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"Back in the heartland":[1] Seamus Heaney's "Route 110" sequence in *Human Chain*

Michael Parker*

This essay foregrounds the increasingly significant role translation has played in Seamus Heaney's compositional and creative practices since the 1970s, and how it functions as a means of displacement and route into imagined homecomings. It offers a detailed analysis of the sequence which occupies a central position within *Human Chain*, in which Heaney attends to and seeks to reconcile once more the different "voices of my education", that of originary familial/parish culture of Mossbawn and Bellaghy, and that acquired at St Columb's College and Queen's University that furnished him with rich linguistic and cultural assets, but sentenced him also to a "migrant solitude" ("The Wanderer", *Stations*). "Route 110" illustrates the enduring effects of both bequests, as Heaney takes scenes and motifs from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI, which details Aeneas' experiences on his descent into the seventieth year, Heaney takes readers with him on a road back to pre-Troubles Northern Ireland in the mid-twentieth century, stopping off initially at Smithfield Market, Belfast, in order to pick up a "used copy" of the Virgil that will become his guide. What he subsequently assembles is an album of snapshots of his youth, part of his legacy to his newly-born granddaughter.

Keywords: contemporary poetry; classical poetry; translation; memory; Northern Ireland; Heaney; Virgil; *The Aeneid*; intertextuality; allusion

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In the opening paragraph of his study of Northern Irish poets and their relationship with other literatures, Rui Carvalho Homem points to how the terms "translation" and "metaphor" are closely aligned, not least because "their respective etymologies (Latin and Greek) ... lend them a common meaning of 'displacement' or 'transport'".[2] He argues that translation enables the lyric voice "to enjoy a new lease of freedom"[3] by extricating itself, albeit temporarily, from its own particular historical, cultural and linguistic terrain. Translation has been a staple feature of Seamus Heaney's literary activity for almost four decades, during which time he has been in a near-constant state of transport through his interactions with other literary cultures, such as those of Eastern Europe, Greece, Italy and the United States. From the early 1970s onwards, he has repeatedly displaced himself geographically *and* imaginatively as a means of renewing himself, enriching and extending the reach of his own compositions. Every Heaney collection since *North* (1975) has included at least one translated poem, and since the late 1980s the poet regularly produced versions of longer and even whole works, reflecting the diversity of historical periods and cultures attracting his attention.

In 2005, Heaney began work on a translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI. "A constant presence" in his personal literary canon, Virgil's epic and its motifs had been "in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father".[4] With the thirtieth anniversary of his father's death fast approaching, Patrick Heaney must have been very much at the forefront of the poet's mind. That presence only intensified at the time of and in the wake of what *Stepping Stones* refers to as a "mild stroke" in August 2006, but must have seemed at the time more like "a heavy thunderclap"[5] in terms of the

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anxiety it generated.[6] During the lengthy period of his convalescence, Heaney returned to *The Aeneid*, yet also decided to embark on a long sequence in which episodes from his teens and early twenties would loosely mirror those in Virgil's poem.[7] Under the title *The Riverbank Field* the "Route 110" sequence first appeared in print in a Gallery Press limited edition of 2007.[8] It was then subjected to significant revisions when Heaney was gathering material for *Human Chain*. Placed at the book's centre, its lyrics constituted, like so many other poems in the volume, a sustained act of commemoration, communion and reconciliation, carried out by means of a Virgilian-Dantesque journey back to a past "long since vacated". While in its 2007 manifestation that past was described as "returnable to",[9] the absence of these lines from the later published text indicates that Heaney had second thoughts about the viability of that Gatsbyesque claim.

Heaney spells out the reasons for his strong sense of affinity with Rome's greatest poet in an interview broadcast in October 2008, where – partly in jest, partly in earnest – he portrays Virgil's life as running a neatly parallel course to his own:

> When Aeneas gets down to the river to meet his father, it's a beautiful riverbank situation, on the *bruach* of the river ... *The Riverbank Field* commingles the riverbank in County Derry, in Broagh, which is *bruach* with the feeling of the Virgil, of the Latin ... I am very fond of Virgil in that he was obviously a bit like the scholarship boy who's made good. He was from the country in the North of Italy ... He had in his youth gone through the civil war time [when] the pastoral, melancholy, sweet pathetic quality of his sensibility was exposed to the brutality.[10]

Elements in the comparison are tenable, others tenuous. Born and brought up on farms, in locations distant from the main metropolitan power-centres of their day, Virgil and Heaney had their life-chances enhanced hugely as a result of the excellent schooling they received. Neither their education nor their literary success altered the way they spoke or their attitudes to rural living; like Heaney, the Mantua-born poet never entirely lost his "rustic accent",[11] and continued to regard highly "the small independent farmer"[12] and the values of patience and perseverance their working days fostered. Heaney's playful characterisation of Virgil as like "a scholarship boy" is inaccurate, since, according to the Loeb Classical Library text Heaney himself cites, Virgil's father "must have been quite affluent" to have covered the costs of educating his son "at Milan and then Rome".[13] Unlike Heaney, whose acquisition of important political contacts occurred much later in his career, Virgil was close to the political establishment at the outset of his, as a result of his friendship with Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, and other leading Romans like Maecenas, who acted as his patron.[14] In terms of its international significance and the scale of its casualties, Northern Ireland's violence from 1969 to 1998 bears little resemblance to the civil wars that scarred Virgil's twenties and thirties, yet Heaney's point about the impact of such carnage on the artist's conscience and consciousness is no less valid for that. In improvising on themes, images and motifs from *The Aeneid*, Heaney is engaging in what Roger Garfitt once termed "the appreciative plunder"[15] to which poets often resort. Such readings – or "misreadings" as Harold Bloom has it[16] – spark "an imaginative ignition, a release of new energy in an independent creation".[17]

For "The Riverbank Field" and "Route 110", Heaney once more employed the tercet form favoured by Dante that had worked so effectively in *Station Island*, parts II, IV, VII, XI and XII; instead of terza rima, however, he uses blank verse, primarily in decasyllabic lines. Self-reflexive concerns are very much to the fore in the sequence's prelude poem, as the poet again puts to the test translation's mediatory potential, "disinterring the past so that it may speak to and for the present".[18] Each of the participants in this dialogical exchange across time appears in the opening stanza, a triumvirate consisting of a first-person narrator, an unnamed translator[19] and an initially unidentified writer.

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Requisitioning and recycling phrases and sentences originally deployed by Virgil and in Loeb to delineate the appearance and nature of the underworld, Heaney celebrates and elevates the names, places and spirits of his natal and foundational terrain. When in line 3 he asserts that he will "confound Lethe in Moyola", he invokes two meanings of the verb. In a sense, he is damning the river of oblivion, constructing an intricate verbal device as a stay against the erasure of personal memory that must inevitably come. He is "baring the device", signalling how he intends to mix up features from the classical text ("the retired vale", "the sequestered grove", river and riverbank, those "peaceful homes") with ones from his birthplace, Castledawson, so as to render them indistinguishable; in so doing, Heaney prepares the ground for Route 110's multiple acts of translation – temporal, spatial, linguistic, intellectual, cultural, psychological, cultural, political.

While "The Riverbank Field" testifies to an impulse to perceive "similarity in dissimilars",[20] at the same time its author alerts us to differences and differentiation. In stanzas three and four, the narrator acknowledges limits to his conceit:

> Moths then on evening water
> It would have to be, not bees in sunlight,
>
> Midge-veils instead of lily beds. (46)

Interestingly, in the 2007 Gallery Press version of the poem, Heaney had diverged from the Loeb-Fairclough "original" in speaking of "*butterflies* in sunlight", presumably in an attempt to retain a greater measure of comparability. As early as line 1, there had been a reminder of the instability of literary texts and how they can exist in plural and contested versions. His use there of the phrase "what Loeb gives as" incorporates a recognition of pre-existing, established authorities which his putative translation will not only have to sit alongside, but conceivably contend with. Unlike the virgin grass in Elysium in line 12, he is not unaffected by the footprints that have gone before. From line 17 onwards, however, he determines to "continue … In my own words", to forge his own version of the source text. Heaney closes this initial, selective delve into Virgil with Anchises' explanation of how some human beings spend a thousand years stranded in the afterlife, before being permitted "to dwell in flesh and blood" again "under the dome of the sky" (47).[21] It recalls Yeats's vision at the close of "Sailing to Byzantium", where the immortal lords and ladies spend eternity gazing down upon the mutable material world, dwelling on "what is past, or passing or to come".[22]

The opening stops on "Route 110" bring readers very much back down to earth. Poems I and II re-create the multifarious, but at times unprepossessing, sights and smells of Belfast's Smithfield Market, the place where the poet first acquired a second-hand copy of *The Aeneid* Book VI from a stall.[23] Although after a fifty-year lapse the speaker cannot recall the stallholder's face, what survives in the memory is her soiled shopcoat, its buttons, colours, and the "marsupial vent" in which she keeps her change. To this he adds the pervasive reek that surrounds the stall, a pungent mix of dry rot, dust and disinfectant. Whereas for her, one suspects, the Virgil may be merely a commodity, another sale, for him it is one of the most precious texts in literary history, and an access-point to other worlds. The closing stanza of Poem I conveys vividly the mustiness then, the remoteness now of late 1950s Belfast, but gestures towards *The Aeneid*'s enduring capacity to inspire and move. To achieve this effect, Heaney coins an ambivalent compound noun ("Dustbreath"), deploys two archaisms ("bestirred", "deckle"), and emphasises how the atmosphere that filled "the cubicle mouth" was something he could not avoid inhaling.

Succeeding poems trace how, gripping his "bagged Virgil", the speaker negotiates his way from the Market to the bus station to pick up the Toome- and Magherafelt-bound 110

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bus which will take him to Bellaghy. To consolidate the Virgilian parallels and enhance the scene's dramatic impact, he compares the bustling crowds around Gresham Street to the throng of spirits Aeneas observes "streaming" towards the Acheron, in hope of a crossing.[24] Subsequently in Poem II, the sight of second-hand suits and coats swaying on racks puts him in mind of the spirits "close-packed on Charon's barge", not surprisingly since most of their former owners are almost certainly dead. Poem III incorporates and modifies an epic simile from the same section of Virgil's original, which compared the milling souls to flocks of migrating sea-birds.[25] For Heaney, however, passengers at the bus station resemble "agitated rooks", circling "a rookery" where an inspector "ruled the roost" (50). Following the inspector's enumeration of route-numbers, the Saturday shoppers "scattered" in all directions, not to "sunny lands"[26] but to what were then still homely, peaceful towns.

Before embarking on the inevitable return journey to South Derry, where six of the sequence's eight remaining poems are set (V–VIII and X–XI), Heaney represents translations of a different kind in Poem IV, the result of rooting around for bargains on the Smithfield clothes' stalls. Each of his purchases – that of a heavy winter coat and a light, loose-fitting summer suit – has a transformative effect on his appearance and his mood. To convey the greatcoat's weight and discomfort, he deploys a run of compound adjectives and alludes to materials (coal, tarpaulins, slate) associated with railway traffic, an industry Heaney's grandfather McCann knew all about.[27] Despite being chafed by the coarse fabric, he delighted in the gothic look the coat lent him when making late-night social calls, and the "dismay" written on his hosts' faces when opening their doors to this "creature of cold blasts and flap-winged rain" (51). Magically, stanzas 3 and 4 transport the narrator to southern climes, or, more specifically, to Virgilian territory. Kitted out in a loose, light suit – grey like the doves sent by Venus to guide Aeneas to the golden bough[28] – he accompanies some "tanned ex-pats" on an excursion to visit a hill-top oratory.[29] What comes to him there is a recognition of his cultural distinctness, something just as precious as "the vision of leafy gold"[30] Aeneas experiences in the underworld. It is inside the chapel that he senses his difference from his non-Catholic companions, characterising himself as "the one ... most at home". This is a far less emphatic claim than that voiced in the earlier published version of Poem IV, in which he posits that he is "the *only* one at home" (my emphasis).[31]

The very word "home" transports him back to Mossbawn and to years spent between worlds in Derry and Bellaghy. Loyalty to the originary culture asserts itself once more in the question with which Poem V begins and in the homely, rural images it lovingly musters. As fit subjects for poetry, neighbourly pigeons can hold their own alongside classical doves, its speaker maintains, hardly surprisingly given his creator's tendencies towards migrancy and "homing". Relocating himself imaginatively in the McNicholls' kitchen, his gaze alights on "a votive jampot" positioned on the dresser, as replete a sign of piety as the Romans' Lares and Penates. Like his father's "burnished"[32] harvest bows, Mrs Nick's foil-wrapped oat-heads anticipate Heaney's own displays, in artworks which, though steeped in the palpable, still glimmer with the possibilities of transcendence.[33]

The occasion commemorated in the ensuing sections was the first wake Heaney attended as his family's representative, a gathering mourning the loss of Michael Mulholland, a neighbour's son, drowned while swimming in the Bristol Channel. His hapless, untimely end loosely resembles that suffered by Palinurus, one of Aeneas' helmsmen,[34] yet Heaney makes no allusion to this Virgilian parallel in the text. Rather Poems VI and VII revolve around the speaker's perspective of the wake, starting with the disorientating effects of passing successive sleepless nights grouped around an absence, as

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the young man's body had yet to be recovered. In another of the sequence's remarkable transformations, the grimly-named "corpse house" becomes "a house of hospitalities". Poem VII mentions the continual rounds of card-games and refreshments, and how in the small hours the "elders" open up on local lore.[35] Metaphors drawn from music and acoustic chains ("antiphon*al* recit*al*"; "kn*own*"/"undert*one*d"/"h*o*me"/"clothes"/"sm*o*ke"; "*an*tiphonal"/"cl*and*estine"; "*o*th*er*s"/"*u*nd*er*toned") underscore the verifying long-term impact of this parish "night school" on the poet. "Imbued" with insights into its known and secret history, his intimacy with the community provides a future "right of way" poetically.

In marked contrast to the authoritative female-figure who escorts, directs and absolves the speaker at Poem VII's close, the woman glimpsed in VIII's early stanzas is without agency, appearing solely as a face, framed and contained in long shot. Her casting in the role of Dido can be surmised from the opening line, itself a rendering of *The Aeneid* VI, 453–4,[36] and from her depiction as "a dim form amid shadows", with "a wound still fresh",[37] or, as Heaney has it, "a hurt still new" (55).[38] That emphatically-placed adverb, like its predecessor ("again"), underlines how VIII's male protagonist, like Virgil's, is conscious of the continuing suffering his abandonment has caused. Whereas Aeneas is transfixed at the sight of Dido and succumbs to tears,[39] Heaney's character expresses his guilt through a hurried backward glance and precipitate departure, caught in a swift succession of monosyllabic verbs ("Switch on", "rev up", "pull out", "drive away"). In contrast to Virgil's "fierce-eyed" Phoenician Queen, who diverts her eyes to "the ground"[40] after Aeneas' failed attempt to appease her, the figure in Heaney's poem is imagined maintaining her gaze on her lover's car and, specifically, its brake lights. Appearing at a pivotal moment in the lyric, as it segues from private pain to collective repression, they signal the fact that it is not just the car or the couple that are at braking-point, and about to turn a corner.[41] Late 1950s Northern Ireland emerges as the subject of VIII's closing stanzas, a culture taut with frustration and division. The first signs of this he cites are B-Special patrols, flagging down vehicles with their red lamps, suspicious especially of Catholics out in the small hours because of a spate of IRA attacks.[42] For the speaker, as for his contemporaries, the import of those warning lights had yet to register, hence the portentous allusion to "pre-Troubles roads". More aggravating are the sexual blocks and constraints experienced at and after dances, the "holdings on" that all too often ended in "holdings back".[43] Self-restraint amongst the young was something all the North's religious denominations could agree on, since they shared St Paul's abhorrence of "fornication",[44] and were happy to inculcate fears about its terrible consequences. In the closing line, the speaker castigates this phase in the province's history as a "nay-saying age of impurity", the latter a term that recurs in the Catechism to denote acts of sexual misconduct.

What has been said of Czesław Miłosz, that "everyone who survives in his memory has a claim on his pen",[45] is equally applicable to Heaney. In contrast to the lyrics preceding it, which dwell on episodes from his personal history as a child, adolescent and young adult, Poem IX confronts us with "what came after",[46] and in particular the fates of so many innocent civilians. Though in inception it draws on scenes from *The Aeneid* VI (lines 384ff.), where Aeneas encounters the shades of his fallen Trojan comrades, it is the one poem in *Human Chain* which directly confronts atrocities from the Troubles' years and injustices that persist in their wake. Once more Heaney is mindful of John Hewitt's injunction in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, that we "Bear in mind these dead".[47] In a collection embodying and celebrating enduring memory, this lyric constitutes a brief but eloquent act of redress for those innocents whose deaths go largely unremembered. Their

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erasure is pointedly contrasted with the fate of paramilitaries who died in the Struggle, beneficiaries still of yearly memorialisation, with "full honours" and plots separating them from the "ordinary" dead.

The two men singled out and commemorated in Poem IX were personally known to Heaney and killed by paramilitaries in the early years of the conflict. Respectfully referred to as "*Mr*. Lavery", John F. Lavery was a sixty-year-old Catholic who owned a pub on the Lisburn Road in south Belfast. He died at around 11.30 am on 21 December 1971, while trying to remove from the premises a 20 lb bomb deposited, in all probability, by the Provisional IRA.[48] The fact that this explosion occurred a mere twenty yards from the Heaneys' home at 16 Ashley Avenue may well have accelerated their decision in January 1972 to leave Belfast for good.[49] Then, during the first week of February 1972, while still reeling from the events of Bloody Sunday, the poet learnt of the death of Louis O'Neill, a fishing companion and regular "in my father-in-law's public house in Ardboe" (*SS*, 214). The forty-nine-year-old O'Neill had been drinking in the Imperial Bar in Stewartstown, Co. Tyrone, when the blast from a 15 lb bomb, planted by loyalists, killed him instantly.[50] In his earlier *Field Work* poem "Casualty" the poet-persona had raised questions about the degree of culpability O'Neill might stand accused of. In disregarding an IRA curfew, imposed to show solidarity with the Bloody Sunday victims and their families, he is said to have broken "Our tribe's complicity" (*FW*, 23). Heaney's word-choice is extremely important here, since it shifts attention away from O'Neill's failure towards the notion of a collective guilt within the nationalist community, which over the past three years had tolerated unjustifiable, inhuman acts carried out by the Provisional IRA. Revisiting O'Neill's death in *Human Chain*, Heaney depicts him as wholly victim, someone caught in "the wrong place". The phrase is absent from the first published version of the poem in *The Riverbank Field*, yet represents an interesting addition.[51] It prompts the reader to add "at the wrong time", but then perhaps to go further. The unnamed location of the bombing, like the Derry streets, like the whole province, is a place where terrible "wrong" has been and continues to be committed.

Structure, sound, imagery and diction all play a key role in containing Poem IX's emotion, in generating ironies, in charging the reader to write and right meaning. Its four tercets incorporate three questions, and a critical turning-point on line 9 when the contrasting fates of the different war casualties are broached. Mortality and finality are emphasised in the shock of the opening line, where three of the four stresses fall on words that are semantically and aurally linked ("end", "left" and "bury"). This attunes us to the poem's play with rhythm and resonance, its deployment of alliteration and assonance, full and half-rhymes ("bury"/"Lavery"; "bore"/"door"; "still"/"O'Neill"; "device"/"House"/"-place"; "buried"/"Derry"; "what"/"not"/"plot"). Words are strategically placed for acoustic effect, like the "pr***i***med dev***i***ce" which occupies a central position in line 3, encircled by plosive "b"s and "p"s:

> And what in the end was there left to **b**ury
> Of Mr Lavery, **b**lown u**p** in his own **p**u**b**
> As he **b**ore the **p**rimed device and **b**ears it still.

The verb repetition here is very significant; "to bear" belongs to a higher register than "to carry" or "to take", suggesting something altogether grander, even heroic.[52] It is a verb encountered in many common phrases which have a bearing on the poem as a whole, phrases such as "bearing the brunt", "bearing arms", "bearing the consequences", "bearing responsibility", "bearing witness". That this individual, this action, this moment exist in the speaker's present is conveyed by the forward movement in tense, an idea reinforced by

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the choice and placing of the adverb. “Still” bears a double meaning, and serves to prolong Lavery’s careful, tentative act. Ironies accrue in the succeeding lines which refer to the “*sun*-admitting door”, through which less welcome visitors pass, and to “Ashley House”, reduced by the bomb to dust and rubble.

The door image opens the way first to O’Neill, whose murder and guiltlessness links him to the “Thirteen ... shot in Derry”, and then on to countless other victims. After death, they endure further violence and degradation: they are de-individualised (“bodies”), treated as commodities, as irretrievably damaged goods (“accounted for and bagged”).[53] In revising *The Riverbank Field* version of IX, Heaney enhances the weightiness of two key words by moving them. In *Human Chain*, “bodies” is placed at the hinge-point of lines 7 and 8, while “Unglorified” is re-positioned at the start of line 8; as a consequence, it acquires an important change in stress (“ungl**ó**rified” becomes “**Ún**glorified”). The unusual polysyllable thus becomes a pivot-point in and to the poem’s closing comparisons, in which these forgotten civilians figure as “un-”, “not” and “nor” people, consigned to invisibility “Behind the grief cordons”. Those who may very well bear responsibility for destroying their lives, meanwhile, are honoured and celebrated by their well-drilled, smartly-kitted-out replacements. The poem’s last word defines this new generation of paramilitaries as “unreconciled”, though as to what the reader again is encouraged to speculate. “Unreconciled” to the loss of fallen comrades? To the end of the military struggle? To the partition of Ireland? To the use of constitutional means and power-sharing to advance or maintain their objectives? To responsibility for the deaths of innocent civilians? These are all possible readings.

There is a marked lightening of tone in Poem X, which claims, very much tongue-in-cheek, that the athletic contests Aeneas witnessed in the Elysian fields were “Not unlike” those held yearly on Bellaghy sports day. While Virgil’s original and Heaney’s “imitation” share a twilight setting, a “roseate” between-times, there close resemblances end. Rather than to a “live” Orpheus, the crowds in rural Derry are treated to an amplified Slim Whitman, his voice “wavering” above, not weaving into, the activity on the ground. Pitched differently, Heaney’s lyric delights more in the visual than the musical, picturing “sparking dodgems, flying chair-o-planes”, which, along with the mile-long line of parked cars, serve as mechanised stand-ins for Book VI’s “phantom” chariots.[54] Following Kavanagh’s example, Heaney replaces epic heroes, “those who suffered wounds, fighting for their country”,[55] with humbler, down-to-earth characters. The narrator notes the passion, energy and ruthlessness of footballers as they go “hell for leather” after the ball, inflicting stud-scrapes on the pitch and on each other (57). In the wider context of the sequence, his passing reference to the “final whistle” carries considerable resonance; it is suggestive of other endings including death itself, and, in relation to both *The Aeneid*’s religious mythology and the Christian concept of the Last Judgment,[56] anticipates that liminal moment when the long-dead are about to be reborn. Again the poet through a willed regenerative act reanimates lives and times which could so easily be lost to the individual and collective memory, creating a kind of afterlife in print.

Further evidence that intimations of the future are integral to Heaney’s re-imaginings of the past can be seen in the sequence’s penultimate offering. What adds irony and poignancy to the “spot of time” Poem XI replays – precious hours of unity in the Heaney father–son relationship[57] – is the writer’s *and* reader’s foreknowledge of imminent and recurring change. In contrast to the previously published version, where Heaney had emphasised passive concentration – the angling pair “stand / Just watching” (*RF*, ll. 1–2), and are viewed finally “standing watching” (*RF*, l. 11) – in the revised text for *Human Chain* feelings of anticipation are given priority. Situated “on the brink”, as they “*wait* and

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watch", stand there "*waiting*, watching" (*HC*, ll. 1, 11),[58] they and we sense something uncanny afoot, "something more of the depths", as Frost has it.[59] Ahead of the particular instant the poem records lie multiple, geographical, cultural and imaginative relocations for the boy and man, crises that will test their lives and work.

A wistful exclamation provides an initial impetus to the poem. The speaker recalls the pleasure of fishing with his father, his use of the first-person plural here contrasting with the singular "I" encountered in "Uncoupled". This is a rare, shared experience, transmitted in simple alliterated diction, tripping monosyllables. On one particular occasion, the habitual stillness is disturbed. At first the persona appears definite that it *was* an otter's head breaking the water-surface, but then immediately admits alternative possibilities. Magical, elusive, a creature that divides its existence between elements, the otter carries associations in Heaney's mind with both the natal terrain and his future creative life. Seminal to his very making as a poet were his early encounters with Ted Hughes and his extensive bestiary.[60] From his 1960 collection *Lupercal*, "An Otter" testifies to Hughes extraordinary empathy and prescience about the decline of native species due to environmental abuse. Like John Clare in "The Badger", Hughes marvels at the animal's resilience, mourns its displacement and the savagery it faces at the hands of mankind. For Heaney, "An Otter" demonstrates how as a young writer Hughes "wasn't just reading the world" but also "intuiting a destiny and readying for it" (*SS*, 394).

In Heaney's universe, however, the otter is neither exile nor victim but a mediatory, affirmatory source and force. It is an unseen presence in "Fireside" (*Wintering Out*, 76), where light strikes the "licked black pelt"[61] of a stream, setting off "a gleam / of the fabulous". In *Field Work*, it serves as a metaphor to celebrate his wife's grace, intentness, and limitless élan. Whereas at the outset the narrator seems most enthralled by her physicality, the "wet head", the "Surfacing and surfacing again", ultimately she is credited with restorative agency, the capacity to reconfigure herself and transfigure others. Apostrophised as "my palpable, lithe / Otter of memory", she possesses the capacity, like art, of "Retilting the light", of leaving an imprint not just on "stones" (*FW*, 47). The otter's luminous qualities and textual credentials are similarly on display in "Station Island" X, where its miraculous retrieval of his psalter leaves Ronan agog at the "dazzle of impossibility" (*SI*, 88), and in this collection, where one of Ronan's seminarians is aroused by an account of two otters "courting", picturing them "at their shiny romps" ("Otterboy", *HC*, 69).[62]

Regardless of what caused the "gleam", whether an otter, a "ruck" or "a turnover warp", the speaker is convinced that some kind of epiphany has occurred, and scores it accordingly. Plosive "k"s in "ruck", "took", "black", "Quick", "riverbank", "brink" are like snags in the flow, composed of alliterated "w", "t", "d", "s" sounds, assonantal "ɪ", "əʊ", "ɜ", "ɔ". His "No doubting / … Or doubting" (ll. 5, 7) are designed to dismiss all thought of dissent, and even the "solid ground" is invoked for corroboration, though the uncertain light and presence of the midge-drift "ahover" seem to lessen the idea of solidity. In conveying the intensity of feeling he felt with and for his father, he opts for a religious image ("commingling"), one bound up with the concept of transubstantiation. With the preceding use of "as if", however, a measure of reservation is retained, qualifying his longing for the definitive and ungainsayable. Diagnosing himself as "Needy and even needier for translation" the poem's speaker is referring to himself critically then and now, how he has hungered after new experiences and stepping-off points, perhaps in part as a compensation for or distraction from an aching lack in some part of his depths. Against that must be set the force of his recognition that for any human being seeking individuation – not least a poet and critic – a constant receptivity to "translation" remains an absolute necessity.[63]

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Looking back, Poems XI and XII cannot but also look forward, sensing signs of "renovating virtue"[64] yet to come. "Route 110" reaches its terminus alluding to an episode featured in its preamble, that section from *The Aeneid* in which Anchises relates how, following a thousand years in purgatory, some spirits are granted "second bodies". Aeneas' sense of privilege at being able to glimpse his and his father's heirs, "glorious souls waiting to inherit our name",[65] would clearly be deeply affecting for Heaney, conscious of how he very nearly might have missed his grandchildren's birth. A buoyant, look-we-have-come-through pride emanates throughout Poem XII. Instantly succeeding the declarative, present-set opening, an epic simile ("As when once ...") signals a journey back to an earlier "age of births". The speaker re-creates a vivid scene from a morning after the night before, when to "quell ... smells of drink and smoke" following celebrations for a new arrival, one guest – clearly with a feel for the symbolic as well as the practical[66] – gathered fresh flowers from the garden at dawn. In a gesture replicating that act, and also Mrs Nick's gift in Poem V, he arrives back in the present, beside his infant granddaughter's crib with his own "bunch of stalks and silvered heads". In the text first published in *The Riverbank Field*, he refers to this as "a morning offering", a phrase redolent of his Catholic childhood, but less applicable to the secularised *paterfamilias* of the 2000s. For *Human Chain*, he opts for the somewhat awkward but more secular-sounding "thank-offering", inserting the "morning" image at an earlier point (l. 6), in order to consolidate the semantic cluster that began with "births" and "dawn" (ll. 1, 2). The retention of the word "offering" combined with the reference to "tapers that won't dim" at least thwarts, if not defeats, that secularising impulse. Yet tellingly again, one notes the presence of a qualification, how the preposition "Like" admits the possibility that the silvery gleam might not continue.

As it did in the beginning, affirmation marks the final stanza, a sense of a cycle completed. Ending her "long wait on the shaded bank", the sequence's dedicatee, his first granddaughter, Anna Rose, makes her first appearance in the Heaney canon, shedding "earthlight" over the assembled family. The witty depiction of the grown-ups "Talking baby talk" manages to suggest both how one happy event triggers memories of others, and a tendency among adults to revert to second childishness on glimpsing a baby in a cot or pram.

* * *

Like the exquisitely-pitched, tender, poignant lyrics with which *Human Chain* begins – one thinks of "Album", "The Conway Stewart", "Uncoupled", "The Butts" – the "Route 110" sequence is animated by continuing feelings of deep affection for the people and places who comprised his first world, and a consciousness of his own mortality. Patrick Crotty's astute observations on *Seeing Things*, published almost twenty years earlier, shed no small light on Heaney's twelfth and last volume, in which

> a poetry of tentative departures gives way at last to a poetry of arrival. The translation from *The Aeneid* which prefaces the volume announces a visit to the underworld, but the place arrived at in the poems which follow is, rather, Heaney's first world, the County Derry childhood. The difference is that is approached now – "seen" as if for the first time – in the light of mortality, and in particular of the death in 1986 of the poet's father.[67]

The keenness of that loss seems never to have diminished. In recent years, however, Heaney clearly achieved considerable uplift both as a result of the success with which he was able to journey back into the heartland of his memory *and* because of the equally restorative prospect of journeying forward in the presence of an intensely supportive family, which had acquired two new members, Anna Rose and Aibhin Lily. By setting lyrics dedicated to his granddaughters at the centre and at the close of *Human Chain*,[68] Heaney inscribes them within the ancestral line, and within a poetic corpus.

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Notes

1. Heaney, "The Journey Back", 7.
2. Homen, *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland*, 1.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 389.
5. Dante, *The Inferno*, 67
6. In an interview with Robert McCrum, "A Life of Rhyme" (*The Observer*, July 19, 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/19/seamus-heaney-interview (accessed April 12, 2010)), Heaney describes how in the critical hours on the way to hospital, he and his wife experienced a profound "renewal" of their love. Pressed on other memories, he recalled also his terrible sense of helplessness: "I cried, and I wanted my Daddy … I felt babyish."
7. Dates from two private letters to the author, May 22, 2010 and January 24, 2011.
8. Heaney, *The Riverbank Field*.
9. *RF*, "Route 110", Poem XI, n.p.
10. Dawe, *The Poetry Programme*.
11. G.P. Goold, Introduction to the Loeb Classical Library edition of *Virgil: Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid 1–6*, trans. H.R. Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1. For the sake of brevity, all citations will be given as Loeb.
12. Lyne, "Augustan Poetry and Society", 598.
13. Goold, in Loeb, 1.
14. Jackson Knight, Introduction to *The Aeneid*, 11–12. Like other scholars, he notes that Virgil was a shy, retiring figure, who suffered repeated spells of ill-health.
15. Garfitt, Introduction to Seamus Heaney, 2.
16. Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, asserts that "Poetic Influence is gain and loss". In exemplifying the loss, he subsequently maintains that when "one poet influences another, or more precisely one poet's poems influence the poems of the other, through a generosity of spirit", this signifies weakness on the part of the writer influenced. He goes on to argue that fruitful exchanges can occur between "two strong, authentic poets", but that generally the outcome of this dialogue is a "misreading", "distortion" and "wilful" revision of "the prior poet" (29–30).
17. Garfitt, Introduction to Seamus Heaney, 2.
18. Reeves, "'Fearful Equivocal Words'", 94, 99.
19. The Loeb Classical Library translation from which Heaney quotes is the work of H.R. Fairclough, and dates from 1918.
20. Aristotle, *Poetics*: "To be a master of metaphor is a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."
21. In the first published version of the poem, Heaney had opted for "under the dome of heaven" in the final line, a phrase strongly religious in resonance, and which had featured in his *Beowulf* translation, line 414.
22. Yeats, *Yeats's Poems*, 302.
23. Dawe, *The Poetry Programme*. Smithfield Market was one of the oldest, most popular centres for shopping in Belfast, and noted for its huge glass canopy and the diversity of its wares. In 1974 it was fire-bombed and left gutted. The Market is the subject of a poem by Ciaran Carson in *The Irish For No* (1987), which depicts it as a labyrinthine space filled with losses, absences, substitutions.
24. Loeb, 555, l. 305.
25. "Thick as the birds that from the seething deep flock shoreward, when the chill of the year drives them overseas and sends them into sunny lands" (ibid., 555, ll. 311–12).
26. Ibid.
27. Seamus Heaney, interviewed by Adair, "Calling the Tune", 7.
28. Loeb, 545, 547, ll. 191–2.
29. The occasion recalled in the poem is a visit to Tuscany made in 1967 to attend a sister-in-law's wedding.
30. Ibid., 547, l. 207.
31. *RF*, "Route 110", Poem IV, n.p.
32. Heaney, *Field Work*, 58.
33. For an analysis that seeks to exclude the transcendent from Heaney's art, see Clifton's "The Physical World of Seamus Heaney", 23.

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34. Aeneas' exchanges with Palinurus extend from ll. 337–84. See Loeb, 557, 559.
35. For an account which matches closely Poem VII, see O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 48.
36. *"Qualem primo qui surgere mense / aut videt aut vidisse putat per nubila lunam*", Loeb, 564.
37. Loeb, 565, ll. 452, 450.
38. The unidentified, abandoned figure may well be the "serious girl-friend" Heaney mentions in O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 45, 406. The relationship, which occurred during his final years at Queen's, ended "in a certain amount of guilt rather than hate". In the first reference he mentions driving to dances in the girl's home place, in the later one he is specific about how "unflashy" his earliest amorous encounters were, which fits in with this poem's ending.
39. Ibid. Aeneas breaks into tears three times (Loeb, ll. 455, 468, 476).
40. Ibid., l. 469.
41. The "flicker-flushing" on line 7 might be applicable not only to the car but also to its driver. He must be experiencing a range of fluctuating emotions as he pulls away, including shame and relief.
42. Heaney's final year at school and entire university career coincided with the IRA's "Operation Harvest" campaign, which resulted in eighteen deaths and involved around 600 separate incidents. See Parker, *Northern Irish Literature*, 1–2.
43. Heaney refers in the penultimate line to "necking", a term which in Ireland referred to intimate contact while dancing, with the couple neck to neck.
44. "Every sin that a man doth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body" (Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, 6:18).
45. Carpenter and Levine, Introduction to *To Begin Where I Am*, ix.
46. Beckett, *Come and Go*, from *The Complete Dramatic Works*, 355.
47. Hewitt, "Neither an Elegy Nor a Manifesto", from *Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, 188.
48. McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives*, 134. Two days before Lavery's death, Heaney had received a card from John Hewitt which referred to a recent discussion with friends in which "our safe frustrations" were compared with the fates of those "folk in the firing line"(Emory MSS 960, 1:1).
49. Letters in Emory MSS 960, from Ann Saddlemyer, dating from mid- and late January 1972, indicate that the Heaneys were definitely considering a move. On 29 January, she offers them the opportunity of renting her cottage in Glanmore, Co. Wicklow, for the next year, starting in mid-September 1972.
50. The editors of *Lost Lives*, 150, suggest that it was probably the work of loyalist bombers. At the time, however, and in Heaney's poem "Casualty" (*Field Work*, 21–4), it was attributed to republican paramilitaries. In O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 214, Heaney acknowledges that the loyalists from the UVF might have been responsible.
51. The earlier version speaks instead "of Louis O'Neill / Bomb-blasted after hours the Wednesday / The thirteen Bloody Sunday dead were buried" (*The Riverbank Field*, n.p.).
52. One might associate the phrase "bearing the device" with a medieval knight.
53. More innocent bags feature earlier in "Route 110", in the opening poem's reference to a paper bag into which his copy of *The Aeneid* VI is dropped and in Poem II's mention of his "bagged Virgil".
54. Loeb, 579, l. 654.
55. Ibid., l. 660.
56. For "final whistle", read "the last trump".
57. Extra-textual evidence enables one confidently to identify the "we" on the riverbank as Heaney *père et fils*, in the time the summer before the son's departure to St Columb's. See "Album", IV, 7.
58. In his previous collection, in "The Aerodrome" (*District and Circle*, 11), Heaney had employed the same two verbs together twice, albeit in reverse order, to depict a moment of unity with his mother.
59. Frost, "For Once, Then Something", in *Selected Poems*, 130–1. Heaney's inability to identify for certain what they had seen (ll. 3–5) is reminiscent of Frost's "What was that whiteness? / Truth? A pebble of quartz?" (ll. 14–15).
60. It could be argued that Poem XI invokes the presence of *two* fathers, one biological, the other adopted.
61. Hughes's otter "cleaves the stream's push till he *licks* / The pebbles of the source", and at the close is reduced to a "long *pelt* over the back of a chair" (*Lupercal*, 47)

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62. Though subsequently he proceeds to visualise himself as their destroyer, the speaker's deep attraction to them is evident in his closing reverie, in which, abandoning discipline, he "gambols / In pelt-sluice and unruly riverbreath".
63. Yeats remarked to Synge that style is "born out of the shock of new material" (*Autobiographies*, 531, qtd in Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 169).
64. Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), 577.
65. Loeb, 584, 586, ll. 748, 758.
66. In the Dawe interview, Heaney identifies him as the artist Colin Middleton, the subject of "Loughanure" (*HC*, 61–5).
67. Crotty, Review of Michael Longley's *Gorse Fires*, 117–18.
68. *Human Chain*'s final poem is "A Kite for Aibhin". A brief discussion of this poem can be found in my essay "'Air from Another Time and Place'", 22.

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