-calling, in accusation, and in spiteful imperatives. One could, if space allowed, cite precedent for most maledictions; but to do so would be both impossible and misrepresentative, since such phrases have more occasions of utterance than one can possibly catalog even as one’s experience of them is entirely unique. Neither accuser nor accused thus has any control over the malediction in the moment of its utterance, both because the word or phrase is thick with its own history and because each person has his or her own biographical relationship with that history. The accuser’s relationship to his or her malediction may be very different than that of the accused’s relationship to it, depending on the conditions of previous utterances of the phrase unique to both. In this way, the malediction cannot own or be owned by either accuser or accused. It is neither master, nor instrument.

But the malediction is no less affective for this reason; quite the contrary, it can be all the more affective. The accusation can still inflict pain. And in the way Riley argues for language’s affective force – a force that “constitutes the fiber of the personal” – she offers a model of language that directly rebuts the psychoanalytic. To elucidate: Riley reflects on the manner in which malediction variably “lodges” itself in the body, and asks,

Should we, though, necessarily call such a variation in anger’s reception its ‘psychic’ dimension, in a tone which implies a clear separation from the domain of words? There has, undoubtedly, to be something very strong at work to explain why we can’t readily shake off some outworn verbal injury. The nature of this strong thing, though, might better be envisaged as a seepage or bleeding between the usual categorizations; it need not be allocated wholesale to an unconscious considered as lying beyond the verbal, or else to a sphere of language considered as narrowly functional. For the deepest intimacy joins the supposedly linguistic to
the supposedly psychic; these realms, distinct by discursive convention, are scarcely separable.\(^{58}\)

Language can “lodge” itself, it can “shape” us, and in so being, it is constitutive, all the way down to the embodied mind. Riley’s notion of linguistic affect counters a psychoanalytic model that places the psyche in opposition to language, that argues that the “working through” of elegy is characterized by a psyche that seeks the linguistic figuration of its movement from melancholy to mourning. Instead, it suggests that to write elegy is to write a grief that is always already linguistic, that is already drawing from language’s historical and affective charges, charges that have been constitutive of the personal. This is the nature of linguistic affect, a material force of language on the body, rich with affective history.

Riley’s theory of language thus also more strongly suggests the nature of the performative in elegy. No longer fettered to the role of figuration, of representing a nonlinguistic experience of the psyche, language does not simply mean; rather, it does. Elegiac writing is to perform a personal grief through a language that is already rich with affective meaning. Language is always the speaking being that, in its history, in its affect, speaks beyond the elegist. Thus to write elegy is to draw from language’s rich, affective history, but to be aware that one may draw more than intended. This is the peculiar ethical dilemma that arises in elegy, that arises in the awareness that one must use an affectively charged language that is both personal and public, bodily and linguistic. Elegy is thus not, as Ramazani argued, simply “a mimesis of mourning.”\(^{59}\)

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 11.

On the contrary, one might say of elegy what Multu Konuk Blasing has already said about lyric poetry more broadly: “Lyric poetry is not mimesis.” Lyric poetry is not mimesis for Blasing because such an understanding of poetry cannot fully accommodate the affective dynamics at work in that poetry. She decries the impulse of what she calls “the philosophical ban on linguistic emotion,” condemning it for “limiting our conception of poetic emotion to imitations, representations, or presentations of real-life emotions. Remarkably,” she continues, “there is no established critical vocabulary, theory, or methodology to engage the nature of specifically poetic emotion that draws on the rhetorical power of the affectively charged materials of language.” Blasing’s book, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words* (2007), is her attempt to establish that vocabulary, that methodology. These affectively charged materials of language, she claims, operate on a nonrational level, one which a critical discourse that reads lyric as mimesis cannot accommodate, its head buried too deeply in the sands of the discursive and rational logic according to which a “philosophical” language operates.

With its echo of the materiality of language already discussed in relation to both Pinker and Riley, the value of Blasing’s book is likely very clear, focusing on those affectively charged materials of language and the way they can reveal their historicity. By the materials of language, she means in large part “the sonic and rhythmic qualities of a language,” those aspects of language that have, quoting Pinker, “a shred of meaning.” To describe what she means by these affective materials of language, she turns to Paul de

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61 Ibid.

Man, who she quotes at length in order to consider linguistic affective materiality by way of the failures of translation: “‘I was very happy with the word Brot [German for ‘bread’], which I hear as a native because my native language is Flemish and you say *brood*, just like in German, but if I have to think that *Brot [brood]* and *pain* [the French word for ‘bread’] are the same thing, I get very upset.’” For de Man, the loss of sound is not the loss of some representational meaning but a loss of the “set of connotations,” as he calls it, that spring from *brood/Brot*’s material qualities. Lyric, for Blasing, exploits this materiality of language even further. A poem might, she argues, grapple with emotional themes like “love, loss, and death,” and, if one considers poetry solely in terms of the mimetic, then it could be argued that this poem could accurately be translated. And “yet,” Blasing counters, “[poems] are experienced differently in translation because the sound shape, the measures, and the rhythm of a poem, the way the material properties of a language are patterned [in poetry…] will not translate.” The lyric poem thus conveys – indeed, for Blasing it distillates – meaning not simply through figurative language but through the materials of language that evoke their own affective realities.

The untranslatability of the affective materiality of language discloses the historical nature of linguistic materiality as Blasing perceives it, a materiality that is, within my own configuration, meaningful below the level of consciousness, at the level of the embodied mind. In a passage that echoes Riley’s notion of language’s autonomy, Blasing remarks that “poetic experience is at once an experience of the inhumanity of the linguistic code, its obliviousness to meaning, and of the personal feelings that are

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63 Quoted in ibid., 7.
64 Ibid., 11.
nevertheless attached to its material elements.” As such, language and its affective materials are completely public, but uniquely constitutive of the private. “We did not come with language; we all had to learn it. To dismiss the materiality of language is to dismiss the emotionally charged history that made us who we are – subjects in language, which is the subject of lyric.” Indeed, we are born and raised into a linguistic history and culture for which its affective materials shape our unique private lives, and in which affect is translatable within the community of speakers. For the purposes of this project, Blasing’s articulation of language’s affective materiality in the face of representational and mimetic language thus further reinforces the importance of performativity of elegy, the fact that even in its very materiality, language makes claims of a historical and affective nature.

What, then, does an approach to elegy that emphasizes affect and performativity look like? In the chapters that follow, several themes and methods recur. First and foremost is an emphasis on these linguistic materials of language, the way language’s sounds, its rhymes, its rhythms, its syntax and grammar, its punctuation, and its diction all play a performative, affectively charged function in the poem. Additionally, and in deference to the historical nature of affective language, intertextuality and allusion are primary foci, whether with regard to elegiac convention (chapters 1 and 5), to the work of other writers (chapters 2, 4, and 5), or to the work of oneself (chapter 3). And of course it examines the ethical dilemmas these poets face that arise out of the intersection between

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65 Ibid., 7.
66 Ibid., 6.
the personal and the public, the intersection of which all these poets recognize in their own lyric elegy.

In its consideration of these specifically rhetorical dimensions of the elegy, this project thus also aligns with recent critical work coming out of poetics, specifically within the critical school that goes by the name New Lyric Studies. This school similarly decries the dominant approach to poetry that reductively reads it as narrative, or merely as representation. As noted by Jonathan Culler – whose work within New Lyric Studies most closely aligns with my own here – “Lyric is the foregrounding of language, in its material dimensions, and thus both embodies and attracts interest in language and languages – in the forms, shapes, and rhythms of discourse.”67 My project is an attempt to foreground these material dimensions of language, and to do it in a way that considers affect, considers performativity, and considers the historical features of lyric that make it unique, that bestow the lyric elegy with the kind of affective force that require elegists to contend with its ethics.

And finally, in its interest in lyric and its relationship to the historical, my project marks itself as one decidedly engaged in British and Irish poetic traditions. The British and Irish tradition of poetry has always had its hand in the pocket of its history; it has always considered its language to be public. As Stephen Burt remarked in a 2009 lecture at the University of Glasgow, “the British poet’s ‘I’ implies an ‘us,’ a present-day first-person plural already connected to a literary past.”68 To be sure, as opposed to American


poetic traditions, which tended to turn against the lyric – to respond to concerns of linguistic determinism by announcing the failure of lyric and espousing in its place the “anti-lyric” – British and Irish traditions have instead sought out ways to reconsider lyric, to find new ways to engage with public and historical voices that make their presence known through form and genre, allusion and intertextuality. Without the American imperative to “make it new,” British and Irish traditions of poetry seek continuity, and expect an audience of readers who are sensitive to that history. The ethical claims surrounding the elegies of this project’s five poets are thus all the more imperative, being that they fall on, one hopes, receptive ears.

From here, then, each chapter unpacks the relationship between affect and ethics as it develops in post-World War II Britain and Ireland. I turn first to Geoffrey Hill’s work, in particular the elegies of his two earliest volumes, For the Unfallen (1959) and King Log (1968). In these elegies – which include his much-discussed Holocaust poems “September Song” and “Two Formal Elegies” – Hill articulates his misgivings about the affective implications of aestheticizing death in the face of atrocity. He attacks both the indulgence of seeking personal consolation by writing elegy, and the potential to make the Holocaust victims’ “long death | Documented and safe” in the public eye. I position these concerns within the framework of Hill’s larger dedication to history – our “obligation to the dead” – and to the public role of poetry: his belief in the democratizing function of “difficult” poetry, the way difficulty calls attention to language’s history and the affective force it exerts through that history. The difficulty of Hill’s own poetry thus reflects his own desire to “honestly” depict history and death, but in the hostile,

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antagonistic stance against the conventions of elegy that are a product of that desire, Hill’s elegies also inflict a deep wound in the history of the genre – a wound from which the other elegists in the project seek to recover.

In chapter two, I focus on the affective materiality of Heaney’s poetry – his highly consonantal diction, for example – and his pursuit of “linguistic homes” of mourning across his *oeuvre* through which to articulate his grief. I examine three sets of elegies: those written for other poets, those written for the victims of Northern Irish sectarian violence, and those written for his parents. In all cases, Heaney’s own linguistic materiality draws from the “materialities” of his subject matter: the diction and meter of the poems written by the poets he elegizes, the earthly bog bodies through which he obliquely considers Northern Irish death, and the sounds and silences of his childhood home. In part, this chapter considers the ethical ramifications of Heaney’s home-seeking, material poetics, from his own concerns that he aestheticizes death through such poetics, to the concerns voiced by those scholars – like David Lloyd – who notoriously critiqued Heaney for, as they argued, the problematic identity politics perpetuated by his poetics, in his bog poems. I respond to these critics by framing his material poetics within the context of his other elegies in order to suggest not only the narrowness and flaws of these critics, but also the ways his material, home-seeking poetics are symptomatic of a poet for whom loss is a central trope. In arguing thus, the chapter offers an image of Heaney as a poet who, in “pin[ing] for […] | customary rhythms,” in unearthing his grief by mining other communities of mourning for their sounds and rhythms, is thoroughly poststructuralist, whose material poetics betray the loss at the center of a primarily elegiac poetic project.
Muldoon’s elegies are somber and ludic, opaque and direct, ironic and sincere; the means by which he can suspend these near-paradoxical complexities of language, tone, and emotion are the focus of this chapter. In chapter three of this project, and with a focus on those elegies in particular in which he uses the same ninety rhyme sounds, I argue that Muldoon plots the linguistic coordinates of his grief, both charting a map of that grief and offering the very keys to reading that map. Through rhymes that, in their repeated use, continually recall their own histories within Muldoon’s oeuvre and thus accumulate richer and more varied meaning, the poet creates a complex matrix of affect. In doing so, his elegies hold the promise of a shared emotional intimacy between poet and reader; he all but creates his own public of readers. And yet, Muldoon thematizes and reflects on these poetic techniques and their effects, not only by suggesting the untenable nature of the promise of emotional intimacy but also by considering the problematic aestheticization of grief that’s a consequence of those techniques – namely by equating their effects to the spreading of cancer through the body, cancer that killed his mother, his sister, his former partner, and his friend and collaborator, Warren Zevon.

The fourth chapter takes up McGuckian’s idiosyncratic poetic technique, in which she copies lines and phrases from other texts into a notebook, stores that notebook away, and returns to it years later in order to write poems that incorporate those lines and phrases she originally copied from other texts. While many consider her practice to be plagiaristic (and thus ethically suspect), I suggest that she pinpoints what is already true about language – that it is always some form of quotation or citation. She challenges the notion that any personal expression can be distinct from a public one, even in her own articulation of loss. And yet, her poetry is notoriously difficult to parse, a consequence of
her desire to shape poetry out of clusters of words and phrases that have emotional resonance for her, even at the sacrifice of writing lyric that might be “rationally” or conventionally understood. In her process of lifting words and phrases from external sources and repurposing them in light of her own circumstances of grief – in other words, in the process of harnessing the affective charge of a language not originally her own but used for her own elegiac ends – conventional meaning defers to the affective force of a grief articulated.

My project concludes with, primarily, an examination of Denise Riley’s recent elegy for her son, “A Part Song” (2012). Using cliché and popular song lyrics, as well as allusions to “classic” literature, Riley’s elegy presents a collection of public forms of mourning – both literary and cultural – which she inhabits at various moments throughout the poem. In this way, “A Part Song” chimes with her concept of “lyric selves”: though we are born into a (public) language already rife with affective meaning – our grief is not original to us – we can articulate through lyric a grief we might call our own. By way of these conclusions, I consider a current debate in affect studies around affect’s ability to “mean,” a debate to which Riley’s ethico-politically informed theories of linguistic affect speak directly, and which clear a path to consider the ethical in her own elegy. Riley, then, begins this dissertation and concludes it. But whereas, in this project’s introduction, her theoretical work helps to suggest the dynamics of affect and ethics that are at work in the poetry of the elegists that precede her – dynamics which may or may not be explicitly observed by the poets themselves – in this project’s conclusion, Riley considers the role of affect and ethics in elegy itself. In so doing, she offers a model of a “recovered” elegy – recovered, that is, from the wound inflicted by Hill – in which, through affect, elegy
performs in the awareness of its ethics and is not merely determined by it; it performs, in other words, *ethically*. And in a time when death is increasingly spectacularized and technologically mediated, lyric elegy’s capacity to articulate personal grief through public means – to do so ethically – discloses its indispensable role within contemporary culture.
CHAPTER 1

“DOCUMENTED AND SAFE”: GEOFFREY HILL’S RESPONSIBLE ELEGIES

Geoffrey Hill’s early elegies mark a point of crisis in the history of the genre. If, as Jahan Ramazani has illustrated, the twentieth-century elegy exhibits a turn against the consolatory thrust of the genre’s earlier exemplars, Geoffrey Hill may very well be anti-consolation’s most vocal champion, the poet who strikes most forcefully against the redemptive claims of elegy. Informing Hill’s antagonistic stance is, as Ramazani notes, the poet’s “economic misgivings” towards the genre, the ethical culpability of writing in a literary mode that seeks meaning in death, that wishes to alleviate the elegist’s own pain of loss in those circumstances – public, historical – where such pain may serve as an important reminder of the unnecessary and immoral killing that occurs in the world.¹ Hill’s elegies in particular exemplify a post-World War II aesthetic for which these ethical concerns are doubly pressing: deeply troubled by the atrocities of mass genocide perpetrated during those violent years, this aesthetic was keenly aware of its own ethical

¹ Jahan Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7. Ramazani’s comments on Hill are perhaps the most path-breaking for this project, as it is in his engagement with Hill that he takes up the question of elegy’s relation to the ethical, and thus offers a point of entry for my own project, even as his analysis is framed by the primary question of anti-consolation that is only a minor concern here. And Ramazani’s observations are by no means exhaustive: in a book that includes chapters or subsections devoted to some fourteen elegists, Hill does not count among them; instead, Ramazani intermittently gestures to Hill on several relevant occasions – see, for example, pages 7-8, 68, 70, and 361. It is partly for this reason that my project begins where it does – to further develop what Ramazani first notes by giving deeper context to the ethical concerns Ramazani perceives in Hill’s elegies, and to suggest the ways affect is central to these concerns.
responsibilities, its own potential to trade on the massive suffering generated by those atrocities. Nowhere are these ethical concerns more apparent in Hill’s work – apart from, that is, his own acknowledgment in prose that he was a child of that post-war time, “forced to respond to the disputatious ‘relevance of poetry after Auschwitz’ question” – than in his early Holocaust elegies, those “For the Jews in Europe.” In the shadow of post-Holocaust challenges to art that were raised by writers like Primo Levi and Theodor Adorno – the latter of whom famously claimed that to write poetry after Auschwitz was “barbaric” – these elegies, unlike any other, do their utmost to undermine and to counter their own tendencies to trade off death, to seek consolation from suffering; their particular vigilance on this account is the reason they are of central importance to this chapter, and to my project as a whole.

Still, while Hill’s particularly vigilant elegies thus make him a foundational figure for the project, they also make him a bit of an outlier, especially with regard to the role of affect in these poems. Whereas the elegists that follow this chapter will through various means tap into the reservoirs of affect that is and is in language, Hill conversely seeks to

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2 The number of poets who could be counted among those writers whose aesthetic is shaped by these post-war – and more importantly, post-Holocaust – concerns is expansive; among the varied list includes Paul Celan, Michael Longley, Adrienne Rich, Randall Jarrell, and Sylvia Plath. For more on the latter two, see R. Clifton Spargo, The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004).


quell, or at least control, the linguistic affect that in its rich history always speaks beyond the poet, always articulates affect even as, for ethical reasons, he wishes to suppress it. Theirs is a poetic for which ethics and affect are often in dialogue, even in tension, but not finally incompatible; his is a poetic for which ethics requires affect to be challenged and subverted because, in the economy of consolatory elegy, affect threatens to aestheticize, misrepresent, and offer emotional “resolutions” for the harsh realities of an atrocity like the Holocaust. This is not to say, of course, that affect does not exist in his elegies; rather, affect is a consequence of Hill’s linguistic countermeasures to consolatory affect – the irony and self-critique, for example, that attend the pose of a poet seeking to outmatch the emotional solace that is all but promised by elegy. In this way, it may be said, Hill inflicts a wound into elegy from which this project’s other elegists represent its slow recovery. Though these later poets share many of the ethical concerns Hill raises, they carve a place for affect within ethics – and ethics within affect – rather than have ethics serve as the primary arbiter of affect.

While Hill’s unparalleled concern with an ethical poetics is in part a consequence of the post-Holocaust circumstances into which he was born, it is a concern that also emerges from the poet’s profound obligation to cultural and linguistic history, an obligation which may, of course, itself have roots in post-war anxieties, but one which he believes modernity has more pervasively, and regrettably, failed to uphold. In an interview with Carl Phillips for the Paris Review in 2000, Hill remarked,

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6 As Ramazani’s analysis of the genre suggests, Hill is not alone in inflicting these wounds – Thomas Hardy, Wilfred Owen, and W.H. Auden are just a few poets who predate Hill in their turn against the consolatory aspects of the genre – but Ramazani even acknowledges that Hill’s is a particularly deep cut; see Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 70.
There are things one has to witness to. I return constantly to what I think is one of the major outrages of modern life: the neglect of the dead, and a refusal to acknowledge what we owe them, and a refusal to submit ourselves to the wisdom of the dead and, indeed, to the folly of the dead and the criminality of the dead – simply a refusal to accept that the dead are as real as we are, probably more so.\(^7\)

Hill’s focus on “the dead” in the above comment clearly discloses the passage’s significance to this chapter’s analyses, but perhaps even more important is the phrase’s metonymic function, the way “the dead” stands in for the poet’s larger concern with historical obligation, his wish that the modern world “acknowledge what we owe” to what has come before us, to heed to a past – in its wisdoms and its follies – that exerts as “real” a force on modernity as the present does. Elsewhere, David Sherman has noted the relationship between Hill’s elegies and his historical obligations, but his primary lens is that of the theo-philosophical – not an unsuitable lens for the theologically inclined Hill, though not one of particular concern here.\(^8\) Rather, this chapter traces the ways in which Hill’s historical obligations inform the poet’s writing at the level of language, literary genre (elegy), and affect. In acknowledging “what we owe” to the dead, Hill points a mirror to his elegies, wherein he grapples with the history of his own language, keenly aware of the etymological and generic frameworks within which, and against which, he must work. The consequence of this self-reflexive gaze is a language rife with double-


\(^8\) Specifically, Sherman draws from Kierkegaard and Levinas in order to consider the ethics of alterity and sacrifice in Hill’s elegies; see Sherman, “Elegy under the Knife: Geoffrey Hill and the Ethics of Sacrifice,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2008), 166-92. Additionally, Hill’s nod to “witness[ing]” in the statement above chimes with another approach to Hill’s elegies, that of Caleb Caldwell’s, in which Caldwell develops the themes of witness and silence that frequently recur in Hill’s elegies. The question of witness cannot be ignored in my own analysis, but again, whereas for Caldwell the approach is primarily one of continental philosophy – drawing on Kierkegaard and Derrida, among others – I adopt a more pragmatist, materialist view, examining the way Hill’s poetic language itself “bears witness” to history, the way that his language contends with the affectively charged histories it inevitably carries. See Caldwell, “Silence and Geoffrey Hill’s Poetics of Witness,” *Religion and the Arts* 17 (2013), 545-67.
meanings, indeterminacies, ironies, and parentheticals – a language that seeks to slip the bounds of the affective histories that would potentially speak on behalf of the unethical. A further result of these linguistic features is the oft-cited “difficulty” of Hill’s poetry, a difficulty that poses challenges to the reader but which serves a purpose: it forces the reader to work towards understanding, and in so doing it draws their attention to the historical influence of the past, to the influence of language, affect, and of the dead. Hill’s readers are made aware, in other words, of elegy’s ethics.

In seeking to unpack the relationship between history, language, ethics, and the dead that is at work in Hill’s poetry, several scholars have proffered convincing arguments that the poet espouses a theory of language that is primarily informed by the theological. David-Antoine Williams, for example, quotes from Hill’s essay “Language, Suffering, and Silence,” in which the poet himself “seriously propose[s] a theology of language,” and which he describes as follows:

This would comprise a critical examination of the grounds for claiming (a) that the shock of semantic recognition must be also a shock of ethical recognition; and that this is the action of grace in one of its minor, but far from trivial, types; (b) that the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of “solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.”

Beyond the poet’s own use of the term “theology,” there is much to suggest a theological drive behind the statement, not least of all in his particular designation of “grace” to define a recognition that is both semantic and ethical – that is, ethical by way of being semantic (of which more shortly). Indeed, Williams frames Hill’s proposal in terms of a

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Biblical “logology,” noting that Hill has on several occasions echoed Derrida’s famous
dictum that “The sign is always the sign of the fall.”

If ethical recognition in language
is, for Hill, a product of grace, it is because – following Williams’ argument – grace
intervenes within a human language that, unlike the divine Word, is flawed and capable
of coercion.

In bringing in Williams’s particularly theological reading, I do not wish to counter
his claims; to do so would be to suggest that Hill himself falsely assigns the theological to
his own proposal, a suggestion that would be, in this particular instance, illogical more so
than it would be, say, a comment on authorial intention. Rather, I want to suggest that
there are other dynamics at work in Hill’s theology of language, specific affective
dynamics of which Hill himself might not fully be aware – certainly, he would not name
them as such. Nevertheless, in ways that will soon become evident, Hill’s concerns over
the relationship between history, language, and ethics represent a clear attempt to come to
terms with affect in elegy, one that, in its particular configuration, in the vigilance with
which he attends affect in language, marks a key moment in the history of the genre.

Language may “remind us of our fall,” as Hill writes, and thus, for the poet, language’s
imperfections and weaknesses may have a theological basis, but those imperfections –
and the means by which he contends with them – play out at the level of the historical
and the material; it is at this level that the role of affect in Hill’s elegies are most
discernible.

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10 Quoted in Williams, Defending Poetry, 161. Williams points out two occasions in Hill’s
collection The Orchards of Syon (2002) in which the poet makes similar statements, perhaps most
persuasively in poem LVIII of that volume when he remarks that the angels are “beyond grammar that
reminds us of our fall”; quoted in ibid., but see also, originally, Hill, Broken Hierarchies, 408.

11 See Williams, Defending Poetry, 160-61.
For example, an important feature of Williams’ examination of Hill’s “theology of language” is the notion of “intrinsic value” that Hill frequently returns to throughout his career, most comprehensively in his two essays, “Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value” and “Poetry and Value,” from his prose collection *Inventions of Value* (2008). “Intrinsic value” is, as Williams convincingly demonstrates, wrapped up in the problem of postlapsarian human and linguistic imperfection; specifically, “intrinsic value” is that which a writer achieves – in spite of postlapsarian linguistic imperfection – through a “technical integrity” in their writing, an integrity attained, as Williams describes it, through “a correspondence between the achieved work and its subject, a kind of authorial faithfulness, an honesty and moral accuracy in artistic representation arrived at through sustained attention to object and to language.” A text has “intrinsic value,” in other words, because it is accurate and faithful – “honest” – to its object of focus. Williams is not wrong, then, in noting the theological foundations of Hill’s interest in “intrinsic value” – those of the flaws and corruptibility of human language – but I would argue further that its implications are more widespread, filtering into, in particular, a concern with language’s relationship to morality and ethics more broadly. As Hill himself describes it in “Poetry and Value,”

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12 *Inventions of Value* was itself first collected as part of Hill’s *Collected Critical Works*, which compiled three earlier prose collections with two new collections.

13 Williams, *Defending Poetry*, 166.

14 At the risk of unfairly representing Williams, it should be noted that he, too, is aware of the ethical implications of Hill’s notion of “intrinsic value,” and that, in fact – as will become clear shortly – his analysis is, like Ramazani’s in its way, fairly path-breaking for my own work here. Even as his central interests lie in notions of poetic authority, and even as my conclusions differ from his, his focus on ethics and Hill’s language has been formative for my own thoughts on the place of affect in Hill’s elegies. My point, then, is only that I wish to leave aside the theological features of Hill’s ethics in order to draw out the historical and materialist dynamics in his elegies that anticipate similar dynamics in the chapters ahead.
In part, what we are attempting to define as ‘intrinsic value’ is a form of technical integrity that is itself a form of common honesty. Believing, as I have admitted I do, in the radically flawed nature of humanity and of its endeavours entails an acceptance of the fact that, in one way or another, our integrity can be bought; or our honesty can be maimed by some flaw of technē [...]. Another way of stating the claim is to say that the ethical and the technical are reciprocating forces....

As Hill describes it, “technical integrity” – or “technē” – is in reciprocal relation with ethics because it is both the point at which value and “honesty” can be retrieved (in spite of the flawed nature of humanity) as well as that point at which, in its failure, “honesty can be maimed,” “integrity can be bought.” Ethical responsibility lives and dies by the integrity of the writer’s technē; the ethical, in other words, is technē. In an earlier essay, Hill remarks along similar lines that “Language is not ‘the outward sign’ of a moral action; it is the moral action.” Together, these remarks begin to project the image of a poet who perceives ethics not merely in terms of the “outward” expression of language – not merely in terms of what it represents – but in the very materials of that language, in the very shapes it makes. They also provide a window into how Hill perceives the enactment of his own ethical obligations (theologically based or not) in writing, the shape his own poetry must take in order to be ethically defensible. If his ethics is to be articulated in the “technical integrity” of his poetry, how can he achieve that integrity, what shape must that poetry take?

The shape of that poetry, of course, depends primarily on what ethical concerns Hill perceives as particularly urgent; “integrity can be bought,” says Hill, and “honesty


can be maimed,”17 and while the flawed nature of humanity answers the question of why such ethical corruption occurs, the question of how it occurs remains. The potential trouble resides in the particular quality of the “intrinsic” that makes up “intrinsic value.” A conventional notion of “intrinsic” might evoke a sense of a kind of pre-linguistic, human naturalness or inherentness, a sense of the word that is, admittedly, compounded by Hill’s own theologically grounded appeals to “human nature” and “common honesty”; the poet, however, complicates this conventional notion by proposing that the intrinsic is also the mediated, the intrinsic is also the extrinsic. In his essay, “Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value,” Hill elaborates:

My language is in me and is me; even as I, inescapably, am a miniscule part of the general semantics of the nation; and as the nature of the State has involved itself in the nature that is most intimately mine. The nature that is most intimately mine may by some be taken to represent my intrinsic value. If it is so understood, it follows that intrinsic value, thus defined, bears the extrinsic at its heart. […] A crucial issue remains. In so framing the matter, do I confuse intrinsic with mediated value?18

The answer is yes, and he does so for the reason he claims above: because they are already confused, because the intrinsic is the extrinsic and vice versa, the intimate is the State and vice versa. Language, as the above passage implies, is for Hill a bridge between the private and the public, the intimate and the State; and in so being – because of its mediating quality – language is prone to imperfections, it is susceptible to corruption. The flawed nature of humanity, that is, is evidenced in the mediating nature of language; it transpires in a language that is both intrinsic and extrinsic. Poetry – itself being a mediating form – is for that reason as potentially ethically culpable as the State. But what

17 Hill, “Poetry and Value,” 481.

distinguishes poetry, for Hill, what allows it to have “intrinsic value,” is that it is capable of depicting human and linguistic imperfection perfectly. As Hill continues, “The rest is paradox. For the poem to engage justly with our imperfection, so much the more must the poem approach the nature of its own perfection.” If poetry has “value,” in other words, it is because, through its technical integrity, it perfectly depicts imperfection, an imperfection that is both human and linguistic, natural and mediated.

The various dimensions of Hill’s views on language and ethics, poetry and intrinsic value, find further, and clarifying, articulation in his poetry, in particular in that poetry which, tellingly, deals with death and memorialization. The memorial, these poems suggest, is the kind of mediating site between public and private where ethical problems can generate. The second sonnet of the two-sonnet sequence “Two Formal Elegies,” for example, is suggestive of the way the function of memorialization – to preserve in memory – is susceptible to corruption and imperfection, the ways it can be, as it were, modified in the guts of the living. The poem begins by voicing its concern over the anesthetizing effects of documenting the Jewish victims of the Holocaust: “For all that must be gone through, their long death | Documented and safe, we have enough | Witnesses (our world being witness-proof).”\(^{19}\) Whether documented in memorial, or in historical record, or even in poetry, Hill’s concerns remain the same: such documentation makes the atrocity of the Holocaust “safe,” a thing capable of being neatly tucked away in cultural memory because there are “enough | Witnesses” to do justice, at least in principle, to the memory of those that have died. The ethical trap of this kind of memorializing testimonial is disclosed in the double-meaning of “witness-proof” in the

\(^{19}\) Geoffrey Hill, “Two Formal Elegies,” 16.
poem’s third stanza – that which is proof, or evidence, of the event, is also that which proofs, or protects, us from the event, in the way a waterproof raincoat protects us from bad weather. It is with a considerable ironic inflection, then, that the poem continues with a depiction of beach-going English Midlanders who are in every way dissimilar to the “Documented” dead that are now safely locked away in unobtrusive memorial:

Here, yearly, the pushing midlanders stand
To warm themselves; men brawny with life,
Women who expect life. They relieve
Their thickening bodies, settle on scraped sand.

Here, in this portrait seemingly of yearly vacationers, life spits in the face of the dead, not least of all because it so full of life. The men are burly, the women are pregnant, and together their “thickening bodies” grimly contrast the familiar images of emaciated human beings in their World War II prison camps. Hill’s is a portrait of luxury blind to history’s atrocities, in which the scraping of sand is the result of a boredom made possible only because history’s ethical imperatives have been “Documented,” memorialized, and made “safe.”

The sonnet concludes with a question it ultimately does not answer, and by not doing so, it conveys a sense of the difficult double-bind Hill faces in writing memorial: the obligation he feels, on the one hand, to remember – truthfully, honestly – the dead, and the potential, if not inevitable, fallibility, on the other hand, of remembering through a mediating form. After its focus on England’s forgetful Midlanders, the poem asks, “Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, | Of what they have witnessed and not seen?”

The evocation of a “screen” suggests Hill’s concerns reside largely with visual forms of documentation and memorial – perhaps news footage of the camps – but in that screen’s

\[20\] Ibid.
“brief”-ness, Hill implicates any mediating form for which its impact is ephemeral, fleeting, soon forgotten, as in the case of the Midlanders. These mediating forms, these memorials, might bear witness to death, but they fail to capture what must be “seen,” they fail to provide an “honest,” and perhaps lasting, sense of an atrocity which in many ways defies all sensibility. To “witness” in mediated form is to chance not seeing anything at all, to misperceive the very thing that that mediated form seeks to memorialize: the dead.

Hill raises similar concerns over memorial’s mediated nature – and the ethical dilemmas it poses – in another poem sequence from *For the Unfallen*, “Of Commerce and Society,” in which he more directly implicates his own poetry in his claims of unethicality. The fourth part of the sequence begins by equating, as he had done in his essay “Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value,” the State and poetry, here in the form of “statesmen” and “artistic men”:

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,  
Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:  
Some of us have heard the dead speak:  
The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away.21

The poem once again tilts towards the ironic, where the statesmen’s “visions” could be read as those of, say, a “better future” for his nation, or those of a spectral nature. The latter seems more plausible as the poem’s focus turns to artistic men, who, “not alone,” also encounter the dead – though rather than having *visions*, as it were, these artistic men are forced to “prod” the dead from their resting places. Whatever the case may be, such visions and dialogues with the dead suggest that Hill, as poet, is seeking to fulfill his

obligation to the dead by turning to them, by hearing them speak; however, by sentence’s end, he concedes that that obligation – his “obsession” – may quickly fade, “be lifted away.” Thus, like the Midlanders of “Two Formal Elegies,” his memory, too, is short; the poet, too, is culpable. Additionally, as again in “Two Formal Elegies,” Hill voices his concern over the anesthetizing effects of memorial: in its third stanza, the speaker remarks, almost matter-of-factly, that,

Many have died. Auschwitz,
Its furnace chambers and lime pits
Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable
Unbelievable in fatted marble.

The remnants of the once-active concentration camp now half-gone, the memory of it half-wiped, Auschwitz is itself, ironically, “half-dead.” And as the reality of the camps recedes further into the past, memorial, in its “fatted marble,” does nothing to make that reality any more believable. Memorial conveys only a “fable,” a tale of fiction, fantasy – one, perhaps, with a moral to tell, but incapable of articulating history in its reality. Memorial, poetry, witnesses without seeing.

These two poems, then, articulate the poet’s clear concern over the effects of memorialization – in whatever form it takes, be it “screen,” “marble,” or poetry – with a special focus on the dulling, or as I have termed it “anesthetizing,” effects of such acts. Memorial eases the pain, stores it “safely” away, allows atrocity to be forgotten. Seamus Heaney once remarked – keeping his own ethics in check (as the next chapter will show) – that poetry can keep “at bay the actual savagery of the wartime experience,”

on the role of grief in politics, Judith Butler has sought to unpack with regard to different and more contemporary concerns – terrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – but in such a way that speaks relevantly to this project’s focus on Hill and post-Holocaust elegy. Both in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), Butler ponders what makes certain lives “grievable” and others not, what allows a culture to bestow precarity and vulnerability on the lives of some, thus making them worthy of mourning, and not to others. Why do we grieve, for example, for the victims of the September 11th attacks, but not for the many innocent victims of America’s own drone attacks abroad? Butler’s answer lies in a formulation of grief that, like Hill’s, is concerned with the relationship between mediation and ethics, but one for which affect is a central – or more explicitly recognized – component of that relationship. “Our moral responses,” she argues, “first take form as affect.”23 And this is in no small part because affect is mediation, that which bridges the public and the private, that which, in Hill’s parlance, brings together the intimate and the State, the intrinsic and the extrinsic. As Butler posits (with a particular focus on grief as affect),

Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own.24


This “sociality of embodied life” means, then, that the nature of our grieving – its shape, its direction – can be influenced, determined for us, by something beyond (be that the State, or poetry). The ethical stakes of memorial, then, are clear. While for Butler the way death is framed can determine for whom one grieves, for Hill, the fear is that memorial and document can “maim” the reality (or “honesty”) of atrocity; it can blind one to the “wisdom” of the dead, to the past that is “as real” as the present is, “if not more so”; and it can alleviate the pain of grief but in doing so can potentially curtail the feeling of ethical responsibility that is spurred by that pain, by that grief. “Because such affective responses are invariably mediated,” Butler notes, “they call upon and enact certain interpretive frames.” The memorial, as Hill’s poetry and prose makes plain, has its own interpretive frame; and, as a poet, there is perhaps no memorializing interpretive frame more potentially injurious to him than that of elegy.

Elegy’s interpretive frame is primarily that of its promise to console, its long history of tropes, metaphors, and figurations by which elegists have sought such consolation, such reprieve from suffering in the face of loss. Once again, as Ramazani has demonstrated, by the start of the twentieth century, poets had begun to turn against such tropes; but Hill’s own turn is, in the wake of the Second World War, particularly acerbic: if the dead are as real as we are, as he contends, then his obligations to those dead are that much more exigent; he must counteract elegy’s historied, affective frames in a manner that is that much more aggressive. One means of counteracting these interpretive frames is by making them the primary focus of his elegies. This is the


26 Butler, *Frames of War*, 34.
strategy, as the reader will have observed, that he uses with regard to memorial more
generally in the poems above, but it is one he uses with elegy specifically in, for example,
the first poem of “Two Formal Elegies.” Midway through the poem’s fifth line, the
speaker remarks:

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

Deceives with sweetness harshness.27

If the song is grasped “roughly,” it is because the elegiac mode is not one Hill wishes to
hold firmly. He decries the “arrogant acceptance” of death which elegy promises to
deliver, from which the elegy is given life at the expense of death, at the expense of “their
blood,” their “ashes.” And, perhaps most importantly, these lines send up the elegiac
tropes of cyclical rebirth and regeneration, as well as that of the pathetic fallacy, that
Peter Sacks so expertly identified in his expansive study of the genre.28 In this poem, life
grows from death, not because life carries on, as it were, and because seasons change, but
because death actually provides the (ashen) nutrients from which life grows. And like the
growing vegetation of earth’s wilderness, it “Deceives with sweetness” death’s original
harshness. The key word here, of course, is “deceives,” which redefines the consolatory
trope of regeneration from that which offers succor in a time of suffering to that which
offers only falsity, a saccharine mask which, like “fatted marble,” disguises death and
atrocity’s harsh realities. In this way the poem resists its affective inheritance, the


28 See, for instance, Peter Sacks, The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 26-37, et. al.
historied trope – an interpretive frame – of the elegiac genre that in its “sweetness” threatens to conceal a more important reality of the Holocaust victims.

It is a strategy that Hill adopts again in his poem “Merlin,” the title of which, in its evocation of the wizard from Arthurian legend, already smacks of the fantastic and the fabled that has already been a means for the critique of elegy and memorial for the poet.

Hill begins his poem by restating his obligation to bear witness to the dead:

I will consider the outnumbering dead:
For they are the husks of what was rich seed
Now, should they come together to be fed,
They would outstrip the locusts’ covering tide. 29

Hill looks to the dead, seeking out – so the poem seems to suggest – their wisdom; they are what remains of once rich lives, “of what was rich seed.” So numerous are the dead, however, that to summon them is to summon an almost threatening presence, greater in number than the plague of swarming locusts. Such is the potential power of the dead, for Hill. And in raising the dead, the poem dabbles with the elegiac trope of apotheosis, in which the elegized person is ultimately elevated to an almost god-like status; but whereas in a conventional elegy such apotheosis signals – again, in a consolatory gesture – the restoration of the dead to a place of higher prominence, in “Merlin,” that restoration is not one of god-like status but that of ghostly status, in a liminal space, haunting. And yet, if the ghosts pose a threat, that threat is one the poem soon disregards. Its second, and concluding stanza, reads,

Arthur, Elaine, Mordred; they are all gone
Among the raftered galleries of bone.
By the long barrows of Logres they are made one,
And over their city stands the pinnacled corn.

The figures of legend – *originary* figures of British legend, who perhaps hold the knowledge of Hill’s own history – have not like locusts enveloped the earth; rather, it is only their bones that have been given any “elevated” status, in “raftered” balconies. And in their burial grounds of Logres – “England” – their numbers are diminished to one. No longer are they a threat in their innumerability; rather, new corn, new *life*, has hidden them from view.  

Again, in a conventional pastoral elegy, the corn’s vegetal nature would signal hope, life continuing in spite of death. But here, life overpowers death, conceals it, grows over it. And thus the reader is left, once again, with an image of a present that ignores the past, that neglects the dead that might bestow their wisdom. “Merlin,” like “Two Formal Elegies,” keeps turning on its head the affective tropes of elegy, reshaping the interpretive frameworks from which it draws in order to up-end and transgress them.

It has become clear by this point that even as Hill strongly articulates his concerns with memorial, and with poetry and elegy more specifically, he often does so by way of embedding critiques of them in the poetry itself, by making memorial, for instance, the very object of focus in a poem, or by loading his poetry with grim ironies, or by drawing from elegy’s affective tropes only for the sake of undoing them. So even while the mediating nature of poetry, its extrinsic-intrinsic-ness, may be a central focus of his near-anguished concern, Hill’s relationship with poetry is an ambivalent one. He does not, after all, choose silence, even though the possibility tempts him.  

30 David-Antoine Williams offers a similar reading of the corn in this poem, and while my focus on the affective nature of elegy’s tropes differs from his, I am in general in debt to Williams for first directing my gaze to this poem; see Williams, *Defending Poetry*, 185-86.

31 See, for one, Hill’s essay, “Language, Suffering, and Silence,” which he begins by noting, “Questions of silence are essentially questions of value,” and then considers what that value may be; see
towards poetry is suggested in another early poem, “History as Poetry,” from Hill’s second collection *King Log* (1968). If, by its title, the reader is to understand the poem as an interrogation of poetry’s relationship to history, it offers no discernibly clear definition or judgment of that relationship. The poem begins, “Poetry as salutation; taste | Of Pentecost’s ashen feast. Blue wounds. | The tongue’s atrocities.”

At its outset, the poem presents poetry as an utterance or gesture of welcoming, marking the arrival of, perhaps, a Pentecostal gift of tongues. Whether these tongues are sacred in quality or whether they merely speak gibberish is unclear, and that the poem seems to implore poetry to taste from a feast that is paradoxically ashen does little to clarify. “The tongue’s atrocities,” as well, seems to be content not to offer any singular meaning: is poetry, as the tongue, something that depicts history’s atrocities, or has the tongue itself inflicted its own atrocities on history? Can poetry speak honestly of history’s atrocities, or is honesty “maimed by some flaw” of poetry? The poem continues with similar ambiguities afoot:

Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead

Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam.

Poetry has the capacity to raise the dead, but this extraordinary power is diminished by the fact that the dead themselves are speechless. Syntax makes unclear whether, in unearthing Lazarus, poetry is mystifying, capable of rendering the inexplicable and the mysterious – for better or worse – or whether Lazarus himself is mystified, confused at

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his rebirth, perhaps even “speechless” in it. The lily, notorious elegiac and funereal flower that it is, rises from the earthy clay as well, but its face is “gouged,” a marred imitation of the flower as it conventionally functions in poetry. Hill has a history, as the reader will have seen, of undermining elegy’s consolatory conventions, but in this poem, the target is too unclear, its focus split in too many directions. The critique of elegiac conventions is an available reading, but not a decisive one. When the poem concludes, then, by noting, “Thus laudable the trodden bone thus | Unanswerable the knack of tongues,” no conclusion seems reached. Poetry might laud the trodden bone of the dead, but it is uncertain whether the “knack of tongues” – in other words, poetry – is unanswerable because the dead are speechless and therefore cannot answer, or because the “knack of tongues” – poetry, this poem – poses questions for which there are no answers. In a poem such as “History as Poetry,” which is so rife with ambiguity and indeterminacy, the reader is left to consider that perhaps there are no answers, that perhaps he or she is meant to be left wondering what poetry’s relation to history and to the dead is – a tongue’s atrocity or an atrocity of the tongue.

The unanswerability of “History as Poetry” is paradoxically, I would contend, the “answer” to this poem. In its ambiguities, the poem – poetry – offers an accurate, “honest” reflection of a condition of history. In a 2004 BBC radio program, Hill remarked, on the topic of precision in his poetry that “It’s precision of a certain kind, because it’s precision that can’t rule out ambiguity…. The ambiguities can’t come in accidentally, because that’s a solecism. You’ve got to be accurate in your ambiguities.”

Hill is essentially reiterating what he perceives in his essay “Rhetorics of Value and

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33 Geoffrey Hill, interview by Michael Berkeley, Private Passions, BBC Radio 3, April 25, 2004; quoted in Williams, Defending Poetry, 166.
“Intrinsic Value” as poetry’s need to perfectly present linguistic and human (human-linguistic) imperfection; through poetry’s technical integrity – without accident, without “solecism” – poetry achieves “intrinsic value” because it “honestly” and “accurately” presents ambiguity and indeterminacy, the “natural” state of the postlapsarian human.

“History as Poetry” is thus a poem that does not fall on one side or the other with regard to poetry’s relationship to history because Hill does not fall on one side or the other: poetry, being a mediating form, is naturally imperfect, but through “technical integrity” it can aspire towards perfectly capturing that imperfection, towards precisely capturing ambiguity – which is ultimately what the poem seeks to do.

In this way, “History as Poetry” does not so much represent its meaning as it does perform its meaning. That Hill is sensitive to the performative aspects of poetry is discernible already in his oft-articulated concerns over his elegies’ memorial roles, the acts of memorialization that, in their affective function, threaten to perpetuate various ethically corrupt interpretive frames. And this sensitivity to the performative is moreover discernible in the various linguistic methods he uses to act against these interpretive frames: his ironies and ambiguities, and his subverting of elegiac trope. What “History as Poetry” reveals further is that such counter-acts seek to expose – with precision, with accuracy – the historied nature of its own being. History is ambiguity, is imperfection; the poem seeks to perform that imperfection perfectly – in other words, the act of “History as Poetry” is to reveal the historied nature of its ambiguities and indeterminacies. Adding “history” to the notion of performative utterance is, in fact, what characterizes Hill’s revision of J.L. Austin’s famous conception of the speech act in the latter’s seminal text *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In Hill’s essay, “Our Word is Our Bond,” the poet
contends that while Austin’s notion of speech acts suggests a kind of clarity and perfection in language – the word does the very thing it says – Austin’s own playful coopting of the Stock Exchange’s phrase, “our word is our bond,” betrays an awareness of language’s knottier, more opaque features.\(^{34}\) Whereas Austin’s notion of the speech act offers “a bright memorable impression of a transparent success,” Hill observes that “the very idea of a ‘transparent’ verbal medium is itself an inherited and inherent opacity.

Where there is ‘semantic content’ it is most likely that there will be semantic ‘refraction,’ ‘infection’ of various kinds.”\(^{35}\) Words like “refraction” and “infection” resonate with the double-meanings, ambiguities, and seemingly proliferating indeterminacies one regularly faces in the fun-house mirrors that Hill’s poetry can often be. And this is because refraction and imperfection are symptoms of being a person for which our mediating language has a history; it comes to us already packed with interpretive, and affective, frames. That Austin can use a phrase like “our word is our bond” and it can evoke the motto of the London Stock Exchange is proof enough of this. And so, for Hill, while bond may suggest an act, an oath understood between two or more people, it is also the “shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility” that word’s – that language’s – history presents us with.\(^{36}\) Elsewhere, Jeffrey Wainwright has noted in his own examination of “Our Word is Our Bond” that “Ambiguity,” in Hill’s poetry, “is the flexing of the


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 161.
determinations of language.” His point is, as I have been arguing, that ambiguity in Hill helps to expose language’s variable meanings and thus reveal a history of language that can be determining because it has such history; I would add only that in intentionally flexing those determinations Hill seeks to make them conspicuous to his reader – that is, in order to break from the bonds of language, Hill seeks to show that those bonds exist, to make clear the mediated quality of human nature, the extrinsic quality of the intrinsic, the public nature of the private.

To do so is, for Hill, to bring ethics to the surface; in foregrounding the historical aspects of language, Hill can draw out the ethically informed interpretive frames of that history, of that language. The reader may recall that in Hill’s proposal for a “theology of language,” he remarks that in that theology, “the shock of semantic recognition must be also a shock of ethical recognition.” To be sure, earlier in the same essay, Hill himself observes – *recognizes* – ethics at the very level of semantics, of language. “It may be possible to comprehend an ethical distinction grammatically,” he states, and then proceeds to compare two similar observations made by fifteenth-century English scholar William Tyndale and twentieth-century American poet Ezra Pound. Although there is not the space in this chapter to recount in full Hill’s comparison, it is enough to note that for Hill, Tyndale’s observation that “‘Though we be sinners, yet is the cause right’” is “scrupulous but avoid[s] scrupulosity,” whereas Pound’s “‘To confess wrong without losing rightness’ […]” is grammatically self-serving and metrically glib. It sounds right,

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but it is not right.”39 Tyndale’s subjunctive opening subordinate clause, for Hill, affirms the scholar’s expression of faith because it “stoops to confess the fact of our innate sinfulness”; Pound’s statement, on the other hand, fails to “stoop to confess,” and in its glibness betrays the falsity of his claim. In the process, an ethics is conveyed. Hill’s aim, then, is to write a poetry that “shocks” the reader to semantic recognition and thereby “shocks” the reader to ethical recognition. That “shock” is achieved through the linguistic strategies that this chapter has already begun to enumerate – the poetry’s ambiguities, its indeterminacies, its subversion of generic conventions. Moreover, and most importantly for the purposes of this project, that “shock” is achieved because these strategies are affective strategies. As noted previously, Butler argues that because “affective responses are invariably mediated,” they necessarily “call upon and enact interpretive frames”; but while this reads as a bleak assessment of the state of linguistic affairs, she also notes – and as Hill has already demonstrated – that the very conditions of affect that create this state of affairs are also the conditions by which they can be counteracted: “they [the affective responses] can also call into question the taken-for-granted character of those frames, and in that way provide the affective conditions for social critique.”40 While, for our purposes, it would be appropriate to substitute “social critique” with “ethical critique,” Butler’s point is no less pertinent. If it is through affect that language confers its ethically informed interpretive frames – its historical claims – on the human, then it is through similarly affective means that Hill seeks to expose and ultimately critique those interpretive frames, those historical claims.

39 Ibid., 400.

40 Butler, Frames of War, 34-35.
By way of conclusion, then, I wish to examine one final elegy by Hill in order to draw out his affectively charged linguistic strategies, including those strategies already enumerated in this chapter, as well as a few more. And while every poetry scholar and her grandmother has an interpretation of Hill’s “September Song,” here I hope to proffer a reading that speaks specifically to the dynamics of linguistic affect in the poem.  

Concerned once again with the ethically corrupting affective frames of memorial and elegy, Hill continually subverts these frames, directing the reader’s gaze to the historical determinants within the elegy, and attempting to supplant them through affective strategies that range from the ironic to the self-critical. In its particularly unrelenting attempts, there is arguably no better example of what this chapter has attempted to identify and appreciate as Hill’s “responsible elegies,” and for this reason it is a bedrock for the elegies that are yet to come in this project, if not also a bedrock for the history of elegy more widely.

“September Song” immediately strikes an ironic pose, and in so doing plays with readers’ expectations, expectations generated, as it were, by historical, interpretive frames. Before the poem begins, it employs the sometimes-used elegiac convention of listing the birth and death dates of the elegized figure. In this elegy, however, the reader is merely provided with a birth date – “born 19.6.32” – and a deported date – “24.9.42.” Of course, deportation during the Holocaust all but meant death, and therein lies part of

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41 Henry Hart and Christopher Ricks are among the earliest and most foundational readers of this poem, though many others have since contributed to the discussion. See Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), 295-304 and Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986), 110-11. Ramazani’s brief reading of the poem has been influential on my own; see Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 7-8. In truth, I know none of their grandmothers’ opinions of the poem.

the point: the atrocity of the Holocaust is of such a scale that conventional modes of understanding have become foreign, are no longer adequate or appropriate. One no longer simply is born and then dies; rather, they are born, and then deported. The opening lines, too, play with expectation in their double-meaning: “Undesirable you may have been, untouchable | you were not.” Both “undesirable” and “untouchable” conflate the sexual with racial discrimination;43 but in a reversal of the notion of a romantic interest being desirable-but-untouchable, the idea that because of the child’s racial or ethnic background he or she is undesirable-but-not-untouchable gives way to an ugly irony. For the romantic, the fantasy cannot be fulfilled; for the camp guard or the SS officer, it can. In these early ironic moments then, language slips expectation, mocks – however grimly – the “historical frames” from which they draw.

The poem then takes on an almost administrative tone, yielding a cold

inexpressiveness unbefitting traditional elegy:

    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.

Hill evokes a sense of organizational regulation in language such as “proper time,” “patented,” and “routine,” all of which clash in various ironic ways: “cries” should in no way be routine as much as “terror” should in no way be patented, and the proper time to be “forgotten | or passed over” for death as a ten-year-old child is every time. And diction

betrays a matter-of-factness that furthers these lines’ sense of coldness: “you died. Things marched.” Alex Houen, in considering the affective power of diction in his introduction to *Textual Practice*’s 2011 issue on the theme of affect, remarks that “Vocabulary alone provides a rich array of affective tones that I might adopt as what I feel”; and, fittingly, as one example, he notes with regard to describing death that to “say he ‘died,’ ‘passed away,’ or ‘snuffed it,’” is to evoke three very different affective tones. Suffice it to say, Hill’s “you died” seems least interested in conveying any feeling in the matter, as if feeling were an indulgence in this scenario. Certainly in the ways Hill has attempted to strip his elegies of their conventions, it is possible to read these lines as his attempt to strip away elegiac feeling, leaving the poem with a coldness that is appropriate not only in the sense of “honestly” representing the coldness of casualty and death during the Holocaust but also in the sense of striking an ethically responsible stance towards death for which consolatory affect would be an affront, an indulgence.

Or it may be an attempt to efface the elegist himself, which would itself be an ethically motivated gesture. As Ramazani notes, for Hill, in this poem, “To elegize […] is to enjoy one’s grief, to indulge the onanistic work of mourning.” To grieve in poetry is to indulge a certain narcissism, to seek out one’s own recovery from pain at the expense of the dead, to trade off the deceased – in the economic sense of elegy first noted in this chapter’s opening pages – for the sake of the living. This kind of ethically charged, self-

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44 Alex Houen, “Introduction: Affecting words,” *Textual Practice* 25, no. 2 (2011): 217. Not insignificantly, Houen begins the journal issue by suggesting that affect studies has the potential to offer its own revision to J.L. Austin’s conception of the performative utterance; and while, again, Hill never himself explicitly speaks in terms of affect in this specific way, certainly this chapter is in part attempting to present one interpretation of what affect’s revision might look like. See also the final chapter in this project on Denise Riley and the relationship between affect and performative utterance.

excoriation certainly seems to inform the elegy’s next lines, in which the poet, in parentheses, confesses,

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)\(^{46}\)

The parentheses are the most distinctive feature of this confession, those which help indicate the sense that Hill is confessing. Christopher Ricks remarks that the punctuation reveals “the heart in hiding,” that “which makes possible a mingling of the candid and the covert which is ‘the true voice of feeling’ partly because it acknowledges that some true feelings cannot exactly be voiced.”\(^{47}\) Ricks thus posits the idea that the parentheses themselves convey a sense of affective honesty, perhaps the only moment in the poem, which, like a whisper or a secret, can be candid but only covertly. I think Ricks is correct in his assessment, but it is important to remember that such honesty comes in a moment of figurative self-criticism, which, too, is predominately conveyed by the parentheses – because what the parentheses do is lend the poem another distinct voice. And by giving the poem another voice, Hill gives himself, and his reader, another person to engage.

Why is this important? I want to suggest that through these parentheses, by introducing another voice, Hill is able once again to point to the historied nature of the language he speaks. The parenthetical essentially gives “September Song” two Geoffrey Hill’s that speak to one another – and to the reader – and enact, or perform, a kind of call-and-response that undermines the notion of an elegist who speaks a wholly intrinsic, wholly private affect. David Shaw, in his analysis of Hill’s own *The Mystery of the*

\(^{46}\) Hill, “September Song,” 44.

\(^{47}\) Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, 304.
Charity of Charles Péguy (1983), calls Hill’s style in that poem “antiphonal,” and notes that through that style of call-and-response, Hill “display[s] radical rectitude’ in his decision to dramatize the conflicts.”48 Shaw, in making his argument, cites a telling line from Hill himself, who, in discussing what he sees as Coleridge’s own antiphonal style, remarks, “His parentheses are antiphons of vital challenge.”49 This “vital challenge,” then, I would argue is what Hill poses to himself in “September Song.”50 If the parentheses do help facilitate a self-critique – of elegiac onanism, of indulgent mourning – it is because they allow Hill to turn against himself, to slip between linguistic modes and thus to break the bonds of language’s historical determinants, its interpretive frames. The parenthetical helps expose the extrinsic in the intrinsic by, in essence, providing two extrinsics, two linguistic modes. The semantic “shock” of encountering two Hills in the poem thus helps to generate the ethical shock he is ultimately after.

As the poem leads to its conclusion, Hill, no longer in his parenthetical mode, begins to undermine additional elegiac tropes.

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

This is plenty. This is more than enough.51


50 It is worth noting that Hill’s use of parentheses is far from limited to “September Song.” In “Two Formal Funerals,” in fact, he inserts four discrete sets of parentheses to close out the second poem. I would argue for that poem what I am arguing here: that the punctuation gives Hill another voice through which to displace his own subjectivity in multiple linguistic voices, and thus point to the historical conditions of his language.

51 Hill, “September Song,” 44.
As in the first poem of “Two Formal Elegies,” Hill once again draws on the conventions of pathetic fallacy and cyclical regeneration, and again, he ironizes them. In the American pop standard from which Hill’s poem takes its name, September marks the final stages of the year, a cautionary future moment from which the singer feels he must seize the day; but in Hill’s poem, September ironically does not signal death, but rather “fattens” with its own life on the vines – an inversion, perhaps, of Eliot’s cruel April. Autumn’s fires also present their own irony: they sting the poet’s eyes, but such pain pales to the injury inflicted by the fires of the concentration camp. Thus Hill distances himself not only from the circumstances of the elegized, but from the circumstances of elegy itself, suggesting the genre’s ultimate incapacity to mourn the death of this child properly. This is the ambiguity with which the poem finally concludes: is the poem “plenty,” because it has done its job, or because it will always be excessive? Is the poem “more than enough,” because it has done its job exceedingly well, or because it will always do more than Hill wishes of it? Such indeterminacy and ambiguity is, as is now clear, notoriously characteristic of Hill, even as the evidence suggests (plenty) that the latter two possibilities are the more plausible. If this elegy strikes an ethically responsible pose, it does so not by allowing itself to be elegy, but by negating the very conventions by which elegy has historically worked. This is the “technical integrity” Hill strives for; this is history as poetry, because all it can do is disclose its historicity. These are the strategies by which semantic shock might translate into ethical shock.

52 The lyrics to the poem can be found scattered across the internet; the particular lyrics I turned to are located at “Oldie Lyrics,” accessed June 17, 2015, http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/frank_sinatra/september_song.html.

53 It has been noted by numerous scholars that Hill’s ultimate distancing of himself from the elegized is in dating the child’s fictional birthdate one day after his own actual birthdate. See, among others, Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 7.
But they are strategies, admittedly, that make Hill’s poetry particularly difficult. And this difficulty may very well be the poet’s intention. In his interview with Carl Phillips for the *Paris Review*, Hill defends his poetry’s difficulty, and his argument is pertinent both for the way it returns to the events of World War II and for the ethical imperatives that frame it:

> We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We’re difficult to ourselves, we’re difficult to each other. And we’re mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. [...] And since people generally go on from this to talk about elitism versus democracy, I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification. [...] German writer Theodor Haecker argues, with specific reference to the Nazis, that one of the things the tyrant most cunningly engineers is the gross oversimplification of language, because propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement. And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence. Maybe an intelligence under threat, maybe an intelligence that is afraid of consequences, but nonetheless an intelligence working in qualifications and revelations…resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification.54

To say that the genre of elegy is a tyrannical force for Geoffrey Hill may be to overstate the case, but clearly he works to subvert any affective tyrannies it might impose.

Difficulty is an ethically responsible strategy for the poet, just as those strategies that make his poetry difficult – irony, ambiguity, indeterminacy, double-meaning, subversion of convention, choice of diction, and punctuation – seek to be ethically responsible. These are the affectively charged means by which he counteracts language’s historied affects. In his post-Holocaust setting, his methods are particularly vigilant, but they are also deeply influential. The strenuous efforts he makes to write elegy responsibly necessitate his readers make strenuous efforts to understand his elegy; but this, ultimately, is our ethical obligation, to the past, to the dead. In his collection *The Triumph of Love* (1998), the poet writes,

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54 Hill, interview with Carl Phillips, 277.
By understanding I understand diligence
and attention, appropriately understood
as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement
of what is owed the dead. 55

This may serve as a kind of *ars poetica*, for which, through diligence and attention, Hill
seeks to provide in his poetry “what is owed the dead.” But so, too, might it be the poet
gently asking the same of his readers, to give diligence and attention to his poetry,
because they too owe the dead. Or, in a more general sense, Hill may be offering
guidelines to the modern elegist, those poets that comprise this project, alerting them to
what will be required in order to write elegy after Auschwitz.

CHAPTER 2

“GLEANING THE UNSAID OFF THE PALPABLE”:

SEAMUS HEANEY’S MATERIAL LOSS

In his recent elegy for Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon admits – in a fashion that is far more direct than is usual for the poet – “I’m at once full of dread | and in complete denial. | I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead.” It is a line he will repeat later in the poem: “I cannot thole the thought of Seamus Heaney dead.” The statement is curious not only for the poet’s uncharacteristic directness but also for his use of “thole,” a word that sticks out like a sore thumb in Muldoon’s phrase because of its relative obscurity. Yet, “thole” is not a word that is particularly obscure to Heaney: in the introduction to his translation of Beowulf (1999), during one particular passage in which he describes what brought him to the project, Heaney remarks:

What happened was that I found in the glossary to C. L. Wrenn’s edition of the poem the Old English word meaning “to suffer,” the word þolian; and although at first it looked completely strange with its thorn symbol instead of the familiar th, I gradually realized that it was not strange at all, for it was the word that older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up. “They’ll just have to learn to thole,” my aunt would say about some family who had suffered through an unforeseen bereavement. And now suddenly here was “thole” in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt’s language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage, one that involved the journey þolian had made north into Scotland and then across into Ulster with the planters, and then across from the planters to the locals who had originally spoken Irish, and

then farther across again when the Scots Irish emigrated to the American South in the eighteenth century. When I read in John Crowe Ransom the line, “Sweet ladies, long may ye bloom, and toughly I hope ye may thole,” my heart lifted again, the world widened, something was furthered. The far-flungness of the word, the phenomenological pleasure of finding it variously transformed by Ransom’s modernity and Beowulf’s venerability made me feel vaguely something for which again I only found the words years later. What I was experiencing as I kept meeting up with thole on its multi-cultural odyssey was the feeling that Osip Mandelstam once defined as a “nostalgia for world culture.” And this was a nostalgia I didn’t even know I suffered until I experienced its fulfillment in this little epiphany. It was as if, on the analogy of baptism by desire, I had undergone something like illumination by philology. And even though I did not know it at the time, I had by then reached the point where I was ready to translate Beowulf. Tolkien had opened my right of way.²

What does Heaney discover in “thole”? He discovers the journey of a word across time and place. He discovers a continuity, the history of thole’s use and of its sounds, the “th” of the thorn. He discovers in the word, as he says, a “world culture,” its “far-flungness” as it appears to globetrot from medieval England to twentieth-century America. And, almost paradoxically, he discovers a part of himself, both through thole’s ability to generate memories of himself growing up hearing the word spoken and in the way that it discloses to him a previously unrecognized feeling of nostalgia – a nostalgia not only, as he says, for the “world culture” signaled by thole’s “multicultural odyssey” but also, as the word nostalgia itself implies, for a home. That is, for Heaney, translating Beowulf becomes possible because, in thole, he discovers a point of entrance for himself, a place to step foot into, a “right of way.” In other words – and recalling thole’s meaning – he discovers a home for suffering.

The notion that Heaney, in language, discovers a home – or, as will become clearer, homes – for suffering provides this chapter with its main thrust. As Muldoon locates a linguistic home for his own elegiac suffering by adopting Heaney’s language,

Heaney’s elegiac impulse is to seek out and locate homes for his suffering through his own use of the linguistic materials of other expressions of suffering and mourning – their sounds, their rhythms, their meter. In other words, in the way that, in “thole,” Heaney locates a “world culture” in which to position himself, in which to inhabit, similarly he locates various “cultures of mourning” in language through which to position his own grief, in which to inhabit his own suffering. If, in the previous chapter, it was through poetic genre that Hill largely considered his own ethics of loss, in this chapter it is at the level of the poetic line, even that of the word, that Heaney grapples with the relationship between loss and responsibility. And grapple he does: the elegies that comprise this chapter trace, in a sense, the longue durée of the poet’s concern over the connection of what he once called “Song and Suffering,” the responsibility of poetry toward pain and grief.\(^3\) To that end, this chapter examines three sets of Heaney’s elegies, the first being those elegies for other writers and artists in which he appropriates the aesthetic styles of the elegized in order to seek out linguistic precedents for his own grief, and through which Heaney’s belief in the affective dynamics of linguistic materiality is most clearly demonstrated. The second set of elegies returns to the site of his most contentious engagement with death and suffering, the poems from *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979); I take up the long debate in Heaney scholarship over the ethical import of these poems in order to consider how the poet’s particularly earthly, “synthesizing” poetic is much to blame for the diverse and often combative readings of these oblique elegies for the victims of Northern Irish sectarian violence. The chapter concludes with a focus on a series of Heaney’s elegies for his parents, elegies that turn not to the language of other

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writers, nor to the bog bodies and matter of the earth, but to the poet’s own home, and ultimately to the silences of that home, to those absences in which the very relationship between sound and home that run through these elegies is unmoored.

To invoke the notion of “home,” or “place,” as I have done in this chapter is to enter into a tradition of Heaney scholarship interested in the relationship between place, language, and identity politics; it is thus also to risk perpetuating some of this scholarship’s more myopic perspectives, among which argue that the poet’s engagement with notions of home, origin, and place is, in the context of the Northern Irish sectarian conflict in particular, highly problematic. Whether because, as David Lloyd has notoriously argued, it effaces the historical circumstances of the conflict, it “reduces history to myth,”4 or because, as Ciaran Carson has notoriously argued, it is symptomatic of a fatalistic viewpoint for which Heaney is “an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for ‘the situation,’”5 the poet’s concern with origins, with “home,” has been seen as deeply unethical. Indeed, for critics such as Lloyd and Carson, the poet’s commitment to aesthetics – in the form of a beauty that derives from a poetic language whose very materiality seems to originate in the materiality of the physical world – trumps that of ethics.6 In this chapter’s direct focus on the affective materiality of language, as well as on the different ways Heaney grapples with that materiality in his elegies, I seek not to dismantle these critiques of Heaney’s work but to contextualize them – to suggest why they have merit, if also why they are limited in scope. A specific

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5 Ciaran Carson, “‘Escaped from the Massacre’?” Honest Ulsterman 50 (Winter 1975), 183.

focus on affect and language in Heaney’s elegies illuminates the poet’s preoccupation with the relationship between linguistic materiality and “home,” suffering and ethical responsibility, that can be traced across Heaney’s various elegies, even as the exact configuration of that relationship differs not only according to each elegy’s particular focus but also at various stages of the poet’s writing. My point is not that Heaney seeks out a home for suffering, but rather that, in elegy, he seeks out many homes for suffering, and that the notion of home shifts, even as it remains a pivotal trope in his elegiac work. In arguing thus, this chapter aligns with another tradition of Heaney criticism that seeks to nuance scholarship’s understanding of the poet’s relationship to “homecoming,” to origins; this scholarship includes the work of, for example, Richard Kearney, who perceives in the poetry “an unresolved dialectic between the opposing claims of home and homelessness,”7 or, more recently, of Richard Rankin Russell, who seeks to rescue Heaney’s regionalism – or, to be faithful to Russell, Heaney’s regionalisms – from critiques of benightedness and exclusivism.8 The picture I paint here of a poet attentive to the affective materials of language is thus not a Heaney defined narrowly by retrograde, essentialist Romantic notions of poetry’s capacity to recover origins and generate continuity;9 rather, it is a Heaney who does pursue home and place in language (a neither inherently unethical pursuit, nor, as I will argue, an entirely misguided one) but who, in his pursuit, is sensitive to poststructuralist interventions into the question of language and identity, a poet who, by 1986, tellingly observes that “we have become highly conscious

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8 Richard Rankin Russell, Seamus Heaney’s Regions (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 33. See also his direct response to David Lloyd, 409, 104n.

of the conditioning nature of language itself, the way it speaks us as much as we speak it.”¹⁰

*Thole*, after all, does “speak” Heaney; its thorn pricks him, awakens him to the word’s history, as well as to the history of his own relationship with it. As I have previously suggested, for Heaney, *thole* brings a part of Heaney home to himself, a claim that critics like Lloyd and Carson might more easily stomach if they allow for the possibility that Heaney in fact sees both “home” and “himself” as constituted by language, that the longing for a world culture he experiences is born of the fact that thole had already marked him in his youth through his aunt’s idiomatic use of the word. Discovering a “world culture” in thole is discovering how that world culture, preserved in a word, preserved by its history, has already and unconsciously shaped him.

This interplay between “world culture,” language, and selfhood presented in the *Beowulf* passage is no doubt complicated, perhaps even more than a little dubious; Heaney’s lecture, “Englands of the Mind,” delivered some twenty years prior to the *Beowulf* passage, goes some way towards clarifying – and substantiating the claims of – that relationship.¹¹ Heaney’s particular focus in the lecture is the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, and Philip Larkin, specifically each poet’s pronounced regional English voice through which Heaney perceives a common “desire to preserve indigenous traditions, to keep open the imagination’s supply lines to the past.”¹² Heaney’s analysis follows these supply lines, in which he discovers various “Englands” of history: an

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¹⁰ Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero,” xix.

¹¹ The lecture was delivered at the University of California, Berkeley in 1976 and later published in the prose collection *Preoccupations*; see Heaney, “Englands of the Mind,” in *Preoccupations* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 150-69.

¹² Ibid., 151.
Anglo-Saxon England in elements of Hughes’ poetry, a medieval England in the Latin-influenced language of Hill’s work, and Larkin’s “England of customs and institutions, industrial and domestic.” The language of these poets is, for Heaney, a window into time and place, into England’s history and culture.

To help articulate how it is possible that language is capable of netting both time and place, of capturing these various “Englands” of his interest, Heaney begins the lecture by channeling T.S. Eliot, whose notion of “the auditory imagination” offers a means by which the Irish poet can substantiate his later claims. So, the lecture begins:

One of the most precise and suggestive of T.S. Eliot’s critical formulations was his notion of what he called “the auditory imagination,” “the feeling for syllable and rhyme, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back,” fusing “the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.” I presume Eliot was thinking here about the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abysm of mind and body; thinking of the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play; thinking of the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, and symptom of human history, memory and attachments.

Readers will hear echoes in this passage of Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s notion of the affectively charged materials of language. Both Heaney and Blasing, for example, are particularly focused on the materiality of language, its syllables, its rhymes, its rhythms. Both writers also make much of the coincidence of the historical and the corporeal in language, what Heaney perceives in language as the “abysm of mind and body” and “the word as etymological occurrence, symptom of human history.” Both writers also

13 Ibid., 168.
14 Ibid., 150.
15 Discussed at greater length in the current project’s introduction.
emphasize a kind of non-rational, or subconscious, experience of language. And both help us to comprehend why, in particular, a word like “thole” holds such fascination for Heaney, a word whose very materiality has a traceable history, and a word whose affective force on him was below his conscious observation until it seemingly revealed itself to him. To be sure, Heaney, in channeling Eliot, offers a notion of linguistic affect akin to that which I have defined throughout this project, for which cultural lines are drawn on the body, for which language reveals the affective means by which the historical is inscribed on the corporeal. “Thole” is cultural history, but it’s also Heaney’s history, and, in the heretofore unrecognized nostalgia he has for it, it is also his present.

“Englands of the Mind” thus also goes some way towards clarifying the subtle differences between my argument regarding Heaney’s pursuit of origins, of linguistic places and “homes,” and those claims made by David Lloyd and others. And while I leave my more robust engagement with these scholars for the discussion of Heaney’s elegies for victims of Northern Irish sectarian violence – opting to focus first on less divisive elegies from Heaney’s career in order to illustrate more clearly the nature of linguistic affect in his poetry (and thus to lay the groundwork for my discussion of why the elegies of North will get him into trouble) – it is nevertheless worth drawing out an important distinction at this juncture. For Lloyd, Heaney’s poetry “holds out the prospect of a return to origins and the consolatory myth of a knowledge which is innocent and without disruptive effect”; in doing so, the poetry lays waste to difference (cultural, linguistic), to the facts of historical contingency. 16 The poetic pursuit of origins “symbolically restores the interrupted continuity of identity and ground”; it presumes an

16 Lloyd, “Pap for the Dispossessed,” 22; see also 25, 26.
“immediacy of the relation of culture to pre-culture.”\textsuperscript{17} The Eliot passage in “Englands of the Mind” smacks of the kind of ahistoricizing, undifferentiating recovery of origins that concerns Lloyd, in which Eliot’s auditory imagination “fus[es] ‘the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.’”\textsuperscript{18} And yet, a closer reading of this passage suggests that difference and historical contingency need not be effaced by such origin-seeking. The affective experience described here – the very thing that would seem to collapse “culture and pre-culture” in the form of the “cultural depth-charges” that “delight the ear […] mind and body” – remains, importantly, a highly linguistic experience, one in which difference and contingency can be, and are, accommodated. Materiality, after all, is configured in this passage not as a symptom of the pre-linguistic but as that of the super-linguistic, the interplay between word as “etymological occurrence” and as “pure vocable, as articulate noise.”\textsuperscript{19} The passage requires us to reconsider the relationship between language and materiality in Heaney’s poetry, to complicate the picture presented by his strongest critics, to allow for the possibility that the affective materiality of his language does not necessarily efface historical and linguistic contingency but, rather, can mark it. Is this no more clearly suggested than in the title of Heaney’s lecture, which seeks not one England in Hughes, Hill, and Larkin but several Englands? Continuity met with difference. To recover “place” in language and to seek out continuity is not to ignore change or to eradicate difference; it is, instead, to be attentive to, to flag, the linguistic and cultural inheritance into which we are born. In those elegies for which Heaney adopts

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 23, 24. The means by which Lloyd perceives the poetry doing this will, again, be addressed at greater length ahead.

\textsuperscript{18} Heaney, “Englands of the Mind,” 150.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
the affectively charged linguistic modes of prior articulations of mourning, the poet seeks
literary homes for suffering not in the form of prelinguistic, essentialized grieving but in
a grieving sourced in language.

At the risk of leaning too heavily on “Englands of the Mind” for my analyses, the
lecture nevertheless provides one final point of entry: in its focus on the poetry of Ted
Hughes, it offers a way into reading Heaney’s elegy to Hughes, “On His Work in the
English Tongue,” from *Electric Light* (2001); it is with this poem that Heaney’s impulse
towards specific cultures – and specifically linguistic cultures – of mourning becomes
clearer. As the title of the elegy suggests, for at least part of the poem, the main focus is
on Hughes’s *work* as opposed to the man himself. The second part of the five-part poem
describes his encounter with Hughes’s poetry:

I read it quickly, then stood looking back
As if it were a bridge I had passed under—
The single span and bull’s-eye of the one
Over the railway lines at Anahorish—
So intimate in there, the tremor-drip
And cranial acoustic of the stone
With its arch-ear to the ground, a listening post
Open to the light, to the limen world
Of soul on its lonely path, the rails on either side
Shining in silence, the fretful part of me
So steadied by the cogged and bolted stillness
I felt like one come out of an upper room
To fret no more and walk abroad confirmed.20

Heaney describes the impact of Hughes’ work as having bestowed him with a confidence
and surefootedness that, in its allusion to the Biblical “upper room” – the presumed
location of the Last Supper – was nearly spiritual in force. He equates the surefootedness
he feels upon his encounter with Hughes’ poetry with one similarly provided by a bridge

Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 75-76.
near his primary school of Anahorish. In likening lyric to physical structure, Heaney begins to conjoin the two, to merge the materialities of word and world, as he once did with the landscape in his earlier poem titled “Anahorish,” which he famously described as “soft gradient of consonant, vowel-meadow.” The bridge, Heaney imagines, is a place of sound, such that the arch of the bridge is figured as an ear, listening for the “tremor-drip | and cranial acoustic of the stone” while the rails on the railway lines shine “in silence.” Architecturally equipped to capture earth’s music, and with its “cogged and bolted stillness,” the bridge steadies the poet – or, more accurately, it is Hughes’ poetry, like the bridge, that steadies the poet. After all, it is the affective force of Hughes’s language, his work in the English tongue, that ultimately concerns Heaney in the poem.

How is the relationship between language and materiality configured in this stanza of Heaney’s elegy? On the one hand, language and the material world would appear to merge, such that Heaney hears in Hughes’s poetry what the bridge “hears” in earth’s sounds, both providing the poet with stability; on the other hand, the affective force of language is such that it offers a stability akin to the bridge, but ultimately language and material world remain separate – the poem’s “as if it were” suggests similarity but also difference. In “Englands of the Mind” as well, Heaney uses both senses of the relationship between language and materiality to describe Hughes’s work. For instance, on the one hand, language and the material world are one: “Its sensuous fetch,” Heaney remarks of Hughes’s poetry, “its redolence of blood and gland and grass and water, recalled English poetry in the fifties from a too suburban aversion of the attention from the elemental; and the poems beat the bounds of a hidden England in

streams and stress, on moors and in byres.”²² Language, the passage suggests, is capable of salvaging an “elemental” England, here configured in a kind of pre-cultural landscape, one “hidden” by the then-contemporary culture of the fifties. But Hughes’s language is also redolent of another past, a linguistic past: “Everything inherits everything,” Heaney claims, “and Hughes is the rightful heir to the alliterative tradition, and to the cleaving simplicity of the border ballad.”²³ For Heaney, this inheritance is most clearly discerned in the materiality of Hughes’s poetry, the “consonantal bolts” of his language.²⁴ Language is thus also capable of salvaging its own linguistic history. So, both in his prose and in his poetry, Heaney’s interest in the relationship between language and materiality is characterized not simply by a pursuit of the pre-cultural (or, “elemental”) in the linguistic but also by a philological interest, an interest in the history of meaning that derives from language’s own materiality. If Hughes’s poetry conjures an England of the past, it does so through what Heaney perceives as his consonantal diction; history resides in language’s sound, its materials.

There is more to be said about the first sense of a linguistic materiality – that which merges word and world – not least of all because it serves as a point from which Heaney’s harshest critics lodge their primary critiques of the poet. However, for the moment, I set that discussion aside to focus on the second sense of linguistic materiality – in which language’s own materiality is of central importance – primarily because it is this latter sense of materiality that Heaney considers at greater length in “On His Work in the

²³ Ibid., 154.
²⁴ Ibid., 154. The word “bolts,” of course, is echoed in Heaney’s elegy to Hughes as well.
English Language.” To be sure, by way of its interest in the specific theme of “passive suffering,” Heaney finds himself returning not to the bridge metaphor of his second stanza but to the alliterative poetic tradition of which he sees Hughes (and himself) as inheritor. This theme of passive suffering, which begins the third part of the poem, comes out of Heaney’s thoughts on Hughes’s life, specifically the controversial aftermath of the suicide of Hughes’s wife, Sylvia Plath. Following her death, Hughes was notoriously private about the whole affair, choosing not to speak directly to it until thirty-five years later with the publication of his collection *Birthday Letters* in 1998. And he was widely criticized for not commenting upon her suicide in its immediate wake, especially by some groups who felt he was in large part responsible for her depression and the resulting death by her own hands. This third section of the poem, then, sets the stage for an apology of sorts for Hughes’s silence in those years:

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Passive suffering: who said it was disallowed  
As a theme for poetry? Already in *Beowulf*  
The dumbfounding of woe, the stunt and stress  
Of hurt-in-hiding is the best of it—
As when King Hrthel’s son accidentally kills  
His older brother and snaps the grief-trap shut  
On Hrthel himself, wronged father of the son  
Struck down, constrained by love and blood  
To seek redress from the son who had survived—

And the poet draws from his word-hoard a weird tale  
Of a life and a love balked, which I reword here  
Remembering earth-tremors once in Dartmoor,  
The power station wailing in its pit  
Under the heath, as if our night walk led  
Not to the promised tor but underground  
*To sullen halls where encumbered sleepers groaned.*
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To the question posed at the beginning of this section, the answer is well-known: it was W.B. Yeats who disallowed passive suffering in his edited *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), in which he summarily dismissed the work of Wilfred Owen and other First World War poets because, as he claimed, “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry.”

Heaney, however, dismisses Yeats, and begins instead to excavate a history of – to find an origin for – passive suffering in English literature all the way back to *Beowulf*, thereby reclaiming the theme not only for poetry but also for himself. And reclaim he does, as Heaney’s elegy begins to take on and appropriate certain stylistic traits of *Beowulf*. This occurs in a very explicit way in the fourth part of the elegy, when Heaney goes so far as to retell the story from *Beowulf* of King Hrethel’s own passive suffering over the death of his son; but even before that, the poem’s third part takes on certain characteristics of Anglo-Saxon literature – the heavy alliteration, for example, in the fashion of alliterative verse in a line like “The dumbfounding of woe, the stunt and stress | Of hurt-in-hiding is the best of it—,” but also his frequent use of kennings such as the “grief-trap,” the “earth-tremors,” and, perhaps most importantly, the “word-hoard,” so indicative in this poem that Heaney sees himself, and Hughes, unlocking verbal treasures. Heaney’s engagement, then, with a literary “culture” of passive suffering – one that includes Hughes and the *Beowulf* poet – is shaped not simply by pointing to literary precedents but by actively adopting the styles of – the linguistic materials of – those precedents.

Heaney engages an additional literary precedent at the end of the third section by reclaiming the words of Wilfred Owen himself: the final line of the section combines two lines from Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” a poem in which the speaker of the poem meets,

in hell, the man he killed on the battlefield the day before. This final line, then, offers another link in the chain, a further occasion for Heaney to appropriate a language of passive suffering; additionally, it introduces the theme of redress to the poem, a theme linked to the notion of passive suffering, which becomes, for Heaney, the primary upshot of the tale of King Hrethel in the fourth part of the poem. In Owen’s poem, of course, the theme of redress – or, more accurately, the impossibility and failure of redress – comes out of the stalemate illustrated by the meeting of wartime opponents in Hell, both with shared hopes in life but now both dead, one by the other’s hand. For Owen, the disillusioned soldier, the impossibility of redress occasions a political critique. For King Hrethel in Beowulf, however, the failure of redress is more personal. One son dead by the hand of another son in a hunting accident, Hrethel cannot avenge the child’s death without causing further pain and loss to himself, leaving him to suffer, passively. “The king,” Heaney translates, “was helpless | To set right the wrong committed….”

The fifth and final part of “On His Work in the English Tongue” considers this latter, personal sense of redress and the passive suffering that results from it by concluding with a series of proclamations that speak to Hughes’s suffering silence over Plath (and also to the Heaney’s own suffering silence over Hughes). The speaker of the poem remarks, “Soul has its scruples. Things not to be said. | […] Things for the aye of God | And for poetry. […] A thing allowed.” If Heaney is writing an apology for Hughes’s silence after Plath’s suicide, he does so by approving of and legitimizing passive suffering, by allowing for “things not to be said,” or, perhaps, for things to be

28 Ibid.
said only to God (with his all-seeing if also approving “aye”) and in poetry. Hughes published *Birthday Letters* thirty-five years after his wife’s death; Heaney published “On His Work in the English Tongue” only three years after Hughes’s death. But in writing the poem, Heaney, too, allows “things not to be said,” speaking, instead, through poetry, through other poetic voices: Hughes’s voice, and the voices of other passive sufferers, translated (literally, in the case of *Beowulf*) by the poet to speak his own grief. In doing so, Heaney bestows to passive suffering its own history, a history, a “home,” from which he can then give voice to Hughes’s passive suffering, as well as voice his own. To be sure, if, as I am arguing, Heaney speaks his suffering indirectly by appropriating the affective materials of prior articulations of passive suffering, the poem’s abstruse first section becomes relatively comprehensible. It reads, in full:

> Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end  
> Not past a thing. Not understanding or telling  
> Or forgiveness.  
> But often past oneself,  
> Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs  
> In language that can still knock language sideways.  

For all the “things said” by “Post-this” and “post-that” intellectual discourses and disciplines, none offers Heaney the means to redress – in the form of “understanding,” “telling,” “forgiveness” – suffering. Instead, he looks past himself, to “grievs | in language,” those “that can still knock language sideways.” This is a language that does not merely say the thing directly, but speaks it through its physicality, through a materiality that “pounds” like a roller to the shore. “On His Work in the English Tongue” therefore reaches back to reclaim such griefs in language, to find a home in the linguistic,

\[29\] Ibid., 73.
affectively charged materiality out of which the poet grapples with his own passive suffering.

“Audenesque,” immediately follows the Hughes elegy in *Electric Light*, and, as the title suggests, Heaney undertakes a similar project of using the affective materials of prior literary “cultures” of mourning by appropriating Auden’s poetic in order to elegize his friend, Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky. The poem “Audenesque” uses Auden’s elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” as its central reference point, not least of all through allusions and references made by Heaney in his poem, but also, and more importantly for this project, through his use of the trochaic tetrameter and rhyming couplets found in the third part of Auden’s elegy, itself an appropriation of the meter and rhyme scheme of Yeats’s self-elegy, “Under Ben Bulben.” As in his elegy for Hughes, then, Heaney seeks out literary precedents for mourning and uses the affective materials of their language – in this particular case, meter and rhyme scheme – to articulate his own grief. In his elegy for Brodsky, in fact, Heaney explicitly announces this poetic strategy. The poem begins:

Joseph, yes, you know the beat.  
Wystan Auden’s metric feet  
Marched to it, unstressed and stressed,  
Laying William Yeats to rest.

Therefore, Joseph, on this day,  
Yeats’s anniversary,  
(Double-crossed and death-marched date,  
January twenty-eight),

Its measured ways I tread again  
Quatrain by constrained quatrain  
Meting grief and reason out  
As you said a poem ought.

*
Trochee, trochee, falling: thus
Grief and metre order us.
Repetition is the rule,
Spins on lines we learnt at school.\(^{30}\)

The decision to elegize Brodsky using the meter and rhyme scheme from Auden’s elegy for Yeats is not, as the second stanza remarks, arbitrary: both Yeats and Brodsky died on January 28\(^{\text{th}}\) – the former in 1939, the latter in 1996. And yet, the coincidence of the two poets’ shared death day is, in the end, only the most minor point of convergence between Heaney’s elegy and Auden’s, or even between these four poets. Brodsky, after all – like Yeats before him and like Heaney after – does know Auden’s beat, just as the poem claims: he used its meter and rhyme scheme to write, in his original Russian, an elegy for T.S. Eliot upon his death in 1965.

Among other things, Brodsky’s elegy, titled “Verses on the Death of T.S. Eliot,” lays bare some of the central themes that pervade these four elegies, from Yeats’s to Heaney’s. Brodsky considers the fate of Eliot and his words, just as Auden considers the fate of Yeats and his. Yeats’s poetry, Auden famously doomed, will be “modified in the guts of the living”; Eliot, according to Brodsky, will fare better:

Hill and dale will not forget.
Aeolus will know him yet.
Blades of grass his memory hold,
just as Horace had foretold.

Thomas Stearns, don’t dread the sheep,
or the reaper’s deadly sweep.
If you’re not recalled by stone,
puffball drift will make you known.\(^{31}\)


Regardless of whether Eliot need actually fear sheep or whether the guts of the living will actually modify Yeats, both elegies are preoccupied with the notion of immortality and ephemerality – themes that are not foreign to the genre of elegy, of course, but which are particularly apt for a series of elegies that originate with Yeats, a poet unremittingly concerned with (his own) immortality and ephemerality. (Nowhere is this more apparent than in “Under Ben Bulben,” self-elegy as it is.) Moreover, these poems’ concerns with immortality and ephemerality are most frequently articulated in the concurrent anxiety over poetry’s efficacy, its ability – or more often than not, its inability – to make things happen, to give life in the wake of death. Auden famously remarks in his elegy to Yeats that “poetry makes nothing happen,” but whether or not the reader is to take him at his word – the verdict is still out33 – the statement indicates the poem’s preoccupation with poetic efficacy. Heaney’s poem to Brodsky echoes these concerns: “But no vodka, cold or hot, | Aquavit or uisquebaugh | Brings the blood back to your cheeks.” And later:

Worshipped language can’t undo  
Damage time has done to you:

notes in the introduction to his translation that Brodsky in his original exactly duplicates the meter and rhyme scheme of Auden’s poem, but that his translation differs slightly in the first part of the poem. Part three of the translation, from which the above is excerpted, clearly follows the same trochaic tetrameter and couplet scheme as Brodsky’s, and Auden’s, poem.


33 The most extensive analysis of Auden’s remark can be found in Peter Robinson’s Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen (2001), which observes the significant literary and cultural impact of the statement, and then spends the following two-hundred pages demonstrating how poetry does make things happen. I agree with Robinson that Auden’s remark ultimately cannot be taken at its word – that, indeed, poetry may not impress upon “executives,” as Auden says in the poem, but that it remains a “way of happening”; see Auden’s poem, 242, and Robinson, Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen (Oxford: OUP, 2001). Like Robinson’s, my project demonstrates the way poetry can make things happen, doing so through my particular focus on the affective nature of poetry, the way it can mobilize emotion and grief, and in doing so, becomes entangled in questions of ethical and political import.

34 Heaney, “Audenesque,” 78.
Even your peremptory trust
In words alone here bites the dust.\(^\text{35}\)

There is no elixir of life – Russian (vodka), Scandinavian (Aquavit), or Irish (*uisce beatha* means “water of life,” but is also, delightfully, the etymological root of “whiskey”) – that can bring Brodsky back. Words – in which, as Heaney notes here and elsewhere,\(^\text{36}\) Brodsky had incomparable trust – can do nothing to repair the damage to Brodsky inflicted by time. If these series of elegies weigh immortality against transience, Brodsky, Heaney seems to believe, tips the scale toward transience, certainly more so than Eliot does for Brodsky.

And yet, by returning to the trochaic tetrameter and rhyming couplets of the earlier elegies, Heaney offers a stay against transience. Discussing style, and raging against originality, Yeats once proclaimed, “Ancient salt is best packing,”\(^\text{37}\) and in the continued elegiac return to the form of “Under Ben Bulben,” Heaney (and Brodsky, and Auden) seem to take Yeats at his word: meter and rhyme preserve like salt to meat. They *cure*, in both senses of the word. In one sense, that is, meter and rhyme *cure* because they offer a potential means of recovering from mourning; as Heaney claims in the opening lines of the poem, “Trochee, trochee, falling: thus | Grief and metre order us.” In grief, the trochaic meter restores a kind of order to the poet. In another sense, meter and rhyme *cure* because they preserve the kind of affective charges that Heaney can draw out again in his own poem, that he can find a literary home in – affective charges that pulse in

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 80.


trochaic tetrameter, that hum in rhyming couplets. In the face of death and ephemerality, Auden’s meter continues to beat.

Hence, while words may not be able to resurrect the dead, they nevertheless exert some kind of generative force, and “Audenesque” thus concludes on a hopeful note: by the end of the poem, Brodsky’s “trust in words” may have bitten “the dust,” but

Dust-cakes, still – see *Gilgamesh* –
Feed the dead. So be their guest.
Do again what Auden said
Good poets do: bite, break their bread.

In *Gilgamesh* – a story, in part, of a king who seeks immortality – one character dreams of an underworld in which the dead feast off dust and clay; Heaney invites the now deceased Brodsky to do the same. But the same might be said of Heaney himself: in appropriating the meter and rhyme of these earlier elegies, he finds his own nutrition in communing with the dead, in breaking bread with them. “Art,” Auden said,” is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead.”

In returning to the meter and rhyme of Brodsky (and Auden, and Yeats), Heaney does just that, finding company – in the etymological sense of the word – with the dead and, more importantly, with the mourners. The affective materials of their poetry give him sustenance; they provide, like

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38 Though Auden’s line has significantly permeated a popular cultural consciousness, it first originated in a featured interview with the poet in *The New York Times Magazine* from 1971. Not irrelevantly, the quotation is sandwiched between two further rejections of the efficacy of poetry. The full comment reads: “Nothing I wrote saved a single Jew from being gassed…it’s perfectly alright to be an *engagé* writer as long as you don’t think you’re changing things. *Art* is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead…but the social and political history of Europe would be exactly the same if Dante and Shakespeare and Mozart had never lived.” Again, regardless of whether or not Auden believes in a kind of practical efficacy of poetry, his mid-statement interjection about breaking bread implies he has some faith in the power of poetry, perhaps especially in the power of elegy. This latter sense, I think, is what Heaney is keyed into. See Alan Levy, “On Audenstrasse – In the Autumn of the Age of Anxiety,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 8, 1971, 42.

breadcrumbs (and at the risk of mixing metaphors), a trail for him to follow. “Its measured ways I tread again,”\textsuperscript{40} announces Heaney early in the poem. Indeed, if the culture of mourning Heaney sought out in “On His Work in the English Tongue” was that of passive suffering, in “Audenesque” that culture is one we might call “measured mourning,” in which time – in life, in poetic meter – “met[es] grief and reason out.”\textsuperscript{41} Measured ways direct his grief home.\textsuperscript{42}

A note of clarification: the elegies for Hughes and Brodsky share a few tropes common with the genre of elegy more broadly, primarily in the way they gesture to notions of literary inheritance and, relatedly, imitation.\textsuperscript{43} These tropes are particularly conspicuous in the case of “Audenesque” because, as Jahan Ramazani has expertly demonstrated, Auden all but made imitation the primary conceit of his elegiac aesthetic, a strategy by which “Auden proves himself the imaginative inheritor of [those he elegized, including] Yeats, Ernst Toller, Freud, James, and Louis MacNeice.”\textsuperscript{44} It is not impossible, then, that the imitative nature of both elegies may be symptomatic of the kind of commemorative act not uncharacteristic of elegy, and, in fact, distinctly characteristic

\textsuperscript{40} Heaney, “Audenesque,” 77. The theme of “measurement” plays a more significant role in this series of elegies than I have articulated here. Meg Tyler unpacks the role of measurement in Heaney’s and Auden’s poems more thoroughly than space allows here; see Tyler, \textit{A Singing Contest: Conventions of Sound in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 155-164.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Upon Heaney’s death in 2013, John Matthias composed his own elegy for the poet, one that again uses the trochaic tetrameter and rhyming couplets of his elegiac precedents. Matthias’s “An Elegy for Seamus Heaney” can be found at \url{http://samizdatblog.blogspot.com/2013/08/an-elegy-for-seamus-heaney.html}.

\textsuperscript{43} For more on elegiac inheritance, see, for example, Peter Sacks, \textit{The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 36-37, 40-47. For more on elegiac imitation, see above.

of Auden. And yet, while inheritance and imitation clearly play significant roles in both poems, these tropes are less strategies in their own right than they are the specific consequence of Heaney’s more pervasive and longstanding pursuit of “homes” for his grief, his seeking out of affectively charged materialities that provide a “place” from which to mourn. Thole has its history, its “place,” and while translating Beowulf, he discovers his home within that history; it gifts him with his right of way. This pursuit of “homes” goes back more than twenty-five years before Heaney grieves Hughes and Brodsky: as the sectarian violence of Northern Ireland was steadily rising, the poet was already remarking that, “we pine for ceremony, | customary rhythms: || the temperate footsteps | of a cortège.” This passage, from North’s “Funeral Rites,” speaks to Heaney’s yearning for cultural rituals of mourning in the wake of increasing death and violence, and yet, its “rhythms” and “footsteps” cannot help but signal a concomitant yearning for the linguistic rituals (or materials) of poetry, the rhythms and footsteps, in these later elegies, of Hughes, of Brodsky, and of the other poets that populate the poetry.

The passage from “Funeral Rites” also suggests the proximity of Heaney’s pursuit for homes of suffering and his use of the “mythical method” (derived from Eliot) in North to grapple with the violence coming out of Northern Ireland at the time. Both demonstrate a form of reaching back in order to make sense of the contemporary moment, whether that be in the shape of personal grief or of widespread cultural violence.

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45 Meg Tyler even goes so far as to note, not incorrectly (nor uncharitably), that some of the “choppiness” of “Audenesque” is “reminiscent of Brodsky’s verse in English”; see Tyler, Singing Contest, 158.

46 Seamus Heaney, “Funeral Rites,” North (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 7. Of course, the argument could be made that Heaney’s pursuit steps all the way back to “Digging,” the first poem – an ars poetica of sorts – of his first formal collection of poetry. More on the centrality of the “elegiac” in Heaney’s poetic towards the end of this chapter.
Describing the mythical method, Heaney notes, “This was the art of holding a classical safety net under the tottering data of the contemporary, of paralleling, shadowing, archetypifying.”\(^{47}\) But this archetypifying, this mythic shadowing, is also the poetic strategy for which Heaney would receive much criticism. I have already noted David Lloyd and Ciaran Carson’s critiques, and they are joined by Conor Cruise O’Brien and Edna Longley, for whom Heaney’s archetypifying method evinces an ultimately fatalistic perspective, an overly determinist view that is not uncharacteristic, in their opinion, of a Catholic, Nationalist stance.\(^{48}\) For the purposes of this chapter, I am less interested in testing the validity of some of these broader claims as I am in noting what they share in common, namely a concern with the ethical import of Heaney’s use of a mythical method that, for these critics, problematically flattens difference, a method that, by suggesting a coherence between the past and the contemporary, engenders a determinist point of view that masks the political realities of the Northern Irish conflict (even to the point of masking its own political biases from itself). Lloyd is particularly relevant to my analysis—and towards this particular end, I will test the validity of his claims—because of his specific interest in the materiality of Heaney’s language and its relation to his concerns over the mythical method, the way in which language seems to enact through its materiality a similar kind of flattening of difference that tacitly confirms the broader


ethically precarious methods of the poet. With his attention to the linguistic materiality of Heaney’s poetry and its relation to the mythic method, Lloyd thus brings to light the potentially problematic ethics of Heaney’s pursuit of “homes” of suffering that I have been detailing here. Nowhere is this more acutely true than in the bog poems of *North*, elegies as they are for victims of Northern Ireland’s sectarian violence, and many of which the aforementioned critics target specifically.

Heaney’s famous encounter with P.V. Glob’s *The Bog People* occasioned the bog poems in *North*, providing the poet with the archetypes against which he would approach Northern Ireland’s then-contemporary conflict. In an oft-quoted passage from his essay “Feeling into Words,” Heaney, having looked upon the preserved bodies documented by Glob, remarks that “the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles.” Citing this passage specifically, David Lloyd responds by remarking that such blending of past and present atrocity “is effectively to reduce history to myth, furnishing an aesthetic resolution to conflicts constituted in quite specific historical junctures by rendering disparate events as symbolic moments expressive of an underlying continuity of identity.” Of particular concern, as this quotation suggests, is the poet’s privileging of the aesthetic over the historical, which promises a symbolic continuity (with “identity,” but what is possible to read as “home,” or “origins”) over and

49 Though Longley, too, notes the “mutual vibration between language and landscape” in Heaney’s place-name poems, as well as the emotional “sabotage” created by Heaney’s poetic equation of landscape, body, sex, language, and, finally, Ireland. See Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, 156, 162.


51 Lloyd, “Pap for the Dispossessed,” 27.
against the very real sectarian differences that require resolution. It is this symbolic continuity that Lloyd detects as being furtively at work in the materiality of Heaney’s poetic. “In all its functions,” Lloyd argues, “language performs the rituals of synthesis and identity, from the mysterious identification of the guttural and the vowel with Irishness, the consonantal with Englishness, to the symbolic function of metaphor which produces those recurrent stylistic traits of Heaney’s metaphors of identity born by the genitive, the copula or the compound.”52 Heaney’s identification of the consonantal with Englishness that Lloyd mentions here echoes comments from the poet’s “Englands of the Mind” lecture quoted earlier in this chapter regarding Hughes’s consonantal, English style. And for Lloyd, identifications such as these are not only, as he says, “mysterious” – a word that is, in this context, all but synonymous with “bafflingly unfounded” – but also fly in the face of language’s arbitrary nature, that which accommodates difference, that which accommodates the very real differences in Northern Ireland that require real, not symbolic, solutions. As Lloyd remarks, such identifications enable a “return to place, a reterritorialization […] which symbolically restores the interrupted continuity of identity and ground. An implicit theory of language operates here, for which the name is naturally integrated with place, the sign identified with the signified, the subject with the object.”

By employing the notion of “reterritorialization,” for which the notions of “a return to place” or “a reclaiming of a home” could be equally substituted, Lloyd illustrates the broader ethical concerns that potentially haunt Heaney’s “home” aesthetic and its relation to the elegiac poetic I am tracing here. Does the pursuit of a “home” for suffering

52 Ibid., 23.
obliterate difference? Does it mask – does it naturalize\textsuperscript{53} – the identity politics out of which the Northern Irish discourses of sectarian violence, reprisal killings, and martyrdom originate, discourses that are employed in the name of mourning and suffering? Beyond the context of Northern Ireland, is Heaney’s pursuit of affective materialities of linguistic mourning itself ethically bankrupt, symptomatic of, to quote Lloyd, a wider “theory of language” that dehistoricizes mourning, and which is therefore blind to – or, worse, hides – differences in mourning across cultural, gendered, religious, and racial lines, among many others? And, in the end, is it an elegiac poetic that privileges the aesthetic over the ethical – one that, regardless of difference, seeks beauty – in the pleasure of poetry – at the sacrifice of the painful realities of loss?

I have recounted Lloyd’s critique at length not only because of these wider implications regarding the ethics of Heaney’s elegiac poetic – the bog elegies occasion the critique, but the critique ramifies across the elegies featured in this chapter – but also because Lloyd’s evidence is, frankly, compelling, his argument nearly convincing. Alongside Heaney’s identification of the consonantal with English, Lloyd churns up further evidence of the poet’s tendency to “reterritorialize” – the poem “Anahorish,” for example (also important to the elegy for Hughes), which, along with Heaney’s other place-name poems, seems to merge word with world, language and nature.\textsuperscript{54} From the bog poems, Lloyd cites what is arguably Heaney’s most explicit conflation of word and world, when, in “Bog Queen,” the titular speaker of the poem declares, “My body was  

\textsuperscript{53} By which I mean, in erasing the lines between sign and signified, by erasing difference, the cultural and the linguistic is made to appear “natural”; see also ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{54} He also includes Heaney’s frequent use of kennings – what he calls “compounds” – among the list of stylistic tropes that signify the poet’s tendency to “merge,” his putting-together of things. The reader will recall, these kennings were also a stylistic trait of the Hughes elegy. Ibid., 24-25. Other place-name poems include “Toome,” “Broagh,” and “A New Song,” all from Heaney’s Wintering Out (1972).
braille,” expressing a kind of legible materiality. A line such as this suggests that Heaney’s interest in the relationship between language and material is not primarily philological, that he really does want a synthesis between language and material thing. Synthesis, it could even be argued, is the primary currency of Heaney’s bog poems.

“The Grauballe Man,” for example, is rife with the kinds of synthesizing stylistic traits that trouble Lloyd. It is an elegy that equates the archetypal Grauballe Man’s preserved bog body – whose throat, apparently, was cut in ritual sacrifice – with those bodies of “hooded,” “slashed” victims of Northern Irish violence. The poem begins with a catalog of similes and copulas that describe his body: “The grain of his wrists | is like bog oak,” “His hips are the ridge | and purse of a mussel,” and “his spine an eel arrested | under a glisten of mud,” to name only a few. These are not quite the synthesis of language and material world that are present in, say, Heaney’s place-name poems, but they nevertheless indicate the larger tendency to create one-to-one relationships. More thorny is the poem’s final stanzas, in which the synthesis between Grauballe Man and Northern Irish victim is directly articulated. Reflecting on an image of the Grauballe Man that the poet has committed to memory, he says of the body that it is,

hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:


56 For example, according to my rough count, in the four primary bog body poems of North – “Bog Queen,” “The Grauballe Man,” “Punishment,” and “Strange Fruit” – those stylistic traits that Lloyd argues indicate “synthesis” abound: there are, for example, fifteen copulas (or similes), eleven kennings (or “compounds”), and nearly innumerable onomatopoeic words. (For the importance of this last stylistic trait – not explicitly mentioned by Lloyd – see my analysis of “The Grauballe Man” immediately below.)

57 Though “The Grauballe Man” is not a poem to which Lloyd explicitly turns.

with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.  

The bog body is balanced between “beauty,” in the form of the famous Hellenistic Dying Gaul sculpture, and “atrocity,” in the form of the Northern Irish dead. The suggestion is that the sculpture is too well-composed, “too strictly compassed,” to capture the “actual weight” of those killed in Northern Ireland, and thus atrocity outweighs beauty. For Jahan Ramazani, these final lines even suggest that Heaney actively seeks out the ethically responsible gesture, that he seeks not to privilege the aesthetic over the ethical. “With the thud of this final line,” Ramazani notes, “Heaney hints at an irredeemable violence beyond poetry, the kind of ‘atrocity’ that the poem has continually shown escapes its quaint conceits.”  

The poem’s final lines, Ramazani argues, points to a materiality beyond language, not to a materiality that – in the parlance of this chapter – merges with language. And yet, Ramazani’s reading ignores the synthesis of language and materiality that is captured in words like “slashed” and “dumped” that conclude the poem, onomatopoeic words that seem to perform the very thing they describe. Heaney himself said of these lines that “There is a brutality and a ruthlessness and a cruelty and casualness and abusiveness about ‘slashed and dumped.’ … In a sense you are administering the shock to yourself as well as hopefully to the world and the reader that

59 Ibid., 29.

60 Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 341.
this is what’s being done."⁶¹ In “administering the shock,” Heaney seeks to generate an affective experience in his reader that mirrors his own at the news of such violence; in so doing, the intention is clearly to provide the reader with an experience that will caution against such violence, to suggest there are realities and conflicts beyond the resolutions of poetry, as Ramazani argues. But even as it does so, the sounds of “slashed” and “dumped,” the effect of their materiality, incriminate the poet. If we take Lloyd at his word, the synthesis of language and material that onomatopoeic language like “slashed” and “dumped” engender ultimately betray the poet and his intentions. The mastery of the aesthetic – its “beauty” – outperforms his ethical concerns surrounding atrocity. Heaney simply can’t have his cake and eat it, too.

But must we take Lloyd at his word? Compelling though his argument is, there is much to suggest that his focus is too narrow at times, and that his concerns may even be unwarranted. On the latter point, it is true that Heaney has a tendency – as Lloyd’s evidence, along with evidence reproduced in this chapter, suggest – to conflate language and the material world, to seek synthesis through naming (as exemplified in Heaney’s place-name poems). The concern for Lloyd, here, is the effacing of difference, the flattening of sign and signified; but naming such as Heaney does, his “reterritorialization,” is not the affront to difference that Lloyd assumes. As Steven Pinker notes, even in the case of sound symbolism – in which “the pronunciation of a

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⁶¹ Quoted in BBC Northern Ireland Learning, accessed May 31, 2015. http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/schools/11_16/poetry/war2.shtml. The original source of this quote has, maddeningly, not been identified.
word […] reminds people of an aspect of the referent”\textsuperscript{62} (as is the case in “Anahorish,” or in “slashed and dumped”) – sign and signified remain discrete items. After all, Pinker argues, “you can never even come close to predicting a word’s sound from its meaning or vice versa”:\textsuperscript{63} hence why there exist so many varied written iterations of a dog’s bark across the globe, or why it is quite doubtful that a trip to Anahorish’s “vowel meadow” would lead a person to deduce its place-name. Language simply cannot naturalize its own materiality, its own affect, in that way. The sound of a word or a name can certainly carry variously meaningful associations, but no one-to-one synthesis can ever actually be achieved; in other words, as it was articulated earlier in this chapter, the relationship to language and materiality is defined by the super-linguistic, not the pre-linguistic, affect generated by the materiality of language itself, not by some non-linguistic materiality that language taps into. It is therefore not inexplicable how Heaney might perceive a kind of Englishness in the consonantal diction of Anglo-Saxon poetry, or that the word “dumped” might elicit in his reader a sense of the lifeless body hitting the ground, or that the figure of the bog body might provide a suitably meaningful metaphor for contemporary suffering. It is possible that – as examples of language and imagery rich in historical and affective connotation from which loss may be felt, may be made meaningful – neither a word like “dumped” (at the level of diction) nor an archetype like the Grauballe Man (at the level of method) are the ethical pitfalls that Lloyd’s critiques would suggest.

\textsuperscript{62} Steven Pinker, “What’s in a Name?” in \textit{The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature} (New York: Penguin, 2007), 300. For more on sound symbolism, see the introductory chapter to this project.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
Still, we might grant that what concerns Lloyd here is not the actuality of synthesis but the “trick” of it, the illusion of synthesis and naturalization created by Heaney’s mythic method and the stylistic traits that support that method – that which favors aesthetic resolutions over historical ones. But if that is the case, then as readers of Heaney we cannot ignore the many ways the poet explicitly deconstructs aesthetic privilege. For every “My body was braille,” there are “illiterate roots,” a materiality that remains illegible. In “The Grauballe Man,” before the point at which “slashed and dumped” teeters between a materiality beyond the aesthetic and a materiality that can be aesthetically relished, the poet asks of the bog figure,

Who will say ‘corpse’
to his vivid cast?
Who will say ‘body’
to his opaque repose?65

The poet in these lines all but dares someone (the reader?) to “name” the preserved remains of The Grauballe Man; he prods with the confidence of one who knows its strange materiality resists legibility, and thus aestheticization. Even the catalog of copulas and similes that open the elegy convey the difficulty, if not impossibility, of aesthetically rendering the figure. It is a heterogeneous object, part “bog oak,” part “basalt egg,” “swan’s foot” and “swamp root,” “mussel” and “eel”; it is all of these things, and none of them. It is difference.

Equally important to recognize is Heaney’s own commentary, in prose and poetry, on the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical, and on the dangers of the former overshadowing the latter. In an essay titled, “The Impact of Translation,” while

64 Heaney, “Bog Queen,” 25.

considering the classical inheritance that Eliot and his peers drew from by turning to the past – in other words, their adoption of the mythical method – Heaney remarks that “the poetic tradition inside which they worked cushioned the blast” and that “the beauties of the poetic heritage could be [effective] in keeping at bay the actual savagery of the wartime experience.”

This concern over art’s ability to “cushion the blast” of atrocity is certainly at work in “The Grauballe Man,” as well as in his poetic response to the death of his cousin Colum McCartney, another casualty of sectarian violence, whom the poet elegizes in “The Strand at Lough Beg” in Field Work (1979) and whose revenant Heaney later confronts in the titular poetic sequence of Station Island (1985). In that latter sequence, the ghost of McCartney turns on the poet, and censures him for his “Lough Beg” elegy. He accuses the poem, and the poet, of having “whitewashed ugliness,” the way it “drew | the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio | and saccharined my death with morning dew.”

Thus Heaney poses a self-accusatory stance against his own proclivity to aestheticize suffering, to “cushion the blast” in mourning. It is a stance he already takes in the bog poem “Strange Fruit,” a poem that even Edna Longley admits undermines the determinist attitude of Heaney’s methods. Having spent the majority of the elegy performing the same archetypifying of past and present, the paralleling of bog body and contemporary dead, the final lines relinquish the poetic act and conclude:

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Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
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68 Longley, Poetry in the Wars, 155.
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.\(^69\)

Heaney’s final note in the poem is a self-critical one, a jab at the troubling reverence
towards death and violence that is potentially engendered by mourning through mythic
methods. The actual facts of murder, the girl both “forgotten” and “nameless,” overpower
the aesthetic that would all but venerate her death.\(^70\)

Even more significantly for the purposes of this chapter, Heaney’s commentary on
aesthetics and ethics extends down to the level of linguistic materiality, the way sound in
particular is pulled between beauty and atrocity. It is notable that Heaney, in his essay
“Sounding Auden,” remarks upon a tension he believes Auden himself felt, a tension
between poetry’s “beauty/magic” and its “truth/meaning.”\(^71\) As Heaney describes it,
Auden felt that, “On the one hand, poetry could be regarded as magical incantation,
fundamentally a matter of sound and the power of sound to bind our minds’ and bodies’
apprehensions within an acoustic complex; on the other hand, poetry is a matter of
making wise and true meanings, of commanding our emotional assent by the intelligent
disposition and inquisition of human experience.” Poetry, in other words, has dual
obligations, one to beauty, the other to truth – one to sound and the power it holds over
body and mind, the other to speaking truth and wisdom. Pulling from an essay in which


\(^70\) My analysis has not dwelled too long on either “Strange Fruit” or the McCartney poems. This
is, in part, because Ramazani offers excellent, and more thorough, readings of the role of ethics in these
poems, but also because my primary concern is with the relationship between ethics and the affective,
linguistic materiality that I am tracing across Heaney’s poetic \textit{oeuvre} (and that, as my reading of “The
Grauballe Man” suggests, presents its own challenges – potentially even to Ramazani’s analysis). Gesturing
to these other elegiac works provides a framework for understanding Heaney’s thoughts on the ethical and
the aesthetic, which, as the following paragraph demonstrates, trickle down into the linguistic materiality of
his poetry. For more on the McCartney poems in particular (along with other “ethical” elegies from \textit{Field
Work}), see Ramazani, \textit{Poetry of Mourning}, 345-53.

Auden equates poetry’s beauty/magic with *The Tempest’s Ariel* and its truth/meaning with Prospero, Heaney notes that for the British poet, Ariel “stands for poetry’s enchantment,” which, quoting Auden “‘gives us delight precisely because of its contrast to our historical existence.’”\(^72\) But for Auden – as, I would argue, for Heaney – to “fully indulge [Ariel] would lead poetry into self-deception, and thus the countervailing presence of Prospero,” or truth. Beauty in poetry, in sound, is thus understood to be affecting but also potentially deceptive, something that must be counterbalanced by truth. Heaney concludes that “All this is self-evident” – which might be so, but for our purposes these remarks confirm the limit of Heaney’s sympathies towards the aesthetic, his awareness of the potential hazards of beauty in sound, of the enchanting nature of language’s sonic materiality that must be tethered by “truth” in poetry. They indicate a poet cognizant of the potential risks in frequently using the copula, kennings, or onomatopoeic language.

To be sure, commentary such as this helps paint a more detailed picture of Heaney, one whose relationship with linguistic materiality is more complex and nuanced than Lloyd allows, one whose pursuits of linguistic “homes,” whose efforts to “reterritorialize,” extend beyond the bog poetry or place-name poems of Lloyd’s focus. It is on this point that the narrowness of Lloyd’s argument is most conspicuous; and it is on this point that the true depth of the connection between Heaney’s pursuit of linguistic “homes” and elegy begins to reveal itself. Already this chapter has tracked a pattern of “home-seeking” in his elegies from *North* in 1975 to *Electric Light* in 2001. It is possible, as well, to detect this pattern in his very earliest poems – the most obvious example is, of

course, “Digging,” from *Death of a Naturalist* (1969) – and in his very last poems – such as “Route 110” from *Human Chain* (2010), which tells the story in twelve parts of Heaney’s journey from the Classics section of a bookstore to his home, to his granddaughter “talking baby talk.”

The sheer longevity of Heaney’s pursuit of “home,” the multitude of its various articulations across his volumes of poetry – whether in the shape of the mythical method or at the level of linguistic materiality that is the abiding concern here – indicates not a poet for whom home can be possessed, for whom land is reterritorialized; rather, it indicates a poet for whom home must be continually *sought*, for whom reterritorialization is aspired to but never achieved. It is the preoccupation of a poet for whom *loss* is a defining characteristic. Thus *elegy* becomes the defining mode of Heaney’s poetic. In Richard Kearney’s appropriately titled essay “Heaney and Homecoming,” the Irish philosopher contends that “if Heaney insists that one of the tasks of the poet is to recover a sense of belonging to a shared past […] he construes this task as a *project* rather than a *possession.*”

This notion of Heaney’s pursuit of “homes” as a *project* is an important one, and I would only add that it is a particularly *elegiac* project, one in which recovery is sought out of a central feeling of loss.

The proximity of “home” and the elegiac is nowhere more apparent than in those elegies for which Heaney’s real-world home, his actual “origins,” is the focus. In the elegies for his parents in particular, Heaney continues his pattern of seeking out affective materialities – sounds, rhythms – that he can potentially recover in his own poetry. But whereas in his elegies for other poets Heaney sought out linguistic and poetic

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74 Kearney, “Heaney and Homecoming,” 218.
materialities, and whereas in his elegies for the Northern Irish dead he sought out more “earthly” and archetypal materialities, in his elegies for his parents, the home itself – its sounds, its rhythms – becomes the source of the affectively charged materialities that Heaney’s poetry will seek to recover. The paradox, however, of this attempt – that is, the paradox of seeking a “home” in home – manifests in a series of elegiac poems that teeter on the brink of their own oblivion. If poetic predecessors and earthly archetypes give Heaney historically rich materialities, affective “homes,” then to face loss in his own history, in his own home, is to confront the loss at his very center, to confront the constitutive loss from which his project of pursuing linguistic homes originates. The result of this confrontation is the emergence of silence as a primary trope in these parental elegies: silence is what remains when a language built on loss begins to buckle under its own weight. A tension thus fills these poems, a tension between sound and silence, as silence threatens to overwhelm the sonic recoveries of Heaney’s poetry, even as that poetry proves a stay against silence, against loss. By returning to his own home, Heaney risks losing his way entirely.

The importance of sound and language – the sounds of language – to Heaney’s childhood and the domestic spaces of his home is detectable already in the poet’s commentary around thole that begins this chapter, in his aunt’s use of the word, the memory of which would come flooding back later as he translated Beowulf. But their importance is more thoroughly articulated as well in Heaney’s “Feeling into Words” essay, wherein he credits his childhood encounters with language as creating solid, acoustic foundations for the poetry he will later write. As he describes the experience:

I was getting my first sense of crafting words and for one reason or another, words as bearers of history and mystery began to invite me. Maybe it began very
early when my mother used to recite lists of affixes and suffixes, and Latin roots, with their English meanings, rhymes that formed part of her schooling in the early part of the century. Maybe it began with the exotic listing on the wireless dial: Stuttgart, Leipzig, Oslo, Hilversum. Maybe it was stirred by the beautiful sprung rhythms of the old BBC weather forecast: Dogger, Rockall, Malin, Shetland, Faroes, Finisterre; or with the gorgeous and inane phraseology of the catechism; or with the litany of the household: Tower of Gold, Ark of the Covenant, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star, Health of the Sick, Refuge of Sinners, Comforter of the Afflicted. None of these things were consciously savored at the time but I think the fact that I still recall them with ease, and can delight in them as verbal music, means that they were bedding the ear with a kind of linguistic hardcore that could be built on some day.75

The depiction of home in this passage is not an insulated one, of course – religion, school, and a vast world delivered via the radio all encroach into the household – but it is a hub nonetheless, the origin, it might be said, of Heaney’s own linguistic being. The way these various linguistic influences “bed” the poet’s ear even recalls Denise Riley’s notion of a linguistic unconscious, the way language, replete with its own history, nevertheless embeds itself in the personal.76 In the intimate spaces of his childhood home, language – in its materiality, in its “verbal music” – is mother to Heaney the poet.

Heaney’s actual mother, Margaret Heaney, is an accomplice to the poet’s linguistic birth, as he describes it in the above passage, through her recitations of Latin roots and school rhymes; and the poet holds her similarly responsible in the opening stanzas of his highly regarded elegy for his mother, the eight-part sonnet sequence “Clearances,” from The Haw Lantern (1987).77 The proem that launches the sequence

75 Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” 45.

76 See Denise Riley, Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 15. See also the introductory chapter of this dissertation, as well as its final chapter, in which the topic is elaborated more fully.

77 The third part of the sequence was recently named Ireland’s “best-loved poem” in the past 100 years; see Douglas Dalby, “Seamus Heaney Work Wins Contest Honoring Ireland’s Poets and Its Past,”
tells of an education for which sound plays a primary role. What begins with his mother’s instructions for splitting coal (along the grain, with the hammer at the correct angle) quickly becomes a reflection on sound, on the sound of Heaney’s poetry. Having heard the coal split, Heaney recalls:

*The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,*  
*Its co-opted and obliterated echo,*  
*Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen,*  
*Taught me between the hammer and the block*  
*To face the music: Teach me now to listen,*  
*To strike it rich behind the linear black.*

The home place offers up sounds, the “alluring blow,” that not only will echo through the sonnet sequence but will even instruct him in what to hear, teach him “to listen.” Like the block that co-opts and obliterates the echo of the hammer’s blow, Heaney co-opts and obliterates its sound in his elegy, soaking it up in language. Ramazani notes that the word “taught” in these stanzas imitate the blow of the hammer. And while I fully agree with Ramazani’s sharp insight, the point I make here is that the proem announces the significance of sound more generally as it ripples through the sonnet sequence as a whole – in the various ways I track below. As the sound of the blow doubles into the sounds of language, so too does the proem begin to trade in double-meanings, in puns. Heaney, for one, must “face the music,” both because he must hear what it has to offer and because his mother’s death is a fact he must now confront. In doing so, he will “strike it rich,” both because he has learned how to create music in his poetry, to imbue his language


with the affective force of the blow, and because, in writing her elegy, he profits – aesthetically, if not monetarily – from his mother’s death. (Heaney’s nod in this pun to profiting from death reaffirms that he is cognizant of the ethical binds that writing elegy places him in; so even as he undertakes a new kind of “synthesis” in this sequence – merging the acoustic materials of home and language – and even if the nod alone does not exonerate him from ethical responsibility, nevertheless, within the framework of previously voiced ethical concerns, the nod is a reassuring gesture.)

And so Heaney does strike, and thus embarks on the eight-part sequence.

The first two sonnets of “Clearances” are significant in their own right, but it is not until the third part that the sounds of home are once again of central importance. The poem begins with a memory of Heaney and his mother alone (the others are at church) peeling potatoes. The bucket of water in which the potatoes are stored sits between them; the potatoes in the bucket are “things to share.” With this bucket of water, Heaney begins to hint at an intimacy between the poet and his mother, an intimacy that will find its full articulation by poem’s end. The poet zooms in on the sounds of their work, as the two drop the peeled potatoes back into the bucket-water: “And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes | From each other’s work would bring us to our senses.” Heaney has punned again: in coming to their “senses,” the poem suggests both that the boy and his mother are awoken from a kind of hypnotic enchantment of their work, and that they become alert to their sense-experience of that moment, to the sounds of the potatoes’

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80 Additionally, as with the elegies for Hughes and Brodsky, the ethical stakes of this elegy, while not absent, are significantly lower. Again, the ethical implications of a synthesizing – and thus naturalizing – linguistic materiality are not something to dismiss absolutely; but outside the framework of identity politics, the concerns are not as pressing.

81 Heaney, “Clearances,” 27.
“splashes” – a word that, in its onomatopoetic echo, awakens the reader, too, to his or her senses.82

The importance of this sound is suggested at the point of the sonnet’s volta, when other sounds interrupt the speaker’s memory, sounds – significantly more abrasive – of the priest and crying mourners at the deathbed of Heaney’s mother. The sound of the potatoes dropping is thus in stark contrast to these deathbed noises. And so, as if to escape these more severe sounds, the poet returns to his memory in the poem’s final lines: he observes, “I remembered her head bent towards my head, | her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives – | Never closer the whole rest of our lives.” The moment is one of intimacy for Heaney and his mother, and it is an intimacy rendered in linguistic terms. Aside from the mere orality signified by their proximal, breathing mouths, their language is conveyed by the “fluent” knives – fluent, meaning, not only skilled in the peeling of potatoes but also, in being skilled, conversant in a common tongue. The importance of sound, too, is reinforced in the description of the “dipping” knives, in which the reader again hears the “splash” of the potatoes in the sonnet’s first eight lines. And so, in these domestic sounds of potatoes in water, in a household language of fluent knives, the poet draws out a moment of closeness for him and his mother. Sound and language consolidate the intimate.

The seams of this intimacy, stitched by language, are soon exposed, however, as the following sonnet in the sequence gestures to the duplicitous nature of a language shared between Seamus and Margaret. At the near center-point of the sonnet sequence,

82 It also smacks of the Oedipal dynamics in play throughout the elegy. For more on this particular theme in “Clearances,” see Ramazani, 355-356, as well as Iain Twiddy, Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 105-109.
the elegy thus begins to counter the galvanizing work of sound and language that its
proem initiates. The point of contention in the poem arises out of the mother’s choice of
diction: in order to not appear “false,” she falsely downplays her learnedness. “Fear of
affectation,” says the poet, “made her affect | Inadequacy whenever it came to |
Pronouncing words ‘beyond her.’ Bertold Brek.”83 Her mispronunciation of the German
playwright’s name, her failure to sound the plosive “t” that should close both his first and
last name, distances the child from his mother, both of whom know better. This distance
is reinforced in the sonnet by the failure of “Brek” – lacking its final consonant – to hard-
rhyme with “affect” two lines before it. The tactic even becomes a means by which
Margaret separates herself from her son; as Heaney explains, “With more challenge than
pride, she’d tell me, ‘You | Know all them things,’” her use of improper grammar only
ensuring the separation, only heightening the challenge. The sounds of home, the Bertold
Breks and the “all them things,” are thus not the sounds of intimacy but the sounds of
estrangement.

Or, at least, her diction threatens estrangement, until Heaney refuses to take up his
mother’s challenge. As the poem describes, rather than admit he does know “all them
things,” he instead adjusts his speech as well: “I’d naw and aye | And decently relapse
into the wrong | Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.”84 The poem concludes, then,
by acknowledging the rupture her affectation creates, but allowing that, like the hammer
to the coal, this affectation functions as a kind of education, one that allies them in tacit
understanding. The poem thus strikes a careful balance, one that I would present in terms

84 Ibid.
of the notion of artifice and the double meaning it holds. On the one hand, that is, the mother’s affected, artificial diction breaks the sense of synthesis and intimacy generated by sound that heretofore has guided the poem. But on the other hand, it serves to ally, to share in a different intimacy, and to educate the young Heaney in the powerful relationship of diction and identity that will ultimately enliven his own artifice, his own sounds, his poetry. In the path I have been tracking here, this fourth poem in the sequence is important for introducing tension to the dynamics of sound established in its opening lines, but so, too, is it for introducing this latter, empowering sense of artifice, a theme that “Clearances” will revisit again in its concluding moments.

If this fourth poem begins to deconstruct the work of sound initiated in the sonnet sequence’s earlier poems, then this deconstructive act is furthered in the sequence’s seventh poem, during which silence becomes the dominant trope. The sonnet begins by noting that Heaney’s father, at his dying wife’s side, now says more to her than he ever has before. The significance and implications of his father’s silence will be further examined in the paternal elegies at the end of this chapter, but in the maternal elegy of “Clearances,” it is the break in his silence that is most telling, so suggestive of time wasted in silence, so desperate for more to be said. The poem continues to play out this battle between sound and silence: for the Heaney children, the sound of their father’s voluminous chatter is something for which they are “overjoyed,” and yet, their mother “could not hear” his words. For his children, his chattering voice presents a possible stay – unexpected, overjoying – against silence, but to their unhearing mother, it holds no potency. As if to decide a winner in the battle between sound and silence, at the turn of

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85 Ibid., 31.
the volta, the poem flatly states, “Then she was dead,” and her absent “pulsebeat” signals that silence was the more formidable opponent. And yet silence, like artifice in the earlier poem, is not entirely detrimental. The sonnet’s final lines strike an ambivalent note:

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.

With “high cries” “felled,” the silence is pervasive and irreparable. But silence has also opened to those in the room the titular “Clearances,” suggestive here of clarity, clearness, and “a pure change.” These clearances are accompanied by the penetrating “space” the room’s occupants now “keep” – the mother’s life now empties into theirs – but in a world of sound, silence is definitive. Death has gifted those in the room their mother’s life to keep – complete, almost tidy in its ending. But such a gift comes only at the sacrifice of that irreparable loss, that unending silence.

Silence is figured equally ambivalently in the sequence’s closing poem. The sonnet resumes, thematically, where the previous poem left off. “I thought of walking round and round a space,” the poet says, “Utterly empty, utterly a source.” Emptiness, as in the previous poem, is not merely what remains in the shadow of death, but is a space with its own capacity to yield. And, in a sense, it does yield: the poet, as he was originally instructed in the proem to “Clearances,” once again “faces the music” – not, at this juncture, directly to his mother’s death, but indirectly through the sounds of a chestnut tree – one that stands (no longer) in his childhood home – being chopped down. Heaney hears “the hatchet’s differentiated | Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh | and the collapse” of the tree. Clearly the felled chestnut metaphorically echoes the death of the poet’s mother,

86 Ibid., 32.
but more pertinently, it echoes the movement from sound to silence, from “alluring blow”
to “obliterated echo,” that takes place over the course of the sonnet sequence. The “cut,”
the “crack,” and the “sigh” of the tree offer a fleeting moment of respite from silence, but
all three warn of the silence to come in their wake. Still, as was the case in the prior
poem, the silence conveyed here is not necessarily a debilitating one. Returning to the
chestnut in its final lines, the poet observes that “Its heft and hush become a bright
nowhere | a soul ramifying and forever | silent, beyond silence listened for.” As in the
previous poem, these final lines point to a lasting, irreparable silence: if the hammer-blown in the sequence’s proem taught the poet how to listen, the sequence concludes with a
silence beyond that which can be “listened for.” And yet, nowhere’s brightness recalls the
“Clearances” of the previous poem, a place of clarity, of clearness, or purity. “Nowhere”
is light’s cloudless somewhere. It gives, even in its emptiness. It is from nowhere, after
all, that the soul of Heaney’s tree – of Heaney’s mother – ramifies elsewhere, in the
linguistic sounds, say, that course through the series of eight poems that compose
“Clearances.”

It is this paradox – silence as emptiness, silence as source – that results from
Heaney’s elegiac, home-seeking turn to home. So interconnected is his project of home-
seeking with his own constitutive feeling of loss – that origin from which to pursue other
linguistic sources of mourning – that to face loss in his actual home is to find only
emptiness. It is no coincidence, for this reason, that the chestnut tree is “coeval” with
Heaney: by sharing the same origin, Heaney confronts his own oblivion in the oblivion of
the tree. The “culture” of suffering Heaney seeks out here is his own culture, himself –
but that culture is crumbling. And yet, if loss and suffering already constitute his pursuit
of “homes,” of origins, than it is also already that “home,” that source, from which he has always written. “Utterly emptied, utterly a source.” Susan Stewart opens her examination of the role of the senses in poetry, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002), by claiming that “poetry is a force against effacement,” that the “cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness.” As a potential description of Heaney’s poetic, Stewart’s sense of poetry articulated here is particularly incisive; as a way of understanding “Clearances” in particular, it is singularly helpful. If silence concludes the elegy, it is a silence that is ultimately generative. As the penultimate poem states, at the moment of his mother’s death, “The space we stood around had been emptied | into us to keep.”

Heaney thus *keeps* his mother in his poetry, in the linguistic materials – in the domestic sounds – that *ramify* through the sequence. In sound, Heaney counters “the oblivion of darkness,” the finality of death, the emptiness of silence.

Silence plays a significant role, as well, in Heaney’s elegies for his father, Patrick Heaney, and the paradox of silence-as-emptiness/silence-as-source continues in these poems. Silence is significant in these poems, however, for reasons beyond those suggested in “Clearances,” because Patrick Heaney was a notoriously silent person (as the penultimate poem of that sonnet sequence suggests). In fact, it might be said that if Heaney’s mother educated her son in sound, Heaney’s father educated the boy in silence. Silence is his paternal inheritance. Thus, in these elegies, Heaney seems to consider the important role silence plays; two elegies, in their brevity, even seem to desire their own

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89 For more on inheritance in Heaney’s parental elegies, see Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy*, 103-123.
silence. But in the end, as the saying goes, “silence can be deafening,” and, as he does in
“Clearances,” the poet, the sound-maker, lands on the notion that much can be said
through silence.

“The Stone Verdict,” for example, toys with the notion that to say anything is to
say too much. A proleptic elegy for his father from The Haw Lantern, the poem imagines
his parent standing in judgment upon his death. The poet hopes, for his father’s sake, that
whatever judgment falls on him, it will be communicated not through words but through
some other means. In part, he wishes so because silence befits his father: “It will be no
justice if the sentence is blabbed out. | He will expect more than words in the ultimate
court | He relied on through a lifetime’s speechlessness.” As “blabbed” sonically
implies, a spoken judgement will be an affront, an injustice to the man who made his way
through life perfectly well in silence. And so, as an alternative form of judgment, Heaney
suggests a precedent from classical literature in the form of Hermes, who, according to
the tale, stands trial for the murder of Argos. Hermes’s verdict is cast not in voice, not
through pronouncement, but with the placing of stones, each of which is a vote of guilt
(though he is eventually acquitted). No such stone judgment, Heaney concludes, will his
father receive, however: “Somebody will break at last to say, ‘Here | His spirit lingers,’
and will have said too much.” Even to announce his father’s own acquittal is to say too
much; even the pronouncement that “Here,” in Heaven, “His spirit lingers,” is
unwelcome. The poem, in this way, posits the idea that, when his father does die, perhaps
silence is the appropriate form of elegiac expression, that no elegy is the appropriate
elegy.

1987), 17.
After his father’s death in 1986, however, Heaney does write elegies for him; but at least in a few cases, the brevity of these poems implies that Heaney has taken himself at his word, that to say anything is to say too much. Two such elegies appear in *Seeing Things* (1991), in which one immediately follows the other. The first, “1.1.87,” furthers the theme of inheritance that has been present already in these parental elegies. It reads, in its entirety, “Dangerous pavements. | But I face the ice this year | With my father’s stick.”\(^1\) As the title suggests, it is the start of a new year, and with it comes new dangers and new conflicts, here figured in January’s icy paths. Heaney has a newfound confidence, though, in the form of his father’s ash walking stick, which will guide him and protect him. His father’s ash stick is a frequent presence in poems about his father, from the “Stone Verdict,” to “The Ash Plant,” to “The Harvest Bow”; but in the relatively short “1.1.87,” it is the “tick” of this stick against the pavement and the ice – cautioning him, steadying him – that will outlast the poem. Unspoken, or at least hidden within the poem’s final word, it is that tick that will put the poet in good stead. The poem thus says very little, but gestures to the sound beyond it: Heaney’s father’s stick, saying more than his words will.\(^2\)

In the poem that immediately follows, “An August Night,” Heaney is once again relatively tight-lipped. The poet offers the simple image of two ferrets at play, a metaphor for his father’s hands in death, relieved of the pains of age and use. The poem, again in its entirety, reads: “His hands were warm and small and knowledgeable. | When I saw them

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\(^2\) And it is a sound that will be heard again in the analysis of “The Harvest Bow” below.
again last night, they were two ferrets, | Playing all by themselves in a moonlit field.”

The moonlit field in this poem gains certain currency by recalling the “bright nowhere” of “Clearances,” as if the ferrets are unheard in that isolated space but bursting with energy nevertheless – this, not unlike the poem itself, which is on the brink of silence, yet manages to “speak” a great deal in its short amount of space: a poem about endings, but which is also about the release that accompanies such endings.

In its focus on his father’s hands, “An August Night” also gains currency by recalling another famous poem, Heaney’s “The Harvest Bow,” from *Field Work*. While “The Harvest Bow” is not an elegy *per se*, “An August Night,” by alluding to it, seems to retroactively make it so – a proto-elegy, an elegy lying in wait. It is a poem that speaks back to “An August Night,” as well as to “1.1.87”: if those latter poems creep toward silence, this poem suggests the presence of sounds that reside in their shadows. The ash stick from “1.1.87,” for instance, appears first in this earlier poem, its “tick” more dynamically conveyed here: in the poem’s fourth stanza, Heaney recalls walking with his father through rural Ireland, he with a fishing rod, and his father with his stick, which

“The tips of weeds and bushes | Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes | Nothing.”

The poem beats to the stick’s beatings, and in so doing, like the domestic sounds of “Clearances” – the hammer-blow, the splash – it becomes another object “kept” in poetry, as well as a sound that is difficult not to hear echoing in “1.1.87.” So, too, do his father’s hands first appear in “The Harvest Bow,” hands not at play – as in

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“An August Night” – but at work, plaiting the titular bow. It is through the work of his father’s hands that Heaney once again toys with the tension between sound and silence that is discernible in the elegy for his mother. For in making the harvest bow, his father “implicated the mellowed silence in you | in wheat […] | Into a knowable corona.”

Silence – his father’s silence – once again gives way to light, to knowledge. His father’s harvest bow, like his mother’s hammer blow, educates the child; but in the case of this poem, it is an education in silence, a knowledge gained not from sound but from the unspoken. Picking up the bow, the speaker observes, “I tell and finger it like braille, | Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.” Heaney learns to read from the haptic, to listen to the palpable, as he does with the Bog Queen’s “braille” body from his earlier poem.

Silence, once again, is not simply emptiness; it is also a source.

In fact, in all of Heaney’s elegiac pursuits of “home,” he may very well be “gleaning the unsaid off the palpable.” It is a phrase that could itself serve as a definition of affect as it functions in his poetry, in which Heaney is “gleaning [home] off [the linguistic].” In other words, whether in the form of “passive suffering,” or “measured mourning,” whether in reaching back to myth or to the materialities of the bog and of the land, whether seeking out household sounds or domestic silences, Heaney gleans from linguistic materiality the unsaid: affect – that which is not explicitly stated, which is “unsaid,” but which is nevertheless palpable, felt, and in so being actually speaks volumes. To recover these affective materialities is to make mourning possible, is to know that in the “history and mystery”\(^5\) of words is a well of affect to tap. And if his attempts to render affect from and in linguistic materiality wind up placing him in the

\(^{95}\) Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” 45.
ethically precarious position of obscuring that history – of favoring the “mystery” over the “history” – then perhaps it is enough to know that for Heaney, as he states in “The Harvest Bow,” “The end of art is peace.” Such a comment suggests that the poet knows art’s aim (or its completion) is either peace as harmony, or peace as silence. And if not, perhaps, then, it is enough to turn to another endpoint, the one found in his late poem, “Route 110,” where, upon reaching his home, he finds his baby granddaughter babbling – not silence, but rather, *pure sound*. 
Among Paul Muldoon’s most acclaimed poems are his elegies. That this is the case, however, might give the reader pause. How would Muldoon, whose poetry is generally characterized as ludic, erudite, and often opaque, find critical favor for his work in a genre that often demands a certain gravitas and emotional transparency from its poet? Why is it that his elegy “Incantata” – no short poem – has been anthologized in multiple volumes, and yet, as Helen Vendler once famously noted, his poetry has “a hole in the middle where the feeling should be”? Several potential answers to this apparent conundrum present themselves in the critical literature on Muldoon. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that the elegiac genre itself has become capacious enough to accommodate Muldoon’s style – that, in fact, the poet fits snugly within the larger trajectory of the elegy in the twentieth century as Jahan Ramazani has mapped it, in which elegists more frequently employ the kinds of ironic stance and parodic mode that

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befs Muldoon’s work. Other scholars argue, conversely, that it is Muldoon’s style that has changed, that his style now better accommodates the genre. This latter perspective is shared by Vendler in her review of Muldoon’s collection *Horse Latitudes* (2006); she remarks, after having spent considerable space unpacking two elegies from the volume, that “Paul Muldoon seems to me a more convincing poet now than he was ten or fifteen years ago,” that “Age has deepened Muldoon’s poetry,” and that he is now able to “bear aloft both grief and playfulness.” Time has brought Muldoon a great deal of loss, and in grappling with that loss, Vendler argues, he has plumbed new emotional depths.

Both arguments – that is, on the one hand, that the genre of elegy has changed, and, on the other hand, that Muldoon’s style has changed – have merit, and, in fact, together they speak to the linguistic, tonal, and affective complexity of his elegies. These poems are simultaneously somber and ludic, opaque and direct, ironic and sincere, as well as many other things, and it is these very complexities of language, tone, and emotion that provide the central focus of this chapter. In his elegies, and in particular through his now infamous use of the same ninety rhyme sounds that he employs across multiple poems, Muldoon plots the linguistic coordinates of his grief, charting what

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4 Helen Vendler, “Fanciness and Fatality,” review of *Horse Latitudes*, by Paul Muldoon, *The New Republic* 235 (November 9, 2006): 26-33. Jefferson Holdridge has similarly noted this change in Vendler’s stance, though it is worth adding that, even in her earlier review for the *New York Review of Books*, she was already backing down from her claim that Muldoon’s poetry lacked feeling – a retraction based on her reading of none other than “Incantata”; see Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon* (Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2008), 174. Tim Kendall has also remarked, with regards to Muldoon’s elegy “Yarrow” from his earlier collection *The Annals of Chile* (1994), that the poem “is as emotionally charged as anything Muldoon has ever written,” similarly suggesting that the elegy is an exceptional (in both senses) genre for Muldoon; see Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Chester Springs: Dufour, 1996), 226.
amounts to both a map of that grief and a key to reading that map. This distinctive practice of plotting grief produces a kind of affective echo-chamber in which, through an accumulation of affect generated by his repeated use of the same language and rhyme, Muldoon’s elegies hold the promise of a shared emotional intimacy between poet and reader. In returning time and again to the same end-rhymes, his language continually echoes its own sonic and affective history, even as it generates new points along that history; for the dedicated reader of Muldoon, the accumulating complexities of that history only deepen the bond (however imperfect, if no less compelling) between the reader and the poet. Ultimately, Muldoon thematizes and reflects on his poetic techniques – what I call his end-rhyme aesthetic of affective accumulation – and their effects, not only by suggesting the untenable nature of that promise of emotional intimacy but also by considering the problematic aestheticization of loss and grief that is a consequence of those techniques. And while it is surely a fool’s errand to seek an answer to the question that opens this chapter – why Muldoon’s elegies in particular should be critically lauded – in its examination of the linguistic and affective work of these poems, it nevertheless offers a few potential reasons.

In a sense, it seems only fitting to trace, as I do here, a chronology of Muldoon’s elegies, though of course it is unlikely that any new reader of Muldoon would begin with his first volume, New Weather (1973), and read forward. Still, the developmental nature of his elegiac work over time is a relevant if not necessary feature of the affective dynamics I see at work in his poetry. For that reason, I begin with an elegy from his
The elegy, called “The Mirror,” does not use any of the ninety rhyme sounds that will become central to this chapter. The poem is not even original to Muldoon; rather, it is a translation from the Irish of Michael Davitt’s elegy for his father, “An Scáthán.” Its status as an elegy that might bear special significance to Muldoon is furthermore questionable, as its publication predated the death of his own father by three years. And yet, the curious circumstances of this early elegy offer an initial, and uncluttered, glimpse of language’s relationship to grief as it functions across Muldoon’s work – namely that language does not merely express or represent grief but that it provides a kind of stage on which to experience it (such that Muldoon’s father need not have yet died, so to speak, for the poet to – however imaginatively – mourn his death in this poem). “The Mirror” begins,

He was no longer my father
but I was still his son:
I would get to grips with that cold paradox,
the remote figure in his Sunday best
who was buried the next day.

If we read this poem with respect to Davitt, in the context of its original composition – following his father’s death – the paradox this stanza articulates of still being a son even

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5 Elegies are rare in Muldoon’s early volumes. Not until Meeting the British (1987), following the death of his father the year before, does the poet begin writing more frequently in the genre. Though his mother died in 1973, twenty years passed before he began to elegize her in The Annals of Chile. I hesitate to diagnose the reasons for this twenty-year gap, though one potential explanation is the complex and apparently fraught relationship between Muldoon and his mother, which are evident in poems (if we take them by their word) like “Brazil,” “They That Wash on Thursday,” and “Yarrow,” the sprawling elegy for his mother in Annals. Muldoon has also been quoted as remarking that “I’m sure we [he and his mother] had some unfinished business.” See Robert Potts, “The Poet at Play,” Guardian, May 11, 2001, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/may/12/poetry.artsandhumanities. Jefferson Holdridge suggests the death (also by cancer) in 1992 of Muldoon’s partner Mary Farl Powers, who is elegized in both “Yarrow” and “Incantata” in Annals, may have reignited the poet’s grief for his mother. See Holdridge, The Poetry of Paul Muldoon, 130.

while the father, being dead, is no longer a father, makes logical sense. With respect to Muldoon, though–his father being still alive–the poem acts as a kind of imaginative projection. Whereas Davitt is grappling with death, Muldoon is grappling with the idea of grappling with death. This shift is particularly clear in the line, “I would get to grips with that cold paradox.” A literal translation of Davitt’s original Irish reads “I would embrace the paradox,” in which the word “embrace” suggests resolution, a coming to terms with death. This sense of resolution is lost, however, when Muldoon translates the Irish as “get to grips with,” a phrase that suggests, instead, the translator’s sense of struggle with a seemingly inevitable future moment, a kind of rehearsal of his own inescapable experience of mourning.

Refracted through the lens of Muldoon as translator—as opposed to that of Davitt as writer—the elegy’s closing images similarly take new shape. In the poem’s third and final section, the speaker imagines refurbishing the bedroom, a task his father had been in the midst of doing before he passed. In fact, it was one particular task during refurbishment—lifting a mirror off the wall—that seemed to have fatally overworked his father; and yet, despite the circumstances of his death, by poem’s end, the father returns as a revenant to help his son place the mirror back on the wall:

And we lifted the mirror back in position
above the fireplace,
my father holding it steady
while I drove home
the two nails.8

7 I would like to thank my friend and former Irish-language teacher Gráinne Ní Mhuirí for providing an alternative, literal translation of Davitt’s poem, with which to better discern Muldoon’s editorial decisions.

For Davitt, again, the concluding lines suggest resolution, consolation: the father returns, congenially lends a hand, and the job is finished. The mirror is up, hanging by two nails – nails which certainly double for the nails of the coffin in which the father may now peacefully rest. With regard to Muldoon’s act of translation, however, this all feels a bit premature. The ghost of the father returns to give a hand not to his own eternal rest but to his untimely and hasty confinement in the grave. And as it is the poet who drives the nails home, Muldoon appears to be indicting himself (the first of what will be many self-indictments in his elegies). In undertaking this flight of fanciful mourning, the poet places himself in the odd position of imagining his father’s death, of sealing his father’s coffin before it is appropriate to do so. Whereas for Davitt the poem reads as delivering consolation from grief, in Muldoon’s hands, the poem reads as simply “morbid,” not merely because it betrays the poet’s concerns about death but because those concerns are borderline unwholesome and potentially unsettling – hence the poem’s end, in which the poet indicts himself for indulging the experience of mourning, for imagining and rehearsing through language that very experience.

The morbid quality of this poem is not exceptional, however, from Muldoon’s other elegiac work, and for this reason it should not be read as a consequence of the peculiar circumstances of the poet imagining his father’s death before it has happened. On the contrary, Muldoon’s elegies suggest the very opposite: that there is very little, if any, difference between elegiac writing prior to death and elegiac writing following death. “The Coney,” a poem from his next volume, *Meeting the British* (1987), is particularly illustrative of this, because it more comfortably fits within a conventional understanding of elegy, having been written following his father’s death a year earlier. It
is also a poem that one might consider quite morbid because, like “The Mirror,” it makes an indulgence of death (in this case, however, it does so by almost literally making a cartoon of it); the poem thus also departs from, as I have earlier suggested, the kind of somber tonality conventionally attributed to elegy.

“The Coney” begins by ruminating, much like in “The Mirror,” on tasks undertaken by the poet and his father; we have migrated in this later poem, however, from the bedroom to the yard. Any sense of solemnity or reverence for these tasks is quickly curtailed with the intrusion of the titular coney, who emerges suddenly from inside his father’s cap; in the middle of this poem, the poet all but literally pulls a rabbit out of his hat. Tonally, this elegy thus is pitched somewhere between the weight of responsibility – it begins with Muldoon taking up the work his father can no longer perform (“Although I have never learned to mow | I suddenly found myself half-way through | last year’s pea-sticks”9) – and the thrill of magic, not only in the magician’s tricks but in the rabbit who speaks in a wise-cracker tone befitting Bugs Bunny.10 This tonal tension is further complicated when the coney, who has by this point endeared himself to the reader with his “front teeth” and “bathing-togs,” jumps into a swimming pool already populated by a pack of dogs, which proceed to gruesomely flay the rabbit. Tonally schizophrenic, the poem asks us to, as it were, “get to grips with that cold


10 Clair Wills has also noted the coney’s similarities to Bugs Bunny; see Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), 120. I would add to her observation that in its use of a cartoon figure from childhood, Muldoon is able to not only configure himself as a child, or adolescent (not yet fully in command of the responsibilities of adulthood), but also channel the sense of comical violence that, in its confrontation with real-world death, will eventually make this poem so unsettling.
paradox” in which the somber, the cartoonish, and the grisly pull each other in seemingly conflicting directions.

If the scene were merely a cartoon, the violence unleashed upon Bugs Bunny would be appropriate; and yet, smack dab in the middle of a meditation on death, dying, and the duties that linger in death’s wake, the Looney Tunes universe twists into a much more threatening landscape. The final turn of the screw occurs when Bugs Bunny sends out the following invitation: “Come on in, Paddy Muldoon.”11 To whom the coney actually extends this invitation is unclear: is it Paul, or is it his father, Patrick (i.e. “Paddy” as the rabbit says)? Or is it Paul as his father, who has already taken on his father’s responsibilities? This final possibility is supported by the poem’s closing lines, “And although I have never learned to swim | I would willingly have followed him,” which suggests that Paul will follow in his father’s footsteps, he will pick up the mantle left in his wake. But these lines also suggest that Paul will follow his father’s footsteps into death, hinting at a suicidal impulse in the speaker of the poem: they recall the poem’s opening lines, but whereas mowing the lawn is a relatively harmless activity to undertake, a leap into the pool is literally a matter of life and death for the poet, where the threat of drowning meets the threat of mongrel violence. Indeed, the threat of drowning looms over this poem in its entirety; its tonal juxtapositions appear to suffocate both Muldoon and the reader in its cartoonish and violent configuration of a son “getting to grips” with his father’s death. Significantly, then, even though the poem unfolds in a surreal, cartoonish, fictive setting, it is still able to convey the poet’s grief; in fact, it is through the narrative and linguistic coordinates established by this setting that such grief

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is configured, primarily in the shape of the poet’s own death wish. “The Coney” is thus quite similar to “The Mirror,” even as the composition of each poem falls on either side of the “event” of Muldoon’s father’s death: in both, grief is not simply something that occurs in death’s wake and is then expressed in language; rather, language provides the very stage on which that grief might be performed, the very means by which it can be experienced. Those elements that are surreal and cartoonish in the poem – what makes the elegy morbid – are thus not an affront or in opposition to a more solemn grief; rather, they are the very components with which that grief can take place.

The tonal clash exhibited in “The Coney” will occur in considerably more complicated ways in Muldoon’s later, longer elegies, especially as those elegies begin to recycle the same ninety end-rhymes. And as “The Coney” offers its own small-scale example of these later elegiac methods, so too does his poem “Cauliflowers,” primarily because this latter poem is, as Tim Kendall notes, Muldoon’s first formally published attempt at a sestina. This specific poetic form will become significant for an elegy like “Yarrow,” which Muldoon famously described in interview as a “very complex poem involving nine or ten intercut exploded sestinas”; but it is the sestina form’s general ability to play with and complicate the relationship between sound and affective meaning that make it central to understanding Muldoon’s later elegies more broadly. The complex affective charge of the sestina’s end-words accumulate when their sounds bring

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14 In similar regard, Muldoon further notes of “Yarrow” that it “uses repetition in a way that wouldn’t have occurred to me before Shining Brow,” the first of his select opera librettos. Again, it is the relationship of repetition and sound that most intrigues me here. See Keller, “An Interview,” 9.
their diverse individual contexts into conversation with each other; in other words, the use of an end-word in the second stanza literally echoes its use in the first stanza (even as it retains its own contextual meaning), and the use of an end-word in the third stanza echoes its use in the first and second, and so forth. Each use of an end-word in a stanza of the sestina has its own contextual meaning, but the repeated sound of that end-word records and eventually layers those contexts with greater meaning. The potential to stretch and accrue meaning through sound is even greater with a poet like Paul Muldoon, whose notoriously liberal and playful use of close-rhyme affords him seemingly endless possibilities of accumulation.

“Cauliflowers” is an elegy, again, for his father, from his collection Madoc: A Mystery (1990). In a general sense, this poem contrasts tones much like the previously discussed elegies do: as the poet sits in an Oregon motel, he recalls various memories of his father and uncle over the course of several stanzas until those recollections are interrupted by two lovers in the room next door, which is then interrupted, for example, by the thought of Magritte’s pipe, which is then interrupted again by an image of pipe-bombs that recall the Northern Irish conflict; in other words, tonally in this poem, the introspective abuts the erotic abuts the surrealistic abuts the violent. But these more general tonal tensions – wrought by association – are seeded in more meticulous ways through the sestina’s various end-words and end-rhymes that, over the course of the poem, accrue greater and more complex meaning. Following, for example, the poem’s end-rhyme phrase “going down” as it appears variously throughout the elegy, the reader

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15 Eric Falci remarks that the poem, at the point we encounter the lovers, turns “from narration to association (both sonic and intertextual)”; I am inclined to agree. In this article, I wish to bring this notion of sonic and intertextual association into direction conversation with Muldoon’s elegiac aesthetics. See Falci, Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 67.
finds it not only refers to the price of cauliflowers that “goes down” as well as to a memory of Muldoon’s father “going down | the primrose path” but also to the “lovers | repeatedly going down | on each other.”¹⁶ The decline in the cauliflower’s price encounters the remembered image of his father, which then encounters a sexual act between lovers. This phrase “going down” thus goes down its own windy path; but within the sestina, it also cannot help but turn back on itself again and again, recalling, through rhyme, where it originated and has since been.

Arguably more complicated is the end-rhyme that begins, in the first stanza, as “Belfast market,” where the price of cauliflower is going down. What follows in the second stanza is the memory of a platoon that Muldoon can just “make out”; following that, it is the “mud-guard” of a lorry he remembers his uncle leaning against; then, the “scorch-marked” pocket into which his father slips his pipe; then “Magritte’s” own pipe that is not a pipe; then “Margaret,” whom the poet asks, “are you grieving?”¹⁷ thus recalling Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Spring and All”; and finally, the “unmarked” pit where the cauliflowers are harvested. It is worth noting that there is no discernible end-word in these rhymes, only end-sounds. And even then, it is not clear what those sounds are: “m-r-k-t,” “m-k-t,” “m-g-r-d,” “m-r-k-d,” “m-g-r-t,” “m-r-g-r-t”? Not only are we faced with varying letter combinations in which these consonants are ordered, but we must also contend with the question of whether the consonants are voiced or unvoiced. These sounds thus signal both their relative closeness as well as their ultimate differences: within their various contextual meanings in their lines and in their stanzas,


¹⁷ Ibid., 201.
they remain distinct, and yet through sound they continue to echo each other. The reader can hear “Magritte” in “Margaret,” but the relatively playful surrealism of Magritte starkly contrasts the sobriety of Muldoon’s reference to Margaret, which, in recalling Hopkins’ poem – about a child who, in mourning the falling of leaves, mourns for herself – gestures to the self-elegiac nature of Muldoon’s poem. Indeed, as we might argue of “The Mirror” and “The Coney,” this poem seems more interested in Muldoon than in his father; or, more accurately, I would contend that this poem – as with many of these elegies – is more interested in the nature of Muldoon’s own mourning, and the relationship of grief to language consequent of that mourning.

This poetic self-reflexivity is no less clear than in the central metaphor of the poem, the titular cauliflowers. As the poem comes to a close, and as the poet has returned to thinking about the passing of his father and uncle, the tornada reads, “All gone down | the original pipe. And the cauliflowers | in an unmarked pit, that were harvested by their own light.” The cauliflowers are, on initial reading, a proxy for the poet’s father, who was a farmer of, among other things, cauliflowers. But, as Eric Falci notes, if the cauliflowers are, as the poem says, “harvested by their own light,” they are no cauliflowers of Patrick Muldoon, whose economic woes surrounding the crop are evident in its declining prices “on the Belfast market” mentioned at the poem’s beginning. The sestina’s end-rhymes, however, behave much like the cauliflowers, flourishing and accruing meaning and affective resonance throughout the poem by echoing each other, by

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18 We might, of course, similarly read “The Coney” as self-elegy.

19 Ibid., 201.

20 Falci, Continuity and Change, 69.
reflecting and refracting – to use the poem’s visual metaphor – their own light. The reader is presented, once again, with an elegiac aesthetic in which the poem sets the stage for its own unfolding, for which language is in dynamic relationship to grief. Whereas the poem begins by depicting a “static” memory of the elegized, the further we proceed into the poem, the more it begins to uproot itself, to progress through association; the poem creates the very circumstances in which it continues. On the one hand, this associative, accumulative aesthetic seems to lose track of its central figure(s), Muldoon’s father (and uncle). And in this way, the poem could very well validate Helen Vendler’s concern that Muldoon’s poetry has a “hole in the middle where the feeling should be”; in other words, in the associative head-game of the poem, we lose, as it were, its heart. It is a concern articulated by the poem itself, beginning as it does with an epigram that describes the science behind the cauliflower’s self-generating light, but which is a quotation attributed to that most untrustworthy source, *The National Inquirer*, thereby suggesting that “Cauliflowers,” too, is all false artifice. And yet, on the other hand, this associative, accumulative aesthetic keeps at the foreground its other central figure, the mourning poet. The poem meanders, it twists, but so does grief, which can at times lose track of its bereaved figure; which can be interrupted by thoughts unbefitting of solemn mourning; which can discover dissonant (sometimes uncomfortably so) relations between death and the erotic, or death and humor; and which, as this particular poem does, can articulate the potential anxieties in indulging these dissonant tones, in hearing sexual and economic registers in the phrase “going down” even as those registers reshape (as if it were some artificial plastic) what the phrase centrally echoes, the elegized father walking along the path.
What the sestina form gives to Muldoon, then, is a fixed poetic structure in which linguist and affective complexity can arise. As he famously described (almost a decade before writing “Cauliflowers”):

I’ve become very interested in structures that can be fixed like mirrors at angles to each other – it relates to narrative form – so that new images can emerge from the setting up of poems in relation to each other: further ironies are possible, further mischief is possible. I hope the mischief I make is of a rewarding kind, not that of a practical joker, and will outline the complexities of being here.  

The end-rhymes of the sestina create these kinds of complex, rewarding ironies, as do the other complex poetic rhyme schemes that Muldoon employs throughout his oeuvre – schemes that are the product of what Justin Quinn identifies as the poet’s tendency towards “procedural form,” by which Muldoon constrains himself by assigning arbitrary formal challenges. What “Cauliflowers” does specifically is demonstrate the close relationship between the complexities created by the sestina form and the complexities also already inherent in grief. If, through its end-words, the sestina records its own history, linguistic grief is similarly defined by history – by which I mean the elegy not only marks the history of a person who has died but also records the history of grief that continues in the wake of that person’s life. Muldoon’s follow-up volume to Madoc, The Annals of Chile, marks the poet’s further elaboration (and complication) of the relationship between poetic form and history, affective echo and linguistic mourning, which he achieves not only through the aforementioned “explosion” of the sonnet form in


“Yarrow” but also through his establishment of the ninety end-rhyme sounds that make up both “Yarrow” and “Incantata” in this collection.

If we read The Annals of Chile sequentially, then “Incantata” is the first poem to use these ninety rhyme-sounds, though the poem already has its own (sonic) history in the form of his poem “Mary Farl Powers: Pink Spotted Torso” from Quoof. “Incantata” is Muldoon’s elegy for the American artist (and his former long-term partner) of the earlier poem’s title; Pink Spotted Torso is the name of one of her paintings. Their relationship ended in the early 1980s, and Farl Powers died in 1992 from cancer. While we learn much about both her and her relationship with Muldoon in “Incantata” – or, at least, we learn what Muldoon offers us, whether truthful or not – “Pink Spotted Torso” offers an initial, fleeting glimpse of the artist, and “Incantata” seems to build itself on the stage that the other poem has set. For example, “Incantata” begins:

I thought of you tonight, a leanbh, lying there in your long barrow
colder and dumber than a fish by Francisco de Herrera,
as I X-Actoed from a spud the Inca
glyph for a mouth: thought of the first time I saw your pink
spotted torso, distant-near as a nautilus,
when you undid your portfolio, yes indeedy,
and held the print of what looked like a cankered potato
at arm’s length – your arms being longer, it seemed, than Lugh’s.23

The rhyme scheme of the stanza – though perhaps not immediately apparent due to Muldoon’s fast and loose rhyming – is AABBCDDC, the stanza’s end-rhymes being (in some shape or other) “-arrow,” “-ink,” “-lus,” and “-dada.” A reader of “Mary Farl Powers: Pink Spotted Torso,” however, will have seen the images from this stanza before; they will have heard some of its rhymes already. The “pink spotted torso” may

certainly be Farl Power’s sexualized body (with the thinly veiled expression of arousal, “when you undid your portfolio, yes indeedy”) but it is, of course, also the title of the earlier poem, as well as the central image of that earlier poem’s first stanza:

She turns from the sink
potato in hand. A Kerr’s Pink,
its water-dark
port-wine birthmark
that will answer her knife
with a hieroglyph. 24

The knife, the hieroglyph, and the potato are all already present in “Pink Spotted Torso,” as is the “ink” end-rhyme that will find later iterations not only in “Incantata” (down to its very title!) but also in “Yarrow,” and then again in other, later poems. 25 It is as if Muldoon anchors the beginning of his elegy by recalling the images and sounds of his earlier poem, by giving us a reference point he has already provided. The affective work of rhyme carried out within a sestina like “Cauliflowers” develops, at this juncture in Muldoon’s poetic output, beyond one self-contained poem and, instead, extends across multiple poems.

As the two poems in which Muldoon first incorporates the same ninety end-rhymes, “Incantata” and “Yarrow” are fundamental to the claims I am making here about the relationship between grief and language in Muldoon’s elegies. But they are also expansive, unwieldy poems, and the complicated affective entanglements wrought by the very ninety end-rhymes in which I am interested resist paraphrase – at least in the space


25 It is not entirely clear that the other end-rhymes in this stanza – “-ark” and “yph” – are picked up in the ninety rhyme words. The sound “-ark” closely resembles an end-rhyme sound of “-treck” that is among those ninety, but “yph” does not have an immediately clear heir apparent.
For that reason, my analysis of these poems will be limited to following the trail, so to speak, of one and only one of the end-rhymes Muldoon uses in these two long elegies: that of “-arrow,” echoed, as it is, in “Yarrow.” By tracing the development of this end-rhyme through these two poems (and then beyond), I will gesture to the affective complexities that accrue over the end-rhyme’s repeated use and suggest its ultimate import within both poems. My analysis illustrates the function of one instance of the ninety end-rhymes that are in many ways the extreme example of the work with rhyme that Muldoon began in “Cauliflowers.” Across multiple poems, however, Muldoon begins to build a more comprehensive history of his own grief – a grief activated in language, and one that, in its historical mapping, is made (potentially) legible to his readers.

While abstracting the end-rhyme from its original stanzaic context strips that end-rhyme of much of its meaning (if not comprehensibility), I have listed below each instance of the use of “-arrow” in both “Incantata” and “Yarrow” to offer at least some semblance of its tonal and affective variety. Next to each line, I have noted the poem and stanza number in which the end-rhyme is used (“I” means “Incantata”; “Y,” “”Yarrow”; “t” for “Yarrow’s” tornada); and I have included in brackets those words or phrases that immediately precede or follow the end-rhyme, in order to clarify context:

I thought of you tonight, a leanbh, lying there in your long barrow (I 1) colder and dumber than a fish by Francisco de Herrera (I 1) on which you’ve etched the row upon row (I 45) of army-worms, than that you might reach out, arrah, (I 45) Little by little it dawned on us that the row (Y 1)

26 Though see the following for excellent, comprehensive (if not exhaustive) readings of these poems: Wills, Reading Paul Muldoon, 157-185; Kendall, Paul Muldoon, 209-239; Holdridge, Poetry of Paul Muldoon, 119-136; and Iain Twiddy, Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Elegy (London and New York: Continuum Literary Studies, 2012), 201-228.
the Spanish Lear; the umpteenth Broken Arrow; (Y 9)
[Harp-]er and Row (Y 18)
in which he’d dash off a couple of ‘sparrow-[songs]’ (Y 27)
as a two-edged sword, as the arrow [that flieth by day] (Y 36)
The day S---- came back with the arrow [through a heart tattooed] (Y 46)
‘parsnips’, swedes’, and, I guess, ‘vegetable marrow’; (Y 57)
That must have been the year I stood by the wheel-barrow (Y 58)
The magical toad entrusted to me by Francisco Pizarro (Y 75)
The storm blew over, of course, and with the help of Arrow (Y 92)
but (this chilled me to the marrow) (Y 93)
As we neared Armagh, she’d dipped the tip of each little arrow (Y 103)
bird that she is, feeds on the corpse from Run of the Arrow, (Y 112)
now her tattoo of a heart and arrow (Y 121)
my da would have said—while the Cathedral of Ero-[tic Misery] (Y 130)
bird while the scald crow (Y 139)
‘I am the arrow that flieth by day. I am the arrow.’ (Y 147)
In a conventional tornada, the strains of her ‘Che sera, sera’ (Y t)
to a bath resplendent with yarrow (Y t)
it has to do with a trireme, laden with ravensara (Y t)27

A quick glance through this list helps illuminate the difficulty of unpacking the
development of even one end-rhyme, let alone all end-rhymes in their entirety. In

“Incantata,” the “barrow” of Farl Powers’ gravesite is echoed in the Spanish painter
Francisco de Herrera, known as the “Spaniard of the Fish” for his masterful still lifes; this
juxtaposition of “barrow” and “Herrera” manifests, tonally, in the comically morbid that
we have seen in Muldoon’s earlier elegies – not every poet would compare their deceased
ex-lover to a fish – and yet that juxtaposition also reinforces Farl Powers’ relationship to
her own artistic life, even in her cold death. This relation to her painterly life is reinforced
later in stanza 45 with the row (upon row) of “army-worms” – the name the poet gives to
the squiggly figures of Mary Farl Power’s painting Emblements. And in “-arrow’s” final
iteration in “Incantata,” the rhyme resonates in “arrahh,” the Anglo-Irish expression of

27 Tim Kendall also lists many of the end-rhyme variants of “-arrow” in “Yarrow,” and he includes
some variants I have not listed here. The reasons for this discrepancy will be made clear during my analysis
of “Yarrow” below. See Kendall, Paul Muldoon, 228.
thrill, or excitement, which, in its original context, *seems* to articulate a hope in the consolatory power of art that ends the poem: “that you might reach out, arrah, | and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained in ink.”

I say “seems” because, even while the image of Farl Powers’ hands in Muldoon’s hands – and the chiasmus that frames that image – suggests resolution and closure, the inkiness of the image contrastingly (for lack of a better word) *stains* the sentiment. Does the “arrah,” then, signal not compensatory thrill but unresolved frustration? Can it do both? What affective charge is consolidated in the end-rhyme at this point? The answer is unclear, and thus, too, is our understanding of how the end-rhyme “-arrow” develops. It is possible to read this ambiguity as a failure of the work of end-rhyme in the poem, especially if, as I have been arguing, part of that work is to make legible (for both Muldoon and his reader) the poet’s grief; but if so, it is a failure that is already registered in the poem in various other ways. To clarify: as I have been arguing, yes, in the affectively-charged aesthetic of end-rhyme, Muldoon locates and establishes his grief in sound and echo; however, as he does in “Cauliflowers,” so, too, in “Incantata” does Muldoon include a critique of that aesthetic, an awareness of its limitations. For example, the poem comes to a close only after a long catalogue – beginning in the middle of the poem and lasting some twenty stanzas – of memories and artifacts that remain in Farl Powers’ wake, memories that, like affect in the poem, accumulate in an act of poetic monument-building, but which can also only ever signal Muldoon’s inability to capture it all – to capture, I would argue, not only the life of Mary Farl Powers and Muldoon’s relationship to her in their entirety, but also the full dimensionality of Muldoon’s grief at

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her passing. And in one of the elegy’s most oft-quoted passages, Muldoon makes his signature self-critical move, noting that Mary Farl Powers “detected in me a tendency to put | on too much artificiality, both as man and poet, | which is why you [Farl Powers] called me ‘Polyester’ or “Polyurethane.’” To be sure, in the poem’s use of ninety end-rhymes deployed through an intricate rhyme scheme, the complaint of artifice and artificiality that Farl Powers’ voices (through Muldoon) in this particular passage is not unfounded. The end-rhyme aesthetic smacks of cold virtuosity and detached calculation. But that doesn’t stop Muldoon from returning it.

Indeed, “Yarrow” once again employs the ninety-rhyme aesthetic of affective accumulation and does so through an even more intricate rhyme scheme; but it, too, comes prepackaged with its own critique of that aesthetic. As demonstrated by those lines from the poem quoted above, “Yarrow” is a sprawling elegy that interweaves many narratives and intertextual sources together – the yarrow that threatens to overwhelm the Muldoon farm’s kale (and just about everything else in the poem) encounters the death of Muldoon’s mother, which encounters the picaresque novels of his youth, which encounters the poet channel-surfing, which encounters the Sylvia Plath’s suicide, which encounters King Lear and Nabokov’s Ada, which encounters the figure of S-----, a drug-addicted, fictional lover of the poet’s who is at times the antithesis of and at other times conflated with his mother. Many of these encounters can be deduced from “-arrow’s” various iterations listed above: the “row” in stanza one is that row of kale about to be

29 For an excellent reading of the role of monument and objects that remain in Muldoon’s elegies, see Matthew Campbell, “Muldoon’s Remains,” in Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2004), 170-88.

30 Ibid., 334.
overwhelmed; in stanza 9, as Muldoon flips through television stations, he comes across (yet another) episode of the late-1950s television series, *Broken Arrow*; by stanza 36, that *Arrow* (having, in the meantime, also become “sparrow” and “marrow”) summons the “arrow that flieth by day” of Psalm 91:5, the arrow from which, in its Biblical context, God protects us; by stanza 147, however, this Biblical phrase is echoed in Sylvia Plath’s suicidal proclamation, “I am the arrow,” from her poem “Ariel” – a poem whose title itself evokes the “-arrow” rhyme. This short catalog of the poem’s references fails to unpack “-arrow’s” many other iterations, like S-----‘s tattoo (an arrow through the heart), or the Cathedral of “Ero”-tic Misery, another of Muldoon’s gestures to the art world, this time to German artist Kurt Schwitters’ Dadaist art installation bombed during the Second World War. From television series to suicide to S----- to surrealism, the sound of “-arrow” becomes cacophonous with meaning, affectively pulling the reader in innumerable directions, to such degree as to resist paraphrase. Indeed, if the cauliflowers in Muldoon’s earlier elegy represent the aesthetic of affective accumulation by refracting their own light, here the titular yarrow, on the verge of overwhelming everything in the poem, represents the emotional accumulation that all but overwhelms poet and reader. Too much is compacted into one rhyme to be fully unpacked, to be fully articulated – hence why, as I have argued, language *activates* grief in Muldoon’s end-rhyme aesthetic. The end-rhymes and their affect must be experienced. Like the dissonant narratives and intertexts in play in “The Coney,” here the juxtaposition of language and rhyme, context and sound, generate the complex layers of a grief that is often overwhelming. In other words, language activates grief because rhyme can shoulder accumulating paradoxes, it can draw out similarities while accommodating difference, and thus it can contain the full
complexities of mourning and make it alive to both the mourner and his readers. The poet gives life to rhyme, but rhyme eventually speaks back; and the reader, if he or she is willing to follow, can hear it too.

The reader can hear rhyme speak because Muldoon, by anchoring meaning and affect repeatedly and so thoroughly in rhyme, imbues rhyme with history, an affective history of his grief that lives in language and rhyme and thus can be read, studied, and potentially understood. In history is legibility. And yet, the method is not infallible, and of this fallibility Muldoon is, as always, aware. If rhyme can speak independently of its author, then it can also speak beyond him or her. I am not merely voicing some death-of-the-author stance; if anything, the elegy as a genre reasserts authorship, insists on the subject who locates grief in language. On the contrary, what makes Muldoon’s elegiac end-rhyme aesthetic so robust is the tension between author and echo: the poet may localize his overwhelming grief in, for one, the “-arrow” end-rhyme, but by the poem’s tornada, “-arrow” speaks beyond itself by echoing another of the poem’s end-rhymes, an end-rhyme I have designated “-sara.” Thus the poem signals the very slipperiness of the end-rhyme aesthetic, the inability of rhyme to contain its own echoes. As the compiled list above illustrates, the final three articulations of “-arrow” (all located in the tornada) swing from the muddled strains of “Che sera, sera” – a mishmash of the 1950s American tune Que sera, sera and the 1970s Italian song Che sará – to the poet’s (imagined?) memory of a bath teeming with yarrow, and then finally to the image of a ship decorated in ravensara, a plant, like yarrow, believed to have medicinal qualities. Before the reader

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31 The end-rhymes “-arrow” and “-sara” are clearly distinct, as can be deduced from careful study of Muldoon’s rhyme scheme, which helps distinguish the two according to placement of rhyme and its use of 90 (as opposed to 89) rhymes. For more about the intricacies of “Yarrow’s” rhyme scheme, see Twiddy, Pastoral Elegy, 208-19.
advances too far in interpreting the ravensara as a kind of doubling-down of yarrow as metaphor for healing (and thus gesturing to the poem’s potential consolatory power) it should be noted that the end-rhyme “-sara” of ravensara also recalls from earlier in the poem, among other things, “Assaroe” in stanza 122 – Assaroe being the waterfall in Donegal named after the legendary figure Aodh Ruadh, who, as tale tells, drowned in its waters – and Writing Degree Zero in stanza 104 – or what is the first full-length book of Roland Barthes. Both of these earlier articulations of the “-sara” end-rhyme throw into question the credibility of the healing power of ravensara, whether by recalling death in Irish legend or by referencing the work of a writer responsible for proclaiming dead the very figure of the author. That “-arrow” echoes “-sara” more generally through the poem further implicates the slippery instability of the end-rhyme aesthetic, its capacity to speak beyond itself, to echo boundlessly, to gather interminable affective charge. Yarrow may heal, but it may also suffocate all in its path. It may give shape to Muldoon’s grief, but it may also drown him in that grief. It may provide his reader with a map to follow his grief, but it may also lead that reader astray. This double-sided nature of the end-rhyme aesthetic is what both “Incantata” and “Yarrow” present.

Muldoon uses his set of ninety end-rhymes in a handful of poems following the two collected in The Annals of Chile; and by way of conclusion, I would like to examine one of these poems alongside another poem which, for reasons that will become clear, does not use the end-rhymes. In “Sillyhow Stride” and “Turkey Buzzards,” both collected in Horse Latitudes, Muldoon mourns the passing of two people who, like Mary Farl Powers and like his mother, fell victim to cancer: the poet’s sister, Maureen, and his friend and sometimes collaborator, the rock musician Warren Zevon. Together, these
poems articulate once again the double-sidedness of the end-rhyme aesthetic: its capacity to locate grief in language (alongside the hope of rendering it legible), but also its ability to speak beyond itself, to spread and proliferate beyond the elegist’s intentions. In these poems, Muldoon thematizes once again this aesthetic of accumulation, but instead of cauliflowers or yarrow, he employs the central metaphor of the turkey buzzard.32 Through that metaphor, the poet lodges a further critique of that aesthetic, the ethical import of which makes for a particularly scathing occasion for self-reproach, arguably more trenchant than those presented in his earlier elegies.

If, through his repeated use of the same ninety end-rhymes, Muldoon developed a means by which to make – at least potentially – the biographical historical, to make the personal public, in “Sillyhow Stride,” he doubles down on that effort. The reader finds the poet anchoring the personal – in the form of his relationship to Zevon, and in his grief at his passing – in shared historical forms, styles, and tones. His use of the end-rhyme aesthetic is, in the case of this poem, just the cherry on top; in addition to these end-rhymes, Muldoon packs the poem with allusions and references to – not to mention direct quotations from and stylistic mimicry of – his own work, the work of Zevon, their collaborative work, as well as the work of one unlikely if not irrelevant source, John 32

32 The other central metaphor of many of these poems is that of cancer, that which has killed so many of his loved ones, and which, like the yarrow, spreads beyond control. There is little space to unpack this in this article; and more importantly, Iain Twiddy has already done much of this work in his two excellent pieces on Muldoon’s elegies and their relation to cancer, his chapter “Grief Brought to Numbers: Paul Muldoon’s Circular Elegies” in Pastoral Elegy, 201-228, and “Cancer and the Ethics of Representation,” in New Hibernia Review. His claim in the latter that “The structural principles of the disease – replication, invasion, and metastasis – elicited mimetic correlates” is clearly pertinent to the work I am doing in this article; see “Cancer and the Ethics of Representation,” 18. One place in which I see my own article helpfully expanding Twiddy’s work, however: Twiddy primarily focuses on rhyme scheme as a mimetic correlative for cancer, whereas in this article my focus has been to unpack how rhyme, independent of its scheme, functions with regard to affect, and in fact to suggest that rhyme operates more than simply as a mimetic corollary to cancer-like grief but also as generative of that grief, a way of activating it. My interest is less on mimesis, that is, than on the performative. Still, Twiddy’s influence on this article is profound, and this article should be read in close dialogue with his important work.
Donne. Buttressed by these numerous sources, “Sillyhow Stride” is Muldoon’s most ambitious effort to make an increasingly complex grief legible, to rhyme that grief in a past that is his own but that might be shared with others.

Some of the work of buttressing that Muldoon performs in this poem the reader will already recognize: as “Incantata” picks up specific elements from his earlier poem “Mary Farl Powers: Pink Spotted Torso,” “Sillyhow Stride” picks up elements of an earlier Muldoon poem about Zevon, the poem titled “Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy,” from the “Sleeve Notes” section of his collection Hay (1998). “Sleeve Notes” as a series tracks moments of Muldoon’s life and assigns them various album titles – presumably those albums the poet was listening to at those particular times described in each poem. During the time of “Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy,” Muldoon and his wife were particularly unfaithful to each other, and one of her lovers – at least as the poem describes – introduced the poet to Zevon’s album, whose songs “to booty, to beasts, to bimbo, boom boom | are inextricably part of the warp and woof | of the wild and wicked poems in Quoof.”33 The poem thus suggests the deep influence of Zevon’s style on Muldoon from early on, and lays the groundwork for elements of the later “Sillyhow Stride.” Not only will the “excitable boy” – arguably Zevon’s most influential album – resurface in the later elegy, but so too will the figure of the werewolf, Muldoon’s moniker for his wife’s lover in “Sleeve Notes,” but also a clear reference to Zevon’s most popular song, “Werewolves of London.” More importantly, lines from “Sillyhow Stride” rhyme with those of “Warren Zevon: Excitable Boy,” most conspicuously the “zoom zoom” and “vroom vroom” of the latter poem that echo the “boom boom” quoted in the lines just

above. “Boom boom” *also* gestures to another Zevon song, “Boom Boom Mancini,” a song that takes as its subject the real-world boxing champion from the early 1980s, Ray Mancini. So, Muldoon once again anchors his elegy with earlier material from his *oeuvre*; and in doing so, he also begins to anchor his work in material from Zevon’s *oeuvre*. Such is the porousness of their styles.

To be sure, if Zevon’s *Excitable Boy* was truly a significant influence on Muldoon’s poetry, that influence may be no more clearly discernible than in the tonal dissonance of Muldoon’s elegies. Zevon’s album, of which there are many references in “Sillyhow Stride,” is full of the kind of macabre ironies seen in Muldoon’s elegies; this is no more conspicuous than in the album’s title song. “Excitable Boy” tells the story of a teenaged sociopath who rapes and kills his prom date and keeps her bones as a souvenir many years later. But while the story is very dark, the song parades as a light pop song, with an upbeat saxophone melody leading the charge, and a band of pop singers “ooh-wah-oohing” their way through the horrific narrative. The dissonance of musical style and narrative make for the kind of morbid tone so often present in Muldoon’s elegies, in which death encounters, among other things, the comical and the sexual. Zevon’s song pivots on the term “excitable,” which, at song’s outset, conveys the boy’s rowdy but seemingly innocent behavior, perhaps a certain sexual eagerness in him. But by the time

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34 See “Sillyhow Stride,” *Horse Latitudes* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 105-06. Interestingly, “zoom zoom” and “vroom vroom” also rhyme with two *different* end-rhymes in Muldoon’s batch of ninety end-rhymes, the former with an end-rhyme I have designated “-eam,” and the latter with one designated “-arm.” By this point, the reader can clearly deduce the slipperiness of Muldoon’s rhyming.

35 “Werewolves of London” makes its return, as do the African mercenaries of Zevon’s “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner.” (Roland, too, makes frequent appearances – as he does, it is worth noting, earlier in “Yarrow,” another instance of the Zevon’s earlier presence in Muldoon’s work.) See Muldoon, “Sillyhow Stride,” 96-96, for the first of many allusions to Zevon’s album and life. Special thanks to colleague Lindsay Haney for first directing me to some of these references to Zevon’s work.
the boy has killed his prom date, little Susie, “excitable” is exposed for the euphemism it is, hiding the dark reality that ultimately outs itself in the boy’s grisly actions at prom. Like Bugs Bunny in “The Coney,” this isn’t simply child’s play. “Sillyhow Slide” is thus not merely the kind of emulation of the style and theme that Jahan Ramazani has argued is true of, for instance, Auden’s elegies, which “represent a symbolic interfusion between poet and deceased” through stylistic imitation; rather, Muldoon’s style was already deeply indebted to, more firmly rooted in, Zevon’s style.

Muldoon and Zevon’s eventual collaboration is, for these reasons, not entirely surprising. In a sense, they are two sides of the same coin: Muldoon is primarily a poet and academic with some rock star cred, while Zevon was primarily a rock star with some poetic and academic cred (if such a thing exists). The collaboration resulted in an abandoned rock opera called The Honey War, but more lastingly in a handful of songs, most famously “My Ride’s Here.” The song once again demonstrates the kind of tonal variety present in Muldoon’s and Zevon’s independent work, as it sees the convergence of people, places, and things that under normal circumstances would not share the same space. The song begins,

I was staying at the Marriott
With Jesus and John Wayne
I was waiting for a chariot
They were waiting for a train
The sky was full of carrion
“I’ll take the mazuma”
Said Jesus to Marion

36 Ramazani, Poetry of Mourning, 176.

37 Tara Christie Kinsey’s article, “Rave on, John Donne: Paul Muldoon and Warren Zevon,” is an invaluable source for detailing the nature of Muldoon and Zevon’s collaboration and friendship. This article also owes a debt to Kinsey’s unpacking of the source material of “Sillyhow Stride,” especially with regard to Donne’s role in the poem. See Kinsey, “Rave on, John Donne: Paul Muldoon and Warren Zevon,” The Yellow Nib 8 (Spring 2013): 33-51.
“That’s the 3:10 to Yuma
My ride’s here...”38

Jesus and John Wayne at the Marriott; Marion and the 3:10 to Yuma. Later in the song, Shelley, Keats, and Byron hang out at the Hilton. If the song is ultimately about departure – or, more specifically, departure from this world39 – the narrative takes a curious and surreal route to get there. Along with tonally echoing Muldoon’s past elegiac work, it also provides a future line for “Sillyhow Stride” – that of the sky “full of carrion,” a line that speaks to one of the poem’s central metaphors in the turkey buzzard.40 More on that metaphor shortly; first, however, I want to briefly unpack the significance of a line ultimately omitted from “My Ride’s Here,” in which the speaker of the poem, before embarking once again on the song’s title line, hears “the Reverend Donne | strike up his organ.”41

John Donne’s poetry is pervasive in “Sillyhow Stride,” his work not so much alluded to in the elegy as it is heavily quoted throughout the poem. From such Donne highlights as “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “The Sun Rising,” to material pulled from his sermons, to references to texts about the poet – like, for example, Coleridge’s “On Donne’s Poetry” – Muldoon ventriloquizes the metaphysical poet again and again. To cite just one example: midway through “Sillyhow Stride,” the poet turns


39 This specific sense of departure in the song was made amply clear after Bruce Springsteen played “My Ride’s Here” in concert following the death of Zevon.

40 Muldoon, “Sillyhow Stride,” 98.

41 The omitted line can be found in Muldoon’s correspondence with Zevon, located in Emory University’s MARBL library. Here, again, however, I quote from Kinsey’s invaluable article; see “Rave On, John Donne,” 38.
momentarily from Zevon to the image of his dying sister, sitting in her hospital bed. The poet remarks, “I thought of how the wrangling schools | need look no further than her bed | to find what fire shall burn this world.” These lines originate from Donne’s poem “A Fever,” in which the speaker looks on a dying woman and imagines the heat of her fever as a metaphor for the heat of her passions – sexual included. The conflation of death with passion is by no means unusual for Donne, nor, as has been established, is it for Muldoon. Certainly, in this specific instance of the poem, the “fever” refers to Zevon’s passions – his music, but also his alcohol and sometimes drug abuse – as well as the fever of Muldoon’s sister in her hospital bed, oxygen mask on, “drowning in her own spit.” The frequent summoning of Donne’s words creates, in this way, yet another connection to an aesthetic of tonal dissonance. Tara Christie Kinsey has suggested that Donne’s presence suits the poem because, like Zevon, he was one who thought often and deeply about his own mortality; this is true (and true, too, of Muldoon), but I would argue further that Donne functions as a literary predecessor to both Zevon and Muldoon, one who discovers in death its strange and jarring associations. He was also a poet of biographical importance to the two friends: in Zevon’s final months, after inquiring about Donne’s work, Muldoon emailed the rock star the text of Donne’s “Death be not proud.” Zevon wrote back saying, “It’s an honor to receive the Donne lines from your fingers. To look for those lines and have them come from you. What a shining life.”

43 Ibid.
45 Quoted in ibid., 38.
The personal significance of Donne’s poetry in Muldoon and Zevon’s relationship cannot be understated; Donne may have been a stylistic forebear, but he was also at the emotional center of that relationship, and thus of Muldoon’s grief. Indeed, my reason for examining in some depth the various sources of “Sillyhow Stride” – from Muldoon’s own work, to Zevon’s work, to their collaborative work, and to the poems of John Donne – is to illustrate the manner in which Muldoon maps the personal, and thus affective, history of his relationship to Zevon in this elegy. In laying out bread crumbs the reader can follow – bread crumbs in the form of quotation and allusion, as well as through stylistic echo – the reader can trace their relationship, can bear witness to it, and can understand the roots of Muldoon’s grief. This technique thus functions similarly to the ninety end-rhyme technique, in which rhyme always gestures back to its previous iterations, to its own sources. And of those ninety end-rhymes, “Sillyhow Stride,” of course, also gives new meanings, generating further affective charge to those rhymes that are by this point saturated with the history of Muldoon’s grief. The “-arrow” end-rhyme, for example, returns once again in the elegy’s terza-rima final lines:

lies belly-up on a Space Lab scaffold where the turkey buzzards pink Matsuhisa-san’s seared toro,
turkey buzzards waiting for you to eclipse and cloud them with a wink

as they hold out their wings and of the sun his working vigor borrow
before they parascend through the Viper Room or the Whisky a Go Go,
each within its own “cleansing breeze,” its own Cathartes aura.\(^{46}\)

The “-arrow” end-rhyme begins in this excerpt as the sushi cut of “toro,” or tuna, picked at by a group of turkey buzzards. The rhyme is picked up again two lines later in another quotation from Donne, from his poem, “Love’s Growth.” In Donne’s poem, the speaker

\(^{46}\) Muldoon, “Sillyhow Stride,” 106.
comes to the realization that love is not an abstract, unchanging thing, but a feeling that grows and suffers and is influenced by, among other things, the increased “vigor” of springtime’s sun. In Muldoon’s poem, it is the buzzards whose flight appears to be invigorated by the sun. The rhyme is picked up a third and final time in the Latin name for the turkey buzzard, *Cathartes aura,*” which literally means, as the poem states, “cleansing breeze.”

What to make of the “-arrow” end-rhyme, then, at this point? On the one hand, the poem’s final gesture to the “cathartic,” the “cleansing breeze,” would suggest a kind of consolatory purification in the form of a breeze, the “aura,” that blows away Muldoon’s suffering. If the buzzards “borrow” the sun’s vigor and take flight, it is also possible to read here that Muldoon similarly *borrows* Donne’s invigorating poetry, as if for support towards consolatory ends. The poem’s lines also imply a form of apotheosis befitting the elegiac genre, in which Zevon ascends to the skies with the vultures, perhaps to participate in a sky burial – a ritual for which the vulture is well-known, and which is made reference to at various times in the poem through the “Parsi Towers,” the Towers of Silence, or what, in the Zoroastrian tradition of which Parsi is one, denotes the raised, tower-like structure on which the dead are placed so as to be exposed to the elements (among which are the sun and scavenging birds) as a way to clean the dead body, to rid the spirit of the pollution of the earth.47

And while “aura” thus implies a kind of consolatory cleansing through these references to breezes and sky burials, on the other hand, it also echoes, through the figure of the turkey buzzard, the poem’s image of “the sky being full of carrion,” a line which

may be pulled from the lyrics of “My Ride’s Here,” but in the context of the poem is conflated with the falling bodies from the Twin Towers during the September 11th terrorist attacks.48 This distressing and horrific image recalled by the mention of that historical event taint the sense of a redemptive consolation otherwise suggested by the end. And is it not also possible to read “-arrow” – along with the other eighty-nine end-rhymes – as themselves carrion floating in the sky, circling through association and carrying the baggage of all their previous iterations – carrying, that is, the weight of earlier death, the weight of Muldoon’s former grief? To reuse the ninety end-rhymes is not to let go, not to be consoled, but to hold on to grief, to recycle mourning.

The poem “Turkey Buzzards” offers some clarification to the ambiguity of “Sillyhow Stride’s” final lines, not, that is, by definitively supporting one reading or the other – either the consolatory or the melancholic – but by clarifying the double-nature of the turkey buzzard metaphor. “Turkey Buzzards” is a challenging poem in that it progresses much the way the latter half of “Cauliflowers” progresses, from association to association, seemingly suspended in the air, not unlike the buzzards who “seem to stall in the[ir] kettle” at poem’s start.49 The central elegized figure in the poem is Muldoon’s sister, whose cancer eats away at her insides much the way the buzzard eats away at the insides of its carrion meal. If this image seems to incriminate the buzzard, it thus also incriminates the elegist himself, who, in his way, feeds off of the cancer of his sister (among many others) in order to write his poetry. The implication is, of course, that

48 Ibid., 98.

49 Paul Muldoon, “Turkey Buzzards,” Horse Latitudes (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 78. A “kettle” is what bird enthusiasts term the circling in the air often associated with hawks and, of course, vultures.
cancer is, and has been, for Muldoon, a means by which to profit, both aesthetically and commercially.

But the poem complicates this image of the vulture further. As the poet notes, buzzards habitually defecate on themselves, an act the reader might find unpleasant, but which is a protective measure for the birds, “their poop containing an enzyme | that’s known to boost | their immune systems” in the chance they might accidentally cut themselves on a bone, “at no small cost | to their well-being.” Does Muldoon’s end-rhyme technique not similarly immunize the poet by recycling the material of his historical grief in order to create enzymes that stave off suffering in the present? The poet conditions himself by locating his grief in the aesthetic, in the rhyme that, through sound, spreads that grief across his oeuvre. Here the metaphor of the turkey buzzard takes on a positive spin; perhaps it is the thing that allows him to withstand grief.

And yet, Muldoon complicates the figure of the buzzard even further. By the poem’s end, the vultures have failed to return to the surface to feed and defecate, and thus have failed to immunize themselves; they suffer “their command of the vortex | while having lost | their common touch, they’ve been so long | above it all.” In this final passage, the poet lodges a critique on the artist who ultimately stands at a distance, through artifice, of the grim realities of death, who suffers because he is caught up in

50 Ibid., 81.

51 This reading chimes with Twiddy’s reading of the poem, in which the poet’s grief is purged by “achieving an analogue” in the multifarious meanings of the turkey buzzard. See Twiddy, “Cancer and the Ethics of Representation,” 32-4. Jefferson Holdridge, however, reads the poem in less consolatory terms, emphasizing the trenchant self-critique that I explore in the following paragraph. See Holdridge, The Poetry of Paul Muldoon, 185-87. Ultimately, my point is that the poem is doing both, and thus represents yet another articulation of the double-sidedness of Muldoon’s elegiac aesthetic and, in particular, in his end-rhyme technique.

52 Muldoon, “Turkey Buzzards,” 81.
rhyme and echo, in his own poetic mourning, rather than in mourning in the guts of the living. The self-recrimination of “Polyester” that Muldoon voiced in “Incantata” finds new articulation in the shape of the turkey buzzard who flies above it all; but in this latter poem, the self-critique seems all the more scathing. The critique of artifice in the earlier poem has become a critique of one who floats at a distance in the aesthetic, who comes down only to feed off the dead, and who returns to the sky to shape not a history of the elegized but a history of the poet’s own grief. Some twelve years after initiating the end-rhyme aesthetic, “Turkey Buzzards” condemns the aesthetic for, like a kettle of vultures, circling around itself.

Or, at least, that is half the story. As I have shown, “Sillyhow Slide” and “Turkey Buzzards” – like “Incantata” and “Yarrow” before them – articulate not one but both sides of Muldoon’s elegiac aesthetic and his ambivalent attitude toward it. The “-arrow” is both a cleansing breeze and a lofty and distant buzzard; and so, in these later elegies of Horse Latitudes, the poet holds out hope that his grief might come to some consolation, that he might find some catharsis, even as he recognizes the dangerous game of aestheticization that a poetic technique like the end-rhyme aesthetic presents. This chapter has by no means been an exhaustive account of Muldoon’s elegies. There are many impressive elegies that do not use these ninety rhyme sounds, just as there are many poems that use these ninety rhyme sounds that are not elegies. And yet, Muldoon’s project – if we can call it a project – as demonstrated in these particular

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53 Though, admittedly, many of poems that use these ninety rhyme sounds are often, at least, elegiac. Those not addressed here include “The Mudroom,” “Third Epistle to Timothy,” “The Bangle (Slight Return),” “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999,” and “The Humors of Hakone.” Other brilliant elegies include “The Soap-pig,” “The Breather,” and “White,” each of which is considerably different in tone than those elegies discussed here.
elegies deserve special attention. Not only does the end-rhyme aesthetic of affective accumulation speak more broadly to the tonal dissonances of Muldoon’s elegiac work, but it has also been for Muldoon a unique means by which to articulate the hopes and failures of writing, an aesthetic that, on the one hand, potentially captures the complexities of grief and activates that grief, giving it a history and a potential legibility, but that, on the other hand, can often speak beyond a poet’s intentions, a means through which the poet ultimately can lose sight of the elegized figure, aestheticizing grief such that it removes mourning from its object and makes the mourner its solipsistic focus. Muldoon holds these distinct potentialities – one cathartic, one condemnatory – in tension; and he can do so, in part, through rhyme, which holds such tensions in suspension. Wallace Stevens famously wrote, “The poem is the cry of its occasion, | part of the res itself and not about it.”\textsuperscript{54} Muldoon’s elegies are cries that echo themselves, that through rhyme give the poet (and reader) the very means by which grief can be sounded and experienced, and ultimately puzzled over by poet and reader alike.

\textsuperscript{54} Both Twiddy and Campbell have noted the importance of this line in Stevens for understanding the elegy; this article has been one attempt to unpack why this might be so. See Twiddy, \textit{Pastoral Elegy}, 8, and Campbell, “Muldoon’s Remains,” 177.
CHAPTER 4

“IF THE CAP FITS, WEAR IT”: MEDBH MCGUCKIAN’S IMPERSONAL GRIEF

The previous chapter focused primarily on Northern Irish poet Paul Muldoon’s sprawling elegies and the aesthetic of “affective accumulation” suggested by them. Through his recurring use of the same ninety end-rhymes – those ninety words that rhyme not only within specific elegies but also across many of his elegies – Muldoon constructs a poetic echo chamber. Within this chamber, the end-rhymes create both sonic resonances (as rhyme will do) and emotional reverberations – sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant, but always accruing affective meaning. With each (re)use of an end-rhyme, Muldoon lays down new emotional coordinates that, for the reader, yield a kind of affective map of his grief, a map from which the reader can follow the poet’s complex emotional journey of mourning. Muldoon’s poems are not oblivious, of course, to the potential imperfections of this work: through both form and theme his poems acknowledge the capacity of linguistic indeterminacy to muffle or contort their affective meaning, and they recognize the ethical implications of an accumulative poetic in which the mourned subject of the poem risks becoming an unshapely, aestheticized object. Still, behind this poetic project seems to lie the authorial belief that language, with at least some degree of success, can generate and even translate the deeply felt emotions of the
poet for the reader, can give complicated affect a public face in language, even in spite of
the at times paradoxical complexities inherent in that language.

Can we ascribe a similar belief to a poet whose lyric works, as Eric Falci has
claimed, “are constantly at odds with, and keeping secrets from, themselves,” whose
poems seem interested in concealing their meaning (thematic, affective) even from
themselves?¹ Falci’s remark is one of many attempts – by him, and by other scholars – to
describe the elusive poetry of Medbh McGuckian, whose lyric poems do often feel
extraordinarily secretive, almost self-imploding, like black holes collapsing in on
themselves. Take, for example, her poem “The Aisling Hat,” from her collection Captain
Lavender (1994), by no means a particularly egregious example of her poetry’s particular
brand of difficulty, but one which nevertheless illustrates some of the challenges that
confront her readers. The poem begins:

October – you took away my biography –
I am grateful to you, you offer me gifts
for which I have still no need.

I search for a lost, unknown song
in a street as long as a night,
stamped with my own surname.

A spy-glass at the end of it,
a cool tunnel crushed by binoculars
into your grandfather’s house.

The elegant structure of the heart
is a net cast over everything in sight,
its lace design of perforations, truancy.²

¹ Eric Falci, Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,
2012), 88.

² Medbh McGuckian, “The Aisling Hat,” Captain Lavender (Loughcrew, Ireland: Gallery Press,
1994), 44.
The poem is, in part, an elegy for McGuckian’s father, though there is nothing in these opening stanzas that overtly indicates his death’s primary position in the poem. (Though, in fairness to the poet, the father and his dying body are described more explicitly elsewhere in the poem’s forty-seven stanzas.) The reader can discern that some significant event occurs in October – the actual month of her father’s death – though the fact that the month takes away the speaker’s “biography” and yet bestows her (or him?) with unnecessary gifts is both potentially contradictory and considerably vague. The second stanza’s “unknown song” may be the very elegy McGuckian writes here, and the intent of the song is stated clearly enough – to seek out a kind of paternal lineage through the “surname” – but while the third stanza’s notion of peering into the “grandfather’s house” follows that conceit, the clarity of its description is obscured by the changing catalog of images and metaphors used to describe the speaker’s intentions, from song to street to night, and then to tunnels and binoculars. The imagery is thus peculiarly slippery, particularly wily. The reader might infer that the “heart” of the poem’s fourth stanza implies a sentimental gaze in the speaker’s backward look – though, despite the visual metaphors that precede it, the poet opts not to evoke the notion of “rose-colored glasses” (and perhaps for the best); but why the heart’s netted, lacy “perforations” are truant is difficult to parse, unless the speaker feels, in the heart’s sentimentalizing gaze, overly neglectful of her duties to the harsh realities of death.

This is to say nothing of the political narrative that also runs within these stanzas, but which is hardly discernible to the reader. This political aspect is implied by the poem’s title, the *aisling* narrative that, historically, has described a dream vision of Ireland in the form of a woman who bemoans her plight and spurs her countrymen to
restore her back to prominence. It is a feature of the poem that is discernible by its eleventh stanza, in which McGuckian describes her father in a fashion reminiscent of the *aisling* woman, and then again towards the end of the poem, in which the descriptions of her father’s beleaguered body mirror those of Northern Irish hunger-strikers; by making these parallels, the poem, among other things, frames the father’s battle with death in nearly heroic, nationalist terms. But whatever the implications of including this narrative, of more interest here is, as Shane Alcobia-Murphy has observed, its veiled presence in the poem’s opening lines, what is established through McGuckian’s idiosyncratic method of quoting other texts in her poetry. I will address McGuckian’s method at greater length shortly, but for our purposes here, it is enough to note that, as Alcobia-Murphy detects, the first stanza’s language pulls heavily from the writings of Osip Mandelstam, in which the Russian poet addresses the impact of his country’s October Revolution on himself and his work. In a passage that lays the groundwork for the opening stanza of “The Aisling Hat,” Mandelstam remarks, “The October Revolution could not but influence my work since it *took away my ‘biography,’* my sense of individual significance. *I am grateful to it,* however, for once and all putting an end to my spiritual security and to a cultural life supported by unearned cultural income…I feel indebted to the Revolution, but *I offer it gifts for which it still has no need.*” There is no arguing that McGuckian’s first stanza owes a heavy debt to this passage. And in Alcobia-Murphy’s reading, McGuckian’s use of Mandelstam helps imbue the poem with a political weight from its very beginning – which may be true, though it is difficult to imagine a reader (casual or

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academic) that would pick up on the political resonances in these early stanzas, even after
they had encountered the *aisling* tropes that arrive later in the poem. It would take an
exceptional reader, for example, to hear “revolution,” Russian or not, in McGuckian’s use
of “October” – not impossible, but highly improbable.\(^4\) Certainly it took Alcobia-Murphy
alone to discover the link.

Thus the McGuckian reader is met with curious challenges, from vague referents
to wily imagery and metaphor to all-but-indiscernible-yet-still-potentially-meaningful
source texts. And the critical reaction to these challenges, to McGuckain’s poetry, has run
the gamut, from the vociferously hostile to the admiringly laudatory. Arguably
McGuckian’s most notorious detractor is Patrick Williams, whose early critique voices
the opinions – however polemically, and however misogynistically – of a lot of readers of
McGuckian’s work, even twenty-five years on: “McGuckian’s concoctions of endless
poeticism are non-visionary, and the funny, sealed little worlds where harmless cranks
parley with themselves in gobbledygook won’t impinge on the real world of loot and
dragons.”\(^5\) It is not immediately certain what “real world of loot and dragons” Williams
speaks of, but his point is no less clear: McGuckian’s poetry does not speak to its readers
because it is too busy speaking to itself, a consequence of what he reads as her extreme
and apparently uninspired aestheticism. Other critics have offered more generous reasons
for the difficulty of her poetry, arguing, for instance, that it works against larger claims of
human and poetic essentialism, or that it represents the confrontation with ineffable

\(^4\) Though there is a poetic tradition of using “October” in a similarly veiled manner, from Dylan
Thomas to Rosemary Tonks – again, not impossible, but, within the context of a poem for which much else
is veiled, particularly difficult.

\(^5\) Patrick Williams, “Spare that Tree!” *Honest Ulsterman* 86 (1989), 51. Quoted, for one, in
Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink*, 43. Falcini in particular notes the misogyny at work in these early
critiques; see *Continuity and Change*, 215, n7.
“otherness.”\textsuperscript{6} Such arguments allow for the possibility, as I do in this chapter, that McGuckian’s poetic strategies are more than merely ways to obfuscate meaning, and that they serve other intended ends, whether they be political, gendered, lyric, or even elegiac. In terms of the latter two, for example, Clair Wills has suggested that, in writing difficult poetry, McGuckian abandons part of traditional lyric’s “fundamental principal”: “the poems are engaged in self-definition, but not of the kind that can be identified with by the reader.”\textsuperscript{7} The upshot of working against this kind of readerly identification, she claims, is that, within the framework of elegy, McGuckian seeks out modes of consolation and redress that are at home with dislocation and discontinuity, modes that are common to Irish elegy at the time. McGuckian’s difficulty is thus in service to a mode of consolation that is itself difficult, sometimes vague, sometimes wily.

With her focus on redress and consolation, Wills offers a valuable reading of McGuckian’s elegies, but it is one of ancillary interest here. Consolation – what shape it takes, whether or not elegy helps the poet achieve it – has been a concern throughout this project only in as much as it speaks to the broader relationship of the poet to language and affect that I have sketched in each chapter. And, as I hope has become clear, McGuckian’s is a particularly unique relationship. Nowhere is McGuckian’s idiosyncratic relationship with language and affect clearer than in her practice of

\textsuperscript{6} These two critical readings of McGuckian’s work have been recently recounted in more detail in Shane Alcobia-Murphy’s “‘My Cleverly Dead and Vertical Audience’: Medbh McGuckian’s ‘Difficult’ Poetry,” \textit{New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua} 16, no. 3 (Autumn/Fómhar 2012), 67-68. In this article, Alcobia-Murphy – arguably McGuckian’s most preeminent (and certainly most prolific) scholar – proffers his own reading of the poet’s “difficult” work, offering the highly materialist perspective that such difficulty is the result of McGuckian’s unique mode of composition and the “vibrant, thinking presence” behind that composition, the latter of which might seem a mundane comment were it not rebutting claims (like those of Williams’ above) that McGuckian’s work amounts to little more than poetic nonsense. See ibid., 82.

\textsuperscript{7} Clair Wills, “Modes of Redress: The Elegy in Recent Irish Poetry,” \textit{The Princeton University Library Chronicle} 59, no. 3 (Spring 1998), 613.
borrowing heavily, and without acknowledgement, from the texts of other writers. The liberal use of Mandelstam’s reflections on the October Revolution in “The Aisling Hat” is only one instance of a method that spans across her collections of poetry, a method now generally well-known by scholars, if not always well-regarded. Shane Alcobia-Murphy – the scholar who first observed the degree to which McGuckian borrowed from other texts – describes her “intertextual” compositional practice at length:

Before constructing her poetic texts, McGuckian reads a number of biographical studies, critical works or diaries by other authors, and keeps a record of phrases that appeal to her in one of her notebooks. […] She then makes a selection from this list and arranges the words in two columns on the top half of a page. The first draft of a poem is then composed on the lower half of this page, with each phrase being cancelled out once it is selected.8

Alcobia-Murphy has on multiple occasions defended the poet’s methodology against the very accusation one might be ready to hurl upon it after reading the above description: that is, that it merely represents a form of plagiarism.9 Most recently, for example, he has offered a framework for understanding her poetic process beyond the limits of plagiarism by placing it in the context of Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist interrogation of “originality,” in which all texts amount to little more than “a fabrication of quotations,

8 This description comes from his 2012 article, “McGuckian’s ‘Difficult’ Poetry,” 68. For the article in which Alcobia-Murphy first “broke the story,” so to speak, see his “‘Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian,” Éire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies 31, nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1996): 76-101. Prior to this 1996 publication, a few scholars – Catriona O’Reilly and Clair Wills among them – had noted McGuckian’s clear debt to other writers, but Alcobia-Murphy is generally understood to have recognized the extent of that indebtedness, and he continues to generate impressive scholarship on McGuckian from his findings. If not already clear, this chapter owes a tremendous amount of debt to Alcobia-Murphy’s research, which time and again pulls from the discoveries he has made in source material and through interview with McGuckian, even when my conclusions differ or stray from those he makes himself.

9 Shane Murphy, “‘You Took Away My Biography’: The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian,” Irish University Review 28, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1998), 110-132. But he is also responsible for having implicated the poet along these very lines in the first place; see Murphy, “Obliquity in the Poetry,” 76-101, in which he never uses the term “plagiarism,” but implies it throughout.
resulting from a thousand sources of culture.”\textsuperscript{10} Ultimately, Alcobia-Murphy mildly retreats from this potential reading in order to support a claim for the poet’s originality founded on the basis of her ability to modify quotation, to make it her own. Still, leaving aside momentarily the question of originality, her method opens up new questions about mourning, affect, and language that are worth further examination here.

In part, then, I do offer in this chapter my own defense of McGuckian’s poetic practice, but I do so because her methodology generates important questions about the relation of language and affect to elegy and lyric. And I do so not by backing down from Alcobia-Murphy’s Barthesian, poststructuralist reading of her work but by pushing it further – not in order to contest his claims of the poet’s rigor or her originality but in order to look again at what she gains from her source texts, namely, language rife with affective charge, through which, in terms of the elegy, she can articulate her grief. What critics decry (or praise) in her writing – its difficulty, its “impenetrability” – I claim is a consequence of the emphasis she places on language as affect as opposed to language as representation or mimesis, and that both what draws her to her source texts and how she uses those source texts are a function of the affective and emotional charge that language carries and generates. The importance of affect to McGuckian will be made doubly clear in those elegies that function as ekphrastics, in those poems for which not only text but also painting serves as a source for her elegies. As I have argued throughout this project, in the elegy, language is neither (or not simply), as Sacks would claim, the means by which consolation is sought and achieved, nor is it merely a representation of the mourning process; rather, language and lyric provide the affective means by which grief

is located, experienced, and (potentially) translated. McGuckian’s elegies – more so than Hill’s, Heaney’s, and Muldoon’s – thus offer a kind of limit case for an understanding of lyric mourning that exchanges a conventionally understood mode of making sense of death – what we might characterize as rationally coming to terms with it – for more emotional and affective modes. This is not to say that sense cannot be made of McGuckian’s poems through the extensive work and research of her readers, and I will do some of this work alongside those scholars who have earnestly engaged her poet over the last thirty years. But for my purposes, this more meticulous work will be in service to illustrating the larger point: that is, that somewhere in McGuckian’s process of lifting words, phrases, and affect from external sources and repurposing them in light of her own circumstances of grief – somewhere in the process of harnessing the affective charge of language and art not originally her own but used for her own elegiac ends – conventional meaning becomes an afterthought, a concern secondary to that of the affective force of her articulated grief.

Along ethical lines, her unique methodology, too, presents issues both familiar and new to this project. The ethics of unacknowledged quotation is, of course, the most immediately salient to this particular chapter, but the broader implications of an affect spoken almost entirely through quotation further complicates the dynamics of this project’s continuing concern with the ethical relation between public and private, language and subject, that its focus on affect has opened up. There is a sense, after all, that McGuckian’s heavy reliance on quotation, in combination with the general opacity of her poetry, gives lie to the notion that any private realm might exist. Clair Wills has even suggested that McGuckian’s work “parodies the very idea of a private or intimate
domain; instead of intimacy we are confronted with secrecy, a refusal to offer the narrative for inspection, and at the same time we are stalked by the nagging suspicion…that these are not private narratives anyway, but political allegories.“¹¹ It is for this reason that she – along with other scholars who follow her lead – tends to focus on the political in her poetry to the sacrifice of the private and the personal.¹² But McGuckian herself insists on the importance of the private in her work, specifically as it pertains to the relationship between her poetry and her readers. In a 2007 interview with Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, she remarks – in response to the question of her poetry’s seemingly meaningless abstruseness – that, “The kind of meaning that I’m after is beginning in the private, but belongs in the privacy of the ultimate or ideal reader. Sometimes I think only women could understand certain poems, that only a woman who had had a child could understand some of them, or only a man whose child had died might understand a certain poem.”¹³ Privacy thus plays an important role in her poetry, but, as her statement suggests, the nature of that privacy, how one understands that privacy, may require adjustment. McGuckian’s statement does not repute or parody the private or the intimate, but gestures instead to a kind of privacy that is already, in a sense, public, already located in otherness, in the “ultimate or ideal reader” from which it derives. It is this distinct sense of privacy, this public privacy, that I would argue informs


¹² Like Falci, for one instance.

¹³ Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirkland, “Interview with Medbh McGuckian (Athol Hotel, Aberdeen, 6 May 2007),” in The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian: The Interior of Words, eds. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirland (Cork: Cork UP, 2010), 197. She will later say in that same interview – in more general but no less telling terms – “The person who has published a book wants it to be read, and doesn’t mind it being read and going straight into someone’s head.” See Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview (2007),” 199. Clearly her poetic practice is not entirely self-interested; she has the desire not simply, as Patrick Williams might have it, to speak to herself but to speak to others.
both her heavy use of quotation – in the way quotation is already a public, shared language – and her prioritizing of affect, that which, as I have argued time and again in this project, bridges the public and the private. The question of ethics and ethical mourning in her poetry must therefore be posed within the framework of this particular sense of public privacy, a privacy of quotation and affect.

The relationship of affect to her practice of quoting texts is most clearly discerned in McGuckian’s own commentary regarding her compositional practice. Of particular interest is the way the poet perceives the work she is doing along each of its steps, from her initial pillaging of the texts for words and phrases, to her repurposing of that material in her own poetry, to the reception of that poetry once it is received by the public. At each point in the process, one of McGuckian’s primary concerns is the affective and emotional force exerted by language. So, for instance, to start at the end, as it were, with regards to the reception of the poetry, McGuckian has suggested that her poetry might best be read in terms of its emotional force as opposed to its rational legibility. As the story goes, Dillon Johnston, the original editor of her work at Wake Forest Press, once wrote to her, saying, “‘In my own readings I found some poems immediately beautiful and others apparently forbidding. On re-readings I bounced my head against these poems, until I decided I was not offering them the appropriate organ.’”\(^\text{14}\) Reflecting on Johnston’s comments some years later, McGuckian remarked, “I think he meant [by the term “organ”] his heart and not his head. I think he was being too rational when reading them, looking at them in a much too logical way. […] So what he meant in the letter is that he had to allow the emotions to dominate rather than a word-to-word mathematical

In order to successfully read her poetry, she suggests, readers must shut off their intellectual (and perhaps critical?) faculties; instead, she continues, “Readers just need to relax and swim in the stuff.” One the one hand, the rhetoric McGuckian uses in this particular anecdote verges on something you might hear out of the Beatles (“Turn of your mind, relax, and float downstream”), and it may do little to convince detractors of her merit as a poet, detractors like the aforementioned Patrick Williams, or poet-critic James Simmons, who once claimed of McGuckian that she “knows she can elicit rave reviews by writing an alluring book of nonsense.” On the other hand, critical work on McGuckian from scholars like Robert Brazeau or Helen Blakeman depend on the potentially nonsensical qualities of the poetry. Brazeau, for instance, takes up the nonsensical in order to ground claims regarding the political and ideological import of McGuckian’s work for the ways in which it works against simplistic and assumptive social codes. And Blakeman reads the nonsensical through a Kristevan lens in order to suggest the ways McGuckian revitalizes language through “polysemantic play.”

15 Ibid.


19 See Helen Blakeman, “Poetry must almost Dismantle the Letters’: McGuckian, Mallarmé and polysemantic play,” in The Poetry of Medbh McGuckian: The Interior of Words, eds. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Richard Kirland (Cork: Cork UP, 2010), 68-83. There are certain parallels between Blakeman’s piece and my own in her emphasis on the nonrational, “semiotic” nature of poetic language that she draws from Kristeva’s Revolution in Poetic Language (1984), not least of all through affect theory, which is similarly interested in the nonrational charge of things. Still, the emphasis on affect is unique to this chapter, as is, certainly, its attempt to articulate these ideas in relation to the genre of elegy.
might favor Brazeau’s and Blakeman’s readings of McGuckian’s “nonsense” poetry over Simmons’, the specific nature of any one of their arguments hold little bearing at this moment; more importantly, what these critics perceive as either the successful or failed quality of McGuckian’s writing, the poet herself sees as the means by which to convey some emotional experience, in lieu of or in conversation with some intellectually understood experience.

In discussing the first part of her process – what I have called her “pillaging” phase (a term I use without its pejorative connotations, though I find its use all the more appropriate because other scholars might use it so) – McGuckian once again fixates on the affective qualities sought in and generated by her method. She describes her pillaging in physical terms: “There’s so much energy in books. […] It’s really satisfying. You can’t think up all the words. It’s shorthand. It’s like getting a blood transfusion into your system and to feed off other writers who don’t need the words any more.”20 She may mix metaphors, but the embodied quality that nevertheless links those mixed metaphors – energy, satisfaction, blood, feeding – suggests the affective thrill she gets from gathering quotations. And that thrill stems from the language itself: “What you look for in the texts,” she further states, “are images, striking conjunctions of maybe two or three unusual words, esoteric vocabulary; in other words, the poetry which is there, embedded in what people write and say, and what they themselves quote from.” The interest she expresses here in the images of language, in its extensive lexicon as well as in its syntax (in the “striking conjunctions” of words) mirrors the attention to linguistic materiality paid by other poet’s throughout this project; but it is the poet of this project’s final

chapter, Denise Riley, that provides the terms by which McGuckian’s particular interest in these materials might be better understood – namely, in a “musculature” of language that need not necessarily be understood in order to make an impact. As Riley describes it, language does not simply function at the level of reference, but “also works at the pervasive level of its musculature, quietly but powerfully, through its grammatical and syntactic joints.” The physicality she ascribes to language, its “musculature,” chimes with that of the physicality McGuckian ascribes to the experience of encountering language in her source texts. Indeed, what Riley’s remark draws out is the sense in which language’s appeal for McGuckian relies heavily on a sense of its physicality, a materiality that primarily acts as opposed to means. As Riley explains it, “A tangible emotionality is enacted at the very level of language itself, and in such a way as to make the old question of ‘how do words convey or express feelings?’ in part redundant.” Language’s ability to “convey,” to “express” – these are secondary concerns for McGuckian. In this sense, the “energy” she finds in “esoteric vocabulary” is particularly telling, since it is an encounter with language for which – presumably, as a result of its esotericism – the meaning is obscure or vague. But the encounter is no less energized because of the word’s obscurity; on the contrary, McGuckian seems to find the encounter all the more rewarding by virtue of its obscurity. It would hardly be a stretch to think that McGuckian’s most dedicated readers may seek out similar pleasures.

I do not want to overstate this last point: surely part of the appeal of encountering esoteric vocabulary is also in eventually learning its meaning, or, in fact, in having

21 Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification: Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford UP), 3-4. Riley’s elegiac work is, of course, the primary focus of this project’s final chapter.

22 Ibid., 4.
already known that meaning to begin with, should that be the case. In other words, in
highlighting the affective materiality of language in terms of what language *does*, I do not
mean to diminish the significance of language as a thing that can and does *mean* – or that,
in fact, part of language’s affective charge, its force on the body, may very well derive
from that meaning. The second part of McGuckian’s process – what I have called the
“repurposing” stage – is instructive for this reason, because the language she has pillaged
does take on new affective “meaning” for the poet. As she describes it,

I will usually read them [the quotations] aloud at this stage to see if any rhyme or
fit each other. The more ludicrous, often the more poetic sense. Then I will see
that it is falling into a pattern concerning what is my most unconscious anxiety,
fear, love or anger at the time I am working on it, not the time I was reading. So I
may have picked up things about my life that are later discarded. The poem will
end up itself being about what is most on my heart, although when I begin it I
rarely know exactly what this deepest thing is.\(^{23}\)

There are several points to note about these remarks, the first of which is the primacy of
emotion as the guide for the repurposing of the quotations – the “anxiety, fear, love, or
anger,” but also, more generally, the “heart.” (The reader may recall the heart “organ”
that finally allowed Dillon Johnston to come to terms with her work, which now, in
McGuckian’s second use, appears to be a go-to metonym for her for affective
experience). What also becomes abundantly clear is the degree to which McGuckian does
seem to engage (at least partly) in what Clair Wills calls lyric’s “fundamental principle”:
the act of self-definition.\(^{24}\) The strange, full implications of McGuckian’s poetic project
begin to present themselves in this particular aspect – clearly she sees her poetic process
as a deeply *personal* venture. She remarks later in the interview that, “I forget the texts


\(^{24}\) See Wills, “Modes of Redress,” 613; see also, above, p. 2.
totally because I have to – like a diving board – otherwise I would be left up there. They provide the means, but my dive is each time my own skin into the world.”25 Despite what we know of her irregular method of quotation, the way she describes her process here seems to imply that, by the time she writes, her readers are to understand that her method of composing is actually quite a traditional form of lyric writing, simply another act, as Wills suggests, of self-definition. Can this be possible? If McGuckian, as she claims, forgets her source material, is it wrong to call this stage of the process “repurposing; is it, simply, “writing”?

The fact of the matter is, of course, readers need not take McGuckian at her word. But, whether or not McGuckian truly “forgets” her sources, the notion of “forgetfulness” in this context does help to suggest how McGuckian’s method of quotation generates a lyric of “public privacy,” as well as how her lyric mourning is similar to the other poets in this project – because writing, in general, may be understood as a repurposing of forgotten quotations. This, after all, is the nature of Barthes’s interrogation of originality. The difference between “repurposing” and “writing” is only a lost memory, an unknown connotation, apart; the writer’s “sole power,” says Barthes, “is to mingle writings, to counter some by others, so as never to rely on just one.”26 All writing, in other words, is just the new arrangement of a language already received by the writer. And so

McGuckian’s lyric is simply the extreme case that ultimately proves the rule: language is quotation, language is always received, always impersonal, and to write the lyric “private” is to “mingle” and “counter” the language of (public) others. What


26 Barthes, Rustle of Language, 53.
McGuckian’s poetry additionally speaks to – alongside the work of those other poets that comprise this project – is the specific place of affect with regard to impersonal language and personal experience, to public privacy. For her, affect is central to every step of her process, not only in how she envisions her poetry’s composition but also in how the reader might eventually approach that poetry in its published form. Affect is the bridge that links separate stages, that travels from impersonal pillaging to private repurposing to reader’s reception. This is not to suggest, however, that this affect is all the same: her poetry holds in tension an affect that seems to be located in quotation, in the impersonal, and an affect that seems to want to be conveyed, that seems to be motivated by the personal. In turning to her elegies, I demonstrate how these tensions play out and what it ultimately means to “speak grief” in an impersonal language, to mourn in a language that is no one’s own.

Prior to examining specific elegies of the poet, a brief moment here to clarify certain terminology will help simplify and expedite those readings later on. In McGuckian’s favoring of the emotional over the “too rational,” in her challenge to Dillon Johnston’s “mathematical reasoning,” the poet echoes similar comments made by Mutlu Konuk Blasing about lyric affect, namely that lyric functions in its materiality at a level of the “nonrational,” that, in fact, it “poses an every-present danger for rational discourse, which must, for example, vigilantly guard against such poetic encroachments

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27 Much of what is discussed immediately below has been addressed in this project’s introductory chapter. Still, I reiterate it here, in the context of this chapter, as a means to prepare the reader for the interpretive work that lies ahead. I also return to the work of Brian Massumi (below) in greater depth in this project’s final chapter.

as alliterations or rhymes in ‘serious’ prose.” Blasing’s point – and I believe McGuckian would agree – is that, while “serious” prose is meaningful at the level of the rational, lyric poetry can offer that which prose cannot: the nonrational, in the form of affect. But in being “nonrational,” Blasing does not mean “non-meaningful,” an important distinction for the ethical readings of McGuckian’s elegies that lie ahead, and one that has a prior history in the field of affect theory. This debate circles around the “place” of affect and originates largely in the distinction, first made by Brian Massumi, between the terms “emotion” and “affect.” According to Massumi, “An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity [a term synonymous with “affect”], the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions.” In the terms with which we have been considering McGuckian’s work, Massumi’s distinction places emotion in the sphere of the “personal” and affect in the sphere of the “impersonal.” This is not to suggest that, for Massumi, affect can or does not inflict a force on the body, on the personal, just as it locates the impersonal quality of emotions in the sociolinguistic sphere; it does suggest, however, that affect can exist independently of the personal (and, in fact, independently of the “person,” according to his posthuman analysis). To that end, affect operates outside of meaning; it is “asignfying,” “irreducibly bodily and autonomic.”


31 Ibid., 27, 28.
Massumi’s distinctions clearly resonate with some of the issues discussed in this chapter, from the impersonal nature of affect to its potential meaninglessness as a result of that impersonality. The manner in which McGuckian discusses the “energy” – perhaps, Massumi’s “intensity” – of the language she pillages certainly suggests that she imbues it with a certain autonomy, independent of its original source. This seems no more clear than when she remarks, “If it’s enshrined in the work of art, even in a truncated or bowdlerized form, still I think when I meet the people who wrote all the books I think they will forgive me.”

In other words, the language of her source texts, excerpted from the context originally intended by its author, nevertheless preserves its affective power. And yet, Massumi’s distinction has been contested for various reasons and by various critics, not least of all by Ruth Leys, who has convincingly debunked the notion that “affect is an inhuman, nonsignifying force that operates below the threshold of intention, consciousness, and signification.” While the space does not exist here to further explicate her argument, still it offers an important corrective to Massumi’s claims. After all, can language ever truly not signify? As the brief interlude earlier on esoteric vocabulary suggests, it is possible to see how language resists representation (or, more accurately, it is possible to imagine an encounter with language in which one does not know what it represents); but that vocabulary no less signifies because of it. If “nonsense” is the term with which one categorizes McGuckian’s difficult poetry, it is only because that poetry resists clear meaning; it is never completely meaninglessness. In this way, the


34 Again, see both the introductory and final chapter of this project for a more extended engagement of the debate.
clamorous response of some of her critics testifies to the fact that her poetry signifies *something*, even if it has not proved easily understood; in other words, critics are responding to the language even if they do not fully comprehend what it is supposed to represent. This response can occur only if that language *means* in some way or another. For these reasons, I find the basic coordinates of Massumi’s arguments clarifying and helpful – affect, sure, can exist outside of the human – if also his particular notion of an “asygnifying” affect ultimately untenable (thus the reader will note I have used the terms “affect” and “emotion” interchangeably throughout). A more useful definition of the relationship between emotion and affect, then, may be the one provided by Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* (2005): “My assumption,” she explains, “is that affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; less ‘sociolinguistically fixed,’ but by no means code-free or meaningless; less ‘organized in response to our interpretations of situations,’ but by no means entirely devoid of organization and diagnostic powers.”35 It is along these lines that we might begin to better unpack the role of affect in Medbh McGuckian’s elegies, in particular as we begin to grapple with the non-linguistic forms of affect (in art) from which she draws, and later in the ethical implications of an elegy that seems almost to keep its elegiac nature secret from its reader.

The first poem of interest is “Constable’s *Haywain,*” from *Captain Lavender* (1994), a collection of poetry that many read as an extended elegy for McGuckian’s father. It is worth noting from the start that this particular poem was written prior to her father’s death, and thus acts a proleptic elegy. As she explains, “The poem was written

before he died. […] A week before he died, I was sent a form to fill in. It asked me to fill in the parent’s birth-date and, if applicable, the date of his death and it was very strange. I felt this was a warning.36 The curious implications of the proleptic elegy have already been partly suggested in the chapter on Paul Muldoon; with regard to McGuckian’s work, these implications can be further explicated. Primarily for our purposes, by their very nature – written prior to death – proleptic elegies suggest that the event of death need not itself occasion the writing of elegy, that the feelings of loss might be generated in language alone. While Peter Sacks argues that “rather than finding absence or loss to be somehow already ‘there’ in the language, […] an elegist’s language emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss,”37 the proleptic elegy suggests that the event of death is not one of “originating” loss, but rather a loss whose quality is not discernibly different from that which language is capable of manifesting.38 “Constable’s Haywain” plays out this dynamic, as if McGuckian writes her father’s death – and experiences his loss – before it actually occurs. In the above description, for example, she describes the cautionary, “strange” sense of imminent loss she feels when asked to fill in her father’s death-date; she weaves this experience into the opening stanza of her poem, and in doing so, she extends that feeling even further, as if to “write” the experience of loss before it actually occurs. The poem opens:


37 Peter Sacks, The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 1. But again, see also my discussion of Muldoon’s translation of “The Mirror” in the previous chapter for more.

38 Although arrived at independently, it should be noted that Naomi Marklew similarly notes – during a discussion of this particular poem, no less – that proleptic elegy “might be seen to challenge the traditional psychoanalytic explanations of mourning.” Marklew does not elaborate further on the dimensions of that particular “challenge” as I do here, but her insight is affirming nevertheless. See Marklew, “Northern Irish Elegy” (PhD diss, Durham University, 2011), 176.
The incised triangle,  
the angle of the sciatic notch,  
divides the month from the year  
in my father’s birthdate;  
as bone becomes transparent  
against the background of the viaticum.  

The slash that originally divided birth-month and birth-year on the form – and that in her words warned of her father’s death – is here conflated with the actual incisions made into his body that also, more violently, warn of death. In the way McGuckian parallels the form’s slash with the knife’s incision, so, too, does she parallel her poem with the actual death of her father that is soon to come. As if culpable of his murder in writing the elegy, she remarks in the third stanza, “I owned the willed | or invented death | high on its bed of extrovert papyrus.” The poem, on paper, is perhaps distanced from actual death, but in so being, the poet is more overtly emotional, extroverted. Affect thus seems to be generated first, and primarily, through language, in the proleptic elegy that anticipates death, but no less strongly articulates loss.

Though the poem does not explicitly identify its source text, that text, too, suggests that McGuckian has begun mourning in language prior to her father’s actual death. If “the incised triangle” launches the poem, in their original context, they are separate entities: “incised” and “triangle” are separated by nearly seventy pages in Peter Metcalf’s and Richard Huntingdon’s Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of

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40 As McGuckian describes in interview, “The ‘incised triangle’ in the poem was very physical. It’s like what they were doing to him. They were constantly opening him and cutting him. He had one of those very brutal deaths”; see Alcobia-Murphy, “Interview (2007),” 198.
Mortuary Ritual (1991).\footnote{This source text was first identified by Shane Alcobia-Murphy, though the references for these specific words are, to the best of my knowledge, original to this project. See Alcobia-Murphy, “‘If I Prolonged the Look to Rediscover Your Face’: Medbh McGuckian’s Ekphrastic Elegies,” in The Enclave of My Nation: Cross-currents in Irish and Scottish Studies, eds. Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Margaret Maxwell (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, 2008), 1-18.} McGuckian’s method seems to preclude much by way of recontextualizing her pillaged words and phrases back into their original source;\footnote{Though other scholars find great merit in explicating McGuckian’s poetry through the lens of their original source texts; certainly Alcobia-Murphy has made important insights using this method. For a brief account of the scholarly approach to this particular “genetic” scholarship, see Borbála Faragó, Medbh McGuckian (Maryland: Rowman & Linkfield, and Bucknell UP, 2014, 8. Certainly in its concern with McGuckian’s methodology, this paper is interested in the fact of transmission from source text to poem, if not always in specific thematic correspondences. Though, with regard to “Constable’s Haywain,” I clearly suspect some direction relationship between respective content.} her confession that at times she wonders, “‘Why the hell did I write that down?’” suggests that, by the time of that language’s repurposing, the source does not much matter.\footnote{Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview (2007),” 201.} But at a time when death was on the mind, so to speak, for the poet, it is difficult not to read into her turn to an anthropological study of mortuary ritual: death prepares death. A closer look, for example, of the text’s only use of the word “triangle” does open up one possible reading of its function in the poem. In Metcalf and Huntingdon’s text, one section in particular reconsiders French sociologist Robert Hertz’s notion of the three “dramatis personae” of death: the corpse, the soul, and the mourners. Metcalf and Huntingdon are particularly interested in Hertz’s tripartite argument around these figures, remarking that, “We may imagine the arguments as the sides of a triangle, the corners of which are the aspects of the corpse and its disposal, the soul and the dead, and the living and the mourners.”\footnote{Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 80 (my emphasis).} If McGuckian truly had forgotten the initial context for the word “triangle” by the time of the poem’s composition, our guess as to that original context’s import is
probably as good as hers. Certainly the triangle, as Metcalf and Huntingdon refer to it, reflects certain points of contact in the confrontation with death, not least of all McGuckian herself as the living and the mourner. Paired with the word “incised” in its original context – used to describe a Berawan mausoleum – the self-portrait of the mourner gains greater significance. Metcalf and Huntington write: “The aboveground styles are frequently elaborately decorated with the fine incised carving in floral, abstract, and anthropomorphic designs.” Together, these words in their original context provide the elegist with a means of considering the roles of mourner and memorialist she may soon be forced to inhabit – roles, in fact, that she already inhabits by writing this poem.

Admittedly, this analysis verges on the speculative; but speculation, I would argue, is the particular methodological trickiness of McGuckian’s poetic practice for the scholarship that seeks to unpack it. Clair Wills warns that “it is misguided to look for an interpretation (as opposed to a reconfiguration)” in the source texts that supply the material. To read a one-to-one relationship between the source text and its reconfiguration in the poem is to flirt with misreading, or, at the very least, overreading. And yet, this type of analysis begins to tie together the kind of work that McGuckian undertakes in her elegies – namely that the impersonal language of her source texts provide the emotional coordinates for which her experience of grief and her role as elegist can be plotted and followed. Shane Alcobia-Murphy – who has all but

45 Metcalf and Huntington, Celebrations, 146 (my emphasis).
46 Wills, Improprieties, 178.
47 It is similarly misguided, I think, to assume that the affective charge of the language of a source text has a one-to-one relation to the affective charge of its use in the poem. This is affect theory’s particular challenge in its use a hermeneutic approach. Although I hope this is clear throughout this chapter, and throughout the project as a whole, it is worth restating clearly here.
made a career out of tracing McGuckian’s poetry back to their source texts – has
terrifically explicated in this way the repurposing that occurs in the phrase “this sentence
of speechlessness” in the poem’s third stanza: “Only my I, my lost skinfold, | has
disturbed the ground | with this sentence of speechlessness.”48 In the source text, the
phrase refers to the morning rituals observed by women in many cultures: “Sometimes
whole villages of women are under sentence of speechlessness for long periods.”49 But
what in the poem seems a tricky paradox of language (“sentence”) and silence
(“speechlessness”), Alcobia-Murphy reads much more darkly, suggesting that the phrase
“connotes a judgement or judicial determination, and the poet’s ‘I’ has condemned her
father to ‘speechlessness,’ i.e. death.”50 What originally speaks to an anthropologically
informed commentary on commonly practiced rituals becomes, in the poem, a self-
rebuke for the kind of imagining of his death that occurs in the poem.

In the above example, the reader gets a sense of the way McGuckian makes the
public private, the way she twists the source material to speak the personal. And indeed,
the images of the poem in general tend to fall somewhere between these public and
private modes – at one end of the spectrum, more obscure references to the source text,
and, at the other end, extremely personal objects that have absolutely no reference to the
source text. Neither makes for particularly transparent meaning; both obscure in their
own ways. The line “wife-giver and wife-taker,” for example, is difficult to parse in the
poem – it is possible she means that in death, her father has taken the category of “wife”

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48 McGuckian, “Constable’s ‘Haywain,’” 36.
49 Metcalf and Huntington, Celebrations, 49.
that in life he gave to the poet’s mother, though this seems a particularly elaborate, and not overly elegant, conceit – and the source text does not provide much insight either: it reads, “In eastern Indonesia, mortuary exchanges are important in the relations between wife-givers and wife-takers.”\textsuperscript{51} In these instances, affect really does seem impersonal and irrational, a kind of quality innate and hidden the language because context offers no clarification. The appeal for McGuckian in a phrase such as this seems to be its strange conjunction of words and the complex realities these kinds of conjunctions broadly imply, and that prosaic language cannot articulate. As she explains, regarding her own work, “these separate phrases from different places are fused together in a paradoxical, contradictory way to give or get at the truth of something in my life. […] I suppose I yoke together disparates. Nietzsche says, ‘beauty in Art is power over opposites.’ I suppose I select the most incongruous, the ones you would least expect to make the poem.”\textsuperscript{52} These kinds of incongruities, both as she retrieves them from other texts and as she implements them (sometimes creating great incongruity), work against the texts’ comprehensibility, but in doing so, they speak to a more affective experience she seeks to capture. In making the public private, what matters most is the way affect circulates in its various ways within that process.

Among other obscurities is the meaning of the Constable painting (Figure 1) to which the poem’s title refers – not because the painting itself is particularly obscure, but because it has a specifically personal meaning for McGuckian, the fact of which the poem makes no explicit mention.

\textsuperscript{51} Metcalf and Huntington, \textit{Celebrations}, 13.

\textsuperscript{52} Alcobia-Murphy and Kirkland, “Interview (2007),” 201.
McGuckian’s father had owned several prints of Constable’s work, this one included, and she notes in interview that her “father was a Constable type of person. He loved the countryside. To please his family and fulfill his own nature he became a teacher – but he was really a farmer.” The painting, then, functions as a referent for personal meaning, but it additionally functions as another, different kind of source text for the poem. Thematically, for instance, the painting depicts a horse-drawn wain, or farm wagon, carrying two men across the river. So, when in the final stanza of the poem, McGuckian writes of “his islandlike afterworld, his multi-sided water journey,” it is not difficult to

53 Ibid., 198.
see the figure of her father as one of the two men riding the hay wain, islanded by the river as the horses pull it through its journey.

But this reading of the father as the farmer in the painting amounts to little more than the poet doing a bit of metaphorical conflation: the father is the farmer is the father. The ekphrastic nature of the poem, however, cannot be understated. Alcobia-Murphy has noted the tendency in McGuckian’s elegiac work to engage with painting; but he strangely foregoes much consideration as to why she turns to painting.54 For the most part, his analysis is interested in the consolatory function of the paintings, the suggestion that they offer, again, metaphors or images of the dead that provide solace. His argument is convincing, but it strangely avoids the question of ekphrastic translation, the sense in which a poem might aspire to the form of the painting with which it engages. For a poet who makes the “translation” of source texts essential to her compositional process, the question of what such translation work might look like across artistic genres cannot be ignored. What does McGuckian gain from painting, and does it differ from that which she receives from the written text?

The obvious answer I would proffer is that she gains an affective charge from art that does work similar to that of her linguistic sources, but which helps elucidate the nonrational nature of her approach to both. This claim is more compellingly supported through a reading of another one of McGuckian’s ekphrastic elegies – one, again, that Alcobia-Murphy examines in his article – called “The Angel with Blue Wings,” from her collection The Book of the Angel (2004). The poem elegizes the actor Gregory Peck,

54 See Alcobia-Murphy, “Ekphrastic Elegies.”
whom McGuckian befriended in his later years. But it also refers to Édouard Manet’s painting, *The Dead Christ with Angels* (1864), which depicts Christ with two angels at both sides, waking from death (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Édouard Manet. *The Dead Christ with Angels*. 1864. Oil on canvas, 179.4 x 149.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [http://www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

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One of those angels, as McGuckian’s poem’s title highlights, has bright blue wings. In her own words, McGuckian uses the “painting to meditate on the transition between life and the next life: where do all the familiar physical attributes go to?; how to tell when the person has finally gone.” And Alcobia-Murphy reads the poem this way, arguing that it presents an image of apotheosis characteristic of, as Sacks argues, the genre of elegy. This may be true, but this is to ignore the tension that runs throughout the poem, the tension on the material world that continues to exert itself against the notion of apotheosis. The poem begins:

Though I understood, almost feature by feature,  
the unity of a world in your soul,  
if I prolonged the look  
to rediscover your face,  

you would make someone else passionate,  
or even seek to disappoint  
my quarter-smile in the claws  
of a laughing look.  

While the speaker can understand a kind of transcendent, soul-like unity in (one assumes) Peck, the poem suggests that, through an exchange of gazes, “understanding” is displaced, deferred to someone else or intentionally disappointed. Some kind of consoling apotheosis may be hinted at, but at the outset of the poem, at least, it is unreachable.

Alcobia-Murphy identifies the source text for these lines in Michael Fried’s *Manet’s Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1996). Indeed, the sense of a gaze that “disappoints” comes from Fried’s comment that “‘Manet unsettles and has no

56 Again, as described to Alcobia-Murphy in an email. See his “Ekphrastic Elegies,” 12-13.

wish to satisfy; he even seeks to disappoint,” which Alcobia-Murphy notes is a comment on Manet’s own “resistance to closure in his art.”\textsuperscript{58} This may reflect, he argues, McGuckian’s own linguistic opacity, the “resistance to closure” that appears time and again in the vague and slippery cracks of her poetry; but I am more interested in how this line participates in the running commentary throughout the poem about art and the gaze.

The poem repeatedly fixates on looks and gazes and the things that are communicated or not communicated in the separation of soul from material world. The speaker remarks:

\begin{quote}
I would no longer say anything to your eyes, 
the school of your eyes, the eye of the dead 
at that precise moment when mourning begins, 
two eyes that I must get over mourning.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

At the moment of death, McGuckian suggests, the exchange of gazes fails, leaving only the eyes that no longer hold the promise of education. We are left with a materiality that, yes, suggests a certain opacity of meaning but is no less affectively impactful for that.

The sentiment is repeated at the end of the poem:

\begin{quote}
your gaze’s own will to come 
clear of your body, 

the intimacy which was born 
of your flesh-pollen’s willed roughness, 

the left-over-right or masculine 
buttoning of your jacket, 

the feeling of that line of light 
at the \textit{profil perdu} of your fingertips?\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Alcobia-Murphy, “Ekphrastic Elegies,” 14; Fried quoted in ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} McGuckian, “Angel with Blue Wings,” 76.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 77.
After suggesting the moment of the soul’s transcendence from the body in the form of the gaze that wishes to detach itself from that material world, the speaker is left contemplating the memories of that body in action – the buttoning of the coat, and the “feeling” evoked by the light on the fingertips in that action.

What I am arguing, then, is that this poem ultimately is concerned with the continuing affective force of the material world, even in death – perhaps more so in death, as life’s materiality seems to be charged with more affective force as death takes over. It is a materiality that is ultimately encapsulated in the form of painting, not least of all through the emphasis of the gaze but also through the Manet painting it references and the profil perdu with which the poem ends. Profil perdu means, literally, “lost profile,” but in the artistic tradition it represents those facial profiles that are hidden away, either through shadow or, more commonly, because the face in the painting is turned to the side. Christ’s countenance in Manet’s painting is facing forward, but it is in shadow, as if forbidding the clear gaze of the spectator. It evokes what Deleuze claims of painting more generally in his study of Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation – that is, that “Between a color, a taste, a touch, a smell, a noise, a weight, there would be an existential communication that would constitute the ‘pathic’ (non-representative) moment of the sensation.”

In Deleuze’s analysis, sensation is synonymous with affect as it is understood in this project, that through which various materialities – in Deleuze’s statement above, this includes the visual (“color”), the gustatory (“taste”), the tactile (“touch”), and so on – make their presence felt. Such is the case, for Deleuze, in painting, through which materiality presents itself through sensation, through affect. He continues:

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“This is a ‘logic of sense,’ as Cézanne said, which is neither rational nor cerebral. What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes.” The logic of sense – that is, the logic by which the affectively charged materiality of painting operates (at least according to Deleuze) – is a logic of a different order from that of a “rational” logic. It is this alternative logic, a logic of affect, then, that is what McGuckian, in her own way, seeks from painting (and ultimately language, as well). What interests her in Manet’s painting, in its tension between painting and death – as she articulates in her poem – is the continued insistence of the material world through the gaze, through the shadowed face, and through the blue wings of the angel that exert a force in spite of the world of death. The poem translates these tensions from painting to poem, not simply as a way of imagining some kind of consoling movement towards transcendence but through the difficult material reminder of what is left behind in death and thus what is perdu.

By way of conclusion, I will briefly consider one more poem that rehearses again this tension between language and affect, the force of language that remains or is lost through a poetic praxis that results in oblique meaning. That poem is “Drawing Ballerinas,” from McGuckian’s 2001 volume of the same name. Helen Blakeman, in her article, “Medbh McGuckian and the Poetics of Mourning,” offers an excellent reading.

62 Ibid. (my emphasis)

63 I do not address the role of color here, of the angel’s blue wings, but that, too, may be understood as a particularly nonrational, but still meaningful, affect that painting carries and that McGuckian seeks to translate. As early as 1992, McGuckian criticism has noted McGuckian’s abiding interest in color, and its continued presence in her poetry; see, for one, Peggy O’Brien, “Reading Medbh McGuckian: Admiring What We Cannot Understand,” Colby Quarterly 48, no. 4 (December 1992), 239-250.

64 McGuckian pulls the materials for this poem from John Elderfield’s The Drawings of Henri Matisse. See Elderfield, The Drawings of Henri Matisse (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1985).
of the poem as an elegy, the way its imagery of tumult and storm undergirds the poem and suggests a certain doom, as well as the importance of the gaze and the material body exerting itself in the poem, as we have discussed above with regard to “The Angel with Blue Wings.”

Astonishingly, though, what Blakeman fails to note in her complex reading is that the poetry never clearly announces itself as an elegy. To be sure, with the exception of a “lost | body” in the poem — which is itself not even a clear indication of the genre — the only way we know the poem is an elegy is because McGuckian states so in a footnote to the poem:

This poem was written to commemorate Ann Frances Owens, schoolfellow and neighbor, who lost her life in the Abercorn Café explosion, 1972. The painter, Matisse, when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years “drawing ballerinas.”

McGuckian criticism, of course, draws heavily from the poet’s own words (this chapter is no exception, clearly); but for the generic status of a poem to hinge almost exclusively on the poet’s footnote is an impressive feat, a testament to the obscure and difficult quality of the writing.

It is, however, also a testament to what matters in McGuckian’s poetry. While it is not clear on its own terms that “Drawing Ballerinas” is an elegy, still, as Blakeman illustrates, a sense of the tumultuous, the feeling of sudden, chaotic loss permeates the poem. If we can convincingly understand the poem as an elegy without depending on McGuckian’s footnote, it is because the poem affectively generates that sense. The poem

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65 Though it should be said that Blakeman’s concern is in the particularly sexualized gaze, which, while interesting, is not my particular focus here.


resists semantic clarity but nevertheless performs the elegiac work of mourning. When Captain Lavender was released, it was heralded for its more direct engagement, like this poem, with the Troubles. The book’s inscription from Picasso makes this clear: “I have not painted the war…but I have no doubt that the war is in…these paintings I have done.”\textsuperscript{68} Aside from yet another reference to painting, the phrase speaks to the role of affect in her elegies: we may not see her mourning clearly, but the poetry brims with the sense of it.

But what, finally, of ethics? “Drawing Ballerinas” on the surface presents the narrative of a dancer, but underneath it the poem teems with imagery of violence and death. Its third stanza begins “The body turns in, restless, on itself | in a womb of sleep, an image of isolated sleep,”\textsuperscript{69} and its reader may envision the pose of a ballerina, but in “restless,” “isolated sleep,” death quietly lurks. The dancer’s “ringlet of hair tied with black silk” is described as “a machine-gun | in its nest,” and even while the poem’s reader might interpret it is a sparkling metaphor for the kinetic energy of the dancer, Northern Irish violence creeps in the shadows. The concern here is not that the poem has a political bias, of course, but that in its thick opacity the poem conceals that bias, thereby stirring the emotions while masking its ideological character. Elsewhere, Eric Falci notes of McGuckian’s collection \textit{Shelmalier} (1998) that the poet occasionally “slips into an uncritical Republican discourse”,\textsuperscript{70} and, similarly, in this chapter’s opening poem, “The Aisling Hat,” there is a sense that, in seeking to clothe her father’s battle with death in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[68] Quoted in McGuckian, \textit{Captain Lavender}, 9.
\item[70] Falci, \textit{Continuity and Change}, 112.
\end{footnotes}
garbs of revolution, the *aisling*, and the hunger-strikers, she betrays a political bias, whether intentionally or not. Her poetic act risks positioning her father within a rhetoric of martyrdom, which, as this project’s chapter on Seamus Heaney has already suggested, is a precarious act within the context of Northern Irish sectarian conflict.

But where opacity in the case of “Drawing Ballerinas” and “The Aisling Hat” may problematically conceal ideological content, for other scholars, the opacity of McGuckian’s poetry performs important, ideologically informed and ethically responsible work: it creates a mode of resistance – along gendered lines – to rationalist, masculinist modes of discourse. Do her elegies, then, offer a model for a kind of feminized mourning, a mourning that, as Melissa Zeiger has argued in broader terms, counters the traditional, masculinized model of grief and loss that emphasizes Orpheus’s pain while ignoring Eurydice’s? The cultural and gendered force of affect suggested by this possibility cannot be ignored – and neither can the cultural dynamics of McGuckian’s unique poetic method of quotation. On the one hand, unacknowledged citation is reasonably recognized as a type of unethical appropriation; and yet, in the age of Google where such sources are increasingly and more easily traceable, a poetic mourning that “quotes,” that uses a public “script,” potentially offers a model for shared grief. The following chapter will examine the full implications of public “scripts” of mourning in its analysis of Denise Riley’s “A Part Song”; but for our purposes here, McGuckian’s poetic method suggests that in language – impersonal, unoriginal, but


public, cultural, collective – the resources of mourning might be tapped, employed, and understood – not in particularly rational ways, but rather in affective ways. Mourning as impersonal; mourning as communal; mourning as ethical.

What has been of central importance to this chapter is the primary function of affect in McGuckian’s unique poetic praxis and the ways it inflects her lyric voice and the shape of her linguistic mourning. “There’s a mixture of truth in the poem and a mixture of quotation in it. To me, the sources are a crutch and a help” – so Medbh McGuckian describes the quality of her poetry: a mix of truth and quotation. Quotation has been the means by which the poet speaks her “truth.” Through an emphasis on the affective materials of language and painting, McGuckian plots the linguistic coordinates from which to experience the grief occasioned by death. Language is not, in this sense, primarily a means of the “representation” of grief; indeed, the at-times impenetrability of her poetry suggests as much. Rather, through the practice of stitching impersonal quotation with personal experience, language is better understood as the means through which grief is located and shaped. The constitutive nature of the affective materials of language, and what that means for the elegiac genre, will be the focus of the sixth and final chapter of this project.
CHAPTER 5

“SHE DO THE BEREAVED IN DIFFERENT VOICES”: DENISE RILEY’S PART SONG

In 2008, Jacob Riley, the adult son of British poet Denise Riley, passed away unexpectedly. As she details it in her book-length essay published four years later, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (2012), he was found in the bathtub, water still running, having suffered from heart failure. The autopsy concluded that Riley’s son suffered a heart attack, but it was later revealed that his cardiac failure was the result of cardiomyopathy, a disease of the heart muscle. His condition escaped the doctor’s detection, though the signs were there; and for his mother, as she tells us in the essay, the cardiomyopathy was “in retrospect, blindingly evident.”¹ Riley describes trawling through the autopsy report (which she was forced to translate from the original Spanish), burdened by the knowledge that her son’s death could have been prevented and seeking to dredge up any evidence in the postmortem that might have broader genetic implications for her other children, so that, should she need to, she would be able save a life where she had “failed” to do so before. She translated the Spanish, she explains, with “an online medical dictionary in hand, in a coolly determined rush of concentration,” and she notes that, “The living person [her son] was rather squeamish and he would not have cared for this. Needs

must.” \footnote{Ibid., 30.} Driven by purpose, and despite the graphic nature of the report, she read it dispassionately, casting a cold eye on death, hoping to discern where it reached its flawed conclusions – again, heart failure, \textit{not} a heart attack – heedless of the evidence.

Riley’s is a tale of investigation born out of exigency, a mother seeking to safeguard her children in the wake of her son’s death. It is also a telling account of the complicated relationship between language and affect, of the way in which language comprehended in the mind is capable of generating affect in the body, even as emotional states inform the encounter with language that might produce such affects; that is to say, in Riley’s story, language has the potential to produce affect – she imagines the squeamishness her son would have felt, just as we imagine the report’s potential to create distress in her, given the graphic nature of its detail – even as that affect appears to be curbed by the concern and fear she feels for her other children, which motivates her to study the report and undergirds the dispassion (as opposed to distress) with which she reads it. Language and affect, mind and body: Riley’s story exhibits the entangled nature of both pairs of terms.

The (what I call here) “entangled” nature of affect and language, mind and body, has been one of the driving themes throughout this dissertation, one that began with Geoffrey Hill and his play on the notion of “our word is our bond.” In Hill’s estimation, language is, as J.L. Austin first argued, performative, but it also bears an affectively charged historicity that can “shackle” the human mind and body, that functions in a constitutive way. Riley’s own sense of entanglement shares much in common with Hill’s, for which both the question of linguistic performativity and of the affectively charged,
historical nature of language are again of central concern. But whereas Hill’s response to
the constitutive claims of a historied and affectively charged language was, in the playing
field of elegy, to seek out linguistic countermeasures that might draw attention to and
ultimately curb the affective force of linguistic and generic mediation, Riley’s response is
less antagonistic, if no less ethically aware. Riley’s theoretical works are abidingly
concerned with the ethics of language, linguistic and cultural categories, and the affect
generated by and through that language; but as this chapter will demonstrate, her attitude
towards the ethical precariousness of linguistic affect is significantly less anxiety-ridden
than Hill’s. More resigned, in a way, to language’s affective hold over the body, she also
perceives the potential robustness of linguistic expression afforded by that hold, the way
affect thus also enables the lyric subject to speak “robustly” in the realm of the political
or the ethical. As she tellingly remarks, “To consider language itself, shouldn’t plunge us
into anxiety over a loss of our own ‘agency’”; rather, the affective charge that gives
language its hold is that which also makes it potentially thick with affective meaning,
which allows it to be, as she later remarks, “the absolute plenitude of the speaker’s
emotion which is sublime.” I will explicate the reasons for this potential robustness of
language at greater length shortly; and in having done so, I will lay the groundwork for a
more specific consideration of how her elegiac work similarly conveys the sense that
language shouldn’t plunge the elegist into anxiety over elegy’s affective and ethical

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3 Though at the risk of making distinctions between poets that are too clear-cut – and thus
misrepresentative – Riley does advance her own linguistic countermeasures, not least of all through her use
of irony in her poetry (a tactic similarly employed by Hill). Still, as will be made clear, her poetry does not
exhibit to the same degree the symptoms of ethical anxiety that characterizes Hill’s poetry.


5 Ibid., 7.
implications. Thus, in terms of the ethical ramifications of linguistic and affective “entanglement,” while this project begins, in Hill, with the elegy in ethical crisis, in Riley, it ends with a potential “model of sustainability” for the genre, one in which its ethical import is an enduring concern, but neither one so defining nor so debilitating in its force – one, in fact, that is potentially enabling.

By way of coming to these conclusions, this chapter also takes up an ongoing debate in the field of affect studies which is itself concerned with the ethical dynamics of affect, primarily as it relates to affect’s ability to “mean,” to have signification. Most recently, for example, Ruth Leys, in her 2011 critique of the turn to affect in Critical Inquiry, challenges the work of affect theorists like Brian Massumi and William E. Connolly who distinguish the term “emotion” from that of “affect”; for these theorists, Leys explains, “emotion” functions at the level of meaning and signification, whereas “affect” is “prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs – because they are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning.” Indeed, the ethical stakes of theorists like Massumi and Connolly are founded on this particular notion of affect – as that which is nonsignifying and which occurs below consciousness – because they believe it holds the key to considering, as Massumi describes, “postmodern power after ideology.”

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6 This debate is touched on previously in this project both in the introductory chapter and, more recently, in the chapter on Mebdh McGuckian that immediately precedes this one. I have saved my most thorough engagement in the debate for the final chapter, because it is Riley’s own theoretical observations on affect that offer the most compelling – for our purposes – response to the relationship between affect, meaning, and ethics.


Massumi, in being “nonsignifying,” affect operates according to a logic distinct from that of ideology, which remains fettered to the principles of language and signification; and, within the dynamics of power, the manipulation of affect is thus more pernicious than that of linguistically and culturally espoused ideologies because it operates below the realm of consciousness, below one’s awareness.

However intriguing these claims of affect theorists like Massumi are, as will become apparent, I share Leys’ concern that, in making such a distinction between emotion and affect, and “in spite of their explicit hostility to dualism,” as she notes, “many of the new affect theorists succumb to a false dichotomy between mind and body because they equate the mind with consciousness and therefore treat everything that can’t be attributed to mental processes, defined in this way, to the behavior of the body.”9 In other words, these theorists end up reinforcing a mind-body dualism by arguing (mistakenly) that the mind can process meaning in ways the body does not – a claim which, in a sense, threatens much of the work of this dissertation, invested as it is in language’s affective force on the body. Like Leys, therefore, I seek in this chapter to dismantle the false mind-body dichotomy created by these affect theorists. But whereas Leys pursues these ends by attempting to systematically invalidate much of the evidence used by these theorists, I pursue them through a focus on linguistic affect, or “language as affect,” to appropriate Riley’s specific phraseology in her book, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (2005). Riley’s theoretical work, in texts like *Impersonal Passion* as well as *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (2000), offers an important corrective to distinctions between mind and body, and thus between signifying emotion

and supposedly non-signifying affect, by demonstrating the ways in which language impresses itself on the body. Riley begins *Impersonal Passion* by saying, “There is a forcible affect of language which courses like blood through its speakers.” This chapter considers the means by which Riley can equate linguistic affect with the materiality of the body, with the blood coursing through it, as well as the implications of such an equation on current theories of affect.

Of course, in turning to Riley’s work as a potential corrective, my intentions are not to devalue the “ethico-political stakes” that motivate the work of this particular set of affect theorists; Riley’s concern with these very stakes are, as I have already noted, pervasive. Rather, in this chapter, I proffer a means by which to advance such work without needing to seek recourse to claims of nonsignification and noncognition that are untenable to begin with; and I do so through a focus on, primarily, the performative nature of language and lyric. In turning to an examination of performative language, I clear a path from which I can return to the role of linguistic affect – language as affect – in the elegiac, focusing specifically on Riley’s *Time Lived, Without its Flow* alongside her twenty-part poem for Jacob, “A Part Song,” published in the *London Review of Books* a few weeks prior to *Time Lived*. In both elegiac works, the performative nature of language and affect is integral to the shape of each text. But whereas in *Time Lived*, the

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12 My work thus aligns more closely to that of other affect theorists like Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, who have similarly political and ethical ends, but who find the distinction between emotion and affect like that made by Massumi to be varyingly helpful. See Ahmed’s discussion of pain and its challenge to such distinctions between emotion and affect, in Ahmed *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York, Routledge, 2004), 40; and see Ngai’s modified use of the distinction, which views affect as less “fixed, but by no means […] meaningless,” in Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 24 – 27. Ngai’s particular stance is also given greater attention in this project’s chapter on McGuckian.
performative functions as a means by which to “speak” an experience of grief that resists articulation in a language purely understood as “representational” – not dissimilar to, say, how affect functions in the elegies of Medbh McGuckian, generating “meaning” through more affective, non-representational modes – in “A Part Song,” the poem examines its own performative nature, as Riley, over the course of the elegy – and like an actor on a stage – tries on an array of linguistic and cultural masks of mourning, and considers which of those befit her and which of those do not. Riley’s poem thus once again gestures to the historical and constitutive nature of affect in language, and hints at the ethical precariousness of writing elegy, of writing a private grief that is always already public, that is always already operating within a broader network of culturally constructed values and belief systems that speak beyond. But as in her theoretical texts, “A Part Song” suggests that such a condition – a condition of language that, in its historicity, is rife with affect – is also the very necessary means by which affect – by which one’s grief – can be spoken in its fullness, can be conveyed in its rich complexity. Riley, then, through her elegy for her son, offers an elegiac aesthetic that is aware of its potential ethical ramifications but which is undisturbed by them, accepting of the knowledge that unethicalsity is the risk an elegist takes in order to draw from the affective powers of language that make grief speakable.

If Riley’s notion of “language as affect” breaks down the distinctions between signifying emotion and nonsignifying affect as articulated by recent theorists of affect, it does so in part by challenging another set of distinctions according to which those two terms are defined – namely, that of the “personal,” the “social,” and the “prepersonal.” For Eric Shouse – another of Leys’s targets for critique – emotion and affect map
accordingly: “Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal.” Each of the three terms delineates certain boundaries from the others: “feelings” are personal because they are individually experienced and cognizable; “emotions” are social because they can be communicated through “display” to others; and “affects” are prepersonal because they are unrealizable in language, because they are “always prior to and/or outside consciousness.” This notion of the prepersonal, which he links directly to affect, is of particular importance to this chapter because many of the affect theorists I target stake their claims on the prepersonal; it is a notion I wish, here, to invalidate. The relationship of the prepersonal to the personal and the social – and to emotion and affect – is, first of all, largely unclear in Shouse’s formulation, due in no small part to the way in which he rigidly anchors the terms of both sets of distinctions – again, feeling to the “personal,” emotion to the “social,” and affect to the “prepersonal” – such that one hand always seems to force the other. Formulations by other affect theorists regarding both emotion and affect and the personal, the social, and the prepersonal are less rigid, if not always significantly clearer. For example, in his response to Leys’s original critique of the affective turn, William E. Connolly admits that “Emotion and affect are essentially interinvolved, and neither is entirely reducible to the other.” Leys rightly wonders how this statement chimes with other affect theorists who separate affect

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15 Ibid., ¶4.

16 Ibid., ¶5.

from meaning and signification – or how, in fact, it differs from her own position. His comment seems to insist on a much less rigid boundary than that suggested by Shouse between the nonsignifying prepersonal and the meaningful personal and social, such that, for Leys as well as for myself, it is no longer clear that the prepersonal is nonsignifying. If such is the case, though, then why make the distinction?

A more generous interpretation might claim that Connolly’s remark is consistent with one of the primary imperatives of this particular cohort of affect theorists – that is, to consider the prepersonal, the site of affect, in relation to the social. As Patricia Ticineto Clough explains in the introduction to her edited collection, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007), the articles that comprise the collection use theories and methodologies of affect in order “to grasp the changes that constitute the social and to explore them as changes in ourselves, circulating through our bodies, our subjectivities, yet irreducible to the individual, the personal, or the psychological.”18 Clough, like Connolly, brings into closer relationship the personal, the social, and the prepersonal by suggesting that the changes in the social world can be measured both in the personal and in the prepersonal; but unlike Connolly – or at least in a manner more clearly than he – she insists on keeping the prepersonal discrete from the personal. It is only the prepersonal, only affect, that allows for a richer, fuller examination of the social in contemporary times; “attending to the affective turn,” she says, “is necessary to theorizing the social.”19 Although she allows for the need to examine the social through both the personal and perpersonal, the prepersonal enjoys a privileged status. Thus she


19 Ibid., 2 (my emphasis).
provides a formulation that less rigidly distinguishes the social from the personal and the prepersonal, even as it highlights the importance of that last term. In what is an increasingly labyrinthine set of subtle distinctions, the reader may begin to wonder, like Leys towards Connolly, how my own argument deviates from that of Clough, or any of her like-minded affect theorists.

The answer lies in the work of Brian Massumi, to which Clough is self-professedly indebted; it is thus to him that I turn in order to clarify and discriminate between these various argumentative positions. At this point, I also part ways, methodologically speaking, from Leys, who executes her critique primarily through revisionary readings of the science used by this set of affect theorists as evidence for their claims. My own contentions fit more squarely in the tradition of linguistic poststructuralism and the cultural theory indebted to that tradition – the cultural theory, that is, that Massumi targets at the outset of his seminal text Parables for the Virtual (2002). In particular, Massumi takes aim at cultural theory’s “positionality model,” in which the body is “linked to a particular subject position”\textsuperscript{20} that is determined by culture and language. The body, he explains, links to culturally constructed positions on a grid – gendered positions, racial positions, and so on.\textsuperscript{21} And while at first glance this grid model seems to suggest a kind of ineluctable cultural determinism, a fixing of subjecthood, he notes that, for cultural theorists, it achieves a kind of politics of resistance, such that the model’s “ability to link body-sites into a ‘geography’ of culture […] tempered the

\textsuperscript{20} Massumi, \textit{Parables for the Virtual}, 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 2.
universalizing tendencies of ideology.”

This is a politics of resistance born out of the belief that the body’s ability to move from one coordinate on the grid to another trumps the ideological coordinates that would otherwise determine it. For Massumi, however, this belief is illusory, a fantasy of resistance based on a sense of movement that ultimately has no real impact on the governing logic of ideology. As he describes it, “Movement is entirely subordinated to the positions it connects. These are predefined. Adding movement like this adds nothing at all.”

The body may be able to travel from one culturally defined point to another, but it nevertheless always begins and ends on a predetermined location. Thus, “Because every body-subject was so determinately local,” he says, “it was boxed into its site on the culture map. Gridlock.” At this point, Massumi turns to affect, a nonsignifying feature of the body, both with a logic independent of that of ideology and with a movement, so he claims, of real transformative potential.

Massumi’s grievance with the positionality model is thus not with its aims but with its shortcomings; his turn to affect stems from the need to find a theoretical model that can accommodate affect’s supposed unique logic. Furthermore, of the cultural theory that employs that positionality model, he lodges an additional, not unrelated critique: by ignoring affect, he asserts, current cultural theory is unequipped to grapple with other modes of power that employ affective, nonsignifying means. Those modes of power can be ideological; but they are also more than ideological. He contends that, “although ideology is still very much with us, often in the most virulent of forms, it is no longer encompassing. It no longer defines the global mode of functioning of power. It is now

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22 Ibid., 3.

23 Ibid.
one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology.”\textsuperscript{24} In insisting on a nonsignifying, affective mode of power, he shares with Clough a sense of power dynamics such that the social can collapse into both the personal and the prepersonal – the former in the form of ideology, the latter in other forms of power – but the personal and prepersonal are still discrete features of the body.

The reasons for laying particular emphasis on the prepersonal – it being outside of ideology, being the site of affect – are thus clear. So, too, is the prepersonal’s relationship to the personal and the social: Massumi grants that in the social, both ideological and affective power dynamics can impress on the personal and the prepersonal concurrently – that “ideological effects” can be produced “by nonideological means,”\textsuperscript{25} even as the personal and the prepersonal remain distinct. But as I turn now to Denise Riley and her notion of “language as affect,” it will become clear that the ideological and the nonideological, language and affect, are not merely bedfellows; rather, language constitutes the subject by way of affect, not merely alongside it. Affect, I argue, therefore cannot \textit{but} mean, cannot \textit{but} signify, even if one fails to consciously recognize that meaning, or even if he or she lacks the vocabulary to articulate it. In showing how this is so, I take up Massumi’s two-sided challenge to current cultural theory’s discourse on ideology – specifically, both his notion that there exists modes of power that exceed or stand apart from ideology, and his critique of the positionality model wherein the subject “moves” between coordinates in the ideological grid of the social. Ultimately, through Riley, I argue that ideology is more pervasive if also less immobilizing than Massumi

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 40.
believes. The upshot of this argument is to resituate affect within the realm of signification without nullifying its potential political or social force.

If ideology is more pervasive than Massumi contends, it is because, through language, ideology exerts an affective force on the body even when that body seeks to flout the determined positions, the categorical coordinates, of the ideological “grid.” Much of Riley’s work in *The Words of Selves* unpacks this particular connection between ideology and affect, no more so than in her discussion of interpellation and linguistic unease. Interpellation, in the sense Riley uses it, is equivalent to Massumi’s notion of the body’s positioning in language, its subjectification; indeed, when she remarks that “the business of being called something, and being positioned by that calling – that is, interpellation – is often an unhappy affair,”26 her choice of the word “positioned” is blessedly fortuitous. But wording aside, her larger point is moreover pertinent: the situating of the body to an ideologically determined coordinate – to a category, again, of race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on – can be an uncomfortable one, an “unhappy affair.”

The argument she makes is that language, in the process of interpellation, generates affective experience; in fact, it generates an array of affective experiences. As Alex Houen most succinctly explains of her work, “To identify oneself with particular terms of language involves a spectrum of affects, she argues, from linguistic solidarity (e.g., I am an ‘Australian male’) to shame (I will never match up to being an ‘Australian

male’) to irony (well, any term I use is not wholly me…).”27 This is a catalogue of affects to which Houen further adds “anxiety, mirth, resignation, melancholy, irritation, and hysteria.” The fact that one’s relationship to such linguistic categories is marked by the affective is, of course, of central importance to this chapter more generally; but it also speaks directly to Massumi’s own conception of linguistic positioning by way of exposing his ultimate shortsightedness, nowhere more clearly than in the way she suggests the inescapability of linguistic positioning, or interpellation, through affect, because of affect. For example, in the difference between a feeling of linguistic solidarity that results from saying “I am” and a feeling of shame that results from saying “I will never match up to,” Riley suggests that the process of interpellation generates these affects even when a subject seeks to reject those very interpellative positions – again, “I will never match up to” – that language attempts to consolidate. In other words, according to her model of linguistic affect, the body, through affect, remains in relationship with ideology even as that embodied subject seeks to distance itself from its determining categories. As she notes: “a degree of failure is quietly built into the model. Because [interpellation] announces ‘you are this category,’ it’s structured as accusing, yet as soon as it’s pronounced, the way is thrown open to partly refuse it, because no one can always quite so smoothly submit to subjectification. Interpellation has to falter almost as often as it succeeds.”28 To “falter” in this way, such that interpellative language continues to exert a force on the body even if the body is not fixed to a coordinate, is to suggest that we are inescapably in relation to ideology through linguistic affect. The consequence of


28 Riley, Words of Selves, 85.
this is what Riley terms “linguistic unease,” that discomforting feeling that language can both accurately and inaccurately categorize the person, sometimes at the same time. “Both ‘being it’ and ‘not being it,’” Riley says, “can cause unease”; both being an Australian, for example, and yet not fully standing by what others believe “an Australian” to be can be quite the uncomfortable position, indeed. Nevertheless, that unease, in whatever form it takes, discloses the ineluctability of language’s interpellative nature, an ineluctability caused by affect.

Riley’s is thus a more complicated account of interpellation than the one suggested by Massumi when he defines an “emotion” as a “sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal.” His is a true enough description of a moment of interpellation, how language fixes a socially defined emotional quality onto the body. But what Riley adds to this notion is the affective impact that such a moment of interpellation generates in excess of, if not irrespective of, its specific content, and which more firmly suggests the inescapability of the ideological. In other words, while Massumi allows for a collapsing of the social into the personal – indeed, of the linguistic into the body – in the sociolinguistic positioning of interpellation, he fails to recognize the ways in which interpellation continues to generate affect even when that fixing “falters.” Interpellation does not merely bestow a socially derived emotion onto the personal, as Massumi’s definition of “emotion” suggests; rather, interpellation functions because of and according to affect. There is no

29 Ibid.
30 Massumi, Parables of the Virtual, 28.
“movement” – to recall Massumi’s term – outside of the grid because the body is always in affective relationship with the positions it attempts to fix.

Riley’s notion of interpellation and “linguistic unease” is for this reason a strong blow to a mind-body dichotomy, the way language always enacts a force on the body. A further blow is dealt by her notion of language’s materiality, its “thinglike nature.”

Her account of malediction in Impersonal Passion is particularly instructive for understanding what she means by the materiality of language, because the malediction can be, as she notes, both incredibly injurious and incredibly insipid in its unoriginality. One might consider the phrase, “Go to hell”: neither particularly innovative nor imaginative, the reader will have heard it countless times before in movies, in stories relayed to her or him, perhaps on the streets, overheard. It is an inherited phrase. “Rage speaks monotonously,” Riley notes. And in its very monotony, “Go to hell” bears its historical materiality; that is, in order to even be considered “monotonous,” the phrase must have a history that precedes any localized utterance of it.

Language’s history is thus that which bestows language with its own autonomy, an autonomy that is characterized by its affective, material force. Language will always hum with more meaning than is intended by its speaker. So, despite the unoriginality of a phrase like “Go to hell,” it is no less capable of wounding, of cutting, of imbedding itself in the person to whom it is spoken: “the bad word, splinterlike, pierces to lodge,” claims Riley. In other words, if malediction is capable of injury despite its tedious

31 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 12.
32 Ibid., 17.
33 Ibid., 9.
predictability, it is because its historicity, its autonomy, bestows it with a material, affective force, a force over which the speaker has little control. To clarify: as Riley explains, “However much the accuser feels himself to triumph in the moment of his pronouncement, he is prey to echo.”\(^{34}\) That “echo” is the affective charge of the word or phrase both as it is determined – indeed, overdetermined – throughout social history; and at the risk of complicating matters further, it is also the affective charge that exists according to the accused’s own personal history with those words. In either case, the speaker of the malediction wields little control over his or her words because it has history – multiple histories – that always says more than the speaker intends. And this sense of language’s unwieldiness ultimately discloses the pervasiveness of ideology and its relationship to the personal and the supposed prepersonal. If language is, as Riley says, “robust, and fat with history,”\(^{35}\) then through that history language is endowed with autonomy; language is “impersonal” to us, as the title of Riley’s book suggests. And if language always speaks beyond us, then there is no escaping language and ideology; it is always in operation. As Riley remarks,

There is nowhere beyond interpellation for us. Not so much because any speaker is also spoken by language and trapped, but rather because we do not and cannot have naming’s full measure (indeed that ‘we’ is interpellation’s measure of us) as it runs across and through us to go beyond itself.\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^{36}\) Riley, *Words of Selves*, 111. “Interpellation” is, of course, originally Louis Althusser’s term for ideology’s inescapable imprint on the subject, the way ideology “hails” us into knowledge of our linguistically and historically determined selves. Riley’s use in this passage betrays her Marxist leanings, but also suggests the way she adds to Marxist discourse, namely through a consideration of affect’s role in the process of interpellation, the manner in which affect both enables the hold of language over the body but in so doing makes possible the “plentitude” of emotion spoken through that language. See ibid., 111-12 for more.
Language in its autonomy, its historical materiality, always speaks in excess of our intentions. Indeed, in opposition to the notion – implicit in the theory of a nonsignifying affect – that at the prepersonal level we operate with no regard to meaning, I would suggest that meaning operates with little regard for us; it is, as Riley claims, “indifferent” to us.37 There is simply no body without meaning.

I have brought in Riley’s claims about interpellation and linguistic materiality in order to repudiate the notion that some outside-of-signification exists, that body and affect can exist outside meaning. Having more or less completed that task, I want to consider now how her notion of “language as affect” might offer a lens with which to advance readings of meaningful affect, before turning finally to the genre of elegy specifically. After all, as Riley argues, language may be “indifferent” to us, but that indifference is also “amiable” – as her full comment reads, “Language as a speaking thing, neither my master nor my instrument, is amiably indifferent to me.” In its amiability, language, for Riley, thus also provides the possibility to speak a “robust” and meaningful affect. This “amiability,” then, is what I seek to explicate in the pages below.

Returning, then, to her notion of the impersonality of language: these claims make available the possibility of meaning that might occur without our cognizance of it, something that affect theorists like Massumi and Connolly overlook. Ruth Leys briefly mentions this oversight in a footnote, remarking that, “In the process of revising and amending and materializing Freud, [the new affect theorists] end up abandoning the notion of the psychical unconscious.”38 Conversely, Riley’s model of “language as

37 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 7. Her comment is quoted in full in the following paragraph.
38 Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 459.
“affect” makes specific claims for the unconscious – though, importantly for her, that unconscious is not specifically psychical; it is, rather, “linguistic.” Language’s autonomy, its excess of meaning, discloses, as she says, “the unconscious of language”; its tendency to undercut or overreach itself, to crazily ramify, or to make itself unexpectedly heard within some other meaning.”39 To be sure, the “unexpectedly heard” speaks back to her thoughts on malediction: as much as the affect of the accusation can exceed the intentions of its accuser, so too can it exceed the expectations of the accused. Riley explains: “The impact of violence in the present may indeed revive far older associations in its target. An accusation will always fall onto some kind of linguistic soil, be it fertile or poor.”40 A malediction can shore up, unexpectedly, its prior utterances in the person to whom it is directed. The bad word can “indwell,” and this notion of indwelling links, for Riley, the linguistic and the psychic:

For the deepest intimacy joins the supposedly linguistic to the supposedly psychic; these realms, distinct by discursive convention, are scarcely separable. Instead of this distinction, an idea of affective words as they indwell might be more useful – and this is a broadly linguistic conception not contrasted to, or opposed to, the psychic.

For Riley, then, the notion of a linguistic unconscious is one in which language both “indwells” in the body and yet always speaks beyond that indwelling. It is a notion that thus firmly repudiates a mind-body dichotomy – language acts within the body, even as it continues to signify irrespective of the body – and one that suggests, for the purposes of this chapter, how meaning can operate, in multiple ways, at the level of the material.

39 Riley, Words of Selves, 12.

40 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 11.
Indeed, the “linguistic unconscious” is a radical notion, resting on a paradox in which language both always speaks beyond us but also composes our very psychic (or, perhaps, psycho-linguistic) lives. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle, sometimes-collaborator with Riley, has stated elsewhere: “This is the core of Riley’s theory of language, as of her poetic practice: language is both exterior and interior.”\(^{41}\) The reconceptualization of our psychic unconscious into a linguistic unconscious made possible through an affect of language that always stands apart from us, impersonal to us, reconfigures the relationship of personal lives to language and culture. Riley articulates the position of her work best when she claims it is “poised halfway between ‘language speaks me’ and ‘I speak language.’”\(^{42}\) In other words, she situates herself – in my somewhat crude terms – between continental philosophy that sees us as tools of language and analytic philosophy that sees language as a tool for us. Accordingly, in *Impersonal Passion*, Riley revises the title of analytic philosopher J.L. Austin’s seminal text, *How to Do Things with Words*, offering the more apt phraseology, “How Words Do Things with Us,” with the further qualification “that ‘with us’ – as distinct from ‘to us’ – is pivotal.”\(^{43}\) The notion of the “linguistic unconscious” suggests, then, that through affect our bodies are in dynamic relation with language and the ideological; certainly we remain within language, but its measure of us is flexible, even negotiable. It does not simply do things to us; it does things with us. The concept of a linguistic unconscious thus suggests that, while language through affect does exert a determining force on the individual, the weight of that force is


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 3.
not quite so heavy as, say, Massumi would believe. The individual is not faced with “gridlock,” to use Massumi’s term; rather, the bonds of language are looser, less constraining in their autonomous indifference.

The implications of this model of “language as affect” and its various features towards aesthetics are numerous, and I turn now to the elegiac specifically, focusing on Riley’s *Time Lived without its Flow* and “A Part Song,” in order to track some of those implications. Of particular concern are three aspects: first, and again, the “ethico-political” stakes of the model and, along with it, the role of irony in Riley’s work as its own ethical tool; second, the place of non-representational, non-denotative meaning in language and lyric as it plays out in Riley’s elegiac work; and finally, the role of performativity and occasion in her elegy for her son, and the means by which linguistic affect, despite its potential ethical culpability, also serves as the potential means to speak grief in its fullness, in its robustness.

With regard to explicating the ethico-political stakes of Riley’s notion of “language as affect,” Lecercle has admittedly undertaken much of this work in his article, “Unpoetic Poetry: Affect and Performativity in Denise Riley’s ‘Laibach Lyric, Slovenia, 1991’” from the 2011 *Textual Practice* issue devoted to *Affects, Texts, and Performativity*. I return to it here, briefly, because it ultimately speaks to the concerns of elegy that, beyond being of primary focus for my own project, receives no attention by Lecercle. In his article, he takes issue with Deleuze’s notion of affect, which, Lecercle argues, removes affect from the political sphere. Lecercle uses Riley, and specifically her poem “Laibach Lyric, Slovenia, 1991,” to counter Deleuze, to suggest that affect –

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here, in the shape of lyric – can function as a committed literature. Lecercle’s work is thus important for beginning to consider the way Riley’s notion of “language as affect” operates at the level of the ethical and the politic in the realm of the aesthetic. Of particular value is his emphasis on her notion of irony as a potentially resistant mode to identity politics, in which irony, as Riley states it, “can expose a personal category’s historicity and fragility by isolating it as both real enough but also as an artefact, eminently questionable. ”

That is, irony is a linguistic device which exposes the historical, affective, and thus ethical, force of language, and in so doing allows the person to stand at a distance from it, to question it. As this chapter will shortly demonstrate, “A Part Song” is filled with various ironies and ironic stances, and in this way is not so dissimilar to the ironic stances Hill often takes in his elegies; but many of these ironies are not the grim, bleak paradoxes exhibited in those earlier, post-Holocaust elegies, and, in fact, they on occasion strike a much lighter tone, sometimes even humorous – humor and irony being signs not only of Riley’s acceptance of language’s inescapable claims on the body, but also her awareness that they are themselves performative, are themselves potentially political or ethical stances. So while Riley’s poetry recognizes the ethico-political aspects of her writing, of her elegy, that recognition does not consume her entire focus; she does not direct her efforts entirely to dismantling the poem’s ethical import.

The ethico-political stakes are certainly not abundantly apparent in the very personal text, *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, which is first and foremost an attempt to articulate in language an experience of time (or non-time, as it were) that, in Riley’s estimation, has rarely if ever been documented. The experience of time she attempts to

capture is that which occurs following Jacob’s death. It is an experience of, as she
describes it, a-temporality, and one that signals language’s governance over time – hence
why it has rarely if ever been documented. In other words, to attempt to articulate an
experience of time not governed by language is to fail from the outset. Describing the
dilemma, she remarks, “If time had once ushered you into language, now you discover
that narrative language had sustained you in time. Its ‘thens’ and ‘nexts’ had once
unfolded themselves placidly. But now that time has abruptly gone away from you, your
language of telling has left with it.”

In other words, narrative language – with its language of chronology and causation – can no longer describe a sense of time, in grief, where there is no chronology, there is no “flow.” And if the language of chronology and causation falters, as she claims, then this condition certainly accounts for the structuring of the text, a large portion of which is segmented as journal entries designated not by
specific dates but by the quantity of time that has passed since Jacob passed: “Two weeks
after the death,” “Six months after,” “Two years and ten months later.” Time can be
articulated only in reference to the moment at which time stopped; to articulate it
otherwise is to betray the experience.

The concern over narrative and causation she articulates here is largely one of
language’s inability to denote, or represent, the thing it describes; in this particular
instance, that thing is an experience of time, a “time lived, without its flow.” But Riley’s
understanding of linguistic meaning is not limited to its “representational” qualities; she

46 Riley, Time Lived, 59.
48 Ibid., 19.
49 Ibid., 47.
recognizes, as has been suggested throughout this project, language’s ability to mean through its linguistic materiality, through affect. In The Words of Selves, for example, affect is carried by “a sentence’s punctuation, layout, and typography” as well as, later, grammar and syntax – those aspects of language that do not “represent,” per se, but rather structure and act within language.\textsuperscript{50} In the fall of 2013, in interview with Riley, she similarly expressed an interest in those features of language that do not simply “denote” – like the sign to the signified – but that convey meaning otherwise: as she stated in that interview, to her it was “experientially obvious that there is a charge which is extra-semantic in language in how it’s uttered, in its cadences, its speed, its slowness, its texture, which it doesn’t make any sense to cleanly partition from the semantic.”\textsuperscript{51} To be clear, by “extra-semantic,” she does not mean “non-meaningful”; rather, it seems apparent that she is gesturing to a notion of non-denotative, non-representational, meaning. Certainly, when she makes a similar distinction in The Words of Selves that “the structural affects of speech and writing [do not] usually have the strength to overwhelm semantic meaning,” clearly “semantic” stands in for “denotation.”\textsuperscript{52} And so, while her frustrations with narrative language are such that it is incapable of grasping the experience of non-time she experiences following the death of her child, it is clear from her theoretical work that she already has misgivings around the denotative or representational nature of language, that such a notion of language is itself inadequate,

\textsuperscript{50} Riley, \textit{Words of Selves}, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{51} Denise Riley, interview with the author, London, September 22, 2013.

\textsuperscript{52} Riley, \textit{Words of Selves}, 12. And, of course, Riley comes – at least in part – from an analytic tradition, which sees meaning deriving from practice and actions as opposed to representation.

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even as it is something with which she must grapple in regards to her experience of time without its flow.

Denotation is thus the crisis at the center of *Time Lived*, even if Riley’s wider theoretical claims already suggest the ways the text might contend with that crisis. On more than one occasion in the text, she voices her concerns about representation, about how one could describe an experience for which the tools of description work against one’s aims. For example, in frustration she remarks: “Looping around, I’ll repeat myself yet am compelled to keep trying to say it: to live on after a death, yet to live without inhabiting any tense yourself, presents you with serious problems of what’s describable.” In what amounts to her own tale of “linguistic unease,” Riley describes her own unfixing from linguistically defined, temporal categories and the affective anxieties that result from that unfixing.

That *Time Lived, Without its Flow* exists as a text at all, however – despite the fact that the very experience she attempts to describe is, according to her, indescribable – attests to the faith Riley has that she can generate some kind of meaning in language. It is here that the notion of the performative nature of language helps to come to terms with what – and how – Riley seeks to articulate in her text; it is in the performative that meaning derives, a meaning not conveyed (or not simply conveyed) through representation but rather through linguistic affect. This is particularly apparent in a lengthy passage about language and death from the text itself:

The very grammar of discussing a death falters in its conviction in the same breath that the focus of talk, the formerly living person, himself disintegrates. Even the plainest ‘he died’ is a strange sentence, since there’s no longer a human subject to sustain that ‘he.’ […] It’s as if any death causes the collapse of the

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simplest referring language. As if the grammatical subject of the sentence and the human subject have been felled together by the one blow. Yet at the same time, the continuing possibilities for discussing the no longer existing person induce a curious linguistic quasi-resurrection. Perhaps language, at least, possesses a belief in spirit.\(^54\)

Despite the almost spiritual rhetoric with which it concludes, the passage above signals a quite practical effort by the author to continue to use language, a tool that might, in a sense, “resurrect” her child, a tool that seems to believe in its own force, even as it has itself “been felled” by death. So, while representation fails, language remains generative; it continues to act, to “mean,” even if a conventional understanding of the way language “means” is no longer sufficient.

*Time Lived, Without its Flow* continues to “mean” because it demonstrates what Riley has elsewhere described as “a slight amplification of the notion of the performative,” an amplification that, she argues, “would let us think of language as a performer in a scenario which grants the importance of sheer timing, of occasion, of the subjugation of the speaker to the situation.”\(^55\) This “amplification” of the performative is not simply a revision to J.L. Austin that is akin to Geoffrey Hill’s, in which the historical nature of language must be accounted for (although it is that, too); rather, as Alex Houen has described, Riley’s notion lays bare another aspect of the performative that Austin misses, largely that, in ignoring those occasions in which social contexts have not already guaranteed the performative’s happy end – like marriage’s “I do,” to use his oft-cited example – Austin recklessly disregards the possibility of felicitous (and affective) ends created by other linguistic occasions, occasions that occur in everyday language, or

\(^54\) Ibid., 54-55.

Riley’s “amplification” of the notion of the performative, then, contends that, even though it always remains impersonal to us, language can also resoundingly capture the intended outpouring of emotions, as when, to use her example, the otherwise empty phrase “I love you” amply corresponds to the emotional groundswell of its speaker. Or, conversely, such is the case (as the reader may recall) of the malediction that hurts despite its unoriginality; it, too, can be robust in meaning, even if it speaks monotonously. “How Words Do Things with Us,” as Riley modifies the phrase, insists on the importance, then, not of binding social contracts already agreed upon – the “I do” of marriage – but of occasion, of timing and situation; when these elements align – when we, as it were, walk in language – the performative is no less effective, nor no less affective. “The affect of language,” Lecercle says, “is inextricably linked with its performativity”; Time Lived, without its Flow shows this to be true. When the representational function of language is so clearly inadequate, “language as affect” nevertheless carries out other work by opening up the possibilities for a different kind of felicitous end, one that remains alive to meaningful affect, if not to representational signification. This is the robustness of affective meaning that can potentially be wrested from language, from the performative. This is force of “language as affect” that the elegist seeks, even as, in doing so, they risk inflicting ethical harm, of tapping into a linguistically inscribed ideology that speaks irrespectively of the poet.

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 27.
“A Part Song” is, in fact, an extended consideration of language, affect, performativity, and occasion. Written in twenty parts of varying length and form, the poem is almost protean in the various linguistic registers and styles it inhabits at different times. In what follows, I examine the way in which Riley takes up various linguistic styles or forms – cliché, lines from popular consolatory verse, lines from “high” art – in order to contemplate their affective charge, in order to create the “occasions” in which to “perform” her grief. I want to suggest that, ultimately, through “A Part Song,” Riley dramatizes what she already has proven in her theoretical work: that the nature of “language as affect” is such that we are “walkers in language,” always in the knowledge that language may fail us by speaking more than we intend, or less than we intend, but also always in the knowledge that it dwells in the possibility of something more affectively generative. What this notion of language suggests about elegy more broadly, I leave for the final part of this chapter.

The poem announces its performativity several times throughout the poem, and as it does so, it considers the role of “occasion,” the possibility of a language that speaks its affect robustly. The sixth part reads, for example:

A wardrobe gapes, a mourner tries  
Her several styles of howling-guise:

You’d rather not, yet you must go  
Briskly around on beaming show.

A soft black gown with pearl corsage  
Won’t assuage your smashed ménage.

It suits you as you are so pale.  
Still, do not get that saffron veil.

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60 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 27.
Your dead don’t want you lying flat.
There’ll soon be time enough for that. ⁶¹

Riley mocks the notion of herself playing the bereaved mother in her mourning clothes, howling away in sorrow. And the passage reveals a central tension between having to perform grief and feeling a grief that contradicts the societal expectations that demand that performance. The felt artificiality of the mourning gown is highlighted by the artifice of the rhyming couplets, a rhyme scheme isolated to this sixth part. The gown offers no relief from the pain; and yet, the gown does, she admits, befit her: “It suits you as you are so pale.” We might read this as a laughable moment in its own right, the irony of thinking of herself in the superficial terms of her looks, of matching clothing with skin tone. ⁶² But it more broadly suggests the way in which the signs of grief can in fact match the personal experience of it – the language of public grief, in other words, matches the personal experience of it. This is the condition made possible by the linguistic unconscious, wherein the personal grief-in-language is first and foremost a public grief-in-language.

The means by which she draws from cliché in the poem further elaborates this particular point in the way cliché will both befit her experience of grief and sometimes not. In Impersonal Passions, she notes that “a cliché is not to be despised: its automatic comfort is the happy exteriority of a shared language which knows itself perfectly well to

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⁶² A reading is available that all these performative acts are “ironic,” related to her political sense of the term – that she presents to herself the very categories of her own grief in order to come to terms with it.
be a contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world.”63 Although she recognizes the potential emptiness of the cliché – another linguistic monotony, as it were – she nevertheless notes the more beneficial affectivity of it, the way it performs a turning out to the social, the public, to something that is shared between people. She reiterates this more positive notion of cliché in part viii of the poem, when she imagines her son in the Underworld, flirting with Persephone, and sympathizes with Persephone’s mother, Demeter, who, as myth claims, sought out her daughter in that Underworld. Riley writes, “Not so hard | to imagine what her mother had gone through | To be ferreting around those dark sweet halls.”64 The italicization is original to the poem, and such italicization points to the clichéd nature of such phrases, phrases often spoken about one who mourns a recent loss. One the one hand, in the context of loss, such phrases could be understood as near-vacant platitudes, empty rhetoric that serve as placeholders for those who know not what else to say. On the other hand, though, if Riley is to be taken at her word in her theoretical work, these clichés are apt: however contentless they may be, the still evoke – they still perform – an attempt to sympathize, “a sociable turning outward toward the world.”

But Riley’s relationship with cliché in “A Part Song” is a complicated one, a place where she vacillates in her opinions on the power of cliché to speak truths, or to speak emptiness. Earlier, in the second stanza, she asks:

63 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 4.
64 Riley, “A Part Song,” part viii.
Two clichés motivate this passage. The first feels like something out of a tired training manual for motherhood: “What is the first duty of a mother to a child?” As Riley will do at various times in the poem, she sends up this line—one that accuses her, like malediction, of bad parenting—by responding in this instance with the glib, “At least to keep the wretched thing alive.” Through this response, she draws out the ironical disjunction between the mannered tone of the question and the harsh reality of her failure to carry out the oh-so-obvious task of keeping him safe. As she did with the black gown that society demands she wear, here she ironizes a language—in the monotonous but no-less potent shape of cliché—that would give shape to her grief but only by inflicting a wound in her, in her role as mother. And so she reshapes that grief, performatively, through her own affectively charged response.

Her relationship with the passage’s other cliché is similarly dynamic, recalling, in this second instance, her concern that another child might pass away—a fear that, as the reader will recall, drives her reading of the autopsy report in Time Lived, Without its Flow. For Riley, as well as for the reader, the cliché is so well understood, it need not be

65 Ibid., part ii.
fully stated, only gestured to. “Yes, lightning could.” Could what? Strike twice. “No,” the saying goes, “lightning never strikes the same place twice.” In its way, obviously, this is a rejection of the cliché: she believes, she fears, the cliché will prove incorrect, that it will strike twice. But she is also forced to consider it, to contemplate the phrase on its own terms. While clichés are so often seen as throwaways, space-fillers, casual asides, this particular occasion of its utterance induces dread, the dread of knowing she has no control. The lines at the end of the stanza seem to have broken down in the shadow of this dread, the fear that her experience will be the exception that “proves the cliché.” Syntax not only fails her, but she also recognizes the unavoidable inefficacy of the very performative utterance that is that stanza. To name the possible tragedy of lightning striking twice is not to derail the horrific reality of its possible occurrence.67

While the cliché, its own kind of reified language, thus takes on new affective charge in this stanza, on this “occasion,” other reified language remains ineffectual. Such is the case in part ten of the elegy:

I can’t get sold on reincarnating you
As those bloody ‘gentle showers of rain’
Or in ‘fields of ripening grain’ – oooh
Anodyne –68

The two quoted phrases come from a popular poem read at many funerals, Mary Elizabeth Frye’s “Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep,” a poem that depicts the voice of the dead demanding they not be grieved because they can be found still existing in the

66 Ibid.


68 Riley, “A Part Song,” part x.
world, in the rain showers and fields, among other places. It is worth noting again here that the first line of the stanza betrays Riley’s belief that language can perform a kind of resurrection of the dead, that the nature of language is such that it does not acknowledge death. But such confidence is undercut by the ineffectual nature of the well-worn images of resurrection in Frye’s poem; they seem to have little impact for Riley the mourner. If she is to resurrect her son, it is not through these stale verses. Here, she must call out the “anodyne” nature of a monotonous public language of grief that, in its tired imagery and stale metaphor, falls unproductively on a personal, linguistic soil.

The poem, however, concludes by gathering up other literary expressions of grief that do exert some affective power, certainly greater than that of Frye’s expressions. Like the dead who speak in Frye’s poem, these lines come from beyond the grave, in the voice of Riley’s son, at least as his mother ventriloquizes him:

\[\text{My sisters and my mother} \\
\text{Weep dark tears for me} \\
\text{I drift as lightest ashes} \\
\text{Under a southern sea} \]

\[\text{O let me be, my mother} \\
\text{In no unquiet grave} \\
\text{My bone-dust is faint coral} \\
\text{Under the fretful wave.}^{69}\]

The child, ashes in the sea, recall at least two summits of literature: first, Lycidas, which is, of course, arguably the most influential elegy ever written, and written for Milton’s friend Edward King, who was lost at sea; but also, second, The Tempest, specifically Ariel’s song to Ferdinand, whose father drowned. Ariel sings: “Full fathom five thy father lies, | Of his bones are coral made: | Those are pearls that were his eyes: | Nothing

\[\text{69 Ibid., part xx.}\]
of him that doth fade, | But doth suffer a sea-change | Into something rich and strange.”70

The sentiment is similar to Frye’s poem – the dead live on, in different forms, in nature. But here, at the close of the poem, through the imagined voice of her son, the lines of previous literary grief offer what seems to be some kind of consolation – that is, that after nineteen stanzas inside her own head and through the voices of others, Jacob asks her to leave off. It is not an untroubled request – the waves still fretful, the “O let me be,” is maybe too urgent. But, again, the lines suggest a turn from the poet who found the resurrection of her son a less viable possibility through Frye’s lyrics. On this linguistic “occasion,” we are left ambivalent as to the “happiness” of the performative act. Perhaps in elegy, in the knowledge that no performative act will ever actually return the dead to the living, a victory with reservation is all that can be expected.

In “A Part Song,” then, Denise Riley – as she claims in part xix of the poem – “do the bereaved in different voices”; 71 that is to say, she performs while wearing the masks of different languages of grief, a performance no better demonstrated than in her playful reworking of these very lines from T. S. Eliot (or, from Charles Dickens via Eliot). The original line, “He do the police in different voices,” comes from Dickens’ Our Mutual Friend, but, as is well-known, Eliot considered the line for the title of his own Modernist elegy for London, The Waste Land. The line is thus “fat with history,”72 a history common to, say, literature scholars, as well as to the British, as well as to any other group one might wish to name; but Riley, British and engaged in literary pursuits as she is, must


72 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 7.
certainly have her own history with the line. And thus, as she does in “A Part Song” frequently, she tries out different modes of grief, different linguistic “positions” of mourning, some that speak more profoundly to her own experience than others, but that, as a whole, signal the personal subject who speaks of her grief through public means. Riley speaks not of fragmentation, like Eliot, but of a different experience, one defined by the performative and the occasions of linguistic affect they generate.

What, then, of ethics and elegy? In the way “A Part Song” does the bereaved in different voices, it inhabits and draws potential affective charges from the various linguistic styles it performs, from cliché to popular verse, from literature to the literary and cultural conventions of mourning. For someone like Geoffrey Hill, drawing from such historied linguistic precedents and conventions would generate much concern for the way they might misrepresent, even soften, the harsh realities of death and atrocity. And, at the beginning of her elegy, Riley, too, voices concerns that her poem might soften the reality of the death of her son. Speaking to the poem directly, she implores it to

…sleek down
Your furriness. Slim as a whippy wire
Shall be your hope, and ultraflexible.

Flap thinly, sheet of beaten tin
That won’t affectionately plump up
More cushioned and receptive lays. 73

The elegy must be slim and “ultraflexible,” and it exhibits this flexibility in the way it bends linguistically time and again, taking on new voices. But more importantly, it must be a thin sheet of tin so as to not cushion the grief she speaks through other voices. She, too, is worried that the realities of death, of her mourning, may not be spoken truthfully.

73 Riley, “A Part Song,” i.
And while at first read her reasons seem more driven by the personal rather than the ethical – her elegy must speak truthfully of an emotional “ravness” rather than of grim realities of genocide, say – nevertheless, in its clear deference to public languages and cultures of mourning, and in the shadow of theoretical notions of language for which the ethical is of primary concern, the poem implicitly espouses an ethics of elegy. The poem is titled, after all, “A Part Song,” which is suggestive of its choral nature, a mode of singing for the many, not simply the one (even as it puns on the notion of separation, of one being “a-part”). The various parts she “sings” in the poem, to continue the metaphor, come from a musical score that can be read and shared by others in the chorus. And thus its concerns for the historical and affectively charged languages of mourning tapped by elegy – whether they “affectionately plump up” death and grief, or whether they exert some other ethical force – are of public consequence, of an ethics wrought in the entanglement of language and affect, mind and body.

Still, it is not an elegy that is, as it were, “tortured” by the ethical concerns the lie within it; and, as such, it provides a potential model of a “recovered” elegy – recovered, that is, from the wounds inflicted to it by mid-twentieth-century ethical crises, by Geoffrey Hill’s vigilant attack on the historical and affective materials of language. If Riley’s poem is not tortured in the same way Hill’s are, it is not because she is any less cognizant of linguistic affect’s constitutive impact, and thus the potentially ideological and ethical hazards of writing elegy; in fact, her theoretical work suggests that she is keenly aware of how thoroughly and pervasively determining language can be through affect. But she also recognizes that such conditions are those by which grief, in all its affective complexity, might be spoken fully, robustly, and thus with the potential to stake
its own ethical claims within the public language that always already speaks it. Inescapably fated to be born into a language already thick with history, such fate is one’s potential trap, but also one’s potential means of articulation. “A Part Song,” then, suggests that elegy can endure, not blind to its ethical import, but in the knowledge that what puts it at risk is that which also bestows it with affective force. What Riley’s poem thus conveys most importantly is that elegy is a genre rooted in the performative, a lyric means by which a personal grief is articulated in language that is always already public, and always already rich in potential affect.

Auden once remarked that “Poets seem to be more generally successful at writing elegies than at any other literary genre.”74 Few would disagree, I suspect, that for the poets that comprise this dissertation, their elegies do count among their very best poems. Hill’s “September Song,” Heaney’s “Clearances,” Muldoon’s “Incantata,” McGuckian’s “Drawing Ballerinas,” and Riley’s “A Part Song” – all are among the most critically celebrated of their poems. Perhaps tellingly, then, what these poems share is an interest in affect: if affect has been the source of potential ethical concern for these poets, it has also been through affect that they have been able to articulate a complicated experience of mourning. While the degree of their ethical concerns varies, all five poets seek to strike a balance between the ethical imperatives of elegy and the affect that inescapably shapes the genre’s language and conventions. It is in Riley, finally, that affect’s centrality to elegy is made most clear; inescapable, but not necessarily debilitating, it is through affect that, in the performativity of language and lyric, elegy continues to make its impact, to endure. It is through affect that elegy gains its lasting ethical, and emotional, force.

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