

“GREAT POEMS OF DEATH”:

WHITMAN, AUDEN, AND MULDOON IN ELEGIAIC AMERICA

by

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(Under the Direction of Aidan Wasley)

ABSTRACT

In the middle of Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” his elegiac masterpiece on the death of Abraham Lincoln, the speaker listens intently to the song of a bird and asks, “O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?” (10.1). He wonders not only how to mourn but more importantly how to translate grief into verse. This study examines the poetry that results from such contemplation by Whitman, W. H. Auden, and Paul Muldoon, three poets whose American careers led to a flood of elegiac verse. It examines Whitman’s assertion of the power, place, and potential of poets in America beside the poetry of Auden and Muldoon, an Englishman and Irishman who moved to the U. S. and eventually were naturalized as American citizens. All three published elegies, but the poems were not only occasioned temporally. Indeed, elegy, a poetic form historically occasioned by a happening – the death of someone or something – in America becomes conditioned by the very space in which its writers find themselves. While both Auden and Muldoon responded to contemporary deaths such as those of W. B. Yeats, Ernst Toller, Michael Heffernan, Mary Farl Powers, and Paddy

Muldoon, they also turned their elegiac focus to long-dead figures from Henry James and Sigmund Freud to Brigid Muldoon and a host of artists who had lived in Brooklyn.

Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon look backward in time to the dead or the abandoned to help shape their future in America, for their work finds its landscape, though vast and open, nonetheless haunted. Through their journeys to or in America, they hope for a renewal of their poetic and national identities, and they explore such yearning particularly poignantly through elegy, demonstrating an American predisposition to the form especially because of the poems they craft during times of national and poetic identity crises.

INDEX WORDS: Elegy, Mourning, Death, America, American poetry, Immigration, Emigration, Revision, Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, W. H. Auden, Paul Muldoon.

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For the Kanes

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CHAPTER 1

AMERICA AS AN ELEGIAC SPACE

“Something startles me when I thought I was safest”

– Walt Whitman, “This Compost”

“What living occasion can
Be just to the absent?”

– W. H. Auden, “At the Grave of Henry James”

“The roots by which we were once bound

are severed here, in any case,
and we are all now dispossessed”

– Paul Muldoon, “7, Middagh Street”

In the late eighteenth century, the French writer J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur tries to define what makes an American by looking first to the expanse that the arriving Europeans encounter, expressing wonder at the “train of pleasing ideas this fair spectacle must suggest” (66). He sees America as “a prospect which must inspire a good citizen with the most heartfelt pleasure,” but importantly recognizes that “the difficulty consists in the manner of viewing so extensive a scene” (66-67). Although he twice emphasizes

the delight inherent in arriving at and exploring the vastness, he underscores the idea of difficulty, both in the land and in one's attempt to grasp it. In "What is an American?," Crèvecoeur describes the continent as a "fair country discovered and settled," and asserts that the newly arrived should "greatly rejoice" to find it so (66). Still, in his praise for the immense space, he concedes that others might justifiably wonder "what attachment ... a poor European emigrant [can] have for a country where he had nothing" (69). Why come to a land devoid of one's tradition, history, or comfort?

Crèvecoeur finds his answer by peering down to the dirt and arguing that "men are like plants" whose "goodness and flavour ... proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow" (71). Pulled up at the roots either by oneself or through outside circumstance, man simply can transplant himself to this new land, this America, and make himself new by absorbing and transforming such metaphorical soil. "We are nothing," the writer argues, "but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment" (71). *We are nothing* but those things that we absorb from our environment. So what does that American environment have to offer?

First and foremost, for so many writers, native and immigrant, the allure is space. As Yi-Fu Tuan argues in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), there is a significant difference between the seemingly rudimentary terms of "space" and "place." In plain terms, "place is security, space is freedom," and Tuan asserts that "we are attached to one and we long for the other" (3). As such, we long for space because we long for freedom. We admire specific places because we feel securely tied to them. American space has been characterized in countless ways after having been designated

“American” in the early sixteenth century. One of its first colonies enshrined the idea of being supposedly untouched in a name honoring England’s Queen Elizabeth I: Virginia. Henry Nash Smith expanded on that idea in *Virgin Land* (1950), a critical study emphasizing the importance of the American West in folklore and literature by exploring the impact of “the vacant continent beyond the frontier” (4). Smith asserts that

one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward through the passes of the Alleghenies, across the Mississippi Valley, over high plains and mountains of the Far West to the Pacific Coast. (3)

The perception that the land was somehow unspoiled or vacant certainly reached what Smith deems as mythical heights.

Stanley Plumly, however, complicates the perception of virginity by asserting that while America’s landscape emanates a “lure and promise” like Jay Gatsby’s longed-for green light, it is not necessarily an innocent or vacant one (33). Americans have a “‘forever pioneering’ sense of our experience, [a] constant need to break new ground, that makes us extra alert to our vulnerability” (34). Often what they find in their pioneering, in their quest to map out the blankness or nothingness – the very space that seems spread before them – is a nature “endowed with dark purpose” (34). The very nothingness that Americans attempt to chart, discover, and challenge turns out to be filled with ghosts. While they try to assess the landscape, its “large, open, and dark spaces” simultaneously “map themselves on [their] hearts and self-consciousnesses; they do seem to demand an openness and exhaustive, sometimes exhilarating, intensity in return” (32-

33). Studying how that intensity functions in and fuels literature, Plumly finds the “dominant feeling, the resonant tone in American poetry” to be “elegiac, melancholic, meditative, aggressively expressive, and romantic” and astutely contends that “in American poetry, however, the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than it has been the condition under which the life of the poem comes into being” (32). Elegy, that poetic form historically *occasioned* by a happening – the death of someone or something – in America becomes *conditioned* by the very space in which its writers find themselves. Plumly designates poets in America as being “predisposed” (34) to operating in the elegiac mode and “speak[ing] from an elemental, inherited sense of loss, whether that loss is Edenic ... or organic to the character of the modern industrial age,” but he provides few details as to why and how that pattern persists (33). For so many poets, that loss Plumly discusses comes by way of acknowledgement that the vast, open space with which he or she had hoped to contend actually is crowded with a variety of ghosts that require of the poet a rendering into verse.

Walt Whitman wrote of the delight built into the adventure of traveling American space, beginning his “Song of the Open Road” as “afoot and light-hearted” (1.1),¹ but even this joyous American singer quickly recognized that the liberating paths of his country still made up a place where he must “carry [his] old delicious burdens,” and that he must do so “wherever I go,” for it is “impossible for me to get rid of them” (1.12-14). Whitman may seem to be primarily a poet of joy, a poet focused on the fruit of the future, but he nonetheless continually contends with the ghosts of the past, whether they be poetic, national, or personal. Indeed, he constructs that idea in the 1855 preface to

¹ All Whitman quotations in this chapter come from The Library of America’s *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982) unless otherwise noted.

Leaves of Grass, in which he builds upon Crèvecoeur's notion that metaphorical soil helps to make men by extending the idea to American writers. Like Crèvecoeur, Whitman acknowledges the presence of a kind of fuel for shaping American thought, declaring that "of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need[s] poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (8). In the preface, Whitman asserts that "the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature," and he affirms the necessity of valuing "the expression of the American poet" as being "transcendant [sic] and new" (5). The problem, of course, as Whitman admits in 1871's "Democratic Vistas," is that as of yet "America has ... morally and artistically originated nothing" (961). The resulting imperative to make something out of that "nothing" permeates not only Whitman's writing but that of his successors as well. He recognizes that "all the best experience of humanity" has been "folded, saved, freighted to us here" and that soon enough writers (with himself as the leading candidate) certainly will be able to tap those poetical veins (972). He laments the fact that for "long enough the People have been listening to poems in which common humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors" and proclaims that "America listens to no such poems," that the American "chant" will be "erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming" (980). His words point to an enlivening productive power inherent in poetry, asserting the kind of writing he wants Americans to pursue: strong, confident, self-assured, and worthy.

To earn those kinds of adjectives, however, many poets who establish (or re-establish) their writing careers in America find themselves doing so in Plumly's "predisposed" state. They look backward in time to the dead or the left behind to help

shape their future in America. In the seventeenth century, the poet Anne Bradstreet formally mourns the deaths of her father (even including an epitaph for him), at least three grandchildren, and herself as she recognizes the risks of impending childbirth; additionally, she laments the demise of her house, which was destroyed by fire, bidding “Adieu, Adieu” before acknowledging that “All’s vanity” (36).² The speaker of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee” famously attempts to conquer death by asserting that “neither the angels in Heaven above / Nor the demons down under the sea / Can ever dissever my soul” from that of his dead lover (27-29). Emily Dickinson slyly elegizes herself when she writes that “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to me,” ending by asking her “countrymen” to “Judge tenderly – of Me” (1-2, 7-8), and Hart Crane’s “To Brooklyn Bridge” even looks upon a seagull’s wings “As apparitional as sails that cross / Some page of figures to be filed away” (6-7). These Dickinson and Crane poems in particular refer to the process of writing about death rather than just the occasion of it. The wings of Crane’s bird are ghostly to his speaker, and are fated to fill a “page of figures.” Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead” does just that and pushes further by peering upon a Civil War monument and wondering how best to memorialize the heroic dead, especially alongside the present that hurries by, and views “their monument” as one that “sticks like a fishbone / in the city’s throat” (29-30). In their present moments, these

² These include “To the Memory of My Dear and Ever Honored Father Thomas Dudley Esq. Who Deceased, July 31, 1653, and of His Age 77,” “To Her Father with Some Verses,” “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and a Half Old,” “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet, Who Deceased June 20, 1669, Being Three Years and Seven Months Old,” “In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet, Who Died on 16 November, 1669, Being But a Month, and One Day Old,” “Before the Birth of One of Her Children,” and “Here Follows Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1666.”

American poets are attempting to forge their futures, but they recognize how they are haunted by the ghosts of the past.

Whitman especially finds the American landscape teeming with apparitions ripe for rendering into verse. Particularly during and immediately after the Civil War, Whitman does not need to look far to find elegiac subjects. He sees firsthand how the vast expanse of America was filled with lifeless bodies. So, too, do two twentieth-century poets, W. H. Auden and Paul Muldoon, who began writing in their homelands of England and Northern Ireland, but later immigrated to and were naturalized as citizens of the United States. While contemplating those moves and arriving there, the poets prolifically published elegies. The poems were not only occasioned temporally, however. While both Auden and Muldoon responded to contemporary deaths such as those of W. B. Yeats, Ernst Toller, Michael Heffernan, Mary Farl Powers, and Paddy Muldoon, they also turned their elegiac focus to figures who had been gone some time, from Henry James and Sigmund Freud to Brigid Muldoon and a host of artists who had lived in Brooklyn.

Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon in particular demonstrate that American predisposition to elegy especially because of the poems they craft during times of national and poetic identity crises. This study begins with Whitman, who not only crafted poetry about the dead but also asserted in prose how and what American poets and their poetry must do in order to earn the respect of writers and readers throughout Europe and the rest of the world. It then turns to Auden and Muldoon, who elected to leave their countries of birth and become citizens of and poets writing in the United States. In order to reveal how the American elegiac space affects poetry in particular,

this dissertation focuses on an American originator and then a pair of immigrant writers whose poetry transitioned alongside their nationalities. When faced with difficult touchstone questions – What will happen to my war-ravaged country? How do I leave my home in order to make another across an ocean? What do I owe my origins? What does it mean to transplant myself from Europe to America, South to North, a divided nation to a supposedly re-unified one – these poets more often than not write elegiac poetry that functions as a way for them to acknowledge unexpected ghosts in America. Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon might have initially hoped for the freedom of space, of the vast American expanse, that promises a kind of liberating and reassuring comfort, but they instead discover a country that is neither empty nor virginal but intrinsically haunted. Additionally, they recognize that they, too, are preoccupied with their former lives. Their resulting elegies then confront not only the actual dead but the metaphorically vanishing, too. Whitman reconfigures his optimistic, unified notion of America; Auden complicates his former faith in the political power of poetry as he settles in the U. S.; and Muldoon attempts to rectify failures in personal relationships by rewriting his and his predecessors’ histories. These writers do this in poetic forms that address death and the dead in order to make sense not only of the lives that came before them but, even more significantly, of their own present and future American lives.³

In America, Crèvecoeur asserts, a European immigrant “embarks on designs he never would have thought in his own country” (82). For Auden and Muldoon, this is the

³ Muldoon’s poetry could be informed, too, by the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tradition of the “American Wake,” a celebration in Ireland held prior to one’s departure from his homeland and arrival in the United States. It would equate such a move with dying because family and friends were unsure whether or not they would ever see their countryman again.

draw and promise of writing in the United States. The American focus on newness contributes to a peculiar poetic anxiety, for in order to be thinking perpetually of the future, one must sacrifice his present self and live in a state of permanent past: preoccupation with what is yet to come in effect transforms the poet into a living ghost. Whitman writes in “Song of the Open Road” that he does “not offer the old smooth prizes, but ... rough new prizes” (11.2). The “rough new prizes” very well could mirror what the poet sees his country as presenting to citizens, residents, visitors, and immigrants.

For Whitman, a naturally born citizen, America still afforded a kind of newness even as it broke into warring halves and attempted to reunite. Whitman sets out his parameters for the kind of poet and thinker the best American writer should be and then works to fulfill his forecast. Ultimately, he knows he has not accomplished quite what he had hoped. He had pronounced in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that the United States needed someone to speak in its voice and, in order for that person to succeed, the country would “absorb . . . him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (26). Whitman later contends that, for him, this absorption has not happened, and, indeed, the same is true for Auden and Muldoon.⁴ That idea of absorption echoes back to Crèvecoeur’s notion of man’s reliance on the “peculiar soil” from which he is able to nourish himself.

Whitman had argued that “the greatest poet ... drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them on their feet [and] ... says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I

⁴ In fact, Whitman wrote in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” that “public criticism of the book and myself as author . . . shows mark’d anger and contempt more than anything else” (656).

may realize you” (13). One of Whitman’s words about the ability of the greatest poet has rich significance. In her research on civilians and the work of mourning during the American Civil War, Drew Gilpin Faust writes that “letter and diary writers confronting news of loss repeatedly proclaimed their inability to ‘realize’ a death—using the word with now antiquated precision to mean to render it real in their own minds” (144). That word “encompasses an important aspect of the process of grief” as it demonstrates a yearning for mourning, “a process with an end,” over melancholia, “a state, and, in Freud’s terms, a pathology” (144). Whitman’s emphasis on making the dead real, on favoring a process over a state, informs many of his most significant poems, from his elegies on President Lincoln (“O Captain! My Captain!,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”) and other Civil War dead (“Vigil Strange I Kept On the Field One Night,” “Hush’d Be the Camps To-day”) to the less traditionally memorializing but nonetheless elegiac verse of “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “This Compost.” As Auden and Muldoon contemplate and then make their moves to the United States, so, too, does their poetry shift to take on that task of realizing the dead in verse.

But why turn to elegy at these transitional moments in their poetic careers? What is it about the haunted American landscape that so challenges these poets? Before exploring the poetry in depth for answers, it is useful to define and explore briefly the elegy and its history. Criticism on the form has expanded significantly in the past several years, perhaps as a result of greater attention to mourning and trauma in literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (in response to the Holocaust, the AIDS crisis, various wars, 9/11). In 2010, the Oxford University Press published *The Oxford*

Handbook of the Elegy, adding it to other volumes such as early American and Tudor literature, but it interestingly serves as the only form-specific handbook.⁵ Editor Karen Weisman assembled the collection so that it begins with the history of elegies (Greek, Roman, and Biblical) and expands to more conceptual approaches (elegy in drama, elegiac sexuality, even anti-elegy).

Indeed, the field of elegy criticism has developed significantly following Peter M. Sacks's important contribution by way of *The English Elegy: Readings in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (1985). Sacks emphasizes how the elegy necessarily chronicles the rendering of two opposing impulses, for it "is characterized by an unusually powerful intertwining of emotion and rhetoric, of loss and figuration" (xii). Jahan Ramazani and Max Cavitch also have added significant books to the field.⁶ Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* begins with an exploration of our need for elegies, asserting that "our society often sugarcoats mourning in dubious comfort, or retreats from it in embarrassed silence, or pathologizes it, even locking it up

⁵ *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* came out in June 2011. It is the only other literature handbook by the Oxford University Press that is specific to a literary form. There are volumes on literary movements and authors, but only the one on elegy and the forthcoming sermon handbook address particular types.

⁶ For further substantive work on the elegy and mourning in poetry, see the following volumes, many of which were quite useful in the making of this project: David Baker and Ann Townsend's *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry* (2007), John William Draper's *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism* (1929), Kurt Fosso's *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (2004), Jeffrey A. Hammond's *The American Puritan Elegy: A Literary and Cultural Study* (2000), O. B. Hardison, Jr.'s *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (1962), Karen Mills-Courts's *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language* (1990), Abbie Findlay Potts's *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (1967), Joshua Scodel's *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (1991), W. David Shaw's *Elegy & Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (1994), R. Clifton Spargo's *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (2004), and Karen Weisman's *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (2010).

in medical institutions. We need them because people die around us every day and neither science nor technology can fix death, reverse loss, or cure bereavement” (ix).⁷ Cavitch charts the elegy in America from the Puritans to Whitman, contending first of all that “elegies are poems about being left behind,” and that they make up “a genre that enables fantasies about worlds we cannot yet reach” (1). Sacks concludes his book by briefly touching on the form as implemented in the United States, by “elegists [who] have had not only to reinvent the forms (if not the functions) of elegiac mythology but also to establish their own literal and figurative endings” (312-313). He refers to the form’s history in America as being “in large part the story of such poets’ hard-won, highly revisionary, and independent defenses” against the “attractive threat” of what Whitman called ‘the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death’” (315-316). The words of these scholars emphasize the fighting nature of the elegy, the combative stance that the poems necessitate. They struggle against the reality of mortality, memory, loss, and immutability as well as the strange lure of death. They work to assess and make sense of lives that have ceased while trying to give some sort of guidance or consolation to the people left behind.

Karen Weisman’s introduction to the *Oxford Handbook* ties together such notions by affirming that the elegy, “more than any other literary kind[,] ... pushes against the limits of our expressive resources precisely at the very moment in which we confront our mortality, which is as much to say that it throws into relief the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it most” (1). Sacks had drawn similar conclusions, noting that “much of the elegist’s task lies in his reluctant resubmission to the constraints of

⁷ All citations referring to Ramazani’s work come from *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994) unless noted otherwise.

language. The elegy, therefore, gives us the chance to view man in tension with, rather than inertly constituted by, the language that so conditions him” (xiii). Elegy’s necessary confrontation with the “limits of our expressive resources,” its obligatory positioning of its maker as a “man in tension with ... the language that so conditions him,” makes it a form that constantly is yearning for, toying with, and straining to understand the ultimate frontier: the delicate line that separates the living and the dead. Such an effort is particularly fitting for poets in America, the land of the perpetually opening frontier.

Frederick Jackson Turner famously (and controversially) hypothesized about its significance to American identity, proclaiming that “each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past,” while describing it conceptually as emphasizing “freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society” (38). Turner recognized that the “advance of the frontier ... meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines” (4). The more the frontier expanded westward, the more independent the American identity became. At the frontier, “immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics,” and, the historian declares, “the process has gone on from the early days to our own” (23). The frontier enabled “the formation of a composite nationality for the American people” and Turner declared that the closing of the frontier, the last of westward expansion, in effect finished the first major chapter of American history. Turner fails, however, to confront thoroughly (and more sympathetically) the millions of people who inhabited those lands even before Europeans arrived and embarked even further west.

Although Turner was mostly accurate about westward discovery by European descendants and its slowed pace, the imaginative narrative of the frontier certainly has not disappeared from twentieth and twenty-first century ideas about Americanness. His 1893 paper conceded that “the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise,” but acknowledged that “never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves” (37). While moving to a supposedly new west would cease to be an option, the idea of the frontier simply would expand imaginatively to other areas. Indeed, in the decades after the essay’s publication, the U.S. acquired more territory even further west and north (Hawaii, Alaska), but, although no other states have been added since, the idea of the frontier has not vanished; it has simply shifted to other environments. It has moved up (to space), down (underground, undersea), inward (microbiological, psychological levels), and progressively forward (via the technology of transportation and communication). Innovation and ambition in America still depend on the notion of pursuing distant frontiers, and that concept still helps to define Americanness.⁸ Turner argued that the frontier “experience has been fundamental in the economic, political and social characteristics of the American people and in their conceptions of their destiny” (ii). Because the elegy is a form intrinsically bound to the exploration of the most critical expressive frontier – the moment when a body and soul are forever severed and the consequences of it – and because the idea of the frontier continues to be so essential to American identity, America, then, is a definitively elegiac space.

⁸ President Barack Obama’s 2011 State of the Union speech even relies on such a narrative as it linguistically frames his plan for economic recovery and success as “Winning the Future.”

This dissertation examines what happens in and because of that elegiac space through the words of Walt Whitman, W. H. Auden, and Paul Muldoon, three distinct poets across generations, original nationalities, and certainly verse styles. Ramazani touches on the impact of such differences in Patricia Rae's *Modernism and Mourning*, asking "if mourning is usually conceived as culturally delimited, what alternative structures of feeling emerge when grief spills across the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation?" (292). The elegies of Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon focus particularly on the third of those characteristics and what happens "when grief spills." They explore the malleability of national and, of course, poetic identity by considering the fact of a death, the person who died, the people still living, the meaning of memory and loss, and the struggle for immortality in spite of its impossibility. Rather than serving as simple tributes to their deceased subjects, the poems demonstrate the challenge presented to their authors as they work against the "limits of their expressive resources" and attempt to do with words what human beings cannot: survive beyond bodily death.

Abbie Findlay Potts looked to Aristotle's *Poetics* to explore the aims of elegy, focusing particularly on his use of "the word *anagnorisis*, variously translated as 'recognition,' 'revelation,' 'discovery,' or 'discourse'" (36). "*Anagnorisis*," she maintains, "is associated with the *peripeteia* in order to assist a mere change of fortune into an involved action" (36-37). She goes on to give its "lexical meaning" as being "'to recognize or come to the knowledge of a person or thing' ... 'to reveal oneself,' 'to cause to recognize,' 'to recognize a rule in a new instance'" (37). Potts then asserts that *anagnorisis* "is the very goal of elegiac poetry" and that "in its latest as in its earliest

guise elegy labors toward human truth as its end in view” (37). Elegy, then, endeavors to achieve recognition and knowledge of both its initial subject and its author.

Elegies have worked to accomplish such goals for much of literary history, though their original purpose differed. “Elegy” comes from the Greek word for “lament,” and initially referred to “elegiacs,” distichs (or couplets) containing dactylic hexameter followed by a pentameter and focusing on various subjects (“Elegy”). The term only came to refer to poems of mourning around the sixteenth century, and, thematically, that is where its focus remains, but the manner by which the poems demonstrate such mourning has altered in many ways over the course of time. Critics have shown how “from Spenser to Swinburne ... most canonical English elegists had depicted mourning as compensatory,” and poets were expected to articulate how to do so “successfully” (Ramazani 3). This is particularly true of the tradition of the pastoral elegy, which emphasizes a mourner’s important role as a sort of shepherd for the bereaved, a leader tasked with helping mourners understand and providing them some kind of consolation. The sub-genre contains characteristics specific to the setting:

- (a) The scene is pastoral. The poet and the person he mourns are represented as shepherds.
- (b) The poet begins with an invocation to the Muses and refers to diverse mythological characters during the poem.
- (c) Nature is involved in mourning the shepherd’s death. Nature feels the wound, so to speak.
- (d) The poet inquires of the guardians of the dead shepherd where they were when death came.
- (e) There is a procession of mourners.
- (f) The poet reflects on divine justice and contemporary evils.
- (g) There is a ‘flower’ passage, describing the

decoration of the bier, etc. (h) At the end there is a renewal of hope and joy, with the idea expressed that death is the beginning of life. (“Elegy”)

Elegies famous for their pastoral conventions include Edmund Spenser’s “Astrophil,” John Milton’s “Lycidas,” and Percy Shelley’s “Adonais,” and more modern poems such as Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” also have implemented pastoral characteristics, which help to give order to and ritualize mourning and thus facilitate the aimed-for consolation.

Although pastoral conventions aided many poets who tasked themselves with the writing of mourning, their presence has diminished in the last century and a half. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” from 1850 employs a few but not all of the characteristics. The focus of elegies primarily has been the dead, but many of the most significant poems of this type emphasize the struggle of the living more so than the fact that someone had died. William Wordsworth’s Lucy elegies, for instance, meditate “upon the legacy of mortal loss and ... [are] focused more upon mourner than mourned” (Fosso 142). While elegies mostly focus specifically on one deceased subject, others expand the field of mourning to lament the disappearance of a way of life (such as Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”), the unnamed dead (Whitman’s “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen”), or the forgotten existence of a particular time and place (Muldoon’s “7, Middagh Street”). Modern elegists, Ramazani convincingly argues, “tend to enact the work not of normative but of ‘melancholic’ mourning – a term ... to distinguish mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent” and, by “scorning recovery and transcendence, [they] neither abandon the dead nor heal the living” (4). Certainly this is

the case in Auden's elegy for W. B. Yeats, which unceremoniously begins with the Irish bard's having "disappeared in the dead of winter," a season that the poem describes in more detail than its human subject. Indeed, modern poets often seem trapped in elegiac purgatory, unable, unwilling, or unsure of how to properly pray the subject – or themselves – out of limbo.

The elegiac poems of Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon engage in many of the conventions of the form true to the times in which they are writing, but they do so with particular attention to the national and poetic identity shifts their makers are undergoing. As the three poets find themselves in an America new to them, that elegiac space encourages the writing of frontier-pushing poetry. The next chapter of this dissertation, "Whitman's American Compost" explores that kind of output by examining poetry, prose, and archival materials from the first significantly American poet, who repeatedly laid out his poetic aims in prose. As he began to write in the mid-nineteenth century, Whitman worked to become a distinctly American poet, which he felt the United States lacked. Recognizing that America had "veins full of poetical stuff" was one thing; tapping into them was something else altogether (8). Whitman endeavored to figure out how to best do so, how to transform that "stuff" into poetry, hoping of course that his fellow Americans would acknowledge him as their great bard. While Europeans began to see him as a distinctly and importantly American poet, his own countrymen did not embrace his work as quickly or thoroughly as he would have liked (Reynolds 497). He worked continually to revise his work and, by extension, the public's perception of him by adding to and subtracting from, publishing and re-publishing *Leaves of Grass*, his central literary tome.

Begun and published before the first shots of the Civil War, edited and re-published during, and revised and published again and again after the war's end, *Leaves of Grass* unsurprisingly includes innumerable references to the catastrophe of Whitman's nation torn in two. Like its author, who labored with "hinged knees" to aid the injured, the volume in many ways seeks to heal the wounds of war (443). In order to do so, however, it must come to terms with the reality of death. As Whitman himself witnessed all too many times, death in Civil War America was everywhere. Rather than wholly glorify the cause of the Union or singularly degrade the aims of the Confederacy, *Leaves of Grass* attempts to reunite the nation. It focuses on the omnipresence of the dead and the struggles of the survivors to properly honor the lost and move forward with their own lives.

Nowhere is this aim more vital than in Whitman's elegies for President Lincoln and other fallen soldiers. The final edition of *Leaves* published during the poet's life contains an entire section on the assassinated leader. "Memories of President Lincoln" features such elegiac masterpieces as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!," which was hugely popular before and after Whitman died, as well as "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day" and "This Dust Was Once the Man," which designates the Civil War as "the foulest crime in history known in any land or age" (468). In these and other elegies Whitman crafted, the poet labors to come to terms with and pay respect to the dead as well as offer consolation not only to the public that so needs healing but also (and perhaps most of all) to the poet whose task it is to "make great poems of death" (988). That imperative, which Whitman declared in "Democratic Vistas," is a layered one. Not only must the poet make poems of death that *are* great, but

he must also *make great* the poems of death. “America needs, and the world needs,” Whitman contends, “a class of bards who will, now and ever, so link and tally the rational physical being of man, with the ensembles of time and space, and with this vast and multiform show, Nature, surrounding him, ever tantalizing him, equally a part, and yet not a part of him, as to essentially harmonize, satisfy, and put at rest” (988). Here, Whitman seems to recognize the inherent tie between the elegiac aim – to “link and tally,” “to essentially harmonize, satisfy, put at rest” – and the American conception of the frontier, which also pushes the limits of “time and space, and with this vast and multiform show.” The poet begins the paragraph that discusses these aims with the phrase “[i]n the future of these States,” as if to acknowledge implicitly that he alone was not able to accomplish wholly those objectives.

Still, although Whitman recognizes that perhaps *his* words have failed to lead him to that absorption he so desired, he understands the importance of his having tried over and over to “realize” the past, to make it “walk before” him (13). In “This Compost,” he acknowledges the truth of “the ground itself” and wonders at its ability to withstand the impulse to “sicken” from the “distemper’d corpses within” (495). The earth – and especially the American variety – astonishes him because it “renews ... its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops[,] / ... gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last” (497). It generates life from the dead. His elegies attempt to do the same, but their output, ultimately, imitates but does not actualize that effort.

Whitman’s poems acknowledge the pervasive presence of ghosts, through the “carcasses” of “those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations” (495), the “coffin that slowly passes” (460), the “Captain ... fallen cold and dead” (467), the “dust [that] was once the

man” (468), the “boy ... found ... in death so cold” (438), even “a poor dead prostitute” (494). In his elegiac poems, Whitman always is yearning to test his expressive abilities by figuratively dragging those dead figures out of the ground and encouraging them to “Rise and walk” so that he “may realize” them (13). The American landscape facilitates this endeavor by appearing as a constantly renewing environment; its earth does what Whitman’s poems ultimately cannot physically do by turning bodies into new life. Nonetheless, his poems and prose hope for a similar kind of renewal, to generate rich verbal soil for future development.

For W. H. Auden, the image of the earth also holds important elegiac meaning. Writing on January 16, 1940, to Oxford professor and friend E. R. Dodds shortly after emigrating from England to the United States, Auden justifies his decision to remain in the country by asserting

As an artist, I believe America to be the best place to live, because here it is impossible to deceive oneself. All you say about its destructive power on writers is perfectly true. [America is] a terrifying place and I daresay I’m no tougher than the rest, but to attempt the most difficult seems to me the only thing worth while. At least I know what I am trying to do, ... which is to live deliberately without roots. . . . America may break one completely, but the best of which one is capable is more likely to be drawn out of one here than anywhere else. (3)⁹

Auden backpedals a bit on the impossibility of self-deception in future letters, but he consistently returns to the idea of living “deliberately without roots.” He tells Dodds that he has severed himself from “that tradition [and] community” because he finds that they

⁹ The citation here refers to the page of the correspondence.

have “gone forever” and goes on to claim that once people recognize this truth – indeed, this “terror” – they “are trying to make it artificially.” With these ideas in mind and accompanied by his friend Christopher Isherwood, Auden arrived in New York Harbor on January 26, 1939. The first poem he published afterward was occasioned by the death of a great Irish poet, but “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” concerns Auden’s shifting poetic identity as much as it does the life and death of Yeats.

In 1930, long before his transatlantic move, Auden requested, “Let us honour if we can / The vertical man, / Though we value none / But the horizontal one” (53).¹⁰ And, indeed, his elegiac output – those poems extolling the eternally resting “horizontal” man – remained relatively insignificant until he poured forth elegy after elegy upon moving to the United States. The third chapter of this study, “Auden’s ‘Unconstraining Voice,’” examines that elegiac yield in conversation with the poet’s ambitions and expectations upon moving to America. Once residing in that elegiac space, he wrote on both the recently dead (Yeats, Ernst Toller, Sigmund Freud) and the longer interred (Henry James, Voltaire, Herman Melville). Auden’s elegies exhibit a palpable self-consciousness about the life of their author and especially his controversial departure from England. Eschewing the security of place he had in Europe, Auden dives into the vast space of America, and finds himself in “the land of the lonely” (Miller 32). The poet continually marveled at his realization of the pervasive loneliness he observed, but he noted that the feeling was a *shared* one. “There is always hope for a ‘lonely,’” he told his friend

¹⁰ All quotations from Auden’s *Collected Poems* (1991) unless noted otherwise. This quatrain, which was collected in “Shorts” (53), also served as a dedication to Christopher Isherwood in Auden’s first book of poems in 1930.

Charles Miller, “always a chance that the lonely may find someone,” especially since the United States seemed so full of similarly lonely people (33).

That loneliness, perhaps, leads Auden to consider the ghosts of others that arrived before him. Many of his elegies center on European figures that also emigrated to the U.S. In staking his own claim on American space, Auden often looks to others who went west before him. If his subjects were not European-turned-American, they were certainly figures whose influence traversed national borders. “In Memory of Ernst Toller” asserts a latent truth that “We are lived by powers we pretend to understand,” and Auden’s elegies indeed attempt such understanding even in the face of its impossibility (line 19). His poems of mourning emphasize a desire to assess honestly the life of the dead while concurrently yearning to assert his own identity as a poet who recognizes the limits of language. He famously writes in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen” (36), which seems a concession until its qualification that this form of art is one thing that “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (40-41). This stipulation is a hugely important one that some critics tend to overlook, often reading the stanza as a wholly negative view of poetry’s efficacy without recognizing the delicately positive construction of the assertion.

The third chapter analyzes Auden’s elegiac outpouring in the United States and the manner by which its results help the poet to assuage the tension in his worlds, between England and America; his status as a leftist, activist poet and a more careful, deliberate, conciliatory writer; and the distance between his fame and the words and messages that got him there. It engages with the poems alongside some of Auden’s other writing that helps to flesh out his experience of becoming American, from his forewords

concerning his revisions to his essays and reviews on other authors to his musical experimentation with Benjamin Britten on the American folk hero, Paul Bunyan. In addition, the chapter features archival research that further explains the poet's decision to move and remain apart from England for most of his remaining years. Such material facilitates a more profound understanding of Auden's elegies, which so often struggle to understand and explain the role of the poet and artist in the modern world.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation, "Muldoon, Elegy, and 'This Great Void,'" builds on the ideas over which Auden labored by bringing them into conversation with the elegiac works of Paul Muldoon, who was born in Northern Ireland in 1951 and moved to the United States in 1987. Muldoon's poetry practically demands such an endeavor through his long poem "7, Middagh Street," which closes *Meeting the British*, the volume published in the year he relocated. In "Middagh," Muldoon elegizes not only the lively inhabitants of and visitors to a Brooklyn boarding house in 1940 – Auden, Britten, Chester Kallman, Gypsy Rose Lee, Louis MacNeice, Carson McCullers, and Salvador Dalí – but also the atmosphere created by the artists at that significant time in history. Split into seven sections, the poem speaks in the voices of each of those artists, beginning with Auden, and, in so doing, calls into question the efficacy of art in a world torn by war. Muldoon's poem works, in Whitman's terms, to *realize* those seven by presenting their perspectives via imagined speeches during dinner on one of the most uniquely American holidays, Thanksgiving. In a particularly resonant moment, Muldoon has Auden quote Whitman's important reminder to his readers that he will always be present no matter the time nor place: "If you want me look for me under your boot-soles," Auden remembers, altering the quotation slightly to exclude Whitman's "again"

after “want me” (line 92).¹¹ As chapter four demonstrates, the ghost of Whitman helped inform Muldoon’s treatment of the poem’s speakers. Manuscripts reveal Whitman’s further presence in the composition process, showing how the American bard almost wholly supplanted the figure of Paul Bunyan, whose presence in the poem’s drafts was much more significant than in what ultimately was published.

Muldoon wrote the material for *Meeting the British* before moving to the United States, but he did so while contemplating the emigration that was about to occur. In addition to revisiting the lost Brooklyn house that once held such liveliness, the volume contains several elegies. Two poems – “The Coney” and “The Fox” – serve as remembrances and considerations of the life and death of Muldoon’s father, Patrick, and another, “The Soap-pig,” addresses the passing of Michael Heffernan, one of the poet’s colleagues at the BBC. The collection’s title poem serves as an anticipatory elegy, as it foreshadows the death of Native Americans at the hands of the British who entered their land. Muldoon followed *Meeting the British* with *Madoc: A Mystery* in 1990, which contains a fantastical imagining of the American utopia Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey had hoped to establish. In 1994, the poet published *The Annals of Chile*, which boasts significant elegiac verse, including “Milkweed and Monarch,” the magnificent “Incantata,” for the artist Mary Farl Powers, and “Yarrow,” for Muldoon’s mother, Brigid, who died 20 years earlier. Muldoon’s elegies contend with loss by attempting to fill empty space with memories and ideas on mortality and guilt. The poems often contemplate the pervasive and seemingly contradictory presence of *nothing* – a “nothing,” indeed, that Muldoon makes happen. In “Incantata,” for instance, he

¹¹ All quotations from Muldoon’s poems come from *Poems: 1968-1998* (2001) unless indicated otherwise.

writes about “how art may be made ... / of nothing more than a turn / in the road” and includes so many memories and private allusions that parts of the poem importantly mean *nothing* to its readers (335). In this and other elegies, Muldoon confronts with ambition and adventure the presence of the void – a term that points to the absence created by someone’s death as well as his own conception of America in the “Wystan” section of “7, Middagh Street.”

As do the elegiac poems of Auden and Whitman, Muldoon’s works of mourning and memory challenge those expressive limits that Weisman stresses as so central to the aims of elegy. This dissertation argues that the American elegies of these poets result not so much from the occasion of particular deaths but from the condition in which Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon find themselves as poets in the elegiac space of America. There, they push themselves to confront and make sense of the most final of frontiers: the seemingly nebulous but ultimately distinctive boundary between life and death. Their poems work to render into verse the difficult questions and answers that the reality of death demands.

The study culminates with the fifth chapter, “Revision and the Art of Losing,” which briefly examines how the elegiac contemplation of voids is magnified by considering the development that the poems undergo from scribbles to drafts to publication. By considering the elegies as fluid texts and exploring the poets’ perspectives on the process of revision, chapter five argues that analysis of the form particularly benefits from keen attention to the textual losses experienced by each poem and suggests that textual ghosts, too, haunt particular American elegies. As this study concludes, it considers John Bryant’s assertion that “a fluid text ... reveals to us an

additional, and altogether different, kind of narrative, a very concrete narrative of the writer's revision" (134). It closes by exploring such narratives crafted from the elegiac American space in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Auden's "At the Grave of Henry James," and the "Wystan" section of Muldoon's "7, Middagh Street." Muldoon's conception of a young Auden newly arrived in America and quoting a line of Whitman's "Song of Myself" provides a final, haunting image to close the dissertation. That ghost enlivens the words of another in order to assert the pervasiveness of both – and, by extension, Muldoon – and it avows again the centrality of death, the dead, and renewal to American poetry.

CHAPTER 2

WHITMAN'S AMERICAN COMPOST

“Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions”

–Walt Whitman, “This Compost”

Nearing the end of his life, Walt Whitman inserted into *Leaves of Grass* a twelve-line poem called “L. of G.’s Purport,” which asserts a central claim for his lifelong project. Its purpose, he writes, is “not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them,) / But add, fuse, complete, extend—and celebrate the immortal and the good” (652).¹² His desire to commemorate “the immortal” in particular aligns with his contention a few years earlier in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” that “the best comfort of the whole business ... is that, unstopp’d and unwarp’d by any influence outside the soul within me, I have had my say entirely my own way, and put it unerringly on record” (657). Whitman elaborates by insisting that *Leaves of Grass* was “mainly ... the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record”

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, Whitman quotations in this chapter come from The Library of America’s *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982).

(671). Not only has he attempted to “put *a Person* ... freely, fully and truly on record,” but he also maintains that he has done so “unerringly.” By committing that person to record, Whitman makes himself immortal in the best way a poet knows how. Indeed, the first line in 1855’s *Leaves* – “I celebrate myself” – implicitly affirms such an effort (27).

In the final lines of that lengthy attempt to bridge the divide between “I” and “you” in 1855’s “Song of Myself,” Whitman claims to “bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,” assuring future readers that if they “want me again,” all they need to do is “look for me under your bootsoles” (88). When his future audience engages with his words, he will be dead, buried, and part of the nourishing soil. For Whitman, this recognition is more than just a simple, notable fact: it’s also a challenge. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, he declares that “the greatest poet ... drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet [and] ... says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you” (13). Whitman’s own poetry labors extensively to “realize” the past’s myriad dead he encountered as a citizen of the United States before, during, and after the Civil War. The great aim of poetry, Whitman argues, is not to resurrect, or to reinvigorate, but to *make real*, to understand, to recognize what otherwise lies dormant. Because the verb “to realize” not only means “to make real ... to bring into fruition,” but also “to fulfil [sic] one’s own potential,” Whitman’s emphasis of it has interesting implications for the subjects of poetic elegy (“Realize”). Just as President Abraham Lincoln turned back to American forefathers in the Gettysburg Address, stressing the need to fulfill the tasks they set out for the country, Whitman argues that the greatest poet somehow must continue or finish the promise of the deceased.

He had ended “L. of G.’s Purport” with just such a reminder. “I sing of life, yet mind me well of death,” the last stanza begins (10). He recognizes his investment in the promise of the future by continuing to “sing of life,” but the aged poet knows well the limitations of time, for “To-day shadowy Death dogs my steps, my seated shape, and has for years— / Draws sometimes close to me, as face to face” (11-12). Indeed, it is an acknowledgment the American bard has had to make throughout his lifetime: to be a poet of the future, to obsess as he does in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” over what it is “then between us ... the count of the scores or hundreds of years between” himself and his future readers, he must also recognize a relinquishing of his present and past selves (5.1-2). In effect, by always yearning for the future, for that reception he has not yet realized, the poet must become a living ghost, a figure that then perpetually is mourning the present and past he has surrendered.

That state of mind easily feeds his elegiac verse. Throughout his lifetime but especially during and immediately after the Civil War, Whitman demonstrates this unease by crafting elegies about soldiers, statesmen, even himself; for if *Leaves of Grass* is a free, full, and true record of “*a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America),” it is in many ways a comprehensive and anticipatory elegy for the poet himself. After himself, Whitman’s other most recurring elegiac subject was President Abraham Lincoln. His most famous poem while he was alive, “O Captain! My Captain!,” formally confronted the assassination of the 16th President and became part of a lecture he often performed. In that speech, Whitman asserted that “the grand deaths of the race—the dramatic deaths of every nationality—are its most important inheritance-value—in some respects beyond its literature and arts” (1046). Lincoln’s

death, then, when memorialized in literature, would become a critical cultural legacy. With “O Captain! My Captain!” and several other poems contending with Lincoln’s assassination or the passing of other particular figures, Whitman indeed “drags [out] the dead” and attempts to *realize* the past, in effect not only offering healing but working to carry out the subject’s labors that were cut short. Elegy, then, offers the most specific engagement with the poet’s criteria for greatness.

Karen Weisman argues that elegy, “more than any other kind[,] ... pushes against the limits of our expressive resources precisely at the very moment in which we confront our mortality” (1), in effect asserting the genre’s endeavor to push poetic frontiers, and Stanley Plumly establishes the idea that the “dominant feeling, the resonant tone in American poetry” is “elegiac, melancholic, meditative, aggressively expressive, and romantic,” further declaring that “in American poetry ... the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than it has been the condition under which the life of the poem comes into being” (32). These two notions – that elegy inherently tests limits and that the tone of American poetry is essentially elegiac – suggest that America, in a cultural and geographic sense, is a space that invites elegiac inquiry. Weisman’s view that elegy “pushes against the limits of our expressive resources” intrinsically insinuates that poetry of mourning yearns for articulative frontiers, while Plumly’s observation of the American elegiac *condition* affirms that the landscape of the United States fundamentally drives poets to work to reach those frontiers of expression.

Whitman’s emphasis on American earth and what it contains demonstrates a fixation on the dead and the potential fruit they might bear in spite of their mortal ends. His poems – and indeed some prose – indicate an awareness of the predisposition great

American writers could and should have toward writing concerning the dead. Whitman recognizes the presence of a kind of fuel for shaping American thought similar to J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's rich earth, proclaiming that "of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need[s] poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (8). Like Crèvecoeur's "peculiar soil," these "veins" are below-the-surface sources. Veins are either tapped or mined, supplying blood or geologic treasure; either way, the poet is going to have to work to access them (Crèvecoeur 71). The sprawling, ellipsis-laden preamble to Whitman's lifelong work in progress asserts that "the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature" and he affirms the necessity of valuing "the expression of the American poet" as being "transcendant [sic] and new" (5). Whitman admits in 1871's "Democratic Vistas" that, so far, though the eyes of outsiders, "America has ... morally and artistically originated nothing" (961). Still, he asserts that "all the best experience of humanity" has been "folded, saved, freighted to us here" and that soon enough writers – with himself as the leading candidate – certainly will be able to tap those poetical veins (972). He laments the fact that for "long enough the People have been listening to poems in which common humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors" and proclaims that "America listens to no such poems," that the American "chant" will be "erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming" (980). The sexual language here reinforces the generative goals he sets out for poetry. It is not enough for American poets simply to write poetry, but they must endeavor to produce something new from the remnants of the past, to make somehow the dead and the past real and realized again. They need to mimic the earth and the creative power it possesses.

Whitman pushes the necessity for such a “chant” further, arguing that “in the future of these States must arise poets immenser far,” and that these writers must “make great poems of death” (988). Whitman wants these poets to exhibit the kind of immensity their country does, which will help them achieve that last goal. His language in that phrase is nuanced and significant. Not only must these poets write “poems of death” that are “great,” but they must “make . . . poems of death” *be* “great.” It is not enough to be a skilled poet who can put death into verse, but, Whitman asserts, these American writers must also be able to elevate “poems of death” *to* greatness. He argues that to be an uniquely American and great poet, one must look to and craft “great poems of death.” America, Whitman argues, demands such an elegiac approach.

In “This Compost,” published first in 1856, the poet ardently asks, “Is not every continent work’d over and over with sour dead?” (1.10).¹³ “Every continent” may be, but Whitman’s own recognition of America’s “poetical veins” insists upon a particular tendency of his nation to rely on what lies under “boot-soles” and must be “drag[ged] out” of the grave to be realized by the greatest poets. “This Compost” marvels at and is disturbed by the Earth’s power to generate “such sweet things out of such corruptions” (2.27). After opening by retreating from the comfort of “the still woods I loved,” “This Compost” turns back to the natural world and the ground in particular and unleashes a bevy of questions that reveal the speaker’s sudden unease in his environment (1.2). “Oh how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken,” he yearns to know, and then desperately wonders how parts of that world can “be alive” and “furnish health” when there are “distemper’d corpses within” (1.7-9). How is it that “this compost” he

¹³ For an ecocritical examination of this poem and anthology of poetry of its strain, see Jed Rasula’s *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (2002).

commands his readers to “behold” breeds such beauty out of “those strata of sour dead?” (2.1, 14). The image of the compost is particularly fitting for a writer who argues that poetic greatness depends on the recovery and realizing of the past and the dead, for the compost is an in-between entity. Made up of decaying organic matter, it feeds future life.

This fact “startles” and confounds the speaker of the poem, who wonders where the “carcasses” have been “disposed,” where “those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations” have gone (1.11-12). He concedes that he might be “deceived,” but hopes to “expose some of the foul meat” by digging up the earth (2.14, 17). The poem then turns, listing some of the beautiful and pleasing benefits of such decay. The corpses have produced such things as spring grass, the “bean [that] bursts noiselessly through the mould,” and “the delicate spear of onion” (2.4-5). He is fascinated by the “resurrection of the wheat,” which “appears with pale visage out of its graves” (2.7). That image in particular emphasizes a species-specific regeneration; the dead wheat breeds more living wheat.

That type of reproduction parallels the cycle Whitman sees humans as inevitably undergoing, and poets as necessarily rendering into verse. In “Song of Myself,” he contends that “every atom belong to me as good belongs to you,” seemingly in an effort to connect or assert commonality with his reader, but his assertion could also be literal (1.3). Once he is dead and buried, his body will decay, fueling the growth of grass, vegetation, or other organic matter – all atoms of which might become an actual part of later readers. Becoming cognizant of this in “This Compost” initially “startles” him and later makes him “terrified at the Earth,” for it will respond to his death as it does to all others (1.1, 2.26). Even more disturbing is that it will do so with “such unwitting looks”

(2.30). In “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman writes that “the earth never tires,” and is “rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,” before “swear[ing] to you that there are divine things well envelop’d” in it (9.3-5). In “This Compost,” he avows similarly, concluding that it “gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last” (2.31). Emphasizing the divinity of the earth in both places seems to suggest that it has power that supersedes that of the poet, but in “Song of Myself” he declares, “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,” even going so far as to assert the “scent of these arm-pits [is an] aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds” (24.28-30). The two poems then contend that the poet – Whitman in particular, perhaps – especially is suited for emulating the regenerative power of the earth. Writing elegiac verse, then, provides him and other American poets with an analogous ability.

Elegy also serves as the form that facilitates his re-examination of the poetic identity he had so far established with *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s most consistent poetic longing is to connect: the common to the elite, lover to lover, citizen to state, past to present, present to future, and, of course, writer to reader. That last pair, perhaps the most important, indeed is the most troubling. Whitman seems to acknowledge that the kind of relationship he desires with his reader after all is impossible while he still lives. His 1855 preface vividly sets forth his idea about poets, poetry, and nation, declaring that his country needs someone to articulate an American voice and, in order for that voice to succeed, the country must “absorb ... him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (26). Later in his life, Whitman contends that this absorption has not happened, that “public criticism of the book and myself as author ... shows mark’d anger and contempt more

than anything else” (656). Instead of continuing to seek “soft eulogies, big money returns, . . . [or] the approbation of existing schools and conventions,” Whitman turns to future audiences to gauge his worth (657). When he began to publish the lifelong project of *Leaves* in 1855, he sought a contemporary American embrace. Over three decades later, he understood that it had not occurred quite how he wanted, that, as David S. Reynolds writes, “while he was increasingly being recognized as the most distinctively American poet, this recognition was not coming from the American public, which still preferred Anglophile poets like Longfellow” (497). Reynolds asserts in his cultural biography on Whitman that “while it is true that, like most writers, he got his share of rejection slips and snubs from the literary establishment, it has not been adequately recognized that the neglect idea was largely a ploy he used to whip up support and speed his dreamed-up acceptance by the general public” (497). Still, that reception was unrealized. Instead, Whitman retooled his vision for the project to become one of record-keeping, as an undertaking meant to record a man so that future American generations might absorb him as warmly as he did the U.S. throughout his writing life.

As a result, his elegiac poetry then not only looks back to the lives of the dead, but it also inherently hopes for future readers and writers to do the same for him. He suggests that his – or any great writer’s – real achievement will be defined in elegiac terms. Whitman is optimistic that subsequent poets will realize what he yearned to do but ultimately did not accomplish. As such, his position transforms a simple elegist, a mere memorializer, into a simultaneously proleptic ghost. Whitman mimics American geographical curiosity and exploration by pushing against his own expressive limits in poems broaching the frontiers not only of body and soul but remembrance and oblivion.

In an effort to do so, he writes about the Civil War and explores the elegiac form extensively, writing, publishing, revising, and re-publishing poems primarily on figures associated with the conflict. In 1863, Whitman reveals in a draft of a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson that he “find[s] deep things, unreckoned by current print or speech” while tending to the wounded and dying in Washington and beyond (68).¹⁴ With his subsequent poems and prose, Whitman then aims to do such reckoning. “Reckon” has similar connotations to his idea of being able to “realize” the past by dragging out the dead in verse. The former has many definitions, including, of course, “to consider, judge, or estimate,” but can also mean “to include in an enumeration; to place or class in a particular group,”¹⁵ so Whitman’s idea of confronting the “unreckoned” suggests not just considering the unconsidered but also including and enumerating them – listing them, as his catalogues do. Later in the letter, he envisions “Death there up and down the aisle, tapping lightly by night or day here and there some poor young man, with relieving touch,” and asserts toward the end that it is “this thing [that] I will record.” He hopes to measure those moments where life and death intersect, because they “belong ... to the time, and to all the States—(and perhaps ... to me)” (70). He returns to the idea of recording via the written word repeatedly throughout his lifetime.

In an early notebook, Whitman insists that “Shakespeare and Walter Scott are indeed limners and recorders – as Homer was one before,” declaring the Greek “the greatest perhaps of any recorder,” and noting that all three are part of that “class who

¹⁴ Correspondence cited in this chapter comes from *Walt Whitman: The Correspondence: Volume I: 1842-1867* unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Whitman’s predecessor Nathaniel Hawthorne as using “reckon” this way in an 1837 entry of his *American Note-books*: “Among other languages spoken hereabouts must be reckoned the wild Irish” (“Reckon”).

depict characters and events; and they are masters of the kind” (*Notebooks IV* 1434).

Calling these writers “limners” (illuminators or portrait-makers) and “recorders”

emphasizes the importance of their being able to interpret and recast people and events

for their current and future audiences. That the three writers he mentions were not just

great stylists of poetry and prose but also emblematic figures of national literature seems

no accident. Shakespeare was and continues to be the great English voice, while Scott

and Homer remain signature Scottish and Greek wordsmiths. They not only wrote in and

of their countries, but they furthered them by helping to establish their national literature.

In his notebooks, Whitman writes that he aspires to “be also a master, after my own kind,

making the poems of emotions as they pass or stay,” but, more specifically, he wants to

craft “poems of freedom, and the expose of personality – singing in high tones,

Democracy and the New World of it through these States” (1434). What, then, is the best

material for such “poems of freedom?” In “Democratic Vistas,” he contends that

In the future of these States must arise poets immenser far, and make great

poems of death. The poems of life are great, but there must be the poems

of the purports of life, not only in itself, but beyond itself. ... America

needs, and the world needs, a class of bards who will, now and ever so

link and tally the rational physical being of man, with the ensembles of

time and space, and with this vast and multiform show, Nature,

surrounding him, ever tantalizing him, equally a part, and yet not a part of

him, as to essentially harmonize, satisfy, and put at rest.” (988)

“Poems of freedom” necessitate an examination of death because American verse must

“link and tally” the limits of physical life with the vastness of “time and space.”

In its first iteration, *Leaves of Grass* contains elegiac moments, but it lacks poem-length confrontations with the specific dead. “Song of Myself,” for instance, simply culminates with that projected “bootsole” elegizing of the self. The poet insists that his buried body will “be good health to you ... [and will] filter and fibre your blood,” admitting that he will become a resource for readers *and* writers (88). The allusion to his future status, however, is relegated only to its conclusion. The poem yearns for a connection with its reader for hundreds of lines, only to be striving still as it ends. Such is also the case with “To think of time,” which, while meditating on death and extending contemplation to the reader (“Have you guessed you yourself would not continue? Have you dreaded those earth-beetles?”), it simply considers the concept rather than specific, localized loss (100). The poem admits the inevitability of the latter by observing that “He that was President was buried” and, then, “he that is now President shall surely be buried” (101). Another piece, eventually titled “Europe, The 72nd and 73rd Years of These States,” addresses a vast group of the dead as one of many “things [that] bear fruits” and emphasizes that the “grave of the murdered” will be one that someday “grows seed for freedom” (134). Here, the dead may have the ability to effect change in politics or nationhood in this poem, but, so far for Whitman, they are not yet that subject for poetic greatness. (He furthers these ideas the following year in the elegiac strangeness of “This Compost.”)

The first edition of *Leaves* closes with what is later known as “Great Are the Myths,” a catalogued approach to exalting the everyday. After noting the greatness of such things as “liberty,” “yourself and myself,” “youth large lusty and loving,” “day fullblown and splendid,” “the quality of truth in man,” and “Justice,” Whitman concludes

by contending not only that “Great is life,” but also, finally, “Great is death Sure as life holds all parts together, death holds all parts together; / Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death is great as life” (142-145). That contemplation may be “sure,” but it is not particularly thorough. This reminder of the finality and power of death echoes Whitman’s assertion in the preface that American writers must “make great poems of death.” The use of the word “great” in both places emphasizes not only the importance of excellence and distinction but also immensity and vastness. Life and death, Whitman contends, both feature all of these things.

In 1867, *Leaves* includes one such poem of death, “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” which solemnly describes an encounter with a fallen soldier on the battlefield. The elegy for the anonymous dead begins with the syntactically peculiar presentation of the direct object – the “vigil” – before its adjective (“strange”), before the subject and his action – “I kept on the field one night” (438). That vigil, the act of acknowledging, is more important than the one keeping it and the one for whom it is given. The mourner does not cry; instead, he passes the night in silence, reflecting first on the “look I shall never forget” that emanated from the man as he fell, then on the cold quiet face from which that gaze disappeared, and finally to the act of interring the dead. Throughout the elegy for the unnamed, objects are inverted to preface the subject’s action. When it comes time for the grieving to bury the body, the line begins with “My comrade” and then continues with the action: “I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well in his form, folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet” (439). He goes on to recognize “my son” and follow with prepositional phrases and, finally, the action: “in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited” (439). The verb

choice emphasizes the value he places on the deceased. What is probably a common experience – dealing with the dead during the war – becomes more than customary: it is a tearless, solemn, silent vigil for the unidentified.

Not only does the speaker withhold the soldier's name, but he also conceals for which side the man fought. The somber act of keeping vigil supersedes both the soldier and the speaker's affiliations. Indeed, the speaker seldom begins a line with a personal pronoun, doing so to indicate that "I faithfully loved ... and cared" for the soldier, and "I rose from the chill ground and folded" the man in his blanket for burial (439). Because the vigil itself, the act of mourning – not the soldier, not the mourner, not the act of dying – stands as the most significant part of the poem, it suggests that the endeavor to acknowledge and pay respect to the dead – indeed an elegy made *real* – is the act that most matters. In Whitman's "Vigil Strange," the marking of sacrifice and passing carries the most weight.

The anonymous soldier, however attractive an elegiac subject, is dwarfed by poems confronting the events of April 14, 1865, when John Wilkes Booth walked up behind President Lincoln in Ford's Theater and shot him to death. Whitman responded to the assassination in prose and poetry, formalizing the latter efforts by adding to the 1881 *Leaves* "Memories of President Lincoln," a cluster of six poems addressing what seems to him the largest loss of the conflict. The group contains the sixteen-part "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," the three stanzas of "O Captain! My Captain!," "Hush'd Be the Camps To-day," the poem written soonest after the assassination, and the 34 four words of "This Dust Was Once the Man." James E. Miller, Jr., contends that the poems "constitute a sustained elegy," but, though each memorializes, they each do so in quite

different ways, honing in on public or private grief, or both, or contemplating the act of elegizing within the poems themselves (225).

Despite appearing third in the cluster, “Hush’d” serves as an invocation of sorts. The titular first line works as both an observation and command, though the following certainly are a request for action: “let us drape our war-worn weapons, / And each with musing soul retire to celebrate, / Our dear commander’s death” (lines 2-4).¹⁶ The speaker, a soldier or other member of the forces given his use of “us” (a stand-in for “United States,” too), does not command so much as suggest politely how to acknowledge the death of Lincoln. After cataloging what the “dear commander” will no longer face – “life’s stormy conflicts,” “victory,” “defeat,” “time’s dark events” – his recounting of the silence in the camps turns (4-6). A softening, quiet “But” prefaces his call to the poet to “sing ... in our name, / Sing of the love we bore him” (7). He follows that request with a reason: “because you, dweller in the camps, know it truly” (7-8). The “you” here could refer to the poet, perhaps a soldier or some other kind of attendant, maybe medical staff, as was Whitman. “Hush’d Be the Camps To-day” then becomes a poem about a soldier appealing to a poet already in the vicinity, a poet who knows the soldiers’ love “truly,” not to record but to sing their own love for them. Although the event catalyzing its commission was the death of Lincoln, “Hush’d” centers more on the feelings for the man, for “the heavy hearts of soldiers,” than on the fallen himself. Like many elegies, it turns to the survivors, but it does so by recognizing their wish to have their emotions chronicled alongside the dead. Those that remain do not seek consolation but the abilities of the poet to memorialize the “dear commander” (4). They know their

¹⁶ Line numbers here refer to the poem’s appearance on pages 467-468 of the Library of America edition of Whitman’s poetry and prose.

expressive limits, so they instead turn to the more capable poet. They ask him to “sing ... in our name” because they cannot do what he can in the way that he can. The poem intrinsically justifies its existence by asserting that the poet is giving voice to and for the bereaved.

Whitman’s most famous poem on the death of Lincoln, “O Captain! My Captain!,” addresses and laments both the dead and the living. Even its simple title emphasizes its focus; first, it contemplates the dead and then the speaker’s relation to that figure. Published first in the *New York Saturday-Press* on November 4, 1865, “O Captain! My Captain” underwent some revision and featured heavily in Whitman’s recited repertoire later in his life as part of his oft-performed Lincoln lecture. It deals with the death of the president in uncharacteristically traditional form, containing relatively consistent metrical patterns and rhyme. The poem works to realize the past in three stanzas, first by confronting accomplishment, then by begging for some kind of resurrection and trying to deny the reality of the passing, and finally by acknowledging the fruitlessness of doing so. Repetition of words and phrases in its three parts emphasizes those formal devices and furthers the drum-like rhythm. In the final version published in Whitman’s lifetime, the speaker names or calls out to the titular “Captain” eight times, thrice refers to “the deck” on which he lies “fallen cold and dead” and twice recalls the “fearful trip” shared with the leader. Five times he prefaces the “Captain” with “my,” and three times without, leading with either “O” or “Here.”

Only subtly, however, does “O Captain” contemplate the act of elegizing. Unlike “Hush’d” and “Lilacs,” it provides little commentary on how to mourn or remember the dead. The oft-recited verses serve as a monument that represents an event, the death of

Lincoln, without contemplating much beyond the fact of its occurrence. Miller asserts that the poem “seems a public expression, in the formal address for public grief, of a public sentiment,” but the poem’s final stanza complicates such a conclusion (226).

Ultimately, the speaker still shifts the focus to himself rather than the community of the first and second-person address of the middle section. “Our” and “you” become “my” and “he,” emphasizing the coldness and isolation the speaker ultimately experiences. The ship has returned victorious “with object won,” and he calls to the “shores” and “bells” to “exult” and “ring,” but the chronicler of the event remains not *a* part but *apart*, turning from instructions to celebrate by choosing instead to walk his “mournful tread” by the body of the man whose efforts led to the possibility of such triumph (21-22).

The *Saturday Press* version gives a bit more agency and urgency to the speaker. Instead of calling out “O bleeding drops of red,” he commands himself to “Leave you not the little spot” where the dead lies (line 6). In the second stanza, he still begins with “this arm,” but instead of just declaring its position “beneath your head!” without any kind of verb, he recognizes that he is the one to “push [it] beneath” the leader (line 14). The revisions subtly broaden the mourning from a solely specific “I” to a more generalized agent of grief, from personal to more public. The later, somewhat more encompassing version suggests a move from individualized to communal, perhaps even nationalized, lamenting. In addition, the speaker of the *Press* version seems almost spastically to reassure both himself and his readers that the union, represented by the vessel, is “anchor’d safe and sound,” naming it twice in a row as “the ship, the ship,” rather than just once (19). The first printing’s last stanza contains a few other differences, particularly noting the “tread” as “silent” instead of “mournful,” and referring to “the

spot” rather than “the deck” (22-23). He is quiet and not yet sorrowful, and he paces the singular location where the captain lies rather than the more collective expanse of the ship. The words reflect the speaker’s uncertainty as to how he should be reacting to and contemplating the death. Both versions chronicle the recognition of the captain’s fall as one that begins communally and ends personally, but, with the replacement of those words, the later rendering somewhat lessens the singularity of the act. The textual transformations indicate an effort to emphasize collective mourning, even if only slightly. Such revision underscores the poem’s hope for renewal, for finding a way to celebrate the war’s end despite the collapse of the captain.

Because it focuses more on the one who has “fallen cold and dead” than on the desire to or act of chronicling the fact, “O Captain,” is more a poem about losing than loss. It records history in an extended metaphor, but features little substantial contemplation of the repercussions of such loss. With its sing-song rhythm and even its literally ship-shape form – each stanza appears outfitted with a rudder – “O Captain” ultimately does little to resurrect the past for the poet to realize it; rather, it simply points toward it. Despite its popularity, Whitman downplayed the artistic value of the poem. Although he conceded that it had “reasons for being,” he said that he was “almost sorry” for ever having written it (qtd. in Cavitch, 284). It became more of a performance piece, an easily recite-able poem that resembled, as Max Cavitch writes, a kind of “artifact of presidential kitsch” (284). “O Captain! My Captain!,” for Whitman, would not be enough to elegize properly the sixteenth President.

He had begun to write “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” “almost immediately after the assassination and ... completed [it] within weeks,” and, although

like “O Captain!” it features apostrophe, alliteration, and repeating symbols, it mourns with less stringent structure, lines of varying length, only occasional rhyme, and a more prominent and introspective first-person speaker than in Whitman’s more typical free verse (French par. 2). Still, like its more famous counterpart, “Lilacs” never mentions Lincoln by name, but its central subject is abundantly clear. It incorporates into its nameless lines historical facts such as the cross-country journey of a coffin by train, the springtime death of the departed, and buried reference to the slain sixteenth president by way of its sixteen stanzas. Although “O Captain!” was (and perhaps still is) the more well-known of Whitman’s two central Lincoln elegies, critically, “Lilacs” far surpasses the more traditionally structured tribute to the president. Mark Edmundson extends such praise, declaring “Lilacs” to be not only Whitman’s finest memorial, but also that “it is to many the greatest American elegy” (465). Perhaps what makes it so is its multiplicity; it mourns the President, the war, the suffering of the survivors, death itself, and even the poet’s own acknowledgement of the difficulty of memorializing, and it does so by recognizing the limitations of language but yearning nonetheless to surpass them.

Building on the review of *Drum-Taps* by Whitman’s friend John Burroughs, Cavitch stresses that Whitman “sought in ‘Lilacs’ ... to find a way to distinguish the unrealized possibilities of American elegy from their cruder approximations and popular distortions,” categories into which “O Captain!” may certainly fit (244). He contends that Whitman further “sought to make preparation for unrealized possibilities a more-than-consolatory elegiac aim” and declares him “to be open to the dissonance of loss and to be prepared for the creative possibilities it affords” (244). Cavitch’s use of “unrealized” recalls Whitman’s own earlier assertions about recording the “unreckoned”

and realizing the past in poetry. “Lilacs,” then, works to extend the purpose of elegy from mourning and consolation to an effort to consummate a connection between writer and recorder with present or future readers. The affectionate absorption for which the poet had hoped in his preface serves in elegy as a way for the speaker to realize and reckon that past he is dragging out of the grave.

The poem endeavors to do so by addressing Lincoln’s death and the ensuing ceremony of respect and remembrance with winding, unfolding lines. He begins in time, setting the poetic scene first by naming when, where, and what, before personalizing the recollection with “I.” The when – “when lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d” – indicates the springtime, during which the rich scent of blossoming flowers fills the air. The location, a dooryard – “a yard or garden-patch about the door of a house” – is a threshold, a place where the internal meets the external, the manmade the natural (“Dooryard”). Unlike “O Captain!,” “Lilacs” does not initially take place in the present tense; the speaker retrospectively recalls the dawn of his mourning and its consistent return rather than describe it as it is occurring. He emphasizes the idea of seasonal lamenting by ending the first stanza with “ever-returning spring” and immediately begins the second with the same phrase (1.3-4).¹⁷ At first, he addresses that spring as a recollection, but he then alters that notion by speaking directly to that time, noting that “trinity to me you bring” (1.4). The season brings to him three things: the “lilac blooming perennial,” the “drooping star in the west,” and the “thought of him I love.” (1.5-6). The first two are symbols indicating the season and the occasion. The lilacs bloom in the spring, the season that Lincoln died, and the choice of a flower as an offering is also a reminder that

¹⁷ Citations for “Lilacs” give section and line numbers from the Library of America’s edition of Whitman’s poetry and prose. The poem falls on pages 459-467.

dead things eventually yield beauty. The soil from which the lilac comes could only grow the flower because it contains nutrients from decomposed matter. The star represents the figure of the leader, soon described as both “powerful” and “fallen” (2.1). The final “thought” of the first section can be either a noun, as the “thought of him I love” would be the last item in the series of three, or a verb, with the speaker thinking back to the deceased. The verbal reading, however, is syntactically awkward. The poet is describing a trinity and naming its components: the flowers, the star, and the act of recollection. Indeed, the whole poem becomes a quest to determine exactly how that last of the three should both happen and be recorded.

The exclamatory second section answers that call. The speaker calls out “O!” eight times to various objects: the “powerful western star,” “shades of night,” “moody, tearful night,” “great star disappear’d,” “the black murk that hides the star,” “cruel hands that hold me powerless,” “helpless soul of me,” and, finally, the “harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul” (2.1-5). The emphasis is on the absence created by loss. The star has fallen, the night has enveloped, the murk has clouded the once bright orb, and the speaker, without power or help, is contained and constrained. Throughout “Lilacs,” the star is emblematic of Lincoln, that previously shining, potent, driving force that has vanished and left onlookers bewildered and lost. Each line of the section culminates with an exclamation point with the exception of the final, which seems to whisper the speaker’s concession that his soul “will not [be] free[d]” (2.5).

Harold Bloom has written that although with the second section we “expect ... a triumphant ordeal by voice, ... we get an equivocal ordeal by sexual self-touching” (188). “The concealed reference,” Bloom contends, is “a failed masturbation,” and Whitman is

wrestling with the guilt not only of Lincoln's death, but also that of his own father a decade prior (189). Whether or not the last claim is valid, the first two certainly are; the second section indeed utilizes sexual imagery to accentuate a preoccupation with the potential for creation to be marred by impotence. Bloom recognizes that "Whitman mourns Lincoln," but pushes the observation further, noting that "pragmatically he mourns even more intensely for the tally, the image of voice he cannot as yet rekindle into being, concealed as it is by a 'harsh surrounding cloud' of impotence" (190). Bloom's verb, "rekindle," is apt in its prefix pointing toward repeating, but the image of smoldering or burning it elicits does not correspond well to the poet's established efforts to realize or reckon. The goal is not to *rekindle* a voice, per se, but to reinvigorate.

The presence in this section of an anxiety about impotence also underscores Whitman's recognition of the fact that death also breeds life. By stressing early on that inability not only to consummate but also to reproduce, Whitman shrewdly puts more faith in the regenerative power of the buried dead. If the speaker cannot perform sexually and thus cannot reproduce in a traditional manner (either because of impotence or non-procreative homosexuality), he must do so by dragging out the dead and realizing the past. The section fixates on the worry that the generative effort of the "cruel hands" – the same hands that he must use to write and record – might ultimately come to nothing. This anxiety echoes Whitman's concluding assertion in the Preface that "the proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (26). If the speaker of "Lilacs" cannot overcome figurative creative impotence, he cannot perform the larger service of great poetry of calling to the past to rise and be realized. And, if he cannot do that, he cannot expect that affectionate absorption. The apprehension of the

second section is not only sexual but, more importantly, creative. After the first six lines establish the setting of the poem, the second five exclaim its chief thematic questions: How can a poet appropriately mourn, memorialize, and make sense of the fact of the fallen? What happens if the poet fails to transform loss into resurrection in verse?

In an effort to answer such queries, “Lilacs” then returns from the individual realm of the soul to the natural environment and its seasonal sights and sounds. Sections three and four commence *in* things but in the *outside* world. “In the dooryard” and “in the swamp in secluded recesses,” the speaker locates “the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green” and a “shy and hidden bird” (3.1-2, 4.1-2). He examines the plant with sensual and somewhat sexual language, noticing its “pointed blossom rising delicate” and declaring its “every leaf a miracle” before breaking from it “a sprig with its flower,” which will become his offering to the dead (3.3-4). Structurally, the section begins “in,” notes what is there (“the lilac-bush”) and what is “with” it (“blossoms” or “leaves” in various incarnations), and culminates with the speaker finally noting action. As Whitman often does, he inverts conventional clause or sentence structure by placing the object first: “A sprig with its flower I break” (3.6). Delaying the sentence’s subject and verb to the final two words of the section further emphasizes his preoccupation with fruitless action. After all of the “in” and “with,” he must first call attention to the object – that “sprig with its flower” – before he can perform anything.

Such is one of the central problems of elegy. Identifying the occasion for writing – the death of a soldier, the death of a President – is not particularly complex. But, then what? Whitman declares in the preface that the United States “will doubtless have the

greatest [poets] and use them the greatest,” and that the “greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is,” and then emphasizes the power of the greatest poet to drag out the dead and realize the past (13). The central anxiety lies in that act of forming and realizing. If American poets have the most potential for greatness, as Whitman contends, then they must look to the dead, they must tap those “poetical veins” in order to enliven not just the literally deceased for the sake of memory but also the unfinished work they left behind.

The fourth section confronts the act of singing, forever a Whitmanian verb relating to the making of poetry. Like the third, the fourth begins with a prepositional phrase designating a kind of interior in the exterior world, but does not reserve the action until the end. “In the swamp,” an environment that recalls the “black murk” and “harsh surrounding cloud” of the second section, the speaker describes “a shy and hidden bird ... warbling a song” (3.1-2). Something, then, can and does generate from the darkness. The creature, a “thrush,”¹⁸ is “solitary,” “withdrawn to himself,” and “avoiding the settlements” (4.3-4). Its song is “of the bleeding throat” and is “Death’s outlet song of life” (4.6-7). As in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the bird serves as a symbol of the possibilities of poetic utterance. In “Lilacs,” the thrush functions as creative inspiration for its observer. As would a muse, it sings to the speaker of the poem, and, as would epic poets, the speaker encourages its song and endeavors to chronicle it in verse. “Lilacs” takes such conventions and employs them in the natural world, marrying the epic with the romantic image of a centrally significant bird. The speaker does not look to

¹⁸ Thomas Hardy would use the same bird to contemplate beginnings and endings in “The Darkling Thrush,” which was published in 1901 and also features a speaker listening intently to the creature’s voice among the gloom.

God or the gods to seek guidance; rather, he seeks and finds it in the swamp. The presence and acknowledgement of a kind of muse, even if not otherworldly, emphasizes the speaker's desire to take seriously his effort to realize the dead. Whitman's expansive, meandering verse was far from traditional when he was writing and publishing in the 19th century, but, as the inspirational thrush demonstrates, it was not wholly absent of poetic convention. That "Lilacs" uses a feature of the epic is particularly apt; it is indeed a poem intending to reckon a figure the poet certainly deemed heroic. Still, the poem places that muse in the "secluded recesses" of a murky swamp and puts it in the form of a rather meek bird.

Quickly after the introduction of that thrush, however, the poem shifts out of the swamp and into and throughout peopled places. The solitariness of the encounter with the bird transforms into a sweeping account of landscape and travel. Section five again starts and follows with prepositional phrases emphasizing location. Beginning "over the breast of the spring," transitioning "amid cities ... lanes ... the grass," then "passing ... wheat ... [and] orchards," the section finally returns to the object of lament (5.1-5). The "powerful western fallen star" is no longer far away in the firmament; instead, the man it symbolizes is now contained and traversing great distances via railroad. Death has brought him down to earth and among the people. Unlike the star, this manifestation of Lincoln is present whether the sky is dark or light. Just as the action of the third section was reserved for its end, so, too, is the central image and action of the fifth. "Night and day journeys a coffin," it concludes, placing the cyclical nature of time and beauty of the landscape before the reality of the loss.

The poem then describes in more detail the people that inhabit those landscapes and the ceremony with which they receive the casket in transit. The “coffin that passes through lanes and streets” goes “through day and night,” but, more significantly, it does so *with* such a great variety of ritual observation by diverse citizens. There are those in procession and those standing, there is silence and then singing, the great glow of “countless torches” and then “dim-lit churches,” but most importantly, there is the speaker with his gift, which he holds until the end. “Here, coffin that slowly passes,” he says, “I give you my sprig of lilac” (6.6, 10, 12-13). He actively offers that flower representing an “ever-returning spring” to the coffin, not to the person. Unlike “O Captain!,” which manifests Lincoln in the form of a ship’s commanding officer, “Lilacs” refers to the vessel that carries him. This representation emphasizes the poem’s preoccupation with trying to discern exactly what to make of the occasion for writing. The very title “O Captain! My Captain” asserts that poem’s central image. “Lilacs,” however is more about time and the act of memorializing than the memorialized himself. The poem fixates on the act of observing and mourning rather than the act of describing the loss that has transpired. It works to express, then, what many find inexpressible. By making the coffin the central image of death and not the dead body itself, the poem intrinsically parallels its own status as a vessel containing an absence. “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” serves as a coffin, too. Like John Keats’s Grecian urn, the poem becomes a “Cold Pastoral . . . [that] shall remain” long past the lives and events it commemorates (line 45).

Furthermore, “Lilacs” not only explores what a person must do to pay proper respect, but what *a poet* must do. Whitman wrestles with the task throughout the sixteen

sections. Cavitch asserts that with the offering “the passage turns from paying tribute to the slain president to an aggrandizement of the poet as the agent or emissary of all mourning” (264). The speaker may be acting alone but not for himself alone. Indeed, the section that follows directly addresses that undertaking, albeit in a completely parenthetical manner.¹⁹ Hiding the words in such punctuation gives a misleading visual cue that the content is less significant. The parentheses perhaps serve to excuse or make subtler the poet’s aim to broaden both his subject and those for whom he speaks. He notes that this representation of his mourning is “not for you,” the coffin, that is, and the man inside; it is not “for one alone” because he presents “blossoms and branches green” not just to this one coffin, but to “coffins all” (7.1-2). Here, Whitman expands the poem from meditation on an individual, specific figure to the recognition that he must grapple with not only singular loss but also with the broader subject of death itself. To do so, the poem utilizes apostrophe for the first time since the second section. He calls out “O sane and sacred death” (7.3) first and “O death” (7.5, 9) twice thereafter, noting how he approaches it not with one solitary sprig but “with loaded arms” holding lilacs, roses, and lilies that he will be “pouring” (7.8), a verb he had also used when observing the procession of mourners lining up to view Lincoln’s body in Washington (“Lincoln Material”). Characterizing death as “sane and sacred” emphasizes that it is both a normal part of life and one that still should be marked with reverence.

The manner of that reverence continues as a central concern in the tenth section,

¹⁹ Parentheses sometimes frame a poem’s key thematic statement in Whitman’s poetry. “Song of the Open Road,” for instance, after extolling the lightheartedness and freedom of taking to the road, notes parenthetically “(Still here I carry my old delicious burdens, / I carry them, men and women, I carry them with me wherever I go, / I swear it is impossible for me to get rid of them, / I am fill’d with them, and I will fill them in return)” (297).

which follows meditation on the figures of the star and the bird. After asking the thrush to keep singing its song, the speaker turns the focus to his effort and wonders first how he should record his mourning (“O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?”), what techniques he could use to do so (“And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?”), and what kind of ceremony he should perform (“And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love? ... what shall I hang on the chamber walls?”) (10.1-3, 11.1). To answer these questions, he focuses on the landscape of his nation, with its “sea-winds” and “prairies,” “fresh sweet herbage under foot” and “ranging hills on the banks;” indeed, he declares that the pictures he will hang to adorn the grave of the departed will depict “all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen homeward returning” (10.3-4, 11.7, 9, 11). In “Lilacs,” only a catalog representing the diversity of the United States will suffice to properly ornament the burial place of Lincoln.

After bringing the outside world inside the chamber, the speaker turns first to his “body and soul” and then back to “this land,” as if to conflate the two. His inventory of the country becomes more specific, with Manhattan, Ohio, Missouri, and the more general North and South all being named, and he finishes by looking up to the sun, which ultimately is “enveloping man and land” (12.10). His star is soon to depart, but the sun with its “measureless light,” with its power to help his country grow, remains (12.7). Cavitch notes that “Whitman’s projections of himself into the objects ... [are what] helps shape his experience of mourning,” which is certainly true of sections 11 and 12 (247). He brings the outside American world into the burial chamber both to mark more perfectly the occasion, and to emphasize his part of the national mourning. His solitary

offering of a lilac sprig is not enough; while “Lilacs” at first is a poem about one man who “mourn’d, and yet shall mourn,” it transforms into one that aims to grieve for all (1.3). It anticipates and copes with the anxiety of memorializing by extending the elegiac subject from the specific dead – the sixteenth President – to the suffering survivors and then to those that will feel the torment of dying and surviving again, for that process on Earth will never cease. Whitman confronts commemorative worry not necessarily by consoling but by affirming that the cyclical, regenerative nature of life and death is central to the idea of America. The country’s ability to help its citizens (or immigrants to its shores) be renewed, to make something out of nothing – indeed, just as a man born in a log cabin in Kentucky did – assuages the pain of loss.

Lincoln’s death, while tragic, also serves as a point of unity for the broken nation. Cavitch argues that Whitman is attempting to propel “his fantasy of a collective aspiration to share a singular experience of mourning so as to tame and unify the wild, riven subjectivities of the traumatized, the suspicious, the detached, and the resigned” (264). Unification is unquestionably a Whitmanian impulse, especially in “Lilacs,” but the notion to tame registers less so. Indeed, when the poet recounts the days following the assassination, he does not edit out some of the unpleasant, less solemn responses to the loss. Writing in a notebook in New York on April 15, 1865, Whitman first notes that “the country is in convulsions” and contends that “there is but one thing talked of, the assassination of President Lincoln last night at Ford’s Theatre in Washington” (“Lincoln Material”). After hearing the news, he goes out into the city, finding it “impossible to control my tears,” and observes another “middle-aged man who was also weeping” and the “crowd with sad and horror-stricken faces” (“Lincoln Material”). Although most of

the people he encounters share in the sadness, some provide less sympathetic perspectives. In a hotel parlor, he talks to a friend and her husband, whom Whitman “found to be a copperhead,” relating how the man said, “If half the world were to be killed off to night [sic] the world would go on just the same to morrow [sic] morning,” to which Whitman responds in writing that it was “perhaps true but the time for the utterance was not well chosen” (“Lincoln Material”). He also recalls a speech by General Burnside, who spoke of “despising the murder of Mr. Lincoln,” but also notes that the general “adjured them to support the new President, Andrew Johnson whom he declared he knew to be a thoroughly temperate man notwithstanding his having been drunk on the day of his inauguration as Vice President” (“Lincoln Material”). Whitman’s report is mostly solemn, but its moments showing unpleasantness and wry humor demonstrate that reaction to the death was not exactly a conciliatory act of national mourning. Still, “Lilacs” does not exactly tame such responses as it does attempt to figure what a national, lasting reaction should be.

Whitman witnessed the official response to Lincoln’s death, the funeral procession, and Lincoln lying in state at the Capitol by traveling down to Washington after receiving the news in New York. He does not respond in an overly sentimental fashion but a more realistic one. While he does notice from his perch on a balcony that “the funeral cortege appeared,” he mentions it after recognizing that “it was past two oclock [sic],” and, before describing the parade, he makes sure to indicate that onlookers had to wait outside in “the very hot sun which beat down in July fashion from the clear cloudless sky [and] made it rather oppressive” (“Lincoln Material”). The act of mourning is difficult even when simply observing the procession on the sidelines. The heat, of

course, is not the only facet of the day meriting recording; around him, he notices that “all heads were uncovered as the hearse [passed by] slowly,” carrying the “flower strewn coffin” and he watches as “other civilians walked abreast in rows nearly as wide as the avenue,” adding “40 or 50, I should think, in a row!” (“Lincoln Material”). Elements of this scene – the flowers on the coffin, the hats removed in respect, the volume of mourners – certainly resurface in “Lilacs,” but the poem makes the mourning more inclusive and national by creatively interpreting the later railroad procession rather than this more localized one in Washington. Also, in “Lilacs,” the president’s coffin, en route to its final resting place in Springfield, ventures from place to place rather than requiring people to traverse long distances to pay their respects. The poem marks the last time Lincoln in some way could accommodate his constituents.

In these notebook responses to the assassination and its aftermath, Whitman both notes the collective response of the crowds and his individual efforts at marking the loss. He visits the Capitol to see for himself what remains of Lincoln, whom Whitman had observed alive and well while he served in Washington hospitals during the war.²⁰ His account combines features of detached journalistic writing and nods to the emotion just under the surface:

Went to the Capitol to take my last look at the President. The
coffin lay in the centre of the rotunda, an aid de camps at the head
of another at the foot, while a number of generals and other

²⁰ On June 30, 1863, Whitman wrote to his mother that President Lincoln looked “more careworn even than usual—his face with deep cut lines, seams & his *complexion gray*, through very dark skin, a curious looking man, very sad” (*Correspondence* 113). An April 27, 1864, letter to James P. Kirkwood shows Whitman observing firsthand that Lincoln “has conscience & homely shrewdness—conceals an enormous tenacity under his mild gawky western manner” (215).

officers sat on a bench at the sides of the catafalque. A crowd of people, white and black, young and old, of both sexes, poured in at the East gate and passing up in single file on both sides of the platform ... glanced at the face seen through the removed upper part of the coffin and we passed out through the west door. On account of the throng, there was only time for a look in passing, those who wanted to stay longer being hurried on by a marshall stationed at each side. The coffin lay with its head to the West and its feet to the East. The face of the dead man struck me as smaller and shorter than in life. Stepping down from the platform I looked around the rotunda and found the historical pictures all covered with black cloth. The marble statue of Washington had a black sash over the left shoulder. ... I passed sadly out the west door, and stayed a little while in the library, and on the balcony overlooking the city; then came back and stood a long time against one of the pillars at the head of the descending stairs to watch the people as they passed down from looking at the remains. It was one steady stream. A few were weeping, all looked sad and oppressed. They were of all conditions of people. ("Lincoln Material")

He seems to recognize why the mourners must move quickly through, but nonetheless laments their having to do so. With "Lilacs," he slows the concept of procession down significantly, giving the bereaved time to express their grief. In the notebook, Whitman

is sure to note the diversity of observers that “pour[s] in,” a verb that also indicates collective mourning in the parenthetical seventh section of “Lilacs,” where the speaker comes “with loaded arms ... pouring” the floral offerings (7.8). The notebook observations poignantly note how the people travel to the slain President to pay their respects, and later in “Lilacs,” Whitman balances that act by focusing on Lincoln’s traveling to them by way of the train procession. The bereaved still must come to train stations to see the coffin that passes, but they are not excluded from proximal mourning if they cannot undertake the journey to Washington to see him lying in state.

“Lilacs,” then, enables Whitman to transform his actual experience of mourning for the president with other citizens into a more perfect one through which he can explore how to enact mourning again and again when the time for official ceremony has passed. He bears witness to the actual procession and then versifies it in order to immortalize both the deceased and the mourners left behind. Indeed, the poem *realizes* Lincoln by idealizing a response that approaches the occasion collectively, nationally, creatively, poetically, and generatively. After enveloping the landscape and the people into an imagined act of decorating the walls of Lincoln’s death chamber, the speaker returns to the swamp-dwelling thrush, encouraging him to “sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,” which he then strangely calls a “loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe” (13.1, 4-5). He tells him to “pour your chant from the bushes,” which he designates as “limitless out of the dusk” (13.2-3).

Whitman’s language here echoes a plea in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark,” in which the speaker insists that the creature “from heaven or near it / Pourest thy full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art” (lines 3-5). The allusion to Shelley’s

bird is particularly apt as the skylark's song is one that is best heard when it is flying too high to be visible; as such, he represents "an unbodied joy" (15). Shelley writes that the bird is "Like a Poet hidden / In the light of thought / Singing hymns unbidden" (36-38). The mystery of the bird's song is an attractive feature of the animal for a poet. It sings without revealing the source of its song. In "Lilacs," Whitman understands *why* he must sing – to tally the dead and the survivors – but he is uncertain *how* best to do so and *what* is best said, choosing instead to record the song of a bird (a thrush, not a skylark) in the murk. Shelley's poem ends with the poet appealing to the bird to "teach" him what "thy brain must know" and then asserts that "the world should listen then—as I am listening now (101-105). Indeed, that notion is one that permeates Whitman's "Lilacs." He listens for and hears his bird sing, and he records the message from the creature in the swampy recesses and presents it poetically to readers. He does this not only to help understand the loss of Lincoln and death in general, but also to contribute "to the tally of my soul" (15.1). The singing thrush, his muse of sorts, is able to transcend the confines of the murk that the "powerful western fallen star" cannot. "Lilacs" asserts that the poet can exceed the limitations of the dead by doing just that.

The poem's fourteenth section finally gives the bird's "loud human song" actual words. "Rapt" by the "charm of the carol," he envisions himself held by the "hands [of] my comrades in the night," those comrades being the deceased – the "knowledge of death" – and the avian warbler – the "thought of death" – and declares that "the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird" that then follows in italics (14.25-27). The thrush begins its song by commanding, "*Come lovely and soothing death,*" a syntactically tricky imperative. He could be requesting a "*lovely and soothing death*" to "*come,*" or he might

be asking “*death*” to come in a “*lovely and soothing*” manner (14.28). The bird calls death a “*dark mother*” and wonders “*have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome*” before declaring that he will “*chant it for thee*” (14.36-38). The creature offers ceremonial reverence for death, that “*strong deliveress*,” and eventually pronounces that the soul and the body will be “*turning to thee ... [and] nestling close to thee*” (14.50-51). The bird as muse is grateful to death for providing carolers with the most vital of subject matter.

After hearing the song, the speaker thinks to the myriad dead he has seen, from the “battle corpses” and “white skeletons” to the “debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,” but he notes that they “were not as was thought” (15.15-18). In fact, “they themselves were fully at rest, they suffer’d not;” the true debris of death lay in the suffering of those that remained (15.20). “Lilacs,” then, is an elegy not just for Lincoln but also for the nation left behind in suffering. It serves not necessarily to heal such suffering but to create a kind of recurring ceremony by which the mourners can continually make sense of their loss. The speaker indeed presents his lilac to the coffin, and he also must “leave thee lilac ... in the door-yard” (16.10) so that it may bloom and bloom again. The lilac is an offering not just for Lincoln but also for the nation that continues to suffer the loss. He declares that he must “cease from my song for thee,” but that the chant nonetheless remains. “Lilac and star and bird” are then “twined” with it, echoing in the “fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim” (16.21-22). In order to drag out the dead, to realize the past, the poet must not only record the subject matter but also extend mourning and healing to those left to grieve, just as he was requested to do in “Hush’d Be the Camps.” This act could ensure that the same will be done for him.

In this respect, the speaker of the poem – and Whitman by extension – is serving as a shepherd not only for a suddenly shepherd-less people but also for the soul of the dead. Performing such a deed is one of the several conventions of the pastoral elegy, a tradition to which “Lilacs” conforms partially. Whitman’s poem features the invocation to a muse (the thrush) that both epic poetry and pastoral elegies contain, participation by nature in the mourning (the “harsh surrounding cloud” (2.5), the “breast of the spring” (5.1) etc.), the floral offerings to the deceased, and the renewal that recognizes that though death marks an end, a beginning also happens (“lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim”) (16.21-22). “Lilacs” does not, however, specifically engage with the collective memory of the moment of death. Instead, the deceased subject is absent completely. Lincoln is represented by a coffin on a train and also a grave that gives the speaker anxiety because he is unsure how to adorn it. The absence of the President’s body turns the poem from a relatively straightforward, focused pastoral elegy to one that widens to contemplate not one dead man, but all death, survival, and the potential for immortality.

Mark Edmundson suggests that “perhaps we as a nation move, in the fashion of Whitman’s elegy, between the urge to cast out every trace of the past and live with no precedents and the urge to succumb entirely to the practices and values we have received,” and surely Whitman’s poem explores this tension (491). The roots of those impulses, however, might very well come from a poetic recognition that the American inclination to focus primarily on the future, on the promise of the nation and the promise of poetry, in effect buries one’s present and the past, making both perpetually obsolete. This reality makes the act of continual memorializing more understandable. Elegy works

to mourn not only the bodies that have died but also the truth behind this American emphasis on the potential of tomorrow. The poet, then, recognizes his position as a living ghost, and Whitman asserts that the “greatest poet[s]” are the ones who can “drag ... out the dead ... [and] realize” the past because they recognize their own status as a kind of phantom.

Drew Gilpin Faust rightfully designates Whitman as “the poet not just of death but of survival, or the suffering of the not-dead” (161). She asserts that in his poetry, the “lost yet not lost, absent yet ever present, these dead, these immortal phantoms with their unrelenting demands on mourners and survivors, became in Whitman’s eyes the meaning and legacy of the war” (161). Those “unrelenting demands” haunt the poet as a chronicler of America at a time of such lasting sorrow. All he can do to answer them is to write verse that recognizes and makes lasting and significant their struggles. When the poet contemplates his own life to assess how he contributed to the United States and its scarred citizens, he defines his offerings first by conceding what he has *not* done, by what absences remain. “No Labor-Saving Machine,” first published in 1860 and again in 1881, 11 years before he died, briefly exhibits such an effort, and is reprinted here in its entirety:

No labor-saving machine
 Nor discovery have I made,
 Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy bequest to found
 a hospital or library
 Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage for America,
 Nor literary success nor intellect, nor book for the book-shelf,

But a few carols vibrating through the air I leave,
 For comrades and lovers. (283)

Whitman asserts first six things that this “*Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,)” has not accomplished (671). Of course, some of the claims are laughable. Not only did he leave a “book for the book-shelf,” but he left several, many of which were the same one he had handcrafted and then edited, revised, rewritten, and republished. He also enjoyed some literary and intellectual success (though not particularly financial), respected by many significant minds before he died. What he does contend that he has provided, “a few carols vibrating through the air ... for comrades and lovers,” emphasizes his recognition that the affectionate absorption for which he had hoped failed to happen during his lifetime, but that death need not be an obstacle to its ever happening. Whitman leaves behind words and songs “vibrating” electrically for future readers and singers to embrace. He encourages that audience to attempt to do as he did and work to drag out the dead and realize them.

In his great poem whose title seems to emphasize birth over death, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” Whitman writes “I, chanter of pain and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, / Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them, / A reminiscence sing” (388). In the space between entrance into and exit from this world, Whitman offers not an expected emphasis on the promise of the future but “a reminiscence.” That recollection concerns the singing of a powerful bird, and that creature provides the poet with a “thousand warbling echoes [that] have started to life within me, never to die” (392). The poet is filled with the song of the bird and thus the song of many, and he yearns to hear more, to know his “unknown want, the destiny of

me” (393). He wonders what that “word final, superior to all” might be, and if it has been “whisper[ed] ... all the time” from the “sea-waves” (393). That “delicious word,” his “destiny,” of course, is “death,” uttered not once but ten times by the lapping waves (393). That revelation, however, does not scare him. In fact, he finds it to be “the word of the sweetest song of all songs,” indeed, a “strong and delicious word” (394). For death, while capable of causing great and enveloping sorrow, also gives Whitman the opportunity to be resting comfortably under the leaves of grass on which wander the boot-soles of those he asserts in “Song of Myself” he will “stop somewhere waiting for” (52.16). And only then will they, too, be able to realize the past of which he has become a part, as he did before them. Because his stated aim of *Leaves of Grass* was “to thoroughly possess the mind, memory, cognizance of the author himself” and because Whitman believes that “every page of my poetic or attempt at poetic utterance therefore smacks of the living physical identity, date, environment, individuality, probably beyond anything known, and in style often offensive to the conventions,” the act of reading his work, of holding his *Leaves* in hand and absorbing its contents, is an act of recovery, of realizing the work over which he had so labored.

CHAPTER 3

AUDEN'S "UNCONSTRAINING VOICE"

“ ... but existence is believing

We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving”

– W. H. Auden, “In Memory of Ernst Toller”

Two days after Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden arrived in the United States on January 26, 1939, W. B. Yeats died in France at the age of 73. Having just left England aboard the *Champlain* and crossed the Atlantic Ocean, Auden, a few weeks shy of 32, responded to the occasion of the elder Irishman's death by writing one of his finest poems, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” First published on March 8 in *The New Republic* and revised over the years, the poem performs many traditional functions of an elegy. It recognizes the moment in time and condition in which the subject died, acknowledges his particular abilities, attempts poetically to inter him, and makes gestures toward consolation and immortality by speaking to and for the bereaved. Most importantly, though, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” contemplates the meaning of survival and what one – particularly a poet – must do to endure.

This, however, was not the first time Auden had crafted elegiac verse. “Miss Gee,” a poem from April 1937, morbidly and mischievously memorializes the fate of a

forgotten dreamer, assessed at the hospital as “a goner” (line 80) who ends up being “dissected” by “a couple of Oxford groupers” (99-100).²¹ The poem that begins “Stop all the clocks” and is also known as “Funeral Blues,” which was initially featured as satirical in *The Ascent of F6* and later revised and included as the ninth in a twelve-song sequence, dolefully laments the passing of a lover whose absence leads the bereaved to conclude that “nothing now can ever come to any good” (16).²² Auden elegizes a “point in time and space” (7) in 1933’s “A Summer Night,” and questions longevity and legacy by asserting in 1927’s “The Watershed” that he “who stands, the crux left of the watershed, on the wet road ... sees ... an industry already comatose” (1-5). “Let History Be My Judge” (1928) anticipates the speaker’s own demise alongside an undetermined “we,” and concludes optimistically, noting that “there is left remaining / Our honour at least,” as well as “a reasonable chance of retaining / Our faculties to the last” (25-28). In 1930’s “No Change of Place,” the poet wonders at the outset “who will endure” (1). In most of Auden’s early verse, however, he writes elegiacally only about the unspecific dead. He goes against this tendency with his “Letter to Lord Byron,” but that long poem does not memorialize, mourn, or console as much as it attempts simply to commune with the dead. The speaker calls it his “conversational song,” and assures the deceased poet that its length will be no hindrance to Byron since he has “all eternity in which to read it” (4.305-308). It is a poetic “letter,” after all, and not an elegy.

²¹ Citations to Auden’s poetry come from *Collected Poems* unless indicated otherwise.

²² That poem posthumously became one of Auden’s most famous when it was recited by a character in the film “Four Weddings and a Funeral.” Stickers affixed to the cover of *Collected Poems* after the movie’s 1994 release boasted of the poem’s presence in the volume.

For the most part, before moving to the United States, Auden's poetic approaches to mortality and the dead are ambiguous and unspecific. A few exceptions include sonnets such as "Rimbaud," "A. E. Housman," and "Edward Lear," from 1938, and, to an extent, "Epitaph on a Tyrant," which he wrote just before leaving England for America, and which was published in the *New Statesman*, a British magazine, the same month Auden embarked for and arrived in New York. In the first three, he imagines the lives of the dead, with Rimbaud "now, galloping through Africa" (12), while Housman "timidly attacked the life he led" (10), and Lear "became a land" (14). While each of these poems latently recognizes that the named subject no longer lives, none of them works to do much more than imaginatively remember each. There is no acknowledgment of the timing of their deaths or attempt at a consolation to those that survive. The six lines of "Epitaph on a Tyrant" could refer to an early twentieth century despot, but no name or incident reveals a specific person. Sardonic and cutting, the "epitaph" neither praises nor pardons the actions of the deceased; rather, it insinuates what power a man can brandish when his fellow citizens yield too easily. While these poems in many ways memorialize figures, moods, or moments that have passed, they refrain from commenting explicitly on death and survival.

About a decade before leaving England for the United States, Auden wrote a short poem in which he implored readers to "honour if we can / The vertical man," going on to concede that "we value none / But the horizontal one" (53).²³ After arriving in New York Harbor in 1939, his poetic output would feature many pieces contemplating "the horizontal one," the man at eternal rest. Not long after immigrating to America, in

²³ This brief poem makes up part of "Shorts," which can be found in *Collected Poems* on pages 52-54.

addition to his elegy on W. B. Yeats, Auden crafted poems centering on deceased subjects including the German playwright Ernst Toller, Voltaire, Herman Melville, Sigmund Freud, an “Unknown Citizen,” Henry James, and, later, even Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Auden toyed with poetic form throughout his long career, but why, then, did elegy seem to be the form he most interestingly utilized in his early years in the United States? Elegies, of course, are initially occasional poems, and the deaths of Yeats, Toller, and Freud occurred the year Auden reached American soil. Voltaire, however, was long gone, and Henry James died over twenty years before Auden’s emigration. As such, the impetus for those poems was not necessarily the immediacy of the occasion; rather, they fulfill a desire to contemplate those specific deaths regardless of time past.

This reality aligns with Stanley Plumly’s contention that “in American poetry ... the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than it has been the condition under which the life of the poem comes into being” (32). Auden’s elegies then, are not *occasioned* as much as they are *conditioned* by his residence and writing in America. As the previous chapter discussed, the American bard Walt Whitman, about whom Auden wrote on several occasions, declares in “Democratic Vistas” that “in the future of these States must arise poets immenser far,” and these writers, he asserted, must “make great poems of death” (988). “The greatest poet,” he contends in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet [and] ... says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you” (13). Whitman, that great writer in, of, and for America, identifies death as the great poetic subject. It is a fascinating contention

for a writer who also asserts that “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (1).²⁴ How, then, is America a predominantly elegiac space?

“Elegy pushes against the limits of our expressive resources precisely at the very moment in which we confront our mortality,” Karen Weisman insists, adding “which is as much to say that it throws into relief the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it the most” (1). Peter M. Sacks, in his earlier examination of the English elegy, also emphasizes the limits of language, noting “much of the elegist’s task lies in his reluctant resubmission to the constraints of language. The elegy, therefore, gives us the chance to view man in tension with, rather than inertly constituted by, the language that so conditions him” (xiii). Because elegy confronts such significant poetic boundaries, and because the United States is a country predicated on the promise and allure of ever-shifting frontiers, American space is essentially elegiac. The American focus on the future, on the possibilities of days that have yet to come, is hopeful and optimistic, but it is simultaneously and intrinsically lamenting a present and past that necessarily must be sacrificed. A continual emphasis on the future effectively kills the present and the past, and it transforms one aware of the loss into a kind of living ghost.

Auden’s exchange of England for America enabled him to confront more consistently such notions, perhaps particularly because it caused a bit of controversy. On January 19, 1956, almost two decades after he left for the United States, his father George recognized with some urgency the fact that powerful literary and academic figures still considered the 1939 emigration controversial, admitting to Oxford Professor E. R. Dodds his concern that “the lying accusation that was put forward at the beginning of the last

²⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, Whitman quotations in this chapter come from The Library of America’s *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982).

war” might mar his son’s chance to succeed Cecil Day Lewis as Professor of Poetry at the university. He viewed the honor as a “good opportunity for stamping out the deliberate lie” that the purpose of the move was “to escape Military Service.” In the short correspondence, George Auden quickly expresses his anger, using forms of the word “lie” four times and contending that the disparagement of his son is both “deliberate” and “brazen,” declaring that Wystan had already “said good bye to us” as early as “December 1938,” at least a month before arriving in America. The poet’s relocation, his father strongly asserts, was not an act of escape or abandonment.

Writing in *Horizon* in February 1940, Cyril Connolly named that very happening as “the most important literary event since the outbreak of the Spanish War” (68). Connolly calls the emigration of Auden and Christopher Isherwood from England to America “unfortunate” since it happened “as we went to war with Germany,” but he qualifies the designation by saying that such timing “puts too easy a construction on their departure” (69). Still, in the paragraphs of that issue’s editorial commentary, he twice refers to the movement as one that marked the pair as having “abandoned” their homeland. Writing from Ithaca, New York, where he was lecturing at Cornell University, Louis MacNeice in July of that year wondered why people in England “bother” to be “still fussing ... about the ethics of [Auden’s] emigration to America” (464). He continues by reporting Auden’s own explanation for leaving – “that an artist ought either to live where he has live roots or where he has no roots at all” – and concludes that if the poet “feels he can work better here than in Europe,” then “that is all there is to it” (464).

The move is not a question of loyalty or nationalism or fear, MacNeice suggests, but one that addresses the productivity and quality of work by the writer.²⁵

Auden himself responded to the controversy of his departure in letters to Dodds, who, along with his wife A. E., was a lifelong friend and correspondent of the poet. “You speak of England as roots,” Auden wrote to him on January 16, 1940, “but after all what is my England. My childhood and my English friends. . . . People dare not face the truth that tradition, community, roots and what have you have gone forever . . . and in this terror are trying to make it artificially” (3).²⁶ He asserts that, with his move, he is trying to combat that falseness. Auden concludes the missive by claiming that

As an artist, I believe America to be the best place to live, because here it is impossible to deceive oneself. All you say about its destructive power on writers is perfectly true. [America is] a terrifying place and I daresay I’m no tougher than the rest, but to attempt the most difficult seems to me the only thing worth while. At least I know what I am trying to do, . . . which is to live deliberately without roots. . . . America may break one completely, but the best of which one is capable is more likely to be drawn out of one here than anywhere else. (3)

²⁵ When Auden died in 1973, Stephen Spender, responding to his friend’s desire to have his surviving letters burned, wrote on November 15 to E. R. Dodds that Auden’s “reasons for leaving England are historically interesting” and, as a result, correspondence pertaining to the move should not be destroyed. Spender’s justification for keeping such letters was that, after all, “Wystan’s wish is not the only conscience involved,” that recipients needed to assess whether or not the historical or literary significance of the contents merited putting aside Auden’s inclination for disposal. “Dead or alive,” Spender concluded, Auden “was capable of being silly . . . [and] to take this into account is not disloyal to him.”

²⁶ Citations from this letter refer to the pages of the correspondence.

Interestingly, what America draws out of Auden, at least initially, were formal meditations on the past, on poetic and commemorative tradition, and, particularly, on the dead. The resulting elegies attempt to alleviate the tension in Auden's myriad worlds: between England and America; his status as a leftist, activist poet and more careful, deliberate, perhaps passive writer; between his fame and his words and messages that got him there.

Auden's first American publication after moving was "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which appeared in the *New Republic* on March 8, 1939. He revised the poem after initial publication to include what became his famous declaration about what poetry can make happen ("nothing") and later to exclude a section discussing specifically the intersection of poets, poetry, and politics with regard to Paul Claudel and Rudyard Kipling. When the *New Republic* published the piece, it named Auden as a contributor who was a "poet and playwright ... visiting the United States with his friend and collaborator Christopher Isherwood" (148). At that point, just over a month after arriving, the young writer was merely a guest of the country.²⁷ By the May 3 issue, to which he submitted a review, Auden is no longer labeled as just "visiting."

Auden's first published poetic words while living on American soil were "He disappeared in the dead of winter," a line referring, of course, to Yeats's January death but doubly to his own departure from England (line 1). He, too, was seen as having "disappeared" by many of the people he left behind, and he dealt in a variety of ways

²⁷ Auden was naturalized as an American citizen in May 1946, but began the process as early as 1939, when he wrote to A. E. Dodds in a letter dated "26.ii.39" that he "just got back from Canada where I had to go in order to start becoming American," going on even to compliment American bureaucrats, who were "so polite and helpful – an example to our insolent busybodies at Harwich and Elsewhere."

with the accusations of desertion, abandonment, and betrayal. That particular word is a strange one to refer to the act of dying; of course, it indicates absence, but it does so in an otherworldly, magical sense. Yeats and Auden by extension did not actively leave or forsake others by having “disappeared;” rather, they simply and suddenly were no longer present. By vanishing and not *leaving* or *going*, there is less agency for and blame to direct on the individual who is no longer there. If “disappeared” refers simultaneously to Auden, it is a subtle way of telling his detractors that he didn’t actively abandon England but succumbed to forces he was unable or unwilling to thwart. Auden later wrote that “in America ... to move on and make a fresh start somewhere else is still the normal reaction to dissatisfaction or failure” (“American Poetry” 359). His own movement, then, was “normal” and not an act of disloyalty.

As such, his elegy for Yeats wrestles not only with the occasion of the Irish literary giant’s death but also with the survival of poets like himself and poetry like his after such momentous happenings. For although “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” primarily is a work evaluating just that – the act of remembering a particular writer – it simultaneously commemorates a shift in Auden’s poetic and national identity from a leftist, activist English poet to a writer determined to break free from his national roots without necessarily planting himself in a new country with a new nationality. Unlike the hero of Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier,” when Auden the poet dies, no “corner of a foreign field” will be “for ever England” (lines 2-3). His decision first to live in the United States and then become an American citizen in 1946 does not erase his English origins, but it does forever complicate his status as an English writer.

Auden admits to Dodds on March 11, 1940, that his assertion about the impossibility of self-deception in America is not wholly accurate: “of course one can deceive oneself in America. One can do that anywhere. Only the deceptions vary” (1).²⁸ Auden includes in that correspondence “a little dossier” meant to explain and, perhaps, again justify his move. Set up like the Ithaca chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the form of a catechism with an imaginary and anonymous third-person questioner, the exercise allows Auden to declare that he doesn’t “care what happens in England . . . in the least” (2). Regarding his English friends, he admits that “if they were all safely out of the country, I should feel about the English as I feel about the Spanish and the Chinese and Germans. It matters what happens to them as it matters what happens to all members of the human race, but my concern is as a fellow human being not as a fellow countryman” (2). Again, he has no desire to follow the Brookean path and bring England to another part of the world; rather, he is asserting his ability to eschew national ties and not *uproot* himself but disconnect himself from his English roots. That being said, he declares that his “first and foremost” reason for staying in America is *not* because of an attempt to exchange his national identity for a global or simply human one; he admits to Dodds that his rationale for remaining is, simply put, because “for the first time . . . I have a happy personal life [and] secondly or because of the firstly, I find that I can write here” (2). And that he did, composing a number of elegies that explicitly grapple with death, survival, immortality, and time.

In secondary but not final iterations of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” Auden looks to “Time” as something “intolerant . . . And indifferent” that “worships,” “pardons,” and

²⁸ Citations refer to the page number of this letter, labeled number 41, in the Bodleian Library’s collection of Auden-Dodds correspondence.

“lays ... honours” (3.5-12).²⁹ Although he eventually removes this section from the poem (along with its pardoning of Kipling and Claudel), the inherent obsession with time, and by extension his place in it, persists in his elegies. Such a fixation on time, death, and the remaining living particularly and prominently surfaces in Auden’s poetry after he moves to the U. S. Indeed, elegies facilitate the consideration of time in a more direct way than other poetic forms. In order to memorialize someone who is now gone, a poet must begin in the present reality (Person X is dead and consolation is needed), look to the past (Who was Person X? And why? And how?), and then project forward (What does the death of Person X mean to me? To us? How will we go on? What should we know now because of it?). With the Yeats elegy, Auden commemorates the poetry over the poet, preferring Yeats’s verse to his mortal, complicated self. Patricia Rae views the poem as “a challenge to the traditional elegy” and contends that it is “critical of poetry and itself reluctant to shroud Yeats with encomium” (320). Although “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” may indeed complicate poetry’s power, it refuses to deem the genre (or literature by extension) as inert or not dynamic.

For Whitman, the elegiac form was uniquely appropriate to fulfill his desire to link divides between warring citizens as well as project his ideas for a specifically American poetry. The occasion of Lincoln’s death provided the poet with the kind of centralized subject matter that demanded a consideration of time, legacy, and nationality that ultimately enabled the writer to evaluate his identity as a poet. “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” uses the Irish poet’s passing in much the same manner as Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” reflect on President

²⁹ Quotations here come from the version of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” printed in *Selected Poems*.

Abraham Lincoln's assassination: First, the elegy confronts the event as one worthy of remembrance and contemplation; then, it turns that experience into a meditation on the power of poetry and poets, particularly considering the implications such deaths have on a writer's national identity. Auden seems to laud the personal nature of Whitman's "Lilacs" in an essay called "American Poetry":

Leaving aside all questions of style, there is a difference between Tennyson's *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* and Whitman's elegy for President Lincoln *When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd* which is significant. Tennyson, as one would expect from the title of his poem, mourns for a great public official figure, but it would be very hard to guess from the words of Whitman's poem that the man he is talking about was the head of a State; one would naturally think that he was some close personal friend, a private individual. (355-356)

Auden's Yeats elegy in particular uses both techniques. Yeats is kept at arm's length as a monolithic literary figure, but he is also referred to casually as "William Yeats," which was not the name with which he chose to sign his poems, essays, or plays. As the Yeats elegy concludes, the gestures toward the final "poet" become more personal; the speaker politely commands the writer to do particular things in a way that suggests a more intimate, familiar manner. This may be because the poem is asserting a familiarity that doesn't exist, or because the "poet" to which the final lines refer is not Yeats but a generic future poet or even Auden himself.

In Whitman's poems, the goal is to foster unity among a divided American people after the Civil War. The exploration of nationality in Auden's verses, however, is

trickier. Nicholas Jenkins astutely observes that “Auden’s writing in the United States is not an attempt to ‘assimilate’ poetically, to become ‘an American poet’ ... the new poetic measure that Auden sought was not national, but grew out of a world in which ‘nationalities don’t mean anything’” (43-44). Auden’s explanation to Dodds that is he trying to “live deliberately without roots” recalls another young (albeit fictional) writer’s flight from his homeland: Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, in order to “fly by those nets” of “nationality, language, religion” must leave Ireland in order to write without the kind of constraints – which is to say, roots – that his country demands. Like Dedalus, Auden hungers for – indeed, like Yeats, is fascinated by – the difficult, which is “the only thing worth while.”

The difficulty that he found in America manifested itself in what Charles H. Miller remembers Auden as naming “an inescapable sense of loneliness [that] confronts the individual” (5). The idea of the pervasiveness of loneliness in the U. S. is something that Auden would return to time and time again. While he may not have aimed to *become* an American poet, he certainly worked to confront what he considered distinctly American themes. He referred to his new country of residence as “the land of the lonely” and “the land of eccentricities and outcast lonelies,” even asserting that “‘The Lonelies’ could be the title of the grand unwritten American novel” (32). Hearing such observations, Miller, who was a graduate student in poetry at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor when Auden was visiting in the early 1940s, asked him if Sherwood Anderson hadn’t already written that book [*Winesburg, Ohio*], to which Auden responded, “Perhaps, in his own way. But the novel needs to be written by one of us,” meaning by a fellow “lonely” (33). “There is always hope for a ‘lonely,’” Auden

continued, “always a chance that the lonely may find someone” (33). So, then, Auden disappeared from the crowds of England and the again impending threat of war only to find himself in “the land of the lonely,” where “there is always hope.” Loneliness, of course, naturally pairs with yearning, and for Auden it also pairs with that desire to confront the difficult, that “only thing worth while.”

The Yeats elegy exemplifies this yearning by directly confronting the complex (how to commemorate the death of a politically complicated poet) and subtly intertwining a meditation on the purpose, place, and power of poetry. It performs the latter in particular by implementing oral imagery throughout, which interestingly parallels similar language in a 1939 letter from Auden in New York to his father back in England.³⁰ In the fascinating correspondence, Auden recognizes that his father “would like to see me [become] the mouthpiece of an epoch,” and admits that he would, too, but finds it necessary to “explain to you, what being a writer looks like from the inside” (*Bodleian Library Record* 326). “The mouthpiece of an age,” the poet claims, “is someone who reflects the true changes in that age,” and “what an age is like is never what it thinks it is, which is why the best art of any period, the art which the future realizes to be the product of its time, is usually rather disliked when it appears” (327). He explains this idea with a seemingly silly metaphor about imaginary poets and their abilities to ascertain authentic English hair color. The true mouthpiece, he argues, is the one who “became so by

³⁰ This letter, located in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, is undated but, according to the *Bodleian Library Record*, is believed to have been written sometime between January 31, when “the ‘little poem referred to in the second sentence ... appeared in the *New Statesman*,” and the end of March, when Auden and Isherwood moved from the Hotel George Washington, the location noted on the letter’s first page (325).

profiting from his mistake,” by recognizing his past misstep and reconfiguring the way he looks at his people (328).

Auden contemplates such poetic ambition and its consequences in “Yeats as an Example,” a brief 1948 essay in which he describes the difference between major and minor poets. It “has nothing to do with the difference between better and worse poetry,” he argues, contending that “a major poet ... continues to develop, ... the moment he has learnt how to write one kind of poem, he goes on to attempt something else, new subjects, new ways of treatment or both, an attempt in which he may quite possibly fail” (192). Auden categorizes Yeats certainly as a major poet, citing as evidence Yeats’s elegy for his patron’s son, who died at war in 1918. He finds “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” to be “something new and important in the history of English poetry,” because it “never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting ... and at the same time the occasion and the characters acquire a symbolic public significance” (193). Auden appreciates the elevation of the personal to public importance. His own elegy for Yeats aims to find personal (and poetic) meaning in the death of a very public (and poetic) person. Thinking about Yeats’s elegy in *The Kenyon Review*, he concludes by asking,

Does a man feel prouder of what he achieves himself or of the effect he has on the achievements of posterity? Which epitaph upon a poet’s grave would please him more: “I wrote some of the most beautiful poetry of my time” or “I rescued English lyric from the dead hand of Campion and Tom Moore”? I suspect that more poets would prefer the second than their

readers would ever guess, particularly when, like Yeats, they are comfortably aware that the first is also true. (195)

Auden's perspective on talent and influence particularly shapes his elegies. By writing those poems, he is able to choose what the epitaphs for such figures might be, and, as did Whitman, he considers his own potential literary legacy.

Auden wrestles with questions brought out upon the death of the Irish literary giant in his elegy and in "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats," an essay published in the Spring 1939 issue of *Partisan Review*, in which he argues both for and against the greatness of the legacy left behind by Yeats. The essay more clearly grapples with the man and his work, but, in it, Auden offers no concluding verdict. In the argument for the defense, however, he alludes to the most contentious part of the elegy he wrote on Yeats, declaring that "Art is a product of history, not a cause," that "it is a fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged" (7). Again, he does not reveal whether he sides more with the prosecution or the defense in this essay, but this particular declaration seems to re-emphasize the tenet that "poetry makes nothing happen" (36) put forth in the poem he had written upon hearing of Yeats's death.

In his essay "The Elegiac Act: Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats,'" Edward W. Rosenheim, Jr., points out that Auden responds not only to the death of Yeats but also to the fall of Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, which happened just two days prior (424). The coinciding of these two events helps set up what Rosenheim calls "the elegiac act," a moment in which the "death and the profound questions it introduces become the

occasion for considering the poetic gift – and ... celebrates the immortality of poetry itself” (423). Auden takes the occasion of Yeats’s death and in February 1939 writes “about much more than Yeats himself or even the broader question raised by his death” (423-24). He transforms meditation on Yeats into rumination on the power (or lack thereof) and place of poetry in a tomorrow of “importance and noise.”

He begins doing so in the poem’s first section, which reflects on the timing and environment of Yeats’s passing, and goes on to introduce oral imagery that complements his later claim that poetry is a kind of “mouth” (41). Storyteller language sets the scene as “a dark cold day” (6), and the landscape signals this in the snow on the statues and the wolves in the evergreen forests. The poem notes that Yeats “disappeared in the dead of winter” (1) and continues to describe the season by writing that “the mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day” (4). Auden’s word choice here is particularly important. He will later follow his “poetry makes nothing happen” statement by claiming that it is “a way of happening, a mouth” (41). Within the body of the elegy, temperature sinks “in the mouth of the dying day” (4) and Yeats’s death is “kept from his poems” (11) by “mourning tongues” (10). The tongues belong to and serve as acting agents for, of course, the mouth, to and for poetry. The mouth is but “mourning.” Auden refers to the “peasant river” (an entity with a mouth) that lies “far from his illness” (7) as being “untempted by the fashionable quays” (9). Since it has a mouth, the river can be equated with the act of writing, and, as such, Auden here contends that art is best enacted without regard for the

“fashionable.” Here, the mouths are all doing *something*: consuming warmth, mourning, resisting temptation. If poetry is a mouth, it is not an inactive one.³¹

The first section of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” also delivers clear and direct declarations to and about poets and poetry and, by doing so, implies that the “makes nothing happen” comment may serve to shock, but is not to be taken as gospel. Yeats may be dead, but his words (and those of other poets, by extension) retain life and “are modified in the guts of the living” (23). The immortality achieved upon physical death bears a price about which Auden may have been nervous – the concession that with death, one loses the ability to control one’s own canon (his lifelong additions and deletions to his “collected” or “selected” works magnifies this concern). The poem contends that modification of a poet’s words occurs postmortem in the “guts” of those that remain, a much different bodily locale than the usual head or heart. The more active concept of instinct supersedes intelligence and love. The phrase suggests a panicked acknowledgement of a future that does not include him. Unlike Whitman’s “Song of Myself” singer, who hopefully implored his readers to “look for me under your boot-soles” after he had died, the fact that “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living” (22-23) both empowers and unnerves the voice of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” Auden contrasts this statement by pronouncing that “in the importance and noise of to-morrow ... A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual” (24-29). The date of Yeats’s death will become only

³¹ Additionally, the earliest versions of the elegy note declaratively in the first stanza “O all the instruments we have agree” about “the day of his death.” Auden later alters the line to read, “What instruments we have agree.” Initially, even the line seems to take the shape of a mouth with the dramatic “O” at its commencement. The revision de-emphasizes that performance, stressing instead not all instruments everywhere but just those he and the readers possess.

“slightly unusual,” and only to a small portion of the population. He implicitly acknowledges that the same might become true for him.

Between those lines, the poem alludes to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as “each in his cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom” (27) parallels “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (lines 413-414). The “cell” Auden confronts could be a variety of enclosures: bodily time, one’s own mind, even that smallest biological unit of life within a human. In each of these, one yearns for freedom. In Eliot’s line, however, the thought of freedom brings about the reality of one’s imprisonment. The key is the thing that makes a person recognize that he is limited. The two poems also feature contrasting conclusions; Eliot’s work finishes lines later with the white noise peace-seeking ending of “shantih” (433), while Auden offers a more hopeful finish with his instruction to “Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise” (63-65). This disparity suggests even further that poetry is not incapable of eliciting action: Eliot ends by chanting a simple, perhaps calming, mantra, Auden by requesting healing and teaching.

The Eliotic allusion is significant not only for its content but also its context. Eliot, too, immigrated to a new country at a young stage of his writing life, setting a path from America to England that Auden would reverse in 1939. And Eliot, too, would adopt his new nation as his own by gaining citizenship not long after moving. As such, Auden’s references to *The Waste Land* are not just meditations on potential barrenness but also nods to a poet who also disappeared from his native soil, a man who wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their

immortality most vigorously” (4). Indeed, these lines echoing Eliot occur in an elegy, a poem specifically designed to wrestle with those “dead poets” and “ancestors.”

The poem’s second section, which initially appeared in 1940’s *Another Time*, the first book published post-emigration, contains the famous “poetry makes nothing happen” declaration:

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all;
 The parish of rich women, physical decay,
 Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
 Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its saying where executives
 Would never want to tamper; it flows south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth. (32-41)³²

Four of those words in particular have come to make Auden’s most resonant statement in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats.” While meditating on the passing of the Irish poet, Auden injects into the second of three sections the outwardly damning declaration that “poetry makes nothing happen” (line 36).³³ It is not exactly what one might come to expect out of a poem commemorating the departure of a revered and respected colleague. At first, Auden appears to be celebrating someone while simultaneously declaring that man’s

³² This section was not present in *The New Republic* on March 8, 1939.

³³ Line numbers for this poem refer to the version published in Auden’s *Collected Poems* unless otherwise indicated.

chief life instrument idle, and, interestingly, he does so with the same tool. He continues by saying that poetry “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (40-41), and he suggests in concession that although his mode of art, and perhaps all art, “makes nothing happen,” it is an important means or manner of action, a way of making, as he writes in “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” “personal excitement socially available” (6).

Aidan Wasley points to the line as one that offers either “hopeful provocation” or “a despairing resignation to futility” (xvi). R. Clifton Spargo contends that those famous words demonstrate “a deflation of poetry’s value,” deeming Auden’s Yeats poem as anti-elegy, a kind that “refuses the traditional elegy’s reverence for the past tense of being, for a time before loss in which the world was still replete with meaning” (428). Anti-elegy, Spargo asserts, enacts this refusal “simply because it would call us, sometimes severely, even callously, back into the present tense of being, reminding us that there is nowhere else for us to exist or for the dead to be given value” (428). Surely, Auden’s poem turns from the past to the present moment of commemoration and the future of remembering and writing, but to translate “poetry makes nothing happen” into a “deflation of poetry’s value” is to eschew its subtlety and ignore the important words that follow it.

Significantly, the line does not read, “poetry does not make anything happen,” or “poetry cannot make anything happen;” rather, it asserts positively that poetry has the power to make nothing happen. Poets pull words out of the ether and turn them into poems. They make *nothing* happen on the page. The nothing in the air, the nothing spoken, becomes something in print. Asserting that “poetry makes nothing happen” marks no “deflation of poetry’s value” because the transformation of nothing into words that happen is a basic

statement of the fundamental function of poetry. It turns the intangible, the physically non-existent – nothing – into verses teeming with meaning. The nothing is happening. Additionally, the two words following that declaration are not negative, pessimistic, or devaluing; rather, they emphasize that very thing that the deceased subject can no longer do. Poetry “makes nothing happen,” and, more importantly, “it survives.” Poetry can do what poets cannot.

The first time this section appears in the elegy, it claims that poetry endures in “the valley of its saying” (37), but Auden revises “saying” to become “making” (37) in later editions.³⁴ “Saying” stresses the oral imagery of the poem, which again emphasizes the idea of the poet as a mouthpiece, but the replacement of “making” for “saying” further reiterates the action of the previous line. Poetry might make *nothing* happen, but it is still something that is made, something crafted. That valley, the poem continues, is a place “where executives would never want to tamper” (37-38). “Executives” could mean non-literary businessmen or women, but the word also might simply refer to people that execute, which is to say: people that do. Where poetry is made, then, is a place where doers not only have not but also would not want to become involved. Poets make where doers refuse to act.

To turn from the Yeats elegy without evaluating his elaboration on this one powerful statement is a disservice to the more developed ideas the poem contains. What does it mean, then, to make poetry “a way of happening, a mouth?” Rosenheim argues that the poem’s final section answers this question by showing that poetry “still emerges

³⁴ This disparity is apparent by comparing the versions of the poem used in *Selected Poems* with the one included in *Collected Poems*. The *Selected* edition, edited by Auden’s literary executor, Edward Mendelson, includes many earlier versions of his poems as well as verse that he discarded and deemed dishonest.

as the only source of hope for the ‘nightmare’ world in which these verses are written ... poetry and poets alone survive to face the task of redemption” (424). Auden has “done little to assess Yeats as a man or poet, or the magnitude of his loss to us;” rather, he uses his elegy to explore the broader body of poetry, to contemplate and criticize its ability to change or incite anything (425). Finally, the poem appeals to the poet “with your unconstraining voice / Still persuade us to rejoice” (56-57) and, reinforcing those images of river and human mouths, it suggests that the poet must “let the healing fountain start” (63). The poetic voice can not only bring about rejoicing, but it can provoke healing, and the elegy directly suggests to its readers (many of whom would have been contemporary colleagues) that it must do so and then encourage more action, that is to “teach the free man how to praise” (65). Auden emphasized the importance of what must be taught while at the University of Michigan when, according to Charles H. Miller, a female student

abruptly asked Wystan, “What made Yeats so important to you, as he appears in the ‘Yeats’ poem?” And Wystan, plainly taken by surprise, lifted his trusty cigarette in defense, sank back into the wing chair, and mumbled, “I, uh, believe that it’s true, that is, one must—really!—learn to praise, uh, when one feels compelled to do so!” He was embarrassed at being forced to provide an instant but honest evaluation of his poem. (47)

In this way, the “poet” referred to at the end of the elegy could be read as Yeats himself, that the ghost of Yeats, or what lingers in the poems, must then teach those remaining “to praise,” which is precisely what elegies set out to do.

While Yeats, of course, could be that “poet” in the poem’s third section, two other possibilities are just as and perhaps even more fitting. First, that command to “follow poet, follow right” might be difficult to direct to Yeats as at the beginning of the section he was allowed to “lie / emptied of ... poetry” (44-45); that is, he is but a buried vessel. The speaker commands for the nameless poet to “follow” (54), “persuade” (57), “make” (59), “sing” (60), “let” (63), and “teach” (65). Everything requested, however, is not overt action. The poet must “follow” but not lead, “persuade” but not rejoice himself. He must “make a vineyard” (59), but even making a vineyard is but an allusion to further effort; someone or something else must transform those metaphoric grapes into wine. The poet must “sing of human unsuccess / In a rapture of distress” (60-61) actively *sing* but in a *rapture*, that is, in a way that the poet cannot control. Indeed, there is a “healing fountain,” but the poet is not the one that heals; rather he is the one who must “let [it] ... start” (63). And, finally, “in the prison of his days” (again, suggestive of the prison in *The Waste Land*), that poet must “teach the free man how to praise” (64-65). He must teach others to do but not necessarily do himself. The poet, too, is a “way of happening.”

These closing lines contribute to Auden’s compromise that though poetry seems to make nothing happen, it nonetheless is a powerful “way of happening.” It seems rather maddening hairsplitting. Rosenheim points out that Auden “has offered little direct consolation,” but that he “has gone on to an almost liturgical, quite impersonal appeal on behalf of ‘us’ and ‘free men’” (425). “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is “ultimately a kind of ritual exercise, an overt fusion of tradition and innovation, an act which impresses us above all with its virtuosity rather than with its passion or sincerity or

even wisdom” (425). In short, it goes for the “guts,” that part of readers that Auden claims will modify the words of dead men like Yeats and, eventually, himself.

Auden as a reader and writer also works to transform the words of other dead men in the late 1930s and early '40s. In “September 1, 1939,” he claims that “All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie” (78-79) and, with that, he hopes that he might “show an affirming flame” (99). That voice attempts to unfold the contributions of Yeats, Freud, James, and others in his memorial poems, and, in doing so, also manages to instruct readers as to how they should approach the legacies of the dead. The next “In Memory” poem Auden would write and publish was done in honor of Ernest Toller, a German playwright who hung himself in a New York Hotel on May 22, 1939 (Carpenter 266). Auden had met Toller and his wife in Cintra, Portugal, in the April 1936, and later translated some of his work, including songs from the comedy *No More Peace!* (Dove 224-225).

As does the Yeats elegy, the Toller poem begins with a nod to the time of year in which the death occurred, though “In Memory of Ernst Toller” calls to the “shining neutral summer” rather than the “dead of winter” (line 1). That season “has no voice,” it can affirm nothing, the poem continues, eerily foreshadowing that line from “September 1, 1939,” which would not be written for another three months. There is no “voice,” then, “to judge America, or ask how a man dies” (2). America might stand to be judged, as it could have provided some sort of safe haven for the Jewish immigrant, who left Nazi Germany for London and moved to the United States in 1936.

In spite of the asylum, Toller battled depression and misunderstanding in the U. S. He lived in fear for his brother Heinrich and sister Hertha, who were both still living in

Europe (Dove 255-256). After traveling to Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, and London in order to speak out against Hitler, he returned to America in November 1938 aboard the *Queen Mary*, lamenting his reception in New York, which was upstaged by “a dwarf, a giant, and a photogenic girl” (qtd. in Dove 256). Frustrated that he “had prepared an extensive press release” only to have “no one take ... the slightest notice of me,” Toller tried to remedy misconceptions about his plight once back in New York. Having experienced anxiety about his sister’s attempted refuge in Palestine and a “lack of recent success [that] reinforced his long-held doubts about his own creative ability,” Toller committed suicide even before Germany invaded Poland (260-263). In his pocket was a ticket for passage to London aboard the *Champlain*, the very ship Auden had taken from Southampton four months earlier (262).

In Auden’s poem, Toller’s suicidal act comes as a result of “powers we pretend to understand” as those are the ones responsible for “direct[ing] ... at the end ... even our hand” (lines 19-21). As do the Yeats, Freud, and James elegies, the Toller poem fixates on the forces over which we have no control. Even Toller’s last act, to take his own life, is rendered passive, as the hands that caused it were moved by outside powers. As such, the poem is full of questions to the deceased, asking him what it was “that your shadow unwittingly said” (7), what piece of the unknown outside of his mind had “been flying in to tell / About the big and friendly death outside” (12-13). In a way, the poem asks Toller how it was that these outside powers were able ultimately to “direct ... [his] hand,” even though it simultaneously recognizes that it is foolish in trying to comprehend (20-21).

Like Auden, Toller left his home country and sought a new life in the United States. As Auden would do, Toller lived in New York and befriended a sizeable group of

immigrant intellectuals and artists, including members of the Mann family. Auden's interest in Toller's emigration, career, and fate, therefore, is understandable. He, too, was trying to launch a new life in a new land. The four questions of "In Memory of Ernst Toller" express this curiosity, all asking in different ways how Toller's life would end as it did. He personalizes the effort by calling to the playwright by his first name in the third stanza, when he wonders about his shadow (7). Each inquiry muses over the effects of outside forces on Toller and his life. After the last question, the poem turns, telling "Dear Ernst" to "lie shadowless at last," to rest, finally, at peace (16).

The poem concludes by asserting more to readers and not to the resting Toller that "we are lived by powers we pretend to understand," powers that "arrange our loves" and "direct at the end / The enemy bullet, the sickness or even our hand," conceding an inability to exert control over fate, even one that seems self-directed (19-21). For the "tomorrow [that] hangs over the earth of the living / And all that we wish for our friends" does not belong to us but to them (22-23). This can be a particularly troubling recognition when one is working for a future and attempting to sever roots to the past. The final lines of the poem speak to and complicate the task of elegizing the dead, claiming, "but existence is believing / We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving" (23-24). Generally, elegies aim to memorialize and mourn a particular person, but these tricky lines subvert that task. Are they suggesting that the beliefs are ill-placed? That to think "we know for whom we mourn" is to be wrong? Or are they genuinely implying that to live is to trust in our capacity to know? The "but" that precedes the sentiments signals a turn from the verses immediately before these last lines, verses that acknowledge that "to-morrow" is out of our hands. If that is the case, the closing words

suggest that to believe in knowing the mourned and those who grieve is possible only because a perspective on the past is all one can truly have since the future belongs to “powers we pretend to understand.”

Auden elaborates on that past again in “Voltaire at Ferney” and “Herman Melville,” two poems about renowned writers that imagine particular points in their lives and reflect on their contributions. The Voltaire piece focuses on the writer’s perseverance and beliefs, especially as it remembers how he “would write / ‘Nothing is better than life,’” a line that can interestingly relate to the “nothing” in the Yeats elegy. If “poetry makes nothing happen” by turning nothingness – thoughts, feelings, ideas that exist intangibly in one’s head – into something happening on the page, Voltaire’s “nothing” here might ring similarly. “Nothing” would be “better than life” because it is immune from those “powers we pretend to understand.” The poem questions the assertion, wondering, “But was it?,” and then answering, “Yes, the fight / Against the fair and the unfair / Was always worth it” (10-12). Even though “the horrible nurses [were still] / Itching to boil their children,” Voltaire would soldier on, for “Only his verses / Perhaps could stop them” (27-29). The “perhaps” here is key, as it demonstrates a hoped-for effect rather than the effect itself. Standing in contrast to that is the “lucid song” of the “uncomplaining stars” (30) above, stars that perhaps “hang over the earth of the living,” as does “to-morrow” in the Toller elegy. Both the Toller and Voltaire poems contain a concession to the powers above; they are not named as divine or holy or even spiritual, but they exist nonetheless in the heavens. The poems exhibit recognition of the limits of language, of the power of literature to be more than a “way of happening,” as

the Yeats elegy suggests. Still, they push at those frontiers, at the boundary between life and death, between hoping for and actualizing.

Auden continues to push at these limits in “Herman Melville,” a poem he wrote in March 1939 for Lincoln Kirstein, a friend who founded the New York City Ballet. (Carpenter 253). It imagines the end of the great American novelist’s life, when he “sailed into an extraordinary mildness,” and sees him as appreciating that “Goodness existed,” a fact that “was the new knowledge / His terror had to blow itself quite out / To let him see it” (6-8). As did the Toller and Voltaire poems, “Herman Melville” also turns to the heavens for some kind of wisdom:

... all the stars above him sang as in his childhood
 “All, all is vanity,” but it was not the same;
 For now the words descended like the calm of mountains—
 —Nathaniel had been shy because his love was selfish—
 Reborn, he cried in exultation and surrender
 “The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces.” (35-40)

Auden’s Melville senses the difference between the stars’ song he heard as a child and the one he listens to as he nears the end of his life. Knowledge that may have troubled him in his younger years now “descend[s] like the calm of mountains” and renders him “reborn.” Auden inserts phrases derived from a letter Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne toward the end of the poem. In the November 1851 correspondence, Melville wrote, “I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (240). Auden removes references to feeling and condenses Melville’s language to fit his verse, having the New England

writer exclaim the words “in exultation and surrender.” Auden, newly arrived in the United States, implements conversation between two revered American prose stylists about divinity in man. Instead of finishing with Melville’s “Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling,” the poem ends with a standalone line that points back to the author’s own power: “And sat down at his desk and wrote a story” (41). After replying to the stars, Melville readies himself to commit words to paper. He, too, uses the act of creation through writing to respond to celestial songs, to traverse frontiers that ultimately cannot be crossed.

After crafting elegies in memory of Yeats, Voltaire, and Melville, Auden turns once again to the unnamed dead, only this time that unnamed man is specifically unidentified. “The Unknown Citizen” memorializes an averaged version of twentieth century man; the poem opens by turning to the “Bureau of Statistics” for information about the deceased (1). Auden wrote the poem in March 1939, soon after giving what turned out to be a rousing speech in front of the Foreign Correspondents’ Dinner Forum in New York, a speech that was greeted by cheers and applause of an intensity that Auden found “exciting,” but more importantly “so absolutely degrading,” as to make him feel “covered in dirt afterwards” (qtd. in Mendelson 37). By contrast, the tone of “The Unknown Citizen” is detached and unemotional. The titular citizen’s nationality is even unclear. His employer, “Fudge Motors Inc.” (8), seems American, as it satirizes Ford, and he owns a “frigidaire” (21), an American appliance, but he has a “Health-card” (17) and is “popular with his mates” (13), terminology more suited to England. This average, moderate, modern man “wasn’t a scab or odd in his views” (9) and he “held proper opinions for the time of year” (23). A note underneath its title states parenthetically, “(To

JS/07/M/378 / This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State),” and the verses that follow become an epitaph for this imaginary tomb of the unknown. By averaging this unknown citizen, the poem elegizes the disconcerting abstraction of a human being.

As the poem closes, it questions all of the assertions previously stated by asking “Was he free? Was he happy?,” but then argues that the “question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard” (28-29). What remains unheard, then, and *unknown* about this citizen is the poem’s real elegiac subject. “The Unknown Citizen” laments not only the assembly-line construction and assumption of modern man but also the loss of freedom and happiness that might be its consequence. The death that the poem mourns is not the moment when the man ceased to breathe but his incremental loss of individuality. Indeed, the mourner assures readers that the citizen’s “teachers report that he never interfered with their education,” an assertion with an odd pronoun choice (27). What was important about the student’s education was not his participation in it; rather, it was that his instructors crafted and delivered it to him.

The importance of participation and agency surfaces again with “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” an elegy for the father of psychoanalysis. Freud died in September 1939 after battling forms of oral cancer, and Auden crafted his poem for him in November of the same year, about eight months after “The Unknown Citizen.” He opens the poem by asking for whom writers should spend their time rendering and paying tribute to in verse:

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
 When grief has been made so public, and exposed
 To the critique of a whole epoch

The frailty of our conscience and anguish,

of whom shall we speak? (1-5).

He does not answer his own question immediately, but emphasizes right away the poet's function as a mourner, as he must enact that imperative from the Yeats elegy to "teach the free men how to praise" (65). He then reflects on Freud's presence of mind even at his old age: "still at eighty he wished / to think of our life ... but his wish was denied him: he closed his eyes" (9-13). This elegy spends much more space than "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" recounting the subject's life and achievements, from his being "an important Jew who died in exile" (24) to someone "down among the lost people like Dante" to one who "would have us remember most of all / to be enthusiastic over the night" (97-98). Again, Auden chooses an intellectual in exile to commemorate. The poem runs 112 lines long and is more consistently structured than the Yeats elegy, and, though its subject certainly provoked much controversy, the poem does not include the same kind of discontent as the Yeats poem.

Nonetheless, Auden works to condense Freud's impact into poetry by speaking clearly and directly to his readers:

all he did was to remember

like the old and be honest like children.

He wasn't clever at all: he merely told

the unhappy Present to recite the Past

like a poetry lesson till sooner

or later it faltered at a line where

long ago the accusations had begun. (31-37)

Freud “wasn’t clever;” he “merely told,” but the content of that telling very much accentuates a fixation on reconciling the present and past in order to operate effectively in and enjoy the future. Richard Ellman suggests that Auden “takes [his] subject to task even while expressing admiration for his example” in the Yeats elegy, which is also the case with the Freud poem (106). Auden appears to reduce a lifetime of work into seven words by writing that “all that he did was to remember” (31). This reduction, however, does not insult or minimize Freud’s impact; rather it intimates that Freud’s genius was in its simplicity. The line could mean that his only function was to remember, or that *everything he did* lead to remembering. That latter interpretation affirms the importance of the task of memory, an endeavor that the poet, too, significantly and reverently undertakes. Interestingly, when Auden does seem to downplay Freud’s magnitude, his actions are akin to “a poetry lesson.”

Like “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” the Freud elegy also emphasizes the power of great artistic minds not actually to change but to inspire change. Freud does not alter or fix his patients; rather he analyzes and aims to have his subjects also identify and repair (when possible) what ails them. John Hildebidle has noted that Auden implies that Freud “offers... a kind of tempering,” and quotes the poem, which says of Freud that “like weather he can only hinder or help” (95). That status as a catalyst is solidified earlier when Auden identifies Freud as being “to us ... no more than a person / now but a whole

climate of opinion” (67-68). Freud is bigger than the skin that contains him, greater than the transience bodily life afforded him.

With both the Yeats and Freud elegies, Auden honors the minds of both men while nonetheless questioning the reality of their work’s impact. In “At the Grave of Henry James,” from the spring of 1941, he continues to do the same; however, he also looks to the author as a parishioner might a priest. James is a hallowed figure whom Auden invokes as if he is capable of answering prayer. The setting and timing of the poem differentiates it from the other two elegies; because Auden is standing at the graveside and many years have passed since the subject of the poem died (after suffering a stroke in 1916), he conveys an intimacy with James perhaps created by his physical proximity to the body, and his ideas concerning the artist have had more time to steep and develop. Standing “Beside the bed where you rest” seems to provide Auden with a firmer grasp on the artist he is elegizing than his other memorial poems (93).³⁵ Physical closeness allows him also to incorporate the landscape of the author’s eternal surroundings, which he uses to further represent the coldness with which people forget.

In addition to the physical proximity of Auden to James’s grave, another closeness exists: Like James, Auden left his homeland and lived out his life in a foreign land he adopted as his new country. Although James traveled the opposite way, from America to England, his ability to traverse the divide and deftly explore the themes of his new land interestingly parallels Auden’s own literary trajectory. Indeed, the epitaph on

³⁵ Auden drastically cut “At the Grave of Henry James” for his *Collected Poems*; it numbers sixty lines in that edition. Earlier versions of it were much more substantial. This discussion quotes from the lengthier *Selected Poems* publication, which contains one hundred forty-four lines. For more analysis on the impact of those changes, see Chapter 5, “Revision and the Art of Losing.”

James's gravestone calls attention to these biographical facts, reading "NOVELIST • CITIZEN / OF TWO COUNTRIES / INTERPRETER OF HIS / GENERATION ON BOTH / SIDES OF THE SEA" ("Henry James epitaph"). In addition to emphasizing both significant countries of citizenship for James, the epitaph, by calling to the import of James's status as an "interpreter," also interestingly parallels Auden's own epistolary contemplation of his place as a mouthpiece of his generation. The fact that James's body was returned to his country of origin to be buried alongside his family may have led Auden to contemplate the idea of such a physical return to England. (Instead, he was buried where he died, in Kirchstetten, Austria.)

Despite such uniqueness, Auden first looks to James, however, as he had Yeats and Freud. The sadness at the loss of an eminent intellectual figure is replaced by the reality that "the only witness / To a great and talkative man" is a "small taciturn stone" (18-19). Where distinction once emanated, only a grave marker stands at attention. Auden compares that stone to his own "ignorant shadow" (19); it does little more than decorate the landscape. Snow covers the cemetery in which James is buried, and it is "less intransigent than [the tombs'] marble" (1). Auden's recounting of the snow on the graves is reminiscent of the opening of *The Waste Land*, in which corpses recall the winter as having "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow" (5-6). The snow of "At the Grave of Henry James" also feels "forgetful." This is a place "Where one more series of errors lost its uniqueness / And novelty came to an end," but the poet is not only speaking of James; he makes this remark while looking at all of the headstones in the cemetery (11-12). In death and then in burial, James, upon visitation, becomes an equal to others. The once extraordinary is just another grave in a sea of many.

Unlike as in other elegies, however, the poet uses this visit as occasion almost to sanctify the deceased. Auden invokes James with titles as one might refer to the sacred, albeit with a bit of sarcasm in a stanza that he eventually cuts from the poem: “O stern proconsul of tractable provinces” and “O poet of the difficult” (28-29). As the poem progresses, Auden uses the occasion of his graveside visit to comment on the central subject of the late 1930s and early ’40s: war. He refers to James as one of “the good ghosts needed” (73) and he goes on to claim that:

... War has no ambiguities
 Like a marriage; the result
 Required of its *affaire fatale* is simple and sad,
 The physical removal of all human objects
 That conceal the Difficult. (74-78)

This complicates James’s being the “poet of the difficult.” Is he then a writer with the power to affect such concealment? How does that change Auden’s insistence that poetry and art only serve to catalyze and not actually make change? Is there really a difference?

“At the Grave of Henry James” offers no definitive answer. Instead, Auden takes on the spirit of James as one might revere and request of a divine entity. He commands James to “Assent to my soil and flower” (30). As he did for Yeats (“teach the free man how to praise”), Auden seems to ask the dead to perform for him, but he continues in much further detail. Later, he implores James to “Preserve me, Master, from its vague incitement; / Yours be the disciplinary image that holds / Me back from agreeable wrong” (109-111). As one would look to a holy figure, Auden turns to James and asks him to pray for him. He pleads with James to

Pray for me and for all writers living or dead;
 Because there are many whose works
 Are in better taste than their lives; because there is no end
 To the vanity of our calling: make intercession
 For the treason of all clerks. (134-138)

Auden admits and chastises the vanity of his profession, and he suggests that the deceased can somehow help living writers to come to terms with their own self-importance (a task Whitman had placed on his future readers). His appeal to James in particular – an American turned British – is magnified by the pairing of “clerks” and “works,” which rhyme in American but not British pronunciation, slyly affirming once again Auden’s relocation to the U.S. His request is also compelling because he earlier praises James’s heart that remained “true to the rare noblesse / Of your lucid gift and, for its own sake, ignored the / Resentful muttering Mass” (100-102). He asks for James to pray for him and other writers with regard to vanity while lauding the author for ignoring the “Resentful muttering Mass.” The capitalization of the M emphasizes the word’s meaning as both a particularized mass of the populace, a proper noun of sorts, and Catholic ritual and service, which is fitting given the religious imagery throughout the poem. James is able to ignore both the bitter crowd and staunch religious tradition by adhering to the “formal rules” while simultaneously mining his “true” heart.

Such is the inherent struggle between exaltation and realism in Auden’s elegies. With “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” Auden recognizes the cold reality that even a great artist’s death can signify little, that only his writing has actual staying power. With that awareness, however, comes an even chillier notion: that maybe art itself is dead, that art

makes nothing happen, that it is only a vehicle for action but not action itself. Auden complicates the initial pessimism of such a statement with the subsequent assertion that “it survives,” that art as “a way of happening, a mouth,” flows river-like from writer to reader, from past to present, present to future. Perhaps, the power to survive is one among those that the Toller elegy names as what “we pretend to understand.” While memorializing Freud, Auden contends that even the greatest work from the greatest minds can be condensed into simplicity: “All he did was to remember.” Although he wrote that line about one of the most famous psychoanalytical minds, Auden insinuates that remembering is the poet’s duty, too.

In Auden’s American elegies, remembering transforms into memorializing, which serves to reach across chronological boundaries. By choosing to memorialize in verse, to make a monument to particular men out of words, the poet yearns to compress and then triumph over past, present, and future. He assesses these men who traveled extensively and left their homelands (some permanently, some not), and consoles the survivors as a means to understand and succeed in his own adoption of a new home. The American space in which he finds himself beginning in late January 1939 gives Auden a chance to remake himself, an exercise many immigrants to the United States undertook. That task necessitates the sometimes uncomfortable but also liberating recognition that upon arriving to that new world, a man is already a ghost; his past in many ways remains in the country he left behind. Auden’s elegies provide him with the poetic space to explore and appraise the complications, failures, and accomplishments of so many significant figures before him, and they give him the opportunity to reach imaginatively across the only frontier one is truly unable to cross. For although artists and intellectuals have attempted

for all ages to articulate the experience of death, it always will be inexpressible. Of course, that does not keep a poet from trying. Indeed, the elegiac space of America conditions such contemplation. In each of his elegies, Auden works to make that nothing – that gap in human knowledge – happen.

CHAPTER 4
MULDOON, ELEGY, AND “THIS GREAT VOID”

“I thought again of how art may be made ...
of nothing more than a turn
in the road”

– Paul Muldoon, “Incantata”

Like Walt Whitman and W. H. Auden before him, Paul Muldoon wrote numerous poems that challenge the expressive limits posed by the thought and knowledge of death while contemplating the idea of and residing in America. Born in Northern Ireland’s County Armagh in 1951, and educated at Queen’s University, Belfast, where he was tutored by Seamus Heaney, Muldoon moved to the United States in 1987 with his soon-to-be wife Jean Hanff Korelitz after having worked at the B.B.C. and holding fellowships at Cambridge and East Anglia. He has lived in the country ever since, writing and teaching at Princeton University. Muldoon wrote much of *Meeting the British* before his emigration in Dingle, County Kerry, where he resided with Korelitz from January to September 1986, and the book was published just after their relocation to America (Kendall 120). That volume contemplates a westerly transatlantic move by imagining life in America and reflecting on the lives and deaths of several figures important to him, including his father, a colleague, and several artists and intellectuals.

Predominantly elegiac poems such as “The Coney,” “The Fox,” “The Soap-pig,” “7, Middagh Street,” and the title piece all from 1987’s *Meeting the British*, as well as “Milkweed and Monarch,” “Incantata,” and “Yarrow” from 1994’s *The Annals of Chile*, serve to memorialize by examining not only the particular figures that have died but also the idea of departure from Europe and arrival in America and the confrontation with nothingness that the latter strangely seems to incite. Whitman looked to creating something out of absence as the most powerful thing “the greatest poet” can do, and Auden famously contemplated the “nothing” that he saw poetry as capable of making happen. So, too, does Muldoon consider the blankness, the void, the nothingness that America might provide to writers. In his hauntingly beautiful elegy for Mary Farl Powers, the American-born but Irish-raised artist with whom he had a romantic relationship, Muldoon writes, “I thought again of how art may be made” and, after a line break, adds “of nothing more than a turn / in the road” (335). Here, too, a poet confronts the idea of “nothing” in America by looking to the dead and writing them back into existence.

America pushes poets to test expressive frontiers particularly with regard to the dead. Because no one can ever write about having experienced death first-hand, it remains an unreachable but nonetheless tempting poetic subject. The perpetual American focus on the promise of the future necessitates a surrendering of the present and past, and this quiet, perhaps unrealized sacrifice eventually requires a kind of mourning. For poets such as Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon, this strange self-mourning often is considered through elegies for others. Indeed, the idea and actuality of life in America catalyzes a flood of elegiac poetry from Muldoon, and the resulting verses wrestle with both the void

created by the dead and the blankness or emptiness that writing in the United States as an immigrant necessitates. Auden spoke of roots and why he needed to “live deliberately” without them, and Muldoon contemplates that notion while also recognizing Whitman’s reminder that readers should nonetheless look to the soil, to the material “beneath your boot-soles” to make real those that are now physically dead (88). A poet must break free from and then seek a new origin, but he must be wise enough to recognize that his ultimate power comes in the ability to enliven those who are dead and gone. And this Muldoon does by elegizing his parents, his friend and co-worker, a former lover, and the “cultural ghosts” that inhabited a house in Brooklyn (Brown 164). As it did for Whitman and Auden, America serves as fertile elegiac ground for Muldoon; it asserts an idea of nothingness with which the poet must contend through elegy – a making of something from nothing.

He begins that contemplation with *Meeting the British*. The title poem of his 1987 collection begins opens by echoing Auden on Yeats: “We met the British in the dead of winter” (line 1).³⁶ The plainness of the line is deceptive. Indeed, the problem begins even with the first pronoun. The “we” whose voice Muldoon appropriates belongs to Native Americans, with whom the poet often aligns the Irish, and that “we” is recalling the first encounter with the strangers in their land, one which featured the gift of “six fishhooks / and two blankets embroidered with smallpox” (17-18). Subtle and layered, “Meeting the British” foreshadows the decimation of the native population with its final two words, making it an anticipatory elegy, but, with that ending, the poem also becomes circular, recalling “the dead” of its first line. And that in turn echoes Auden. Clair Wills

³⁶ All quotations from Muldoon’s poetry come from *Poems 1968-1998* unless indicated otherwise.

points out that the living Muldoon “modifie[s]” with this poem “the words of a dead man,” and his work “continues the theme of making poetry out of old bones – out of the remains of the past” (*Reading* 117). By appropriating part of Auden’s line and digging up those “old bones,” “Meeting the British” slyly foresees the impending disappearance of his “we.” It transforms a verse from one of the most well-known elegies in English into an ominous recognition of what will result from the “embroidered” gifts of the British (18). Like Auden’s poem, which famously asserts what poetry makes happen (“nothing”), “Meeting the British” also emphasizes the absent, at least on a visual level. The supplemental gift of disease was invisible to both parties, and that invisibility – a nothingness of sorts – proved horribly destructive to its recipients. Even this short poem about a meeting between American and European cultures wrestles with what results from the failure to comprehend nothingness; the natives were unable to prepare for what was not visibly present, and they were devastated as a result.

It might seem strange to use an Englishman’s words inspired by the death of an Irishman to anticipate the deaths of the Native Americans at the hands of the British, but, at this point in Muldoon’s life, he was contemplating that move from Europe to the United States, as Auden also had done in his thirties. Auden had begun writing “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” just as he arrived in New York in late January 1939. While “Meeting the British” gives voice to Native Americans who confronted the newly present British in their land long ago, the lengthy poem that concludes the book, “7, Middagh Street,” speaks through seven artists living in a Brooklyn boarding house in 1940, one of whom, of course, was Auden.

Set on the holiday that records an initial coming together between Native Americans and Europeans, “7, Middagh Street” elegizes the house and its occupants by contemplating their place both in the house in New York and in the larger artistic world. Like Auden’s elegy for Yeats, “7, Middagh Street” uses the occasion of remembering and re-imagining the artistic dead to confront the power, purpose, and limitations of art and poetry in particular. While the poem certainly is not a traditional elegy, as it does not specifically comment on the fact that, at the time of composition, all but one of these seven figures have died, it nonetheless features a variety of elegiac conventions.³⁷ Most importantly, the poem works to make sense of the lives of W. H. Auden, Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Chester Kallman, Salvador Dalí, Carson McCullers, and Louis MacNeice as they were residing in or visiting the house in 1940. It memorializes not only these seven but also the contemplation of art in America, particularly because it begins and ends with Auden and MacNeice, an Englishman and Irishman who came to create in the United States and arrived, perhaps, at different conclusions about art’s efficacy.

Each of the poem’s sections contemplates the life and artistic output of one of the house’s residents as told through his or her own voice and mediated by Muldoon. As such, the poet makes good on Walt Whitman’s assertion that “the greatest poet ... drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet [and] ... says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you” (15). “7, Middagh Street” works to do just that: by speaking with the voices of those seven creative minds, Muldoon enacts Whitman’s metaphor. His poem attempts to “realize” Auden, Lee, Britten, Kallman,

³⁷ Salvador Dalí still was living when Muldoon wrote the poem, but he was in his mid-eighties. He died in 1989, two years after *Meeting the British* was published.

Dalí, McCullers, and MacNeice by vocalizing their thoughts around the Thanksgiving feast. That occasion for the poem of course emphasizes gratitude, not only felt by the attendees but perhaps also by the writer who memorializes the event. Recognizing the poem's effort to control and bring life to the speakers, Brian Cliff calls "7, Middagh Street" a "wholly ventriloquized poem," and he argues that "the setting serves less as a focus in its own right than as a means of exploring the relationships between art, its communities, and its contexts" (614). Indeed, such is also true of Muldoon's other elegiac works around the time of his immigration to the United States; setting – or the contemplation of it – becomes the way such exploration happens.

Completed before he moved but published after he arrived in the United States in 1987, *Meeting the British* features many elegiac moments, from wistful but complicated thoughts on Muldoon's father to the anticipatory recognition of fate by Native Americans to the objects and artistic output of the dead. Appearing after "Ontario," the collection-opening prose poem, "The Coney" is one of two poems in the book that deals with the passing of Patrick Muldoon, the poet's father, who died in 1985. It begins by immediately contrasting the speaker's own agricultural abilities with those of his father, as had Seamus Heaney, one of Muldoon's poetic father figures, in his poem "Digging." The father in "The Coney," however, is deceased and can no longer perform those rural tasks. Muldoon's speaker recognizes that he has "never learned to mow," but that he nonetheless has "suddenly found himself half-way through / last year's pea-sticks / and cauliflower-stalks" (1-4). He lacks what his father possessed with ease. While the son "more quickly" made the scythe "dull" and the whetstone "disappear," the father worked "safely" in a "balanced" manner that "honed" rather than disturbed (13, 12, 17, 7, 9, 14).

What the son sees is absence, not just because the father is gone but also because of what knowledge or gracefulness in the task he does not possess. The scene becomes surreal when his father speaks, asking about cauliflowers and then jumping into a swimming pool containing “a pack of dogs” that took his “bathing-togs” (34, 33). The coney that had been curled up in Paddy’s cap now tells him to “Come in” while it “parade[s] / and pirouette[s] like honey on a spoon” (35-37). The son responds in thought by contending that “although I have never learned to swim / I would willingly have followed him” (39-40), suggesting that even though he has differentiated himself significantly from his father, he still longs to emulate him in some way. Because his father does, he, too, longs to jump into a kind of fantastical void.

Or, at least, that is what the poem *seems* to suggest. That last “him,” however, is a bit unclear. Does it refer to “Paddy Muldoon” or to the beckoning titular coney? If Paddy is the antecedent, the poem then ends by expressing sentiment, by reasserting the son’s willingness to ape the actions of the father even if he hasn’t the actual ability to do so. If the pronoun refers to the dancing coney, however, the ultimate assurance is that the son wants to do *like* his father did rather than just *what* he did. He wants to follow the coney’s summoning gesture because that is what Paddy Muldoon did. Of course, the likely answer is that the “him” is unclear so that it can be both the father and the rabbit, so that the son can do both. The son emphasizes twice in the poem that he has “never learned” how “to mow” or “to swim,” which subtly suggests that he was never *taught* these particular things either (or at least particularly well); calling attention to the lack of learning could be a simultaneous recognition of the parent’s failure (1, 39). As such, that

last pronoun indeed must be ambiguous. The son mourns the death of his father by lamenting the inability to gain the knowledge his father might have eventually imparted.

Another animal bothers the same son in “The Fox,” a shorter elegy that deals more with the continual presence of the father rather than anticipated feelings of absence or departure. The speaker, awakened by the noise of “the geese / on John Mackle’s goose-farm,” arises to look outside and assess the source of the racket, but he is sidetracked by the thought of his father’s body, which “lay / three fields away” in a cemetery (3-4, 7-8). While he acknowledges that his father has died physically – his “face” has been “pumped full of formaldehyde” – his countenance nonetheless “seem[s] engrossed” in activity, “as if I’d come on you / painstakingly writing your name” on a box of mushrooms (17-19). Even though he feels that his father is present in spite of his having died, the son still sees him as being distracted, as being too busy doing something else to assuage the son’s concerns. His father’s look is “saying, *Go back to bed. / It’s only yon dog-fox,*” but he does not appear to be actually speaking (23-24). His absent expression and not his father’s own mouth seems to be what articulates the attempted soothing. While the dead body can seem to be writing a name, the syntax makes it unclear whether or not the look of the face insinuates the words or the father articulates them. Either way, the son interprets the father as warning him not to bother with the “alarm ... [that] was raised” (1-2). He sees him as sending him back into silence, back into safety, but nonetheless *away*.

The central presence of animals in these *British* elegies continues in “The Soap-pig,” which Muldoon wrote in memory of Michael Heffernan, a colleague from his days working at the BBC. As with “The Fox,” “The Soap-pig” opens with the poet in a state

of sleep, again awakened by a different kind of alarm: this time, the telephone. He tries to remember where he was when he had heard the news that Heffernan, who had been enduring heart problems, had died. He asserts that he “must have been dozing in the tub” when word came, but his “must” indicates a lack of certainty on his part (1). The bath is a particularly fitting location in which to imagine himself, as the reality of his friend’s death makes him immediately think of the unused “pig-shaped / bar of soap” that Heffernan had given him for Christmas, as if to say ““You stink to high heaven”” (11-2, 36). The elegy weaves memories of the dead with the presence of that ludicrous gift. Muldoon recalls when Heffernan came onto his scene, “breez[ing] into Belfast / in a three-quarter-length coney fur” (13-14). His friend arrived with ease, wearing a coat made from the pelts of the very animal that beckoned the son to follow the father in the book’s first elegy.

The doubling of that image imparts a magical quality to Heffernan, who alongside Muldoon, “learned ... to float ... through airwaves” and would acknowledge slyly and playfully his past heart surgeries by treating his scarred chest and ribcage as a “xylophone // on which he liked to play / Chopin or *Chop- / sticks*” (21, 23, 54-57). Muldoon carries the soap-pig to his different flats, and adds it to a collection of “porcelain, glass and heliotrope / pigs from all parts of the globe” (71-72). Whether Heffernan was adding to a hoard the poet already had or Muldoon began collecting with the soap-pig is unclear, but he definitely takes care of the silly gift with a strange fierceness. He recalls when his lover Mary (Farl Powers) once tossed it to the backyard, where he scrambled to rescue it only to be reminded of the carcass of “our sow that dropped / dead from a chill in 1966” (85-8). This odd juxtaposition of images of the poet going to rescue a pig-shaped piece

of soap only to think of a pig that died suddenly two decades prior emphasizes the sudden losses he would have to endure. Even though Heffernan had collapsed before, his death still seems surprising, and, even though the poet recognized Mary's discontent by showing her having a "fit," he still seems to lament her imminent departure, as "this time," she is the one that is leaving, and not empty-handed: with her she is "taking ... the gold / and silver pigs, the ivory" (79, 90-92). Her exit from their relationship is real, and he has tried to salvage what he can from it, even if it is a pig of less impressive and less lasting material.

The poem zips forward and backward in time, occasionally slowing down to pause on significant moments, such as the sow's demise. Heffernan's presence, however, tends to reappear at such times. After Mary leaves, making sure to pack up her share of the pigs, the poem shifts to dwell on the fact that Heffernan, too, had to take care, for something as simple as "the common cold / was an uncommon worry" (93-94). Muldoon focuses on how and why his friend fought; his having "breezed into Belfast" transforms to his escape from the same, for which he exchanged the "dog-eat-dog / back-stab / and leap-frog" of London (97-99). The poet recalls Heffernan's ability to engage with the "slow jibes" of a particular "Irish drunk," but unable to handle the man's "quick jab," which "left him forever at a loss for words," just as that final punch of sickness sidelined him permanently (107-109). He was gifted in handling measured action, as he, too, considered things bit by bit. Muldoon demonstrates this calculation with the very placement of words on the page; Heffernan doesn't just mull over something, he must "delib- / erate" (110-111). The lines of the poem emphasize how he stretches out his thought process by bisecting that synonym for "consider" over two lines. The fact of

Heffernan's death calls for careful deliberation. His friend's favorite word, indeed, was "quidditas" – or, "whatness" – the thing that makes something unique.³⁸ For Muldoon, it's that "bar of soap" that most recalls Heffernan's deliberate nature. That item that he put on a shelf, carried with him from place to place, and saved from the backyard is the very thing that he must learn how to use. And so he does, deciding to "work [it] each morning into a lather," using other leftover items from the dead -- his father's brush and his mother's wash-stand – to help him do so. He ends the poem by reflecting on his need to look to and utilize "each morning" these three articles left behind by people important to him who had died (123). Indeed, in some way, he acts to remember those that have passed by including them somehow in his daily routine.

So far, then, in *Meeting the British*, Muldoon has elegized his father, his friend, and Native Americans, always managing simultaneously to assess impending changes in his own life. With the collection's final piece, the seemingly sprawling, wide-ranging poem called "7, Middagh Street," Muldoon moves from memorializing lives entire to commemorating on the surface a day in a specific Brooklyn boarding house in 1940. From there, though, he turns the poem into an elegy not just for the artists that lived there but also for the conversations and debates over the role and value of art in which the seven figures were engaged. Of course, it makes sense for Muldoon to be considering such a house, such a group of artists from disparate parts of the country and world looking to make a life for themselves in New York. Shortly before the publication of *Meeting the British* (but after the writing had been completed), the poet immigrated to the

³⁸ It is also a word favored by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His aesthetic theory depends on it: "The radiance of which he speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing" (231).

United States to teach at Princeton. Like Auden, Britten, Dalí, and MacNeice, he would find himself new to the United States, new to a vast country with hopes to continue creating and sharing artistic output outside of Europe. And like Lee and McCullers, the poet would be trying to establish a new life far from home. Intrinsicly tied up in that awareness of relocation is the question of the purpose and power of art itself. Like these artists, Muldoon would work to re-establish his artistic power in a novel place.³⁹ And much as it did for Whitman and Auden, poetic elegy became an ideal form for considering both the change in setting and the purpose and potential for art. In order to acknowledge the potential of the landscape, of the move, of possibility at all, the poet finds himself wrestling with such blankness, with that void, that nothingness that life in this land new to him provided.

The poet exemplifies this with “7, Middagh Street,” which resurrects a particular time, place, and people, and gives them words in verse to think, feel, and proclaim around a Thanksgiving dinner table. Muldoon had several famous figures for whom he could choose to write a Thanksgiving monologue, including Klaus, Erika, and Golo Mann, Lincoln Kirstein, Chester Kallman’s dentist father, Britten’s partner Peter Pears, and the man who recruited the residents of the boarding house, George Davis. Instead, Muldoon’s poem gives voice (in this order) to Auden, Lee, Britten, Chester Kallman, Dalí, McCullers, and, finally, MacNeice. Their creative output stretched over a wide spectrum of expression: they artistically wrote, composed, painted, drew, and stripped. The longest sections of the poem belong to Auden and MacNeice, who begin and end the poem with 125 and 127 lines respectively. The Lee and McCullers sections are next

³⁹ Muldoon shared with Whitman and Auden an affinity for Brooklyn. All three used that particular New York landscape to help shape their writing.

lengthwise with 98 and 70 lines apiece, followed by Dalí (56), Britten (28), and Kallman (14), giving the poem a total of 518 lines (a sum evenly divisible by seven, the house number and figure with which Muldoon toys throughout the entirety of “Middagh”). Manuscripts of the poem confirm the poet’s meticulous focus on precision.⁴⁰ The “Middagh” material at Emory University contains dozens and dozens of sheets of written and rewritten lines and sections. Indeed, as Brian Cliff suggests, the manuscripts are “more heavily reworked than almost anything else in Muldoon’s papers” and they show “the process through which this mode of crossing over led him to the published poem” (616). Just as the figures in the poem wrestled with the place and meaning of their art in the world (especially with regard to Auden and MacNeice, with whose imagined words Muldoon bookends the poem), so, too, does Muldoon, adding to that his struggle to establish the place and meaning of this particular poem.

Under the heading of “Wystan,” “Middagh” begins with “Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,” the first line of John Masefield’s “Cargoes,” which Muldoon has claimed “is essentially about one idea: the distinction between the colour, beauty, possibility of the imagination that we associate with far-off lands and the down-to-earth ordinariness of our day-to-day world of dirty British coasters” (qtd. in Wills, 129).⁴¹ Having Auden use Masefield’s words to start immediately grounds the poem in the idea of traveling from the humdrum of the ordinary (the British isles) to the possibilities of the far-off (life in the U.S.). From that line, Muldoon’s Wystan retells his

⁴⁰ Brian Cliff’s “Paul Muldoon’s Community on the Cusp: Auden and MacNeice in the Manuscripts for ‘7, Middagh Street’” is particularly helpful in charting Muldoon’s mathematical acrobatics in the poem.

⁴¹ Citations referring to Wills are from *Reading Paul Muldoon* unless otherwise noted.

story of coming to America, remembering the heavy snow, the vessel on which he arrived in New York Harbor, and his accompanying friend, Christopher Isherwood.

Muldoon culls much of the facts of Auden's entrance from Humphrey Carpenter's *W. H. Auden: A Life*, which quotes Isherwood as remembering that they looked up at the made-in-France Giantess with her liberty torch, which now seemed to threaten, not welcome, the newcomer; and the Red Indian island with its appalling towers . . . You could feel it vibrating with the tension of the nervous New World, aggressively flaunting its rude steel nudity. We're Americans here – and we keep at it, twenty-four hours as day, *being* Americans. . . Don't you come snooting us with your European traditions – we know the mess they've got you into. Do things our way or take the next boat back. . . Are you quitting or staying? It's no skin off *our* nose. We promise nothing. Here, you'll be on your own. (253)

Muldoon transforms Isherwood's own commentary into Auden's versified reaction, which recognizes the pair as feeling "diminutive" near the "heavy-skirted Liberty," who does not kindly wave hello to the men on the ship, but instead "would lunge / with her ice-cream / at two small, anxious // boys" (7-11).⁴² Muldoon's Auden feels small, childlike, apprehensive, and even unsure. He and his friend are greeted at the port, not by Americans but by fellow expatriates. Auden's wife Erika Mann (they married in order to give her access out of Germany) "grimly wave[s] / from the quarantine-launch" (11-12). Expecting more from the Statue and the people on the shore, Wystan conveys a sense of disappointment. While Masefield's poem follows "Quinquereme of Nineveh from

⁴² When quoting from "7, Middagh Street," I use line numbers by section; that is, each section starts again at line 1.

distant Ophir” with the hopefulness of “Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,” the lines that follow the same in Auden’s section instead express what Isherwood had imagined the Americans as saying: “We promise nothing” (Carpenter 253). Muldoon includes nuptial and celebratory imagery, but turns what seems to be positive things – “a wedding cake,” “bride and groom,” and “ice-cream” – into daunting, imposing visuals. His “cake,” after all, is really a ship coated in the snow of a blizzard; his “bride and groom” are standing on the “uppermost tier” and are “diminutive;” and the childlike image of “ice-cream” comes as a result of transforming the Statue of Liberty’s beacon – her majestic torch – into a weapon with which she can charge at unsuspecting ship-borne immigrants.

With that flipped perspective, Wystan then admits his own recognition that he has gone through a kind of sea-change, a phrase that Muldoon uses over and over to refer to Auden in drafts of the MacNeice section, but ultimately excises.⁴³ In “Wystan,” Auden concedes that “there was a time when I thought it mattered / what happened in Madrid // or Seville,” but he couches that admission by claiming that “in a sense, I haven’t changed / my mind” (15-19). He suggests that although he might feel that particular things don’t matter in the same way, his own mind is no different. Instead, his perspective, his ability to assess more critically, has sharpened. Muldoon’s Auden recounts the time before moving to the United States, exaggerating about how long and how dirty he was but not about how the situations affected him. He conflates an image of a beast gnawing on the foot of a dead Japanese spy with that of a puppy “whose abscessed paw / my father had

⁴³ Muldoon drafted many versions of the lines in the MacNeice section of the poem, particularly an opening verse that would have read something akin to: “He seems to have suffered some sea-change” (Box 14, Folder 4).

lanced on our limestone doorstep” (41-42). As so often is the case in Muldoon’s poetry, an animal figure is doubled to represent two separate ideas and settings simultaneously. Here, the transformation of the creature in China to the pup in England echoes the idea of leaving home and the potential for return to that origin.

That second option is one that Auden certainly was forced to consider when so many of his contemporaries in Europe were accusing him of having abandoned his homeland in its time of need. Indeed, MacNeice himself would return to Europe shortly after the Thanksgiving feast. “Middagh” often is read as a debate between Auden and MacNeice as to the efficacy of art and poetry in particular, with Auden’s famous statement that “poetry makes nothing happen” from “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” serving as a departure point for debate. Indeed, the manuscripts for “Middagh” confirm that the two sections were in direct conversation. A typed page in the “Wystan” folder contains verses echoing the early stanzas of the “Louis” portion, which declares that Auden “has suffered some sea-change” (Box 13, Folder 49).⁴⁴ Halfway down the page, Muldoon rewrites MacNeice’s vision of Auden and agape in Auden’s voice, naming the Irishman and acknowledging a divergence between the two. “Louis, I know, complains somewhat cattily,” Wystan says, going on to recognize that his “own pursuit of the Ideal” has led him to “Agape / and Chester,” and that he has “suffered a sea-change,” just as Muldoon’s MacNeice pronounced earlier on that page and in subsequent drafts of the “Louis” section. He also claims to be “perched now on a misericor[d],” which suggests that his “sea-change” comes not only from his emigration and recognition of the limits of

⁴⁴ All subsequent quotations from the manuscripts of the “Wystan” section of “Middagh” come from Box 13, Folder 49.

poetry's power but also from his renewed interest in the Christian faith.⁴⁵ That support he gets from the "misericor[d]" helps him to rest a bit after his quest for the "Ideal." While the manuscripts confirm that each section is a kind of revision of the other, the poem's cyclical form, as Wills and Cliff have argued, complicates the notion that Muldoon ultimately sides with either Auden or MacNeice.⁴⁶

Wystan advances that cycle looking back to Europe, imagining his parents' perspective and recognizing his own place in their world. While his father, whom he had remembered as tending to the "abscessed paw" of the pup after seeing the dead Japanese spy, nobly "tend[s] / the British wounded // in Egypt, Gallipoli / and France," he recalls how he had "learned to play / Isolde to my mother's Tristan" (41, 43-47). As a young man, he stepped in while his father was absent, but, as a thirtysomething adult, he becomes the "son / who turned his back on Albion" (49-50). Interestingly, in several pages of the manuscripts, Muldoon originally used "Avalon" instead of "Albion." By replacing the Arthurian destination with a less pristine word for Auden's homeland – indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary defines "Albion" as an expression for England that

⁴⁵ The draft reads "misericor" and not "misericord," but it is likely that Muldoon meant the latter, which the *OED* defines as "a shelving projection on the underside of a hinged seat in a choir stall which, when turned up, gave support to a person standing in the stall" ("Misericord").

⁴⁶ See the *Wishbone / Meeting the British* chapter in Wills's *Reading Muldoon*, which describes how "each monologue [in 'Middagh'] leads on to the next, and 'Louis' ends with the first words of 'Wystan,' bringing the reader full circle" (132) and Cliff's article on the "Middagh" manuscripts, which contends that "the poem's conclusion ... inconclusively returns to its beginning" (630).

refers to “her alleged treacherous policy towards foreigners” – Muldoon further emphasizes the poet’s righteous feelings about his immigration (“Albion”).⁴⁷

Auden’s self-consciousness about his immigration permeates the *Wystan* section and highlights how the situation was far more complex than a simple exchanging of one address for another. Early drafts confirm such awareness. In the manuscripts, Muldoon’s Auden obsesses over Americana much more expansively. The line referring to his having “learned to play softball with Robert Frost” originates from a deleted group of stanzas that combine the idea of being taught an American pastime by an American poetic great with the image of Paul Bunyan, the tallest figure of American folklore and the subject of Auden and Benjamin Britten’s operatic collaboration, on which the pair worked while living on Middagh Street. Muldoon has Auden emphasize the American pioneering attitude by having him say that “every evening we must align / our axle-trees with the brightest star / in the firmament / before making camp in the forest.” This leads to talk of “that clearing” that ultimately makes it into the published version of the poem as “the diamond-shaped clearing in the forest” where Frost instructed him on softball. Muldoon makes that sports memory parenthetical at first, wedged between lines about emptiness and nothingness:

Only when the night is black as pitch
and not in broad daylight,
can we hope to find our bearings

(I once played softball with Robert Frost

⁴⁷ William Blake explores the mythology of Albion in decidedly negative terms in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *The Four Zoas* (1797), and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1820).

in a diamond-shaped clearing in Vermont)
 and know, truly, where we are –
 alone.

Here, Muldoon has Auden reaffirm his contention that America is “the land of the lonely,” but he does so by aligning himself with those very “lonelies” and recognizing that the best time for inquiry is during the blankness of a black night.⁴⁸ When one physically can see nothing, then one poetically can envision true knowledge of where and what we are (in this case, in a clearing, alone).

Before doing so, however, Wystan explores in pioneer fashion, looking to Paul Bunyan as the ultimate American figure. He describes various characters and how they react to the western expanse. While one “may take that clearing for his delight ... [and] finally unhitch // his span of oxen and be a farmhand,” “another will settle / for getting rich” off of “transcendental hooch,” and a third “traps bears and such ‘varmints.’” In a typed draft, Muldoon circles “another” in the second example, drawing a line to the word “Christopher” written in the margins. With Isherwood as the second man, Auden admires more the first, who can “delight” in what Muldoon scrawls in the margins as his “own patch.” At the top of the page, the poet writes “Paul Bunyan” and points to those lines of “delight.” This way, the first description alludes to the mythical lumberjack, but it also suggests that he is the one that Auden wants to emulate, and not that other man

⁴⁸ As the previous chapter discussed, Auden had told Charles H. Miller, a graduate student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, that it was “*amazing* that no one has written about the true America, the land of the lonely! The land of eccentricities and outcast lonelies. ‘The Lonelies’ could be the title of the grand unwritten American novel” (Miller 32-33).

with his “transcendental hooch” – slighting Isherwood, perhaps, for moving out to California and exploring a more mystical, less grounded lifestyle.

These three seven-line stanzas that find Auden imagining the vast American landscape and the opportunities it provides end with his recognition that not only is he alone, but so, too, is everyone. Muldoon, however, cuts them from the published version. Other sections more clearly alluding to Paul Bunyan also are axed. In drafts of the section, the giant “led [Auden] to a clearing in the forest” where he could choose between the “hooch” and “endless softball with Robert Frost.” On a typewritten leaf of paper with no handwriting, Muldoon’s Auden calls Bunyan “the true Colossus / straddling New York harbour,” preferring that image to the menacing Lady Liberty he and Isherwood saw from their ship. He aligns himself with Bunyan, saying that he “want[s] to live deliber- / ately by my wits, without a ruling class,” as he suggests the lumberjack did. As he did in “The Soap-pig,” Muldoon divides a form of the word “deliberate” by stretching it over a line break; in this excised section, the word mimics the action that Bunyan takes over New York water, further solidifying Auden’s hope to emulate the extraordinary man.

The idea to exist purposefully while eschewing origins comes from a January 1940 letter from Auden to his friend E. R. Dodds, an Oxford tutor, in which the poet writes from America that the country is

a terrifying place and I daresay I’m no tougher than the rest, but to attempt the more difficult seems to me the only thing worth while. At least I know what I am trying to do, which most American writers don’t, which is to live deliberately without roots. I would put it like this. America may

break one completely, but the best of which one is capable is more likely to be drawn out of one here than anywhere else. (qtd. in Carpenter, 289)

Muldoon read this correspondence in Carpenter's biography of Auden. Throughout the drafts for the Auden section, the poet has written page numbers and notes referring to the volume. The back side of one handwritten sheet speaks directly to these ideas; on it, Muldoon has scrawled "no ruling class," "289 America tough / self delusion of / Europe," and also "Paul Bunyan." The "289" refers to the page of Carpenter's work on which the letter to Dodds about "roots" appears. Muldoon versifies several instances from that Auden biography; while he is of course taking liberties with his literary subject, he makes sure to do so with some level of precision. His meticulous use of biography demonstrates how careful he was when writing about Auden and MacNeice, the two Middagh Street figures whom Muldoon most closely would resemble once he, too, headed west over the Atlantic.

His Auden contemplates a departure from the U.S. and a move back to Britain, but only if he can "return to Eden / as that ambulance-driver / or air-raid warden" (lines 56-59). He could only go back, however, to "Eden," and Britain is no longer Eden for him. Wystan uses the language of his new country to declare that he certainly cannot return as the man he used to be. The pioneer imagery that heavily permeates the manuscripts (the Bunyan references, the westward campsite imagery) surfaces in the published version when he asserts that he "will never again ford the river ... I will not go back as *Auden*" (60, 63). That italicized version of himself – the famous Leftist writer, the fighter for Spain, the poetic decrier of political wrongs – no longer exists in the same form.

Muldoon toys with Auden's self-consciousness about poetry and politics by injecting another figure with whom Auden wrestled in verse. The ghost of W. B. Yeats pervades the poem, from Auden's allusions to his own elegy and Yeats's "ruined tower" (65) to Lee's quoting Davis as telling her to "never ... give all thy heart" (81) and MacNeice's focus on his "responsibilities" (88). Jonathan Allison sees Muldoon as "signaling his own views ... by using Yeats as a counter-example ... clearly affiliating himself with Auden and MacNeice rather than with Yeats as exemplary poetic precursors," but also argues that the poet aligns himself more closely with MacNeice, because "Auden's credo of the social insignificance of art fails to consider the tragic example of [Gabriel] Garcia Lorca, whose victimization proves that poetry can attract the unwelcome attentions of censor and killer, and thus is considered potentially subversive" (6, 12). Cliff, however, warns against such a focus, contending that it "can too readily distort the poem and risk reducing it to a Yeatsian tributary" (622). Arguing that "Middagh" is a failure, Tim Kendall contends that "the poem's characters speak into the ether," and that it "fails to dramatize them in an enlivening way," conceding that it becomes "a surreptitious elegy for Yeats" and ultimately asserts that "geographical displacement need not entail an emotional amnesia towards Irish origins. The insistent Yeatsian allusions ... act as a pledge of continuity with ... an Irish poetical tradition" (129). Really, though, the poem elegizes an elegist of Yeats (as well as his compatriots on Middagh Street), and is not principally another Yeats memorial.

The fifth division of the "Wystan" section transitions from the poet's pronouncement that he "will not go back as *Auden*" – that his former self in many ways is dead – to his imagining what it would be like if Yeats had not yet died. This part of

“Wystan” begins with Yeats and ends with Paul Bunyan; it envisions the kind of poet Auden could have become – an elitist, condescending writer tainted by politics – and asserts the kind of figure he instead aspires to be – an adventurous, rootless man yearning for “the ghostly axe / of a huge, blond-haired lumberjack” (90-91). Wystan contends that if Yeats were “living at this hour / it should be in some ruined tower” and “not malachited Ballylee,” the 16th century castle in which Yeats actually resided during summers for about 12 years (64-66). By using some of the same words William Wordsworth wrote for John Milton and perhaps doubly alluding to the ruins at Tintern Abbey, he chastises Yeats’s romanticism. Muldoon has Auden sarcastically assess Yeats and his “crass, rhetorical questioning,” wondering himself “If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead / would certain men have stayed in bed?” (71-72, 76-77). The real Auden, at this point, may have argued via his Yeats elegy that the poetry was not responsible, that it is only “a way of happening” (41) and not the agent itself, or, as he wrote for one side in “The Public V. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” that “it is a fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen ... if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged” (7). In Muldoon’s poem, Wystan is mocking Yeats for having believed in and perhaps distanced himself from the reality of such faith by manipulating his pointed words from “The Man and the Echo.” Yeats had wondered in verse if “that play [*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*] of mine [did] send out / Certain men the English shot” (11-12). Wystan’s insistent use of the word “certain” – first in the quotation, next italicized in a parenthetical that breaks up Yeats’s words, and then in adverb form to answer Yeats – confirms his frustration with his Irish predecessor. He rejoins Yeats in one simple line: “the answer is ‘Certainly

not” (75). Allison extends that dissatisfaction to Muldoon, arguing that his “Audenesque impatience with Yeats’s political aesthetic is a retort not only to Yeats’s shade but also to those who, like Pancho Villa, expect a politically-engaged poetry from contemporary Ulster poets” (5). Muldoon then turns the poem to explain why that “certainly not” is the correct answer to Yeats.

Indeed, that kind of impatience is built into the very form of the verses in which Muldoon composes this part of “Wystan.” The iambic tetrameter couplets recall Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” in which an eager lover attempts to seduce his chaste object of affection. Wystan refers to history and the past in the same kind of hastened tone and form that Marvell uses to conjure up “time’s wingéd chariot” (22).

Wystan contemplates political engagement by looking to history and rootedness, contending “For history’s a twisted root / with art its small, translucent fruit / and never the other way around” (78-80). The lines reshape what in 1926 Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica” announced “a poem should be,” which first was “palpable and mute / As a globed fruit” (lines 1-2), and affirm what Auden had written in “New Year Letter” in 1940, that “Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society, / For art is a *fait accompli*” (201). Wystan asserts that art is the fruit and not the root – the output and not the originator – and then goes on to declare that “the roots by which we were once bound // are severed here, in any case, / and we are all now dispossessed” (81-83). The stanza break further emphasizes the cutting from tradition and history, which makes the “prince, poet, construction worker, / salesman, soda fountain jerker— // all equally isolated” (84-86). The “soda fountain jerker” refers to that same January 1940 letter Auden wrote to E.

R. Dodds about America being “terrifying” (qtd. in Carpenter 289). Before that long passage, Auden questioned the idea of favoring tradition, asking

You may speak of England as roots, but after all what is my England? My childhood and my English friends. The England of 13 Court Oak Rd Harborne [the house in which his parents now lived] is a completely foreign country to the England of 12 Court Oak Rd and vice versa. The ice-cream soda jerker is every bit as isolated as the highbrow artist. (289)

As such, Muldoon here is simply rearranging thoughts Auden had expressed months prior to the imagined Thanksgiving feast. Wystan connects those ingrained feelings of isolation and loneliness, states for which people in America seem uniquely positioned, to the idea of westerly quest, making the “prince, poet, construction worker, / salesman, soda fountain jerker” look up and out from themselves and toward the west, loading supplies into a metaphorical “covered wagon” in order to “strike . . . out for his Oregon” (88-89). Wystan had said in the previous part of his section that he would “never again ford the river,” that he had done it once and he would not return in the same adventurous manner, but he recognizes the attraction to doing so in the first place (60). He includes himself among the many that are “straining for the ghostly axe / of a huge, blond-haired lumberjack” (90-91). That reference to Bunyan is the only direct one that survives Muldoon’s revision of the “Wystan” section.⁴⁹ The pages and pages of verse animating the figure of tall tales in the manuscripts are compressed to that “ghostly axe” of the unnamed mythical man.

⁴⁹ One more makes the cut in the whole poem; in the “Ben” section, Britten refers to his work with Auden as “(a collaboration on *John Bunyan*?),” which playfully conflates the mythical lumberjack with the author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (25).

Bunyan is not the only famously American figure that Muldoon condenses between drafts and the published form. The next section of “Wystan” begins with a slightly altered quotation – ““If you want me look for me under your boot-soles”” – that comes from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*,⁵⁰ and the poet is woven into the stanza that ends with Auden “learn[ing] to play softball with Robert Frost” (92, 111). As such, Whitman actually *replaces* Bunyan, who populated the earlier versions of this penultimate part of “Wystan.” Paralleling Whitman to Bunyan is appropriate; the American bard also was larger than life in many ways. By first quoting that line from *Song of Myself*, Wystan demonstrates a keen consciousness of the ephemeral nature of life; Whitman encouraged his readers to look to the dirt to find him after he had died, that his vacant body would somehow make something new (in his case, figuratively and in verse, he made *Leaves of Grass*).

Auden goes to visit MacNeice at the hospital in this section, and recalls him as reading from Garcia Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York*, which contains an ode to Whitman. In draft versions of this portion of the poem, Muldoon quotes and reconfigures other signature Whitman lines. He had drafted the idea of Wystan as being “torn,” referring to himself as “Wystan Auden, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,” which plays off of Whitman’s nearly identical declaration (containing his own name, of course) earlier in *Song of Myself*. Auden was no original son of Manhattan, but New York City certainly became his most significant home after England, and it marked a poetic and national

⁵⁰ The word “again” that originally appeared between “me” and “look” has been deleted (52.10).

rebirth for the poet.⁵¹ On at least two draft pages, Muldoon has Auden ask the rhetorically appealing question Whitman also inserted into *Song of Myself*: “Do I contradict myself?” Whitman follows the query in his own poem by conceding, “Very well then, I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes),” but, by removing the question entirely from the published version, Muldoon makes that statement about “boot-soles,” awkwardly propped up and barely integrated at the beginning of the stanza, the strongest remnant of Whitman remaining (51.7-8).⁵²

After finally playing that game of softball with Robert Frost, Wystan’s final segment of his section of “Middagh” begins with his having “leapt with Kierkegaard / out of the realm of Brunel and Arkwright // ... into this great void” (112-113, 114). He moves from the land of English engineers to the “great void” – to America, where he finds the kind of love that leads to “marriage-vows” (118). He thinks back to the “terrier” – the “pup” with the “abscessed paw” which his father lanced – and looks then at his present, to his “historical / Mr W. H., my ‘onlie begetter’ and fair lady” (124). Muldoon’s use of this line from the dedication to William Shakespeare’s collected sonnets recalls of course the mystery surrounding the identity of the Bard’s “Mr W. H.,” a playfulness with regard to Auden’s initials, and a clever reference to one of Auden’s early romantic memories. As Carpenter’s biography points out, the poet used a similar

⁵¹ To be fair, Whitman technically was not a son of Manhattan, either, as he was born just outside the borough in West Hills on Long Island on May 31, 1819.

⁵² Reading this section after studying its manuscripts is very much akin to imagining Mike Goldberg’s painting process through Frank O’Hara’s eyes. In “Why I Am Not a Painter,” O’Hara remembers Goldberg as explaining his having painted over the prominent “SARDINES” on a canvas by claiming that “It was too much” (8, 16). Perhaps the larger presence of Bunyan and Whitman became “too much” for Muldoon. Their ghosts, however, haunt Wystan’s section with some regularity as the poet comes to terms with the idea of his own nascent Americanness.

dedication – “To the onlie begetter Mr W. L.” – in an unpublished poem called “Quique amavit,” which he wrote in his early days at Oxford for a freshman at Christ Church College named W. L. McElwee (68).⁵³ Muldoon keeps the “W. H.” initials and then conflates the “onlie begetter” with Shakespeare’s “fair lady;” for Auden, then, Chester Kallman serves as both.

Muldoon ends the section with more Shakespeare, italicizing a line from Sonnet 109 – “*for nothing wide this universe I call . . .*” – and begins Gypsy Rose Lee’s portion of “Middagh” with the sonnet’s next line. That particular line works perfectly for Auden as it comes from a sonnet describing “my home of love,” which certainly is what he asserted he had found with Kallman, and it fits Muldoon’s persistent focus on the word “nothing,” which he scrawled no less than three times on a heavily edited typed draft of the section’s final stanza, each time underlining the word and once circling it. An earlier draft of that portion contains Wystan’s notion that seeing Chester’s “exposed left leg / made me want to weep,” but Muldoon rewrites the line below the stanza to read: “made me want nothing / so much as to weep,” which he inserted into the published version as its own line. That firm insistence on including “nothing” elucidates why the closing Shakespeare line fits exceptionally well.⁵⁴ Muldoon’s Auden section, then, makes nothing happen.

⁵³ Even if Muldoon did not read the entire Carpenter volume, the likelihood that he saw this information is high as it occurs on a page that also discusses Auden’s affection for Robert Frost’s poetry. Carpenter writes that “Auden introduced [Cecil] Day-Lewis to the poetry of Hardy and Robert Frost” just two paragraphs prior to the mention of McElwee (68). The index cites the page as containing material on Frost.

⁵⁴ On that same handwritten leaf, Muldoon writes a bracketed note to himself that he will need to “[change the top of Gypsy].” The following line in the sonnet works just as impeccably well for that section as its imagery calls out to the speaker: “Save thou, my rose; in it thou art my all” (1).

In a handwritten draft of ideas for the section, Muldoon writes “Shakespeare quote” beneath “Mr W. H.,” suggesting that he was looking for another more appropriate line with which to end the section, and indeed he found it. The line’s peculiar phrasing suggests that the speaker is deeming “this wide universe” as “nothing;” it doubly stresses the “great void” into which Wystan has jumped and is relishing. The real Auden’s obsessive focus on American loneliness becomes in Muldoon’s hands an inherent recognition of the kind of nothingness and blankness the United States provides to writers who write of and in it.

The rest of “7, Middagh Street” continues to toy with this notion. Muldoon writes in burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee’s voice that “it’s knowing exactly when to stop / that matters, ... The same goes for the world of letters” (74-75, 77). The art of holding back, of doing *nothing* further but tempting the audience with the idea of *nothing*, is what makes Lee’s show so successful and keeps it from focusing on “that unladylike stuff” that she disdains (71).⁵⁵ Her section ends in a void, too. She contends that she “keep[s] that papier-mâché cow’s head packed / just in case vaudeville does come back,” which emphasizes her recognition of absence. That emptiness is furthered in the “Ben” section, which opens by acknowledging a loss: “Come back, Peter. Come back, Ben Britten,” the composer hears people as saying, referring to himself and Peter Pears, his partner, who left Europe to live in America. In manuscripts, Muldoon first includes “Auden and Isherwood” alongside “Britten and Pears,” followed by the motherland’s attempt to induce guilt: “your country needs you” (Box 14, Folder 1). The first pair remains in the published version only as the satirical figures “Pimpernell and Parsnip,” so named by

⁵⁵ The insistent use of “nothing” also toys with the bawdy Shakespearean notion of the word, slang that refers to the vagina.

Evelyn Waugh in *Put Out More Flags*, which savaged the intellectuals as having fearfully fled England as war approached.⁵⁶ Britten's section, the shortest save Chester's, uses quotations from essays and even Parliamentary proceedings to emphasize the confusion so many English minds felt with regard to their peers' having left.⁵⁷

Again, a section ends by bleeding into the next. "Ben" culminates by noting that "it won't be over till the fat lady sings," and "Chester" opens by recognizing that very action: "The fat lady sings to *Der Rosenkavalier*" (28, 1). Perhaps mimicking Kallman's own position in the house, his portion of "Middagh" is bawdy, abbreviated, and generally outshined by Auden's words. While Kallman was a frequent visitor to Middagh Street, he never called the house his home. His "lobster" (14) leads into the opening of "Salvador," which states that "This lobster's not a lobster but a telephone," as if to negate Kallman's final line by transforming it into a reference to his own surrealist art (1). (Dalí's "lobster telephone" fused together a plaster version of the undersea creature with an actual telephone, making the lobster follow the curve of the receiver.) He, too, was not a resident of the boarding house at the time of the Thanksgiving feast, but he may have been invited to the event (Tippins 109). In strangely rhymed couplets, Dalí's section confronts the figure of Hitler, his own departure from Barcelona "by the back door" in order to pursue his art in New York, his "allegiance to the proletariat," and "the chasm / between myself and surrealism" (26, 34-36). His section closes by subtly affirming Auden's insistence that art is but a "way of happening," as he refers to "our

⁵⁶ Britten couldn't have uttered the words Muldoon assigns to him on Thanksgiving 1940 because Waugh's novel would not be published until 1942, but "Parsnip" does rhyme well with "Europe's 'sinking ship'" (7-8). Also, Waugh's "Pimpernel" has only one l.

⁵⁷ The Britten section refers to such real-life dissent as Cyril Connolly's perspective as editor of *Horizon*, Harold Nicholson's impassioned writing in the *Spectator*, and the Minister of Labour's confusion between Auden and the athlete H. W. Austin.

civil wars, the crumbling of empires, / the starry nights without number” – all things captured in paint, in sculpture, in words – as having “only slightly modified the tilt // of the acanthus leaf, its spiky puce-and-alabaster an end in itself” (51-56). The power of the artist’s output, Salvador suggests, is ultimately rather minor.

Dalí’s “end in itself” transforms to Carson McCullers’s meditation on the physical house in which she and her colleagues lived. Her section starts by confirming that “in itself, this old, three storey-brownstone / is unremarkable,” but she goes on to remember the night George Davis conceived of the venture, declaring “so vivid was the reverie ... that when he drove / next morning to Brooklyn Heights / he found it true” (1-2, 4-5). In his way, Davis made real what began as nothing but a dream. Carson focuses on the ability of the housemates to come together for a common goal, quoting “Wynstan” as prefacing dinner with the mandate that “We’ll have crawfish, turkey, / salad and savoury, / and no political discussion” (7, 12-14).⁵⁸ Her words poked more fun at Auden in draft form, claiming before that last line that he “has the nerve to caution” (Box 14, Folder 3).⁵⁹ As in the “Ben” section, “Carson” contains anachronistic detail as well; while Richard Wright was invited to the holiday dinner (though he did not attend), he had not yet moved in and would not until 1942, so Carson’s detail about “the super” having “moved out” when the “Wrights moved in” is not chronologically accurate (19-20). Muldoon might be conceding an awareness of this fact by having McCullers say that it happened “no time ago” (18). While the novelist indeed was American by birth, she still experienced similar fish-out-of-water feelings like Auden, Britten, Dalí, and MacNeice,

⁵⁸ McCullers, in her Georgia drawl, mispronounced Auden’s first name throughout their cohabitation (Tippins 18). Muldoon seems to relish in this fact in the manuscript, as he notes the rhyming possibilities of “Wynstan” and “brownstone” (Box 14, Folder 3).

⁵⁹ Subsequent quotations from the “Carson” manuscripts come from Box 14, Folder 3.

as her coming of age in Columbus, Georgia, was starkly different from the reality of 1940s New York. Muldoon fixates on integrating that part of her life into the section in the manuscripts. For half a page, he drafts versions of lines in which she says she “imagine[s] it empty,” will “try to empty / myself of,” or “watch it empty,” and he then proceeds to work through the stocking imagery, which, in the published version, becomes the only “empty” item after the “orange in its toe spreads its black wing” (34). That focus on what is lacking emphasizes how Carson’s experience in New York is analogous to Auden’s. Like the British poet, the Southern novelist finds an emptiness in her new surroundings with which she must contend.

Carson playfully describes the scene at Middagh Street, one full of cocktails, a chimpanzee, Auden with “Seconal and bennies,” MacNeice “a monarch / lying in state on a Steinway baby grand,” and a “strait-laced Benjamin Britten” who “picks out a rondo in some elusive minor key” (47, 50-51, 54-56). All of this is but constant sights and noise to Carson, who is easily distracted and enlivened by “the chord a fire-siren struck,” which led many of them to have “chased the engines / two or three blocks” (58-60). Despite being surrounded by fascinating people and conversation, she tunes herself into the world outside the house so that she might seek more adventure, even if that comes only in the form of chasing a fire truck down the street. The Carson section serves to depict the dreamlike quality of late nights at the house on Middagh, and it finishes with her thinking that she sees “two girls in silk kimonos” – perhaps herself and Erika Mann – a Yeatsian image upon which MacNeice only slightly builds in the poem’s final part.

Following Carson’s concluding observation, the “Louis” section begins by noting that they are “Both beautiful, one a gazebo” (1), toying with a repeated image from

another Irishman's writing. Yeats's "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz," elegizes "Two girls in silk komonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle" (3-4), and it features a "gazebo," too, as the poem ends, "We the great gazebo built, / They convicted us of guilt; / Bid me strike a match and blow" (30-32). Louis transforms Yeats's original "gazelle" into "a gazebo," alluding to the poem's final image, indeed, but also possibly playing off the Irish slang term "gazebo," which is a word for a fool (Share 123). Rather than focus on remembering a lady or ladies, Louis makes at least one of them into a fool.

He moves from contemplating that modified Yeatsian image to delicately retelling Hart Crane's suicide; Crane only "fell / from the *Orizaba*" because he jumped, but Louis considers that "Ovidian," and he furthers the sea imagery by imagining sitting down to kipper with "the ghostly *Healfdene*" (2-3, 6-8). The meal is significantly less elegant than Crane's fall, as its main courses "tasted of toe-nails" and "the thick skin on the soles of feet" (12-14). Louis's bizarre opening imagery replaced what in the manuscripts was his contention that Auden seems to have "suffered some sea-change," lines over which he labored in drafts and ultimately abandoned (Box 14, Folder 4).⁶⁰ That "sea-change" alludes to Ariel's "full fathom five" song in from Act 1, Scene 2, of *The Tempest*, which T. S. Eliot also appropriates in *The Waste Land*.⁶¹ Ariel sings to Ferdinand about his supposedly "drowned father" (403), declaring that "Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange" (398-400). Alonso, of course,

⁶⁰ This and subsequent quotations from the "Louis" manuscripts come from Box 14, Folder 4.

⁶¹ Eliot transforms Ariel's image of Alonso – "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (1.2.397) into Madame Sosostris's lament for "the drowned Phoenician Sailor, / (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)" (47-48).

is believed to be dead after traversing the ocean, and, in the play's final scene, is ultimately forgiven by Prospero and promised "calm seas" and "auspicious gales" (314). Paralleling Auden, another crosser of the ocean who was perceived as a traitor, to Alonso is apropos.

Although the "sea-change" reference is cut from the published version of "Middagh," Auden still is present throughout "Louis." The second part of the section stands in for the "sea-change" portions of the manuscript. Muldoon had MacNeice originally assert that Auden in the United States is "given to masquerade / as a cross between Eric the Red and Catherine of Siena." In the published version, Auden still strikes a pose, but instead he "affects an ulster lined with coyup / and sashays like an albino rabbit / down the same Fifth Avenue" (15-17). The "ulster" here is a coat, but its double meaning as a reference to the northernmost province of Ireland might suggest he is masquerading as something else altogether. Louis indicates his failure to believe Auden's pronouncements, likening his idea that "Chester Kallman = Agape" to the notion that "Scott Fitzgerald wrote *Ivanhoe* / or the *Rubáiyát*" (22-24). In the manuscripts, Muldoon has Louis call Auden's Kallman assertion "a little zany." Much of the MacNeice section deconstructs Auden's words and ideas, from his faith to his assertion that "poetry makes nothing happen" and is but a "way of happening."

Louis does this by retelling one of Auden's oft-relayed stories about "how he lost his faith / in human nature" when German immigrants cheered Hitler on in a New York movie theater, an event also relayed in the Carpenter biography. It was one of the incidents that led Auden to reconsider the role that artists can or should play in the political realm. Louis entertains that notion by comparing Auden's reaction to that of the

writer Delmore Schwartz, whom he claims “was ushered // from that same movie-theatre / with ‘Everything you do matters’” (58-60). He challenges Auden’s claim that “poetry makes nothing happen” by insisting that it “*can* make things happen— / not only can, but *must*—” (98-99). Muldoon works through this idea on a handwritten sheet, writing that “poetry can make / things happen / but it’s not one of / its functions,” emphasizing the word “can” by circling it. He writes this again on another sheet, underlining the same word. In the published poem, Louis follows his rejoinder to Auden by asserting that “the very painting of that oyster / is in itself a political gesture,” and mentions Dalí’s *Two Pieces of Bread Expressing the Idea of Love* as an example of art succeeding in articulating politics (amusingly calling the Spanish painter “O’Daly”) (100-101).

Like Dalí, Louis looks at himself as having “left by the back door,” but contrary to the surrealist, he departs not from Barcelona or his own European (and Irish) origins but “the back door of Muldoon’s” (117). Is he leaving by the back door of the poem? Of an imaginary pub owned by the poet? Or is the last name a too-convenient rhyme for the “melodeon” of line 115? His exodus is all of these things. After departing, he confronts a “one-eyed foreman,” who he remarks, “had strayed out of Homer,” but really seems to march right out of Barney Kiernan’s pub in *Ulysses*. That Cyclops mistakes his surname as a “Fenian name,” (122-123) and Louis construes that misidentification as the foreman’s means of saying

... ‘None of your sort, none of you

will as much as go for a rubber hammer

never mind chalk a rivet, never mind caulk a seam

on the quinquereme of the Nineveh.' (124-127)

He believes the man to be saying that he and his kind will never board any sort of adventurous ship and be able to set out for some distant and new world. That Cyclops, uttering his own form of erroneous “nobody,” has the last word in “7, Middagh Street,” but his declaration is essentially wrong since he confuses the origins of Louis’s name. Even so, the poem, ending as it began with the first line of Masfield’s “Cargoes,” ultimately hones in on the notion of nothing its speakers explored throughout.

The twirling circular nature of “Middagh,” of each section ending and beginning again in the next, makes the work a verbal kind of Scylla and Charybdis. It resurrects the artistic figures only to subvert them, to lose them in a whirlpool of wordplay. The poem almost is a versified mirror image of itself: Wystan’s first section contains fourteen lines, as does Louis’s last. The reflecting portions continue until Auden first quotes Whitman, turning his direction that “if you want me look for me under your boot-soles” into a playful recognition of the gymnastic verse (92). “7, Middagh Street,” then, is not a sprawling, chaotic, technical stepchild to earlier works, “full of squares yakking at themselves” or pointlessly “speak[ing] into the ether,” as Tim Kendall argues (123). Instead, Muldoon’s intricate vortex is a monument to how a poem indeed can make *nothing* happen.

Muldoon does the same with his first book composed on American soil, the fascinating *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990), which contains a few short poems and then the expansive titular long poem, which envisions Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey as having actually gone to establish their own utopia in America. The pair had plotted out the notion, but they never enacted their plans. Muldoon takes their nothing –

the fact that they failed to venture forth to fulfill that utopian vision – and realizes it in poetic form. Like “Middagh,” *Madoc* is elegiac in its insistence on enlivening both dead people and dead ideas. Its many lines explore the search for a kind of utopia Coleridge and Southey see as possible in America in sections titled by the names of a wide range of storied minds from Abelard and Aquinas to Wycliffe and Zeno. Muldoon’s extensive, varied verse marries ridiculousness – “de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum” (208, 213); “Coleridge leaps out of the tub. Imagine that” (216) – with the lure of the “illimitabilities” of the U. S. (255), sometimes with rhyme (slant or traditional), sometimes in prose, often with Joycean or even Beckettian stylized absurdity. Its density makes a thorough analysis in this brief chapter rather unfeasible, but it serves as an important transition between the idea of going to America explored in *Meeting the British* and the reality of being there in *The Annals of Chile*.⁶²

That volume, published in 1994, contains more elegiac explorations from Muldoon, including the villanelle “Milkweed and Monarch,” with its unnamed speaker crouching by his parents’ graves, the magnificent “Incantata,” written in memory of the artist Mary Farl Powers, and “Yarrow,” the collection-ending elegy for Muldoon’s mother. As did the elegiac works from *Meeting the British*, those in *The Annals of Chile* also grapple with the void left by the dead and found by the living in his new country. “Milkweed” examines the process of mourning by following the thoughts of a man “as he knelt by the grave of his mother and father,” frustratingly recognizing that he has trouble differentiating between tastes, cities, even his parents (1). Rather than fixating on their

⁶² For more extensive analysis of *Madoc*, see Omaar Hena’s look at the Native American perspective, Andrew J. Auge’s essay on imperial philosophy, and the work of Kendall and Wills.

memories, however, the speaker thinks about “the taste of dill, or tarragon” that “filled his mouth” (2, 4). He questions his own ability to grieve for the dead when he thinks instead about “a woman slinking from the fur of a sea-otter” and “the tang of her” (7, 11). While “Milkweed and Monarch” presents one’s dissatisfaction with his ability to lament, “Incantata” absorbs the notion that mourning means thinking and feeling *anything* in order to fill the void left behind and it painstakingly presents exactly that.

“Incantata” begins by immediately righting that wrong of being distracted by the incorrect subject while paying respects in “Milkweed.” “I thought of you tonight,” the poem begins, directly centering the attention on Powers, Muldoon’s relationship with her, and their relationship to art. Powers, who had already been represented in Muldoon’s work (“Mary Farl Powers: Pink-Spotted Torso,” “The Soap-pig”), died of cancer in 1992. Muldoon conflates memories of firsts with Powers with the realities of the lasts. He looks back in incredulity, “hardly [able to] believe that, when we met, my idea of ‘R and R’ / was to get smashed” (17-18). He shares episodes of their life together, secrets and inside jokes that only the deceased would be able to decipher. Allusions ranging from Beckett to the Book of Kells, André Derain’s *The Turning Road*, *L’Estaque* to Emily Post, and *Four Seasons* by both Vivaldi and Frankie Valli to the Dire Straits’ “Sultans of Swing” inundate the poem with overwhelming information about the speaker and his subject. Muldoon’s prolific data about his relationship with Powers resembles the lengthy catalogs Whitman used in so many of his long poems, which can cause readers to skip through what he or she might not understand or have the patience to dissect and discern. Whitman wrote in “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads” that lifelong project, *Leaves of Grass*, was “mainly ... the outcropping of my own emotional and other

personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record” (671). Muldoon’s effort in the lengthy, sprawling, but still tightly controlled “Incantata” resembles such a desire but focuses instead on recording the relationship between the two and the illness and death of Powers. Although the specifics in his poem seem far too personal to affect readers outside of the relationship, they nonetheless demonstrate how when someone dies, the living grasp at any and all memories to resist and eventually make sense of the truth of their loved one’s passing.

The occasion enables Muldoon to recognize his own place in Powers’s life, too. He remembers when she had “let slip ... your secret amour / for a friend of mine” and that he understood then that he would “never be the centre of your universe” – much like Gabriel in Joyce’s “The Dead” realizes about Gretta, who “had been comparing him in her mind with another” while he “had been full of memories of ... [his] secret life” with her (231). The poet remembers that moment of revelation, but he does so without indicting Powers; he knows that he was not and should not have been the heart of hers, either (34, 40). Muldoon’s bare assessment in the poem of his and their relationship’s limitations makes the elegy more poignant and rare, more personally detailed than is generally the case for the poet. Kendall acknowledges the same, calling the work “a new kind of poem for Muldoon – less polished, more openly emotional – where occasional lapses are an inevitable product of spontaneous overflow, and perhaps even a guarantee of authenticity” (210). Muldoon masterfully manages to be “juxtaposing such low comedy with the more orthodox emotions of an anguished lament” (211). Indeed, the comedic moments do not diminish the mourning but magnify it further. The poem moves

quickly from moments when one might “again sing out for joy” to ones in which the bereaved recounts how he “saw you again tonight, in your jump-suit, thin as a rake” (72-73). Time slows here, as he watches her move her hand “in such a deliberate arc” that it seems as if her “hand and the stone blurred to one” and then her face blurs into that of her mother, who “took your failing, ink-stained hand / in her failing ink-stained hand / and together you ground down that stone by sheer force of will” (73-80). In a way, the scene shows Powers becoming not just her admirers but also her craft; in Muldoon’s verses, that is far from an unpleasant transformation. She becomes part of the sculpture, itself a gravestone of sorts, becoming, then her own epitaph – indeed, her own elegy. When the poem finally ends, he, too, will yearn to “take her ink-stained hands” in his (360).

Before then, though, he promptly returns to less emotional and more jovial language, noting how he “remember[s] your pooh-poohing ... / my theory that if your name is Powers / you grow into it” (81-83). He goes back and forth between remembered silliness and poignant visual memories of Powers, again “thin as a rake” (97). He longs to make that “potato-mouth in a potato-face” – both the piece of art and himself – “speak out, unencumbered,” and say that she “had a winningly inaccurate / sense of your own worth” (103-106). From there, Muldoon recognizes her nonetheless keen vision about others, especially himself, as she “detected in me a tendency to put / on too much artificiality, both as man and poet,” which led her to call him “‘Polyester’ or ‘Polyurethane,’” words toying with his given name (110-112). Muldoon’s undulation between the serious and silly, the sad and jovial makes the poem avoid maudlin sentimentality. It makes declarations about “deep-seated hurt” and “a monument to the

human heart” both possible and plausible from a poet generally expected to be technically brilliant and maddening, obscure, playful, and evasive.

Repetition in the poem also serves to solidify such moments. Muldoon includes four versions of the stanza-opening line recalling how he thought of or saw Powers on a particular night, transforming it to “I thought again of how art may be made” in the most vital stanza of “Incantata.” He makes anaphora of the phrases “You must have known” and “That’s all that’s left,” listing after the latter hundreds “of” things, memories, or moments shared with Powers. That last catalog begins after the stanza that recognizes “the fact that you were determined to cut yourself off in your prime” (177). He tries to understand that fate and surrounds himself with Samuel Beckett’s rather nonsensical creations – Belacqua, Lucky, and Pozzo – in order to “make sense of the ‘*quaquaqua*’” (181), an allusion to Lucky’s long speech in *Waiting for Godot*, in which he follows his mention of “a personal God” with “quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua” (45). The babbled, conjoined words essentially repeat the Latin idea of “in so far as” or “in what manner.” Muldoon again utters that noise, but then transforms it into “Quoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoiquoi,” an echoing of the French “what” or “which,” which is the last sound he makes before declaring “That’s all that’s left” for the first time (184-185). Beckett’s “quaquaquaqua” becomes Muldoon’s own more specific white noise.

The items that Muldoon lists begin with “the voice of Enrico Caruso” and he then moves on to name a wide variety, including “great big dishes of chicken lo mein,” “that popular-flanked stretch of road between Leiden / and The Hague,” “sparrows and finches in their bell of suet,” “the Cathedral at Rouen,” “the great roll of paper like a bolt of

cloth,” and “your avoidance of canned goods” (193, 209-210, 217, 228, 273, 305).

Inserted among these seemingly random entities are bittersweet moments, too, particularly when he notes “how you spent your whole life with your back to the wall, / of your generosity when all the while / you yourself lived from hand / to mouth” (281-284) and his own acknowledgment that he appears in her self-portrait as “a dog that skulks in the background, a dog that skulks and stalks” (296). He adds to the catalog images from previous poems, such as the “figurine of a pig” that Powers took with her in “The Soap-pig” and “the sow dropping dead from some mysterious virus,” from the same (321-322). He laments her “vision of a blind / watch-maker” and her “fatal belief that fate / governs everything,” as he sees those things as having hastened her death (340-341). He chronicles all these things she has left – the memories, the things, the moments – and ends the poem on the one thing that isn’t left: Powers herself.⁶³ Muldoon’s final words express a deep longing to bring her back to life long enough to read “this *Incantata*” so that it

might have you look up from your plate of copper or zinc
on which you’ve etched the row upon row
of army-worms, than that you might reach out, arrah,
and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink
(356-360).

⁶³ One thing he does exclude, however, are explicitly direct references to the exact disease that killed Powers. In the drafts of the poem, which feature significantly less revisions than “7, Middagh Street,” Muldoon originally writes “that a little cancer of the breast could be beaten” in stanza 17, and “in your poor breastworks that you would almost surely perish” in stanza 18 (Box 21, Folder 2). He edits both for the final version by eliminating details about the disease, extracting the cruel specificity of breast cancer from the poem.

All those things that are “left” are not enough. What remains most of all is the void her death makes in his world. They had been separated as a couple for some time, and Muldoon had gone on to marry and have children, but the respect for and appreciation of Powers is profoundly expressed throughout “Incantata.” He yearns to take her hands in his, but he physically cannot. Elegy, then, offers a way to do so figuratively.

What he can do, however, is to make art out of the nothing that remains. In the middle of the poem, Muldoon calls attention for the second time to a vibrantly colored painting by André Derain, *The Turning Road, L’Estasque*. He first mentioned it when he recalled Powers’s “animated talk of Camille Pissarro and André Derain’s” painting, which led to his seeing “that muddy road,” which “filled [him] again with a profound sorrow” (117-120). He brings the image back up when he thinks

... again of how art may be made, as it was by André Derain,
 of nothing more than a turn
 in the road where a swallow dips into the mire
 or plucks a strand of bloody wool from a strand of barbed wire
 in the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden
 and builds from pain, from misery, from a deep-seated hurt,
 a monument to the human heart
 that shines like a golden dome among roofs rain-glazed and leaden.
 (145-152)

Kendall concedes that “the reader is unused to expect anything so grandiose from Muldoon as a ‘monument to the human heart’”. Nevertheless, the stanza still offers a summary of his artistic procedures” (213). Indeed, the blunt and ostensibly sentimental

assessment of the origins of art seems out of character for Muldoon, but he combines those “grandiose” images with “bloody wool” and “barbed wire,” and “the aftermath of Chickamauga or Culloden.” He downplays perceived romanticizing by ultimately paralleling that “monument,” the “golden dome,” to the “roofs rain-glazed and leaden.” Those final images recall a much more basic one: William Carlos Williams’s “Red Wheelbarrow,” which itself stood for poetic simplicity. Jefferson Holdridge looks to the “golden dome” as an “image of art and religion [that] offers some redemptive hope of the slaughter of the Scottish at Culloden or of the Union and Confederate soldiers at Chickamauga” (7). “Incantata” in particular certainly “offers some redemptive hope,” but it does not realize it. Muldoon yearns for Powers’s hands, but he cannot hold them. Still, that ability to imagine the moment, to put it into verse, somewhat allays the sadness of his reality. He can turn a sorrowful absence into versified longing, but his poem acknowledges that his yearning must remain just that.

The time between Powers’s passing in 1992 and the publication of Muldoon’s elegy in 1994 for her was rather brief, but he took two decades to deal in verse with the 1974 death of his mother, Brigid Muldoon. The resulting long poem, “Yarrow,” closes *The Annals of Chile* with fascinating form (“exploded sestinas”) and layered personal anguish at the continued fact of her absence and regrets about her presence (qtd. in Kendall, 227). Kendall asserts that it contains “desperate swervings away from the source of grief ... but the poem still homes in on Brigid’s death-bed and the poet’s subsequent desolation,” which make it “a moving elegy not just for the poet’s mother but for his first home” (226, 231). Muldoon’s repetition of the phrase “all would be swept away” betrays a fixation on the idea of casual purging. Parts of his childhood home

would be “sold for scrap,” “the stream / that fanned across the land” would clear the countryside,” and even historical figures – “Montezuma’s daughter” and “the young Ignatius of Loyola” – would not be immune to the removal (347).⁶⁴

While the poem is full of Muldoon’s various memories about his home, the actual physical presence of his mother in the poem is somewhat understated. She is a figure that works behind the poetic scenes; she fuels his guilt and preoccupations, but does not exist in the same visceral way that Powers populates “Incantata.” Muldoon withholds mention of her until the poem’s ninth line, and she only appears to “make one of her increasingly rare // appeals to some higher power” (346-347). She returns at the bottom of the page to “waver ... as she pins the clothes on the clothes-line” and begins the following by “thumb[ing] through a seed-catalogue,” which serves her son with the opportunity to consider the scents and feels of the potential plants (347-348). He thinks of the scientific name of the titular plant, *Achillea millefolium*, which conflates the idea of Achilles, the wrathful warrior, and with “of the thousand leaves.” As such, the plant and its name are particularly fitting for a poet writing as a son. He remarks that the shape of it is “like something keeping a secret / from itself” (348). Indeed, Muldoon’s own “Yarrow” explores his propensity to do the same in reference to mourning both his mother’s death and the strained relationship they had in life.⁶⁵

With such an effort, the poem “record[s] ... Muldoon’s own epic journey back from his current life in the United States to the Ireland of his childhood, when his mother was still alive” (Wills 173). After two decades, he finally bares his “secret,” that his

⁶⁴ Citations give page and not line numbers due to the substantial length of the poem.

⁶⁵ Kendall pushes this idea further, asserting that the poem both “allay[s] a deep-seated hurt and atone[s] for a difficult relationship between the poet and his mother” (235).

mother's persistent moral shaming affected him so deeply that he could not clearly assess or appreciate their relationship. Throughout the poem, he relives the indignity of being caught (or imagining being caught) masturbating or otherwise sinning by comparing himself to Peyton Farquhar from Ambrose Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," who vividly envisions escaping from his hanging fate only to find himself incapable of doing so. He thinks of "the bridge" and "the barn" of the story just as he pictures "S----" seducing him by "shrug[ging] off her halter ... // and hold[ing] herself open," but he pauses, thinking of mother lecturing him (366). He navigates between the distant past of his youth and the persistent presence of his mother in his adult life even beyond her death. He misremembers the kind of cancer that defeated her, first calling it "ovarian" and later correcting himself, "'Ovarian,' did I write? Uterine," as if to recognize a final time his complex and confusing relationship with her as a mother and woman (387-388). All of this, of course, "would be swept away," like Farquhar's dream of flight (390). An ocean and two decades may have seemed like plenty of time to eliminate the need to grieve Brigid Muldoon in writing, but it would not be enough.

As it had for Whitman and Auden, the American space that Muldoon imagined and experienced encouraged elegiac inquiry regardless of the time that had passed between a subject's death and his contemplation of it. Whether immediately or belatedly addressing the passing of a parent, obsessing over objects and catalogues of memories concerning the death of a friend or lover, or giving voice to a moment and mood in time for a house full of artists in Brooklyn in 1940, Muldoon follows Whitman's 1871 imperative from "Democratic Vistas" that "in the future of these States must arise poets immenser far," writers who must "make great poems of death" (988). His meticulous

ventriloquism of Auden and other relocated artists in “7, Middagh Street” recognizes his own preoccupation with how a writer can re-establish himself and what he might find in “this great void” of America. Like Auden, Muldoon confronts his American future by often looking to the past. Around the time of his emigration, Muldoon turns to the dead specifically to render into poetry his reaching for a new frontier. His elegies in particular – from “Meeting the British” and “The Soap-Pig” to “7, Middagh Street,” “Incantata,” “Yarrow” and more – realize the power of vastness, blankness, of *nothing* to make poetry happen.

CHAPTER 5

REVISION AND THE ART OF LOSING

“O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?”

– Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

“On revisions as a matter of principle, I agree with Valéry: ‘A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned.’”

– W. H. Auden, “Author’s Forewords”

“The poem, like the soul, has a concupiscence for becoming all it might.”

– Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*⁶⁶

In 1855, with his nation just a few years away from a devastating civil war, Walt Whitman boldly declared on the first page of the preface to *Leaves of Grass* that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem,” a sentiment that immediately followed his assertion that Americans “of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” (5).⁶⁷ As this study has reiterated time and again, Whitman emphasizes throughout his writing the importance of turning to the grave in

⁶⁶ Muldoon makes this assertion in the book’s fourteenth chapter, which address Auden’s “Homage to Clio” (366).

⁶⁷ Citations to Whitman’s poetry and prose come from The Library of America’s *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (1982) unless indicated otherwise.

order to enact a great poet's finest ability: to serve as the one who "drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet ... [and] says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you" (13). He maintains unwavering faith that the United States in the future will produce "poets immenser far" who will "make great poems of death" (988). He sees the landscape as being full of material for poetry and views as profound and central the potential of American writers to mine that haunted expanse. In that great poem that he assesses the United States to be, Whitman optimistically looks to forthcoming poets and suggests that they work to build their futures by paying particular attention to the dead. As such, Whitman's prose suggests that if the United States, as he contends, is the greatest poem, then, most fittingly, it would be an elegy.

For elegies give poets the significant power to revise – both in the sense of looking at again *and* editing – the life and legacy of a particular person or people. They are an act of renewal, or, as Whitman put it, an effort at realizing. They reflect an American revisionary spirit: an ability for any citizen to make anew him or herself or, as in the case of these elegists, anyone they can render into verse. Elegies are poems that reconstitute the dead and help them to outlast the temporal limitations of their physicality. The writers of these poems choose which pieces of a subject's life to magnify or erase and attempt to assure the immortality of such a vision of the dead. They are selecting what about a person will endure, which version of their being is best for their poetic utterances.

In an essay about women in the writing profession, Adrienne Rich also asserts her perspective on "Re-vision," which she calls "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" and designates it as "for us

more than a new chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival” (18).⁶⁸ Indeed, these elegists work to see the old and dead as realized, vital, and *surviving* in their lines of poetry. Through elegy, poets revise their subjects, themselves, each other, and ultimately even the genre itself. Studying the revision of *of* elegy, then, can lead to a particularly poignant understanding of the process of rewriting, renewal, and realizing of both the elegiac subject and the poet him or herself. Elegies can be haunted not only by their direct and secondary subjects (the dead, the survivors, the poet) but also by textual ghosts, by the words that are added, modified, or, perhaps most importantly, lost.

Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art” famously contemplates the act of making things absent, beginning by noting that “The art of losing isn’t hard to master,” and continuing by observing that “so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster” (1-3). Her speaker goes on to enumerate a list of items she has lost, from “door keys” (5) to “two cities” (13), and names the most significant last: “you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love)” (16-17). She urges herself to believe and accept that “the art of losing’s not hard to master” one more time, even “though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster” (18-19). She self-consciously works to convince herself to lose even the *idea* of disaster as the poem closes. Bishop’s words are helpful to keep in mind while considering a piece of literature’s composition history, especially that of an elegy, as “the intent / to be lost” certainly can complicate the reading experience.⁶⁹ What can we make of what words are lost and, of course, gained in the writing process? Does a poem’s

⁶⁸ Rich’s use of “survival” in the context of poetic history particular echoes W. H. Auden’s assertion in “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” that even though “poetry makes nothing happen,” nonetheless “it survives” (36).

⁶⁹ Bishop herself was particularly deliberative and exacting about her own poetry. Alice Quinn’s *Elizabeth Bishop, Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box* lays bare her methodical writing process by featuring sixteen drafts of “One Art” alone.

supposedly final version inherently lament its own verbal ghosts? Elegies, poems that by definition are contending with loss, can be further haunted by their textual histories. The recovery of words, phrases, and stanzas that poets choose to excise or alter in the composition process can particularly magnify how an elegy contemplates voids. This study has aimed primarily to demonstrate how Whitman, Auden, and Muldoon react to the elegiac space of America, how each poet contends with the poetic frontier of death, and how the idea of nothingness informs their acts of poetic mourning and leads to some kind of renewal. Considering their elegies as fluid texts and particularly recognizing the textual losses experienced by the poetry reveals how each poet struggles to transform the chaos of displacement, relocation, and their resulting shifting poetic identities into more fixed epitaphic monuments.

John Bryant has asserted that “the whole point of a well-written text is to make us forget that we are reading words. But a fluid text, when we become aware of it *as* a fluid text, reveals to us an additional, and altogether different, kind of narrative, a very concrete narrative of the writer’s revision, which breaks the spell of the pleasures of everyday reading” (134). He argues that “masking the energies of revision ... reduces our ability to historicize our reading and, in turn, disempowers the citizen reader from gaining a fuller experience of the necessary elements of change that drive a democratic culture” (113). In that case, recognizing and considering the fluidity of elegies importantly expands an understanding of a writer’s contemplation of the poetic frontier afforded by death. It further emphasizes the struggle to transform the poem into a monument to another human heart.

Whitman, of course, addresses the idea of making his writing into a kind of memorial by “put[ting] it unerringly on record,” (657) for *Leaves of Grass* was his “attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being ... freely, fully and truly on record” (671). Whitman’s record was ever-evolving. *Leaves of Grass* was published six different times in six different editions during his lifetime. Although the 1891-92 text is mostly the same as that of 1881-82, it includes prose annexes that expand it further.⁷⁰ Whitman’s effort to record himself “freely, fully and truly” did not result in his making a variorum edition of his works, however. Instead, that fullness was refined as the poet revised his verse and prose to depict more “freely” and “truly” himself as a human being in the nineteenth century in the fractured and then recovering United States.

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” an elegiac meditation on the poet’s suspension in time between his present and his place in his readers’ future, in particular contends with such a recording endeavor. Added to *Leaves* in its second edition in 1856, it originally was named “Sun-down Poem,” a title that more clearly refers to the end of something than to the transient state depicted by “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Whitman included the poem in each subsequent publication of *Leaves*, paring from it almost a dozen lines, altering several of its words, and breaking it into numbered sections between first and last publication. The editing of the title alone refocuses the poem from one that looks to a cyclical end to one that embraces instead the flux of passage.

Other revisions to “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” confirm and expand upon such a shift. In its first iteration, the poem begins with a dramatic imperative: “Flood-tide of the

⁷⁰ The Walt Whitman Archive (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>) is an extraordinarily thorough and helpful resource that facilitates study of each edition. This project has benefitted significantly from its digitizing of the different *Leaves*.

river, flow on! / I watch you face to face” (211).⁷¹ Instead of having the water simply exist “beneath” (1.1) him, as it does in all subsequent versions, he commands “flow on,” exerting some kind of authority over the tide, that entity that comes to represent the in-between stage, the gap between past and future.⁷² He declares that he will “watch” that flood, a verb designating him as a more active witness, whereas later he will only “see” it (1.1). Whitman cuts two lines that begin “I project” and thus further emphasize the speaker’s agency. The first originally fell after his oft-quoted assurance that “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence” (212), and it features the poet “project[ing] myself, also I return – I am with you, and know how it is” (213). Between deleting that line and the next that commences with “I project,” he eliminates three instances of the pronoun “I” before lines that tally what he “saw” while crossing the East River. After listing the catalogue of images seen, he contends that “These and all else were to me the same as they are to you” (215), as if to forge commonality despite the years between himself and his future readers, and then declares, “I project myself a moment to tell you – also I return” (215). Those two lines about projecting and returning are eliminated by 1881, leaving less of a physical presence of the poet reaching out from the past (his former present) to the future (in which his hoped-for audience reads).

Whitman reduces self-consciousness in other areas, too. When the speaker questions whether his “great thoughts, as I supposed them ... were ... not in reality meagre,” he initially follows the sentiment by critically asking “Would not people laugh

⁷¹ The first version of the poem appeared in the 1856 edition of *Leaves*. Citations here refer to page numbers.

⁷² Quotations from later versions of the poem refer to section and line numbers of the edition published in the 1891-92 *Leaves* unless indicated otherwise.

at me?” (216). That apprehension about his own potential to be mocked disappears by 1881. The deletions suggest that the poet has become more confident about his influence and need not continually re-assert or question it. As such, part of what is lost in later versions of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is a subtle (or simply performed) poetic shyness. They then elegize that coyness or uncertainty by becoming more declarative – though not aggressively so. The poet operates more (but not completely) by implication in the final two versions of “Crossing.”

The poet alters a few stylistically incongruent phrases (“Bully for you!” and a command to “Blab, blush, lie, steal” (220) are both gone by 1871) and axes critical references to both the self (“solitary committer” (217), eliminated by 1860) and the audience (“you novices!” (222), cut by 1881), but the most significant revisions in the progression of the poem come when Whitman cuts two segments of the poem that address quite plainly the aspired cohesion between himself and his future audience. After asserting that he “Closer yet ... approach[es]” the reader and is “as good as looking at you ... for all you cannot see me” (218), the speaker originally continues by affirming that

It is not you alone, nor I alone,
Not a few races, not a few generations, not a few centuries,
It is that each came, or comes, or shall come, from its due emission,
without fail, either now, or then, or henceforth.

Every thing indicates – the smallest does, and the largest does,

A necessary film envelops all, and envelops the soul for a proper time.
(218).

That “necessary film” importantly exists nonetheless in the poem toward its conclusion, but its initial appearance and those lines above are cut by 1881. As such, when the speaker later calls to “You necessary film” – a physical body’s skin, perhaps – and entreats it to “continue to envelop the soul” – to help contain the vibrancy within, for now – it will be for the first time. The excision of these lines forces the poem to intimate these ideas rather than state them outright.

This elimination is followed by deletions of the word “curious” (219) to start lines in what becomes the poem’s eighth section; the verses transform from statements indicating inquisitiveness to outright questions asking “What gods can exceed” and “What is more subtle” (8.4-5). While the speaker’s confidence seems to strengthen because of these revisions, the poet also tempers that self-assurance by cutting more obvious plays toward his ability to transcend time, such as the line “What the push of reading could not start is started by me personally, is it not?,” which is deleted by 1881. Whitman similarly cuts four lines before the closing seven that also exhibit a perhaps insufficiently tempered assertive voice:

We descend upon you and all things, we arrest you all,
We realize the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids,
Through you color, form, location, sublimity, ideality,
Through you every proof, comparison, and all the suggestions and
determinations of ourselves. (221)

Rather than “descend” and “realize,” Whitman’s “we” only will “receive,” “use,” and “fathom” in the poem’s final closing lines (222). Removing those first two verbs emphasizes the importance of the collective’s more passive status. The “we” must wait for things to happen rather than make them happen themselves. The speaker returns to the “you” to “furnish ... parts toward eternity” and not the “we” as the poem concludes (222). Without those lines, the “you” is less ambiguous; its last referent is the “dumb beautiful ministers,” and those help to make up the object that the speaker’s “we receive[s].” The profound lesson here, as in “Song of the Open Road,” is that of reception: how the poet receives his readers and, of course, how they will receive him.

Whitman’s revisions to “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” reveal keen attention to the persona of the speaker. As the deletions demonstrate, what is lost in the process of making the poem – those things that became “filled with the intent / to be lost,” in Bishop’s words – are more obvious and simplistic projections of himself. The self-conscious eliminations of the more self-conscious statements – from “I project myself” and “Would not people laugh at me?” to his identification as a “solitary committer” and as a blatantly “curious” rather than maturely questioning speaker – transform the poet’s persona in “Sun-Down Poem” into the more controlled, deliberative voice of the final “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” The poem elegizes not only the idea of suspension between past and present but also the poet’s earlier unruliness and relatively unwieldy fixation on his agency rather than that of the audience and himself together.

Like Whitman, Auden expresses concerns for making a true or honest record of his writing, but, as he contends, this occasionally means that some previously published poems would no longer make the cut into his controlled collection. That first poem he

writes post-emigration – “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” – momentarily complicates the political thrust of his 1930s poetry by declaring that “poetry makes nothing happen” (line 36). His subsequent series of poems with famous deceased subjects also deals with the idea of crossing in both a literal transporting sense and existential one. “At the Grave of Henry James” in particular undergoes massive revisionary compression. In his early American years, Auden both composes and revises some of his most famous and important verse. He makes numerous changes to many of those poems (including “Spain” and, eventually, “September 1, 1939”) and ultimately decides to eliminate those two from his collection by refusing to reprint them.

In a 1965 foreword to his *Collected Poems*, he admits to having “thrown out” works that he “wrote and, unfortunately, published ... because they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring” (xxv). While he affirms attention to the idea of honesty, he differs from Whitman in that he makes no claims that he has assembled his final collection of poems either “freely” or “fully.” Whitman’s attempt to “put ... a human being ... on record” is far more encompassing and inclusive than that of Auden. While both work to refine their writing, Auden seeks to eliminate the very internal contradictions that Whitman openly embraces.

In a 1948 essay on D. H. Lawrence, Auden attempts to negate Whitman’s free, full, and true recording project by contending that what Whitman documented was simply “a poetic *persona*” and “not an actual human being” (287). He points directly to the lines that follow Whitman’s famous concession on contradiction – “*I am large. I contain multitudes*” – and labels them as “absurd” because, in them, “the image of an individual obtrudes itself comically upon what is meant to be a statement about a

collective experience” (288). He insists that “Whitman looks at life extensively rather than intensively,” that “no detail is dwelt upon for long; it is snapshotted and added as one more item to the vast American catalogue” (288). He assesses the American bard’s endeavor as a catalogue of snapshots, as if to implicitly assert that a poet should instead assemble images in a more careful, calculated manner.

He declares his reasons for revision in exactly that way. In a 1944 foreword, he writes that “in the eyes of every author, ... his own past work falls into four classes,” which include “the pure rubbish which he regrets every having conceived ... the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much The pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance ... [and] those poems for which he is honestly grateful” (xxv). In 1966, he delineates in more detail the motives behind eliminating certain works, claiming that “nearing sixty,” he knows himself and “his poetic intentions better” (xxv). He refuses to look at his poems as having been fluid, changing texts. Whitman, of course, does not publish multiple versions of poems in his last version of *Leaves of Grass*, but he never attempts to deny or expunge completely previous works. Auden, in asserting recognition of early “dishonest” poems, works to correct his comprehensive record by eliminating them. He claims not to have a problem with “anybody ... look[ing] at my writings from an historical perspective,” but he does not aid such efforts and include them in his collection.

In a sense, Auden’s actions strive to resist attempts to view his works as fluid. They are not works in progress; they are works progressed. Auden, in Bryant’s terms, is “masking” those “energies of revision” by suggesting that the only reason to look at old, eliminated poems is for historical perspective (113). Interestingly, again in the Lawrence

essay, Auden writes that “man is a history-making creature who can neither repeat his past nor leave it behind; at every moment he adds to and thereby modifies everything that had previously happened to him” (278). The poet undertakes just such an endeavor with “At the Grave of Henry James,” which he wrote in the spring of 1941. James had died decades earlier in 1916 after having had a stroke, but Auden’s elegy for him feels just as immediate as those for Yeats, Freud, and Toller.

As did the Yeats poem, the James elegy opens in the winter. The speaker surveys the cemetery in which James has been laid to rest next to other members of his famous family and wonders “What living occasion can / Be just to the absent” (15-16).⁷³ He contemplates how best to commemorate the deceased, and if judgment is not only appropriate but also possible. The poet withholds any reference to the specific dead until the fifth stanza of the early, longer edition of the elegy:

Startling the awkward footsteps of my apprehension,

The flushed assault of your recognition is

The *donnée* of this doubtful hour:

O stern proconsul of intractable provinces,

O poet of the difficult, dear addicted artist,

Assent to my soil and flower. (25-30)

Auden excises this section when the poem is reprinted in *Collected Poems*. The speaker’s command to the deceased – to “assent to my soil and flower” – is a tricky one. While it *sounds* as if he is asking James to rise from the grave through the earth and fuel floral growth, the verb is not “ascend” but “assent.” He asks him not to come back to

⁷³ Quotations for “At the Grave of Henry James” refer to line numbers and come from the earlier version published in *Selected Poems* unless indicated otherwise.

him but to *agree* with him. His apostrophic addresses to James are reminiscent of Whitman's toward President Lincoln in "O Captain! My Captain!" and also Auden's own elegy for Yeats. The references to the "intractable provinces" and the "poet of the difficult" (as well as the earlier phrasing "time that is") echo "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" and complicate the speaker's relationship to the deceased of this poem. While Auden's elegiac attitude toward Yeats was certainly distant and skeptical, his demeanor toward James is decidedly less cynical. Still, part of the challenge of the elegy is figuring out how exactly to commemorate the dead.

Auden labored at that by eventually carving out fourteen of the poem's original twenty-four stanzas. The condensed ten-stanza version he ultimately prefers lacks the central meditation on living and dying that in some places echoes other verses Auden discarded. The speaker contends with the present, asserting that "the actual self ... Is so afraid of what its motions might possibly do / That the actor is never there when his really important / Acts happen" (50-54). The emphasis on what might "happen" intrinsically alludes to the Yeats elegy's argument that "poetry makes nothing happen" and is but "a way of happening, a mouth" (36, 41). "Only the past // Is present" (54-55), the James poem continues, underscoring one of the inherent problems of elegy: that a poet must make something lasting out of a fact of the past. The speaker seems to concede a kind of defeat as the stanza continues:

One after another we are
Fired into life to seek that unseen target where all
Our equivocal judgments are judged and resolved in
One whole Alas or Hurrah. (57-60)

The weapon imagery coupled with the focus on how to express defeat or celebration clearly invokes the closing lines of “Spain,” which contend that “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon” (103-104).⁷⁴ That Auden cuts verses mirroring the end of a poem he completely eliminated from his canon is not surprising. The language of these lines also recalls George Orwell’s commentary about Auden’s use of the phrase “the necessary murder” in “Spain;” he wrote in 1940 that the poet’s “brand of amorism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled” (126). Other removed stanzas also allude more to war and politics than to James and his art. Auden cuts references to “a milling mob” (69), “the good ghosts needed” (73), and “That catastrophic situation which neither / Victory nor defeat can annul; to be / Deaf yet determined to sing” (85-87). Indeed, the marring of the physical senses, first by being deaf and then “lame and blind” leads to the speaker’s being “mournfully attracted / By the Real Distinguished Thing,” James’s ultimate characterization of death.

These lines, however, fail to endure through to the poem’s last iteration. Auden’s paring down of the elegy substantially and drastically reduces its exploration of how “Now more than ever ... the good ghosts [are] needed” and instead looks to James as the sole source of answers (67, 73). He cuts that toying with the dichotomy of good and evil from the poem and, as a result, emphasizes more intensely that the speaker both lacks and seeks the responses that the dead might have to his “little inferior questions” (92). The elimination of those stanzas relocates the focus of the poem to that title image, as he “stand[s] / Besides the bed where you rest” (92-93). He asks James, whose “heart ...

⁷⁴ Quotations from “Spain” come from the version published in *Selected Poems* unless indicated otherwise.

remained true to the rare noblesse / Of your lucid gift” (99-101), to “Preserve” him, a sentiment that Auden does not excise. He edits out the speaker’s requests that James “Suggest” and “approve” for him, and the only one of the original five closing stanzas that makes the final cut is the foreboding section that begins “All will be judged” and yearns for James to “Pray for me and for all writers living or dead” (133-134). He asks for prayer again as the poem closes, requesting that James “make intercession / For the treason of all clerks” (144). The elegy originally culminates by giving the reason for such an appeal:

Because the darkness is never so distant,
 And there is never much time for the arrogant
 Spirit to flutter its wings,
 Or the broken bone to rejoice, or the cruel to cry
 For Him whose property is always to have mercy, the author
 And giver of all good things. (139-144)

The excised stanza reduces the influence of James (and, by extension, other renowned writers) by alluding to an even greater power; that author at the end is no longer just James but God. By ending the poem with the previous stanza, which seems to address James more clearly, Auden more clearly focuses the elegy on its dead subject and what the poet can ascertain from him. In effect, he maintains that James still is the most central invisible presence of the poem, repopulating the poem with its initial ghost.

Paul Muldoon addresses Auden’s obsessive revisions and excisions from his canon in his lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, collected in a volume he named *The End of the Poem*. In a talk centered around “Homage to Clio,” Muldoon reveals that

he “want[s] to try ... to understand the extent to which an author is entitled to own or disown the work that has been written through him or her” (348), later contending that “Poetry is a function of its own historical moment” (351), an assertion that casts doubt on Auden’s disowning of poems such as “Spain” and “September 1, 1939.” Muldoon’s textual histories confirm such a claim. While many of his poems undergo significant drafting and reworking before they are published, Muldoon makes little changes to pieces that have already been made available to the public. Still, studying his composition process can illuminate hidden specters in the already teeming poetry.

As the previous chapter of this study discussed, the drafts of Muldoon’s “7, Middagh Street,” a long poem about seven artists associated with a Brooklyn boarding house, demonstrate a particularly rich and methodical progression from penned ideas on loose leaf paper to highly mathematical, structured lines of verse repeated again and again in type with gradual alterations. Most fascinating among the “Middagh” manuscripts are the papers related to the poem’s first section, “Wystan.” As this examination of elegy in and of America concludes, it is fitting to pay special attention to a poetic intersection of these three American elegists. As the “Wystan” portion of “Middagh” comes to a close, Muldoon interestingly has his Auden quote Whitman while thinking of Louis MacNeice. “If you want me look for me under your boot-soles,” the longest stanza of the section begins, repeating almost verbatim the seventh line from the end of “Song of Myself,” a line that serves to assure readers that, despite the time that might pass between his having written and their reading, he will always be as close and accessible to them as the ground beneath their feet. As the manuscripts confirm, Muldoon does not misquote the line; rather, he chooses to excise Whitman’s “again,” which

originally fell between “me” and “look.”⁷⁵ That deletion transforms the line from one that intimates familiarity with the poet to one that welcomes a first encounter between writer and reader. Muldoon’s Auden remembers the line as having been uttered as the latter, which emphasizes his own inquisitive curiosity toward his new American setting.

Indeed, both Auden and Muldoon here look to Whitman for the first time to help them establish their American poetic selves. The ghost of the American bard lurks throughout the “Wystan” section of “Middagh.” In the print version, he appears via the “boot-soles” line and again through Auden’s imagining of MacNeice reading “Oda a Walt Whitman” from Gabriel Garcia Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York*. Words and images of the poet appear in the drafts, but Muldoon ultimately eliminates them. Wystan originally grapples with the ideas of reason and faith and asks, as Whitman did in “Song of Myself,” “Do I contradict myself?” Without providing an answer, Muldoon scratches out the lines of type. In another draft of the same page a few leaves later, he writes in Auden’s voice, “I was torn / Wystan Auden, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,” altering only slightly the opening line of the twenty-fourth section of (again) “Song of Myself.” As such, Muldoon is viewing Auden as having looked to Whitman to construct his own Americanness and, of course, is doing the same himself.

Whitman certainly is not the only American figure to whom Muldoon looks when contemplating his move to the United States – Robert Frost also surfaces in that same section of “Middagh” – but he turns out to be the most significant American influence on Muldoon’s Auden in the poem. While he shows up only sparingly in two lines in the

⁷⁵ In drafts for the “Wystan” section, Muldoon scribbles through “again,” which he initially included in the quotation. All citations from the “Wystan” manuscripts refer to Box 13, Folder 49, of the Paul Muldoon Papers at Emory University.

final publication of the poem, his further presence in the manuscripts emphasizes the different ways Muldoon attempted to implement his existence and influence. Muldoon's meta-elegy for not only Auden but also Whitman *and* even somehow for himself (or at least his European self) certainly challenges the expressive limits of mourning. His resurrection of these American literary figures demonstrates his yearning to mine the past in order to construct a poetic future in the "great void" that is the United States. His postmodern and highly structured poem turns back to the transforming Auden of 1939 and the early '40s and, through his inquisitive and still confident eyes, looks even further back to Whitman's poetic construction of himself.

Whitman had a simple and straightforward hope for the "poets immenser far" who would rise in "the future of these States" to "make great poems of death" (988). "The poems of life are great," he acknowledged, but he affirmed that "there must be poems of the purports of life, not only in itself, but beyond itself" (988). He had recognized an absence and tried to fill it with his own verse, but even as early as 1871, when he wrote those words in "Democratic Vistas," Whitman discerned that his efforts – elegies on soldiers and the President – would be insufficient for some time. He committed to prose his wish for "poets immenser far" and hoped that others would be able to labor successfully over the same task. By coming to America and tapping those "veins full of poetical stuff" (8) to which Whitman referred in the preface, Auden and Muldoon indeed made "great poems of death." The American space they all encountered and the perpetual focus on the future at the expense of the present and past brought forth a flood of elegies from each poet. They yearn to comprehend the ultimate frontier, that "necessary film" between life and death. Before establishing the power of the poet to

“say ... to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you,” Whitman declared that “The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is” (13). Elegy, as he had implied, most perfectly suits such an endeavor: the dead remain in the past, the poet exists and writes in the present, and both strive to form and assert “what is to be.”

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