

**Sounding the Darkness and Discovering the Marvelous: Hearing ‘A Lough
Neagh Sequence’ with Seamus Heaney’s Auditory Imagination**

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Abstract

This essay carefully analyzes an important facet of T. S. Eliot's influence on Heaney, namely their shared understanding of the auditory imagination. Heaney looks to Eliot's auditory imagination to help him accomplish three vital poetic tasks: sounding the dark places of the earth, discovering a luminescence within these dark places, and inspiring poetry even when his dark surroundings threaten to silence his art. After accomplishing this through close readings of a wide selection of Heaney's prose and poetry, the essay presents detailed, original readings of Heaney's neglected, 'A Lough Neagh Sequence'. These readings practically illustrate the operation of Heaney's auditory imagination and the significance of his poetry's aural elements.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney; auditory imagination; sound patterns.

Sounding the Darkness and Discovering the Marvelous: Hearing ‘A Lough Neagh Sequence’ with Seamus Heaney’s Auditory Imagination

Although Seamus Heaney and W. B. Yeats have increasingly been linked—after Robert Lowell famously called Heaney ‘the best Irish poet since W. B. Yeats’—a more formative influence on Heaney was T. S. Eliot. In his essay, ‘Learning from Eliot’, Heaney claims that Eliot’s conception of the ‘auditory imagination’ was ‘the most important’ thing he learned from Eliot.ⁱ Heaney begins his essay ‘Englands of the Mind’ by defining this concept, a concept that exposes the workings of much of Heaney’s own poetry:

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

Several scholars have ably addressed aspects of Heaney’s poetry in relation to Eliot’s auditory imagination, but they have largely focused on only one aspect of Heaney’s multi-faceted description of this trait. As Anthony Cuda explains in his essay on Eliot and Heaney, ‘Scholars tend to restrict commentary on Heaney’s debt to Eliot to explications of the “auditory

imagination” and its relationship to his sense of the historical and racial continuity of language’.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in their exploration of Heaney’s words as ‘etymological occurrence[s], as symptom[s] of human history, memory and attachments’, critics have neglected Heaney’s use of words as ‘pure vocable, as articulate noise’, and the existing criticism has failed to articulate how Heaney’s use of words attempts to engage ‘the most primitive and forgotten’ and enables him to return ‘to the origin’ and bring back his discoveries. In the essay just quoted, Heaney himself focuses primarily on the etymological, cultural aspect of the auditory imagination as he analyzes the poetry of Hughes, Hill, and Larkin to demonstrate how their use of language and sound locates them in particular parts of England. In other essays, however, Heaney builds from Eliot’s conception of the auditory imagination to appreciate the inarticulate, primitively aural function of language in poetry. The aural echoing within his poetry enables Heaney to communicate on a visceral, instinctual plane and discover a linguistic delight that exists even in the darkest places of the actual, often-grim world.

‘The Guttural Muse’,^{iv} exemplifies Heaney’s search for this harmonic inspiration, his delicate feel for the aural qualities of language, and the healing delights that come from language’s sonic qualities. In ‘Traditions’ Heaney uses the term ‘guttural muse’ in reference to a particular, Irish way of speaking that has been challenged by the colonizing English language: ‘Our guttural muse / was bulled long ago / by the alliterative tradition’ (1-3).^v In his later poem from *Field Work*, ‘The Guttural Muse’, Heaney takes up the subject of this local muse and attempts to locate the source of its inspirational power. Heaney claims that the sounds of the youth talking in the car park were renewing for him, and while he does not explicitly state the way these sounds soothed him, he significantly links them to a fish. Heaney’s link between sublingual and subaqueous existence will be further explored in terms of ‘A Lough Neagh Sequence’; what is significant to

note now, however, is the way Heaney embeds the soothing effect of the sounds into his poem instead of attempting to didactically explicate their function.

The first line of the poem contains two distinct *i* sounds in the word ‘midnight’. The tense, short *i* in *mid*- contrasts with the falling, long *i* in *–night*. These two sounds weave through the poem, sonically mirroring the shifting emotions of the speaker as they alternately build and release tension. The tight ‘window’ in the third line is balanced by the relaxing ‘night’ of the fourth line. The short *i* sounds in ‘discotheque’ (5) and ‘thick’ (6) are almost onomatopoeically released in the long *o* and voiced *i* sounds of ‘comforting’ (6). The repeated ‘fish’ (9, 10) in the second stanza release into ‘slimy’ (8) and ‘slime’ (9). And in the third stanza, as the speaker begins to be healed by the sounds rising from the car park below him, the long, open-mouthed *i* sounds predominate in ‘white’ (11), ‘like’ (14), and ‘pike’ (14), broken only by the short *i* in ‘swim’ (15) that resolves in the poem’s final word—‘life’ (15). As in many of his poems, Heaney sets up a sound pattern in the beginning of the poem that he then weaves throughout it; in this case the contrasting *i* sounds in ‘midnight’ gradually shift toward the softer *i* in ‘life’; both *i* sounds are finally echoed in the concluding ‘swim . . . life’ to aurally convey the healing transformation the speaker experiences while listening to the voices rising from the car park.

In the second stanza, Heaney employs a sequence of repeated words to sonically mimic the bubbles rising from the ‘feeding tench’ (a freshwater fish whose thick mucus was thought to have healing properties) and the words rising from the youth in the car park. ‘Up’ is repeated in the first and second lines of the stanza; ‘tench’ appears in the second and third lines; ‘slimy’ shifts to ‘slime’ in the third and fourth lines; and ‘fish’ is repeated in the fourth and fifth lines. These words act as sonic, slimy bubbles, rising up in succeeding lines and providing an aural continuity in this stanza where Heaney describes the healing bubbles that rise from the tench fish.

As the poem concludes, its words echo earlier sounds and build into a swimming pool of vowels. '[C]ars' in the second line of the final stanza echoes the 'car park' in the poem's third line; the rhyming 'like' and 'pike' (14) echo the consonants of the earlier end-rhymed 'park' (3) and 'lake' (4); and the 'touch' in the final line of the poem echoes the 'touched' from the second stanza (10). The short vowels and plosive consonants from the first stanza—'I smelt the heat of the day' (2)—are contrasted, however, in the poem's concluding lines as long vowels predominate: 'her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs / I felt like some old pike all badged with sores / Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life' (13-15). Heaney's rhythm here at the poem's end also conveys this same peacefulness as the final line ends on three equally accented beats, slowing down the voice of the reader and leaving the voiced vowels hanging in the air. Through this careful use of sound, Heaney recreates in his poem the sonic experience that inspired it, as he explains about the poem's genesis in an interview, 'It was like a vision of the kind of life I had in the fifties, going to dances and so on, and I felt the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self'.^{vi} Heaney writes this poem explicitly about the healing power latent in the guttural, illiterate sounds of language, and he embeds these same sonic properties in his poem's own 'articulate noise', modeling an erotic use of words that fingers the mysterious underside of language and discovers salutary qualities.

In order to understand how Heaney intends sound to operate in his poetry, I will turn to several of his essays, particularly 'Learning from Eliot', 'Feeling into Words', and 'The Redress of Poetry', using Heaney's own prose to clarify the shortcomings of previous scholarly work about Eliot's influence on Heaney, particularly regarding his conception of the auditory imagination. Heaney looks to Eliot's auditory imagination to help him accomplish three vital poetic tasks: sounding the dark places of the earth, discovering a luminescence within these dark places, and inspiring poetry even when his dark surroundings threaten to silence his art. Heaney's essays

demonstrate his desire to write poetry that relies on an aural use of language to concomitantly plumb the earth's darkness and discover surprising luminescence through an erotic delight in language. Because Heaney's development of the aural, pre-verbal elements in his poetry is most intentional and explicit in his early poetry, as he seeks to clarify his own understanding of these concepts, I will illustrate this thesis with a reading of the often-neglected 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', from *Door into the Dark* (1969), paying close attention to the ways these poems use sound to plumb subaqueous depths and discover the 'marvel[s] of levitation'.^{vii}

Eliot's conception of the auditory imagination reveals why Heaney might turn to sound as an effective method for his investigation of the dark. Ever since the publication of *Wintering Out* with its poems on pronunciation and local uses of language, critics have rightly interpreted Heaney's use of language as a culturally unifying tool, allowing him to reach back to a culturally diverse set of etymological roots that transcend the typical identity definitions of Northern Ireland. As Meg Tyler puts it, 'The diction he uses, ranging from Ulster idiom to Latinate phrasing, illustrates his intentional reach towards languages and cultures other than his own', and she claims that his use of this broad linguistic tradition enables Heaney to create an expansive community within his poems.^{viii} Richard Russell builds on this strain of criticism to demonstrate how Heaney's language contributes to reconciliation in Northern Ireland: 'Heaney clearly draws upon his Scots, Irish, and English linguistic heritage in his poetic vocabulary, implicitly suggesting that so should the inhabitants of Northern Ireland in order to form an imagined community'.^{ix} Russell reads 'Broagh' carefully, noting the way that the repeated 'o' sounds are echoed throughout the poem to mimic the sound of the place name, with the poem finally ending in a series of fricative consonants that reproduce the difficulty strangers have in pronouncing the place name.^x

In his reading of 'Broagh' that listens to the poem's aural texture, Russell begins to expand the way critics have normally dealt with Heaney's language; Russell notes not only the etymological and cultural depths of Heaney's language but also the sonic, pre-verbal depths. Both understandings are necessary for a competent auditory reading of Heaney's poems, but the primitive elements of Heaney's language have too often been overlooked. As Cuda states in the introduction to his essay on the way Heaney draws on Eliot's conception of memory, 'Postcolonial scholars have tended to focus on Heaney's attention to matters of politics, regionalism, and cultural identity, leaving relatively unexplored his intellectual allegiances to major modern poets besides Joyce and Yeats'.^{xi} And while Cuda masterfully explores the way Heaney learned from Eliot's understanding of the valuable, redemptive uses of memory, he concludes his essay by noting the work that remains to be done: 'Scholars have barely begun to gauge the tremendous pressure that Eliot's influence exerts on Heaney's work, to discern his formative shade lurking behind the urgent social and political concerns that have provoked so much debate, and to trace the contours of a lifelong creative exchange between the two'.^{xii} So while the language Heaney uses certainly draws on Eliot's auditory imagination through its attention to the etymological, cultural history of words and its echoes of diverse poetic traditions, the critical discussion must be expanded to include the way Heaney uses words as 'pure vocable' in order to 'raid' what is inarticulate and 'set the darkness echoing'.^{xiii}

There appear to be three somewhat distinct aspects to the way Heaney sees the auditory imagination operating in his poetry. The first is the ability of sound to plumb the subconscious depths of the reader and the primitive depths of the earth. Heaney found this instinctual, pre-verbal music described in C. K. Stead's analysis of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As Heaney explains about Stead's reading, '[*The Waste Land*] represents a defeat of the will, an emergence of the

ungainsayable and symbolically radiant out of the subconscious deeps. Rational structure has been overtaken or gone through like a sound barrier. The poem does not disdain intellect, yet poetry, having to do with feelings and emotions, must not submit to the intellect's eagerness to foreclose'.^{xiv} So while Heaney still affirms the poem's responsibility to mean, he values Eliot's poetry because it does not merely mean but also reaches toward the reader's subconscious, operating at a deeper level than that of the rational. As Eliot explains, 'If, as we are aware, only a part of the meaning can be conveyed by paraphrase, that is because the poet is occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'.^{xv} Or, as Stead puts it while describing *The Waste Land*, 'the experience of [Eliot's] poetry is foremost an aural, emotional experience, one which approximates in many ways to the experience of listening to music'.^{xvi} Denis Donoghue recognizes this quality in Eliot's poetry, locating the power of his poetry in its aural reach toward primitive, nebulous depths: 'Eliot's words appeal to primordial images and rhythms that can be felt, though they cannot well be called in evidence'.^{xvii} Eliot's erotic attention to the phonetic qualities of words enables him to establish these instinctual rhythms that operate below the surface of the poem's meaning.

Heaney sensed this reach in Eliot's poetry for a pre-verbal, aural level of communication: 'I love [his] lines . . . because of the pitch of their music, their nerve-end tremulousness, their treble in the helix of the ear'.^{xviii} Heaney writes about this aural meaning in an essay on Irish poetry, claiming that what is often most significant about a poem is not its explicit content but its sound: 'In a poem, words, phrases, cadences and images are linked into systems of affect and signification which elude the précis maker. These under-ear activities, as they might be termed, may well constituted the most important business which the poem is up to and are a matter more of the erotics of language than of the politics and polemics of the moment'.^{xix} As Heaney explains in his comments on the auditory imagination, he believes that the sounds of a poem communicate

through echoing literary traditions as well as by expressing an instinctive, erotic conception of language that affirms a delight in and appreciation of sound even in the face of dark subject matter. Heaney further clarified this idea in an interview:

Nevertheless, poetry isn't just its thematic content. Poetry is in the musical intonation. What is missing in a lot of . . . criticism is any sense of the modulation, the intonation, the way the spirit moves in a cadence. It deliberately eschews the poetryness of poetry in order to get at its thematic and its submerged political implication. That's perfectly in order as a form of intellectual exercise and political protest, but it is not what the thing in itself is.^{xx}

For Heaney, then, the unique essence of poetry consists in its aural patterns, patterns that he learned from Eliot can work on a subconscious level that the paraphrasable meaning of a poem's words fails to touch. As Heaney claims about his reading of *The Waste Land*, he learned to discover meaning not just from the literal signification of the words but from the 'undulant cadences and dissolvings and reinings in' of its aural music.^{xxi}

Heaney's descriptions of the musical cadence of poetry clarifies his position within an ongoing debate among poetry critics and linguists about whether certain sounds have universal emotional meanings or whether sound patterns assume particular semantic content primarily within the context of a particular poem. Some critics, like Reuven Tsur, John Vernon, and Roman Jakobson, argue that individual vowels and consonants carry nearly universal, if vague, semantic content.^{xxii} Others, however, like Jan Mukařovský and Benjamin Harshav contradict these claims; as Mukařovský states: 'the aesthetic effect of speech sounds has its source in the serial arrangement which attracts attention to them, whereas semantic value adheres only additionally as a consequence of the contact between the euphonic speech sound pattern and the content'.^{xxiii}

Harshav expands on Mukařovský's description of this process, explaining that sound patterns gain

‘expressive meaning’ through a dialectical progression: ‘In short, we have a two-directional process: first, a sound pattern is established, then, certain meanings in the same text are transferred to the sound pattern, and then the tone of this sound pattern, colored by such meanings, is transferred back to the level of meaning, reinforcing it’.^{xxiv} In both his prose and poetry, Heaney largely aligns himself with this latter view; yet he believes the ability of sound patterns to reinforce meaning enables poetry to communicate in a physical, subconscious, and powerful way.

Poetry’s ability to reach the reader on this pre-verbal level fascinated and inspired Heaney as a young poet, and Eliot’s poetry directed him to conceive of poetry as a medium whose power and effectiveness lie not in some didactic communication but in an aural transmission of human emotion. This physical conveyance of emotion confirms humanity’s common link to a dark, mysterious reality, one that not only harbors violence and hate but also contains beauty and love. Heaney’s poetic soundings plumb this ambiguous emotional origin and confirm their aural delights in the midst of its fearsome uncertainty. In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney delineates the unifying, chthonic level from which he seeks to speak, ‘The all-important thing here is the emerging authority which one senses in the poem being written, when you recognize that there are elements in the poem which are capillaries into the large brutal scheme of things, capillaries sucking the whole of the earth’.^{xxv} As Heaney makes clear in these statements, for him the power of poetry lies in its patterning of sound, its tapping of chthonic power through its use of articulate noise that draws from but transcends the merely denotative meaning of the words; the physical, primitive aspect of language allows the poet to plumb the physical, primitive depths of human experience. Part of the reason this excavation is important to Heaney, as Tyler and Russell claim, is because of his desire to speak across partisan lines in Northern Ireland; poetry communicates on a visceral plane that is common to all humans, regardless of their language or nationality.

But Heaney's valuation of the self-delighting properties of language extends his aural use of language beyond these unifying effects; the second reason he embraces the auditory imagination involves language's ability to affirm, through its aural felicities, life's marvelous core even in the midst of a threatening darkness. In 'Crediting Poetry', Heaney claims that this realization happened years into his career:

[F]or years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world Forgetting faith, straining towards good works. . . . Then finally and happily, and not in obedience to the dolorous circumstances of my native place but in spite of them, I straightened up. I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as for the murderous.^{xxvi}

While Heaney may be accurately describing his conscious outlook, and while there is a certain upward trajectory in his poetic *oeuvre*, he underestimates here the marvelous that has always been present in his poetry, even in the poems that most explicitly plumb the earth's menacing core. While embracing the dark, fearsome parts of life may not seem to be the way to write uplifting poetry, this is the course that Heaney follows and that he also sees in Frost's best poems: '[T]he paradoxical result of this drive toward abasement is a marvel of levitation: in spite of the physical push to earthward, the psychic direction is skyward'.^{xxvii} Tellingly, Heaney identifies the source of the upward thrust of Frost's poetry in the rhythmic and aural delights of its language: 'I call it an emotional occurrence, yet it is preeminently a rhythmic one, an animation via the ear of the whole nervous apparatus'.^{xxviii} And this physical, aural uplift occurs even in poetry about the murderous.

In his essay on Frost, Heaney compares the upward movement in Frost's poetry to the idea of poetic redress that he develops in his essay 'The Redress of Poetry.' In this essay, Heaney attempts to put his finger on the sufficient power of art even when faced with modern atrocities, and he locates art's salutary quality in the delight and gratification it can provide.^{xxix} Heaney stresses that this aesthetic, aural delight does not often come through the poet's attempt to convey a deep moral truth; instead, it surprises the poet as he attempts to be faithful to his art rather than to a political or ideological commitment:

The movement is from delight to wisdom and not vice versa. The felicity of a cadence, the chain reaction of a rhyme, the pleasuring of an etymology, such things can proceed happily and as it were autistically, in an area of mental operations cordoned off by and from the critical sense. . . . It is only right that this should be the case. Poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world.^{xxx}

So while social wisdom may come, it must be secondary to the poem's delight in language, its felicities of sound. In good, auditory poetry, the very sounds that enable the poet to explore the deep, dark places of human experience can become a source of delight, and indeed, for Heaney, this auditory discovery is poetry's hope in difficult times.

The third aspect of Heaney's auditory imagination involves its power as a muse; the sounds of language assist Heaney to discover his poetry. Poetic scholars have noted how some poems follow aural patterns that may originate subconsciously. Northrop Frye describes how "babble" can become the organizing principle of lyric poetry, and Roman Jakobson argues that this aural intuition operates even when neither author nor reader are consciously aware of it:

‘Intuition may act as the main or, not seldom, even sole designer of the complicated phonological and grammatical structures in the writings of individual poets. Such structures, particularly powerful on the subliminal level, can function without any assistance of logical judgment and patent knowledge both in the poet’s creative work and in its perception by the sensitive reader’.^{xxx} This aural intuition describes the composition process that Heaney claims he learned from Eliot.

In his essay on Eliot, Heaney explains how Eliot’s use of sound was enabling for him as a young poet: ‘Eliot’s revelation of his susceptibility to such lines, the physicality of his ear . . . , confirmed a natural inclination to make myself an echo chamber for the poem’s sounds. I was encouraged to seek for the contour of a meaning within the pattern of a rhythm’.^{xxxii} Heaney further emphasizes the importance of sound in his own creative process as he describes his early years as a poet: ‘Gradually, therefore, I began in the early 1960s to take pleasure in the basement life of Eliot’s ear and to teach myself ‘to sit still’ and let its underworkings work. These were also years when I was trying to make a start as a poet, and searching for the charge that sets writing energy flowing in a hitherto unwriting system’.^{xxxiii} Heaney clearly delineates, then, the further influence of Eliot on his use of sound in poetry; Eliot taught him to look below the denotative meanings of words and listen to their aural music when composing poetry.

Heaney explains the way that his stance towards sound assists his creative process in his essay ‘Feeling into Words.’ He reiterates his youthful fascination with the language of poetry, noting that ‘language could give you a kind of aural gooseflesh’,^{xxxiv} and he differentiates between technique and craft. The poetic craft is learned through practice and involves the way the poet puts words together to form a well-made poem. Technique is a much more fundamental quality and is difficult to learn:

Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet’s way with words . . . ; it involves a definition of his stance towards life It involves the discovery of

ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate. . .

Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form.^{xxxv}

The process that Heaney describes, with a phrase borrowed from *The Four Quartets*, precedes the poet's proficient construction of the poem; without a deep, true perception of experience, there is nothing for the poet to form into poetry. As Heaney explains, 'A poem can survive stylistic blemishes but it cannot survive a still-birth. The crucial action is pre-verbal'.^{xxxvi} For Heaney, this primary level of creation is not intellectual but instinctual, not meaning-focused but sound-focused: 'Technique is what allows that first stirring of the mind round a word or an image or a memory to grow towards articulation: articulation not necessarily in terms of argument or explication but in terms of its own potential for harmonious self-reproduction'.^{xxxvii} While Heaney claims his creative technique operates on multiple levels—around words, images, or memories—he uses an auditory metaphor to describe its method, 'harmonious self-reproduction'. The genesis of his creative process, then, relies on an erotic attentiveness to the physical harmonies of sound, as well as visual and historical harmonies, and the harmonious echoes between words assist Heaney to discover and then to create his poems.

With this understanding of Heaney's erotic attention to the aural side of poetry, I want to turn to 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' to demonstrate the practical ways that he modulates the tone of his lines and weaves patterns of sound through his poems. These ways of hearing Heaney's poems open up the complex auditory world that his poetry creates and illustrate how he engages and delights his readers on a visceral, primitive level. Heaney's poetry weaves an aural fabric

where distinctive bits of sound are repeated to link sections, varied to reveal gradations of meaning, and contrasted to distinguish different images. Like a piece of music whose theme is repeated and varied by different instruments, the language of Heaney's poetry forms an intricate song that operates below and interweaves with the denotative meanings of his words. Often, Heaney establishes a distinctive sound at the beginning of the poem and then echoes, with variations, this sound throughout the poem, finally repeating it at the end.^{xxxviii} Many critics have noted the incredible depth in Heaney's poetic language,^{xxxix} but by examining individual Heaney poems in terms of their sonic tone and pattern, in addition to their etymological and denotative meaning, we can gain a detailed understanding of the practical ways that Heaney's language elicits these laudatory reviews.

Since Heaney conceives of the aural side of poetry as a means of accessing the pre-verbal, instinctual side of existence, it seems logical to turn to the volume of poetry where he most explicitly writes about these depths: *Door into the Dark* (1969). Heaney himself describes the kind of poetry he attempts in this book:

The title of the book comes from the first line of 'The Forge', a poem that uses the dark, active centre of the blacksmith's shed as an emblem for the instinctive, blurred stirring and shaping of some kinds of art. And I was happy to discover after I had chosen the title that it follows directly from the last line in my first book. That line suggested that the two directions of my poetry were 'to see myself, to set the darkness echoing.' I hope some echoes have been set up.^{xl}

Neil Corcoran also notes that this volume works out the rhyming investigation of the dark that Heaney declares he will undertake in 'Personal Helicon.'^{xli} Numerous critics have described the subject of this volume as an exploration of the dark, primitive parts of the world,^{xlii} with Henry Hart perhaps stating Heaney's interest most accurately: 'In 'The Forge' [which contains the titular

phrase] Heaney illustrates the preliterate [sic], instinctual, unconscious urges and binary oppositions he finds at the center of all creation'.^{xliii}

Several critics have seen the centrality of 'A Lough Neagh Sequence'^{xliiv} to this investigation of the dark that Heaney indicates in 'Personal Helicon'. Jon Stallworthy notes that the lake in this sequence acts like the deep wells in that earlier poem, 'As the young poet had rhymed "to see [himself], to set the darkness echoing", there is a sense in which he is fishing for himself in a number of later poems. The clearest example is "A Lough Neagh Sequence"'.^{xlv} John Wilson Foster also notes the significance of this sequence in his essay on the scientific and cultural sources of its motifs: "'A Lough Neagh Sequence' occupies the poetic center of Seamus Heaney's second volume, *Door into the Dark*'.^{xlvi} Heaney himself validates this attention by spending a third of the short note he wrote about this volume for the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* discussing the sequence:

Then comes 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', seven short poems inspired by the mysterious life-cycle of the eel and the compulsive work-cycles in the eel-fishermen's life. I envisaged this sequence as a kind of Celtic pattern; the basic structural image is the circle—the circle of the eel's journey, the fishermen's year, the boats' wakes, the coiled lines, the coiled catch, and much else; and in places the connotations of the language is meant to relate the compulsions and confrontation of fish and fishermen to sexual compulsions and confrontations that occur beyond Lough Neagh.^{xlvii}

The sequence does indeed follow cyclical patterns, and not only in its content; the sounds in these poems echo and weave as Heaney draws on Eliot's auditory imagination in his process of 'returning to the origin and bringing something back'.^{xlviii}

These cyclical patterns also shape the chiasmic structure of the sequence: the first and last poems emphasize time ('Up the Shore' 7; 'Vision' 19) and the passing of years ('Up the Shore' 1, 16; 'Vision' 9)—facts that expose human frailty when confronted by the dark depths of the earth. The second and sixth poems chart mirror stages in the eels' life—their journey as elvers from Sargasso to Lough Neagh and their mysterious journey back to spawn and die. The third and fifth poems describe pulling life from subterranean and subaqueous depths—first worms from the dirt and then eels from the lake. The central poem, 'Setting', describes the way that the fruits of the first dark search are used to enable the second dark search; the worms pulled from the 'globe' ('Bait', 14) are lowered into aquatic depths to lure greater dark mysteries. This chiasmic structure emphasizes the cyclical form of the sequence and also lends it a religious significance, since chiasmus etymologically relates to the crucifix and has traditionally been associated with Christ's crucifixion.^{xlix}

Indeed, the origin that Heaney explores in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' is one fraught with suggestions of evil. In an interview given just after he published *Door into the Dark*, Heaney explains the implications that eels have for many Irish people because of a well-known statue of St. Patrick banishing snakes from Ireland: 'The snakes are the emblems of evil, perhaps, the satanic worms who poisoned Eden But in another way Patrick's staff could be seen as a spade that's planting a sense of sin in the country. . . . Certain life forces have been paralysed. I know several people in the country who will never eat eels because of the profound implications of this statue'.¹ Heaney wants to reach back to the ambiguous origins of evil and violence, the causes of the contemporary conflicts in Northern Ireland. He links this origin to Patrick Kavanagh's 'fog of unconsciousness' through which the artist must navigate: 'What is faith, indeed, but a trust in the fog; who is God but the King of the Dark? Somehow the dark presides in the Irish Christian consciousness. But not as a primeval womb which we shall re-enter: it is

something more negative'.^{li} So, like Dante's pilgrim journeying through the Inferno on his way to Paradise, Heaney descends into this sinister darkness as the necessary first stage in his ascent toward the marvelous. In 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', Heaney attempts to rehabilitate aspects of these potentially negative life forces; he sounds the dark fog of human experience and finds gleams of light in places long abandoned to evil.

The dedication of the sequence, 'for the fishermen', has several possible referents, in addition to the eel fishermen that the poem describes.^{lii} In one of the few previous Irish poems about Lough Neagh, 'Let Erin Remember the Days of Old', Thomas Moore describes a fisherman standing on 'Lough Neagh's bank' (9).^{liii} In this poem, the fisherman uses memory to 'look through the waves of time / For the long-faded glories they cover' (15-16). In his sequence, Heaney builds on this stance, not merely looking through these waves, but sounding their dark depths, lifting to the surface the ancient glories that echo back to him. Heaney's dedication could also refer to Yeats's 'The Fisherman', which describes Yeats's ideal, imagined reader as a 'wise and simple' fisherman (8).^{liv} By writing for this man, Yeats hoped to 'write for my own race / And the reality' (11-12), a reality in which Yeats felt himself surrounded by philistine readers. Interestingly, Heaney refers to this poem in an interview, identifying this fisherman as one of 'Yeats's Catholic figures'.^{lv} This reference indicates that Heaney hoped these poems could reach a rural, less literary audience through his use of sound. Because his 'phonetic depth' comes from his home and he writes these sonically rich poems to the rural fishermen of Lough Neagh, his use of sound might strike a chord in these readers.^{lvi}

In the sequence's first poem, 'Up the Shore,' the first and last lines of the poem are the same: 'The lough will *claim* a victim every year.' These lines provide a sonic frame for the significantly repeated *a* sounds that occur in the middle of the poem. In the second stanza, the *a* echoes mark the claim that the commercial fishing industry makes on the lough: 'They've set new

gates and *tanks* *against* the *flow*' (6). The capacity of this mechanized industry is great; they can 'lift five hundred stone [of eels] in one go' (8). The solitary fishermen catch their eels differently than the commercial ones, but Heaney uses the same vowel sound to describe their claim on the lough: 'There is *a* sense of *fair* play in the *game*' (10). So each stanza uses these *a* sounds to describe various claims, whether the lough's claim on the fishermen who '*sail*' (12) out on its waters or the contrasting claims of the fishermen on the lough's fish.

Heaney also uses sound to describe the unnatural manner in which the fishing industry catches the eels; they 'lift five hundred stone in one go' (8). 'Stone', used here as a measure of weight, echoes the poem's earlier statement that the lough's waters have a 'virtue that hardens wood to stone' (2). The commercial fishermen not only prematurely 'break the eels' journey' (7), but in the process they rob the lake of the fruits of its virtue. The hardness and fixity of the 'stone' these fishermen lift contrasts with the rhyming '*flow*' and '*go*' (6, 8), words that connote the fluid, cyclical life of the lough. The fishermen who sail out to 'confront [the eels] *one* by *one*' (11), however, submit to the natural claims of the lough by accepting the possibility that they might drown, even though '*one* hour floating's sure to land them safely' (15). The repetition of 'one' contrasts with the commercial gates that claim 'five hundred stone' and emphasizes the personal nature of the fishing that Heaney finds exemplary for his own poetry. Heaney chooses to confront the darkness of life singly, in tune with its fluidity, and regardless of its potential danger.

In the sequence's second poem, 'Beyond Sargasso', Heaney describes the irresistible pull of the eel to return to Lough Neagh from Sargasso Sea, where it was spawned. The first line establishes two of the poem's key sounds, the first of which is the *and* in '*gland*'. This syllable is repeated in '*in- / land*' (2-3), where the word gains emphasis from being stretched over the line break. These words with the *and* sounds refer to the homing scent released by the mud at the bottom of Lough Neagh, a scent received by the eel's gland that pulls it over great distances and

through incredible obstacles. As the eel nears the lough at the end of the poem, this sound recurs in ‘*sand*’ (19), indicating the eel’s nearness to the inland mud that first sent out this homing scent.

But this journey requires the eel to overcome great difficulties; the abrupt break in the poem’s form combines with the jarring words to convey these obstructions: ‘Against / ebb, current, rock, rapids’ (12-13). The flowing, enjambed lines of the first section break over these plodding, plosive-rich words, slowed down further by the commas separating each word. The ‘muscle icicle’ on the next line continues the poem’s sinuous aural movement beyond these lines, highlighting the eel’s persistence through the obstruction these clomping lines create in this largely fluid poem.

The sinuous, irresistible movement of the eel establishes itself sonically in the second key sound introduced in the first line: ‘*agitating*’. The two trochaic feet that form this word give it a strident pull, and the rhythm and sound of this word find their echo in ‘*insinuating*’ (9) (which simply has a mora preceding two trochee feet) and the poem’s final word, ‘*undulation*’ (25). The similar rhythm and near rhyme of these words, along with their placement at the beginning, middle, and end of the poem, create a pulsing, undulating echo that sounds throughout the poem, mimicking the eel’s action through the water as it seeks the lough.

The description of the eel’s journey parallels the journey that Heaney’s aural poetry might take. Like the eel, these poems avoid the light and swim in the dark, and like the eel these poems are made of the medium in which they swim. The eel is described as ‘a muscle icicle’ (14)^{lvii} and so is made up of the water in which it swims. In an interview, Heaney describes Osip Mandelstam’s conception of the ‘etymological imagination’ in related terms: ‘language is not only the sea upon which the ship of the poem sails but the element from which the ship is fashioned—something, I suppose, like a water bubble sailing on water’.^{lviii} In the interview, Heaney goes on to link this understanding of poetry with Eliot’s auditory imagination. The eel, then, can be seen

as accomplishing the same journey as Heaney's poem, moving through the element from which it is made to find the source that calls it. The eel must travel in darkness, and it is a mysterious, deep journey, like the searchings of Heaney's echoing poetry that take place in language and yet reach below language, toward the pre-verbal.

In 'Bait', Heaney begins to reveal hints of the surprising light his echoing search gives off. This poem describes the eel fishermen out at night searching for worms to use for bait. They carry lamps into the fields and take care to be quiet because '[s]ilence and curious light gather bait' (5). In the line preceding this explanation, Heaney onomatopoeically depicts the noise that they must avoid: 'The bucket's handle better not clatter now' (4). The repeated *t* sounds cause this line to clatter, mimicking the impatient noise that would scare the worms away or, for the poet, a failure to be receptive to the sounds of the poem that would cause its aural failure.

In this poem, however, Heaney and the fishermen successfully draw out the sounds and the worms from the dark ground. This poem is composed of tercets, with all but one following an *xaa* rhyme scheme (the third stanza rhymes *axa*), leaving one of the end words orphaned. Heaney, however, deftly connects each non-rhyming end syllable through an internal rhyme or slant rhyme—usually from the previous stanza—that aurally lures out the following orphaned line ending. The first and the last stanza are special cases as they share almost identical first lines, perfectly rhyming 'midnight' (1) with 'midnight' (16). Within the first stanza, 'follow' (2) and 'prow' (3) aurally bait the 'now' (4) that follows in the second stanza. This pattern continues through the poem: 'handle' (4) baits 'tunnel' (8); 'backwards' (8) baits 'coronas' (10); and 'bound' (12) baits 'ground' (13), which is also echoed by the 'bound' at the end of the stanza (15). This internal pattern mirrors the careful way that the fishermen must draw the worms out of the ground; Heaney subtly establishes a sound and then echoes it in the succeeding stanza, carefully drawing these sounds through the language of his poem. The final stanza, besides end-rhyming

back to the first stanza, culminates this drawing up of sounds by echoing the long *ee* from the '[t]hree' (2) in the first stanza: 'When fishers *need* a garland for the bay / And have him, where he *needs* to come, out of the clay' (17-18). These repeated *ee* sounds enact the ineluctable pull of the fishermen on the worm, and they signal the irresistible determination with which Heaney pulls his aural music out of the dark mysteries of language.

Through the '[s]ilence and curious light' of his poetic technique, Heaney discovers these serendipitous aural delights, and their sonic luminescence is just as surprising as that of the worms the fishermen find 'whirling their mud coronas' (10). Corona comes from the Latin word meaning 'crown,' and the primary definition given by the OED links the contemporary meaning to a crown, or halo, of light: 'A small circle or disc of light (usually prismatically coloured) appearing round the sun or moon'.^{lix} Heaney's description of the worms seems almost oxymoronic; how can a corona be made of mud? But perhaps the dark mud around the worms glistens by reflecting the fishermen's lamps, and this surprising reflection in the dark parallels the felicitous sonic echoes discovered by Heaney's auditory imagination as it explores the dark in '[s]ilence and curious light'.

The central poem of the sequence, 'Setting', gains focus from the previously noted chiasmic structure of the seven poems. Fitting its central location, this poem not only describes the way eel fishermen sound the depths of the water, but it also reveals how, almost incidentally, their dark sounding becomes a vehicle for delightful mercy, the same trajectory followed by Heaney's aural poetry. The initial sounds in this poem set up the circling pattern that Heaney describes in his remarks on this sequence.^{lx} The first line describes the fishing line's descent '*out* of sight, and *out* of mind' (1) as the '*bouquet of hooks . . . is . . . paid out*' (4-5). These *o* sounds reinforce the circularity of the oars going '*round and round*' (7) and the circularity of the eel below, making his '*arcs without a sound*' (9). Finally the line '*runs out*' (11) and the circles seem complete until they

are repeated in the ‘earthy shower’ (17) that the worms create as they are thrown high into the air and snatched by the gulls, who benefit from this act of grace.

Other sounds strengthen the connection between the circling eels below the boat and the gulls that ‘umbrella overhead’ (10). The poem’s first line states, ‘A line goes out of sight and out of *mind*’ (1). From only this line, the poem could be speaking of a fishing line or a poetic line, and the way Heaney describes the fishing line also describes the work he hopes his sonic line will accomplish. The ‘line slants back’ (7) before, eventually, ‘the line runs out’ (11), and it is after the ending of these fishing and poetic lines, after they have reached as far down and as far back as they can, that the poem discovers ‘the marvel of levitation: in spite of [its] physical push . . . earthward, the psychic direction is skyward’.^{lxi} For at the end of the poem the *i* sound from the line that stretched down is echoed as the fishermen, unconscious of their act of mercy, ‘Pitch . . . [the worms] high, good riddance, earthy shower. / The gulls encompass them before the water’ (17-18). The downward reach of the lines has unexpectedly become an ‘earthy shower’ that flies ‘high’ and mercifully feeds the gulls.

In this poem that marks the chiastic center of the sequence, a structure that relates etymologically to the crucifix, Heaney uses religious language to describe this upward shift, portraying the poetic fishermen as priests. The gulls that follow the fishermen are their ‘acolytes’ (12), which the OED defines as an ‘inferior officer in the church who attend[s] the priests and deacons’. And while the fishermen are ‘[n]ot sensible of any *kyrie*’ (13), they still celebrate a type of mass with their followers. ‘Kyrie’ is short for ‘kyrie eleison,’ which is defined by the OED as, ‘The words of a short petition used in various offices of the Eastern and Roman Churches, esp. at the beginning of the Mass; . . . “Lord, have mercy upon us”’. Heaney’s reference to the ceremony of mass imbues the final lines of the poem with a religious significance as the worms pulled from the darkness are transformed into merciful elements for the flying birds. And if the eel fishermen

are seen as analogous to the poet, Heaney seems to see his poetry as a sounding of chthonic depths in order to celebrate the mercy this process reveals with the readers who follow him. Heaney's stance is liminal here as the poet must stand on the threshold of darkness in order to mediate between its rich depths and his followers. And yet the poet must remain 'indifferent' (3) and not be 'sensible' (13) of the great mercy welling up from his dark soundings. By embedding this unlooked-for mercy in linguistic delights, Heaney maintains his receptive stance while allowing his poems to discover 'the marvel of levitation' in their aural riches.^{lxii}

In the subsequent poem, 'Lifting,' Heaney subtly signals the kind of poetry he wants to write by alluding to Yeats in the first two lines of the poem: 'They're busy in a high boat / That stalks towards Antrim, the power cut' (1-2). Heaney's title indirectly prepares the way for his allusion through one of the secondary meanings of 'lifting': stealing or borrowing from someone else's writing. In his poem 'High Talk', Yeats questions his own choice to write lofty, high poetry when many of his contemporaries were shortening their 'stilts' (1-3), the metaphor he draws on to describe his poetic style.^{lxiii} Although Yeats admits that his work is '[a]ll metaphor' (11), at the end of the poem he concludes, 'I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on; / Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn' (13-14). Heaney expresses his opinion of Yeats's conception of language in an interview, 'He doesn't seem to have any erotic/phonetic relationship with words. . . . But then, by God, he has meter'.^{lxiv} In 'Lifting', Heaney draws on his own more erotic feel for words to distinguish the tradition from which he lifts his technique and style; he learns not from the high meters with which Yeats stalks on 'through the terrible novelty of light', but from the 'high boat' of the eel fishermen that 'stalks towards Antrim, the power cut' (1-2). By stripping the declarative power from his language and receptively sounding the dark, Heaney hopes to find a different kind of poetry, one that might gently surprise with unexpected light rather than stalking through novel light.

Heaney sets up the contrasting sounds that govern this poem in the first stanza as he describes the fishermen's boat '[t]hat stalks towards Antrim the power cut. / The line's a filament of smut' (2-3). The four nasal consonants that describe the line contrast with the plosive *k* sounds. These plosives sonically enact the 'hook[s]' (5, 11) that are spaced along the 'line' (3) to 'catch' (17, 19) the eels; their harsh sounds catch the ear lulled by the smooth, repeated nasal tones. These differing sounds crowd together as the fishermen draw the line in: 'every three yards a hook's missed / Or taken (and the smut thickens, wrist- / thick, a flail' (5-7). This thickening, flailing smut is the eel; while in 'Beyond Sargasso' the eels were made out of water, now they have become part of the 'filament of smut' (3). The eels '[c]ome' (10) 'numb' (12) into the boat where each one 'knits itself' (13) into a 'knot . . . / That stays continuously one' (15-16). The nasal sounds that signal the smutty line are continued in the description of the eels, making their life part of the line that the fishermen lower into the water, and metaphorically part of the line that the poet casts into poetry. This connection further illustrates Heaney's claim that poetry is a process of 'intimate[ly] touch[ing]' the medium out of which it is made: the hidden riches that a line of poetry pulls up are part of the linguistic line itself, not some separate object.^{lxv}

The language of this poem further indicates the reverent attitude the poet should have toward the riches his soundings uncover and toward his linguistic tradition. As the fishermen finish drawing up their catch, the poem states, 'And wakes are enwound as the catch / On the morning water: which / Boat was which?' (19-21). The word 'wake' not only describes the trail left by the boats in the water, but also the Irish custom of watching over the bodies of the dead. And by describing the water as 'morning,' this word's homonym, 'mourning,' is invoked, lending resonance to the idea of these fishermen as presiding over a wake for the dead eels. In the same way, Heaney reverently approaches the linguistic past, the previous meanings of words and the previous writings of poets. And just as the fishermen do not know how long the lough has been

fished in, seeing their fishing as a seasonal, endlessly repeated act, so Heaney recognizes his place in a larger tradition of linguistic investigation. The poetic tradition is a recurring cycle: just as he learns from these fishermen, from Yeats, and from other poets whose work has become ‘enwound’ in his, so in later ‘season[s]’ (24) other poets will take up his own sounding work.

And this sounding does not only penetrate the earth’s dark mysteries; the poem’s title, ‘Lifting’, indicates the upward thrust of this whole sequence. The mysterious eels, pulled up from their dark, unknown depths, become marvelous in Heaney’s visceral, aural description of their ‘furling, slippery’ mass (14). And while by lifting them into the air the fishermen ‘murder’ these eels, they also make them ‘marvelous,’ presiding over this transformation with appropriate reverence.^{lxvi}

In the sixth poem of the sequence, ‘The Return’, Heaney traces a female eel’s return to her ‘origins’ (22) to spawn and die. He describes the processes by which she accomplishes this journey in terms that also describe his poetic technique: ‘following / *whim deliberately*’ (3-4). The contrasting sounds between the light ‘*whim*’ and the plodding ‘*deliberately*’ of this phrase are repeated in the second stanza to describe her journey near its end where she is ‘a wisp, a wick . . . light / through the *weltering dark*’ (17-19). The ephemeral sound of the *w* followed by a short *i* is repeatedly echoed before the predominate *d*, *l*, *r*, and *e* sounds of ‘*deliberately*’ are sounded in ‘*weltering dark*’ (19). The eel must exercise firm determination to follow the light pull of her whim through the many obstacles that would prevent her from returning to her origin. And Heaney’s task as a poet involves this same determined following in his pursuit of aural whims through the darkness of language.

The success of this eel’s journey suggests Heaney’s hopes for his own journey even while he refuses to avoid the dangers of his dark search. The eel, like Heaney’s aural poetic line, becomes ‘a wick that is / its own taper and light / through the *weltering dark*’ (17-19); this eel

brings light into the dark, like the fishermen seeking bait, and although this return results in her death—this time ‘wakeless’ (16)—her ‘spawn’ (23) will take up the journey described in ‘Beyond Sargasso,’ the journey back to the ‘pond’ from which she came (1). Just as Heaney’s sound plumbs the depths of the dark and brings back surprising delight, so the eel’s search for sex plumbs instinctual depths and brings forth new life.^{lxvii} The eel’s search for her origins exacts a high price as, ‘once she lays / ten thousand feet down in / her origins’ she dies (20-22), but one of the byproducts of this eel’s self-negating search for her origins is the ‘light’ she brings into the ‘weltering dark’. This light parallels the aural luminescence produced as Heaney sounds the dark depths to ‘return . . . to the origin and bring . . . something back’.^{lxviii}

The final poem, ‘Vision’, links Heaney’s childhood fears of lice to the deeper, more adult fears realized in the eels. The similar sounds used to describes these fears connect them aurally: the lice might form a ‘mealy rope’ (3) that threatens to drag down the boy walking through the ‘fields’ (7), and these sounds describe the man standing in the ‘same fields’ (10) where crawling ‘eels’ (11) make the ‘field’ (14) flow as the man watches these ‘eels’ (16). The repetition of ‘grass’ (8, 12) in both descriptions and the use of the word ‘passed’ (9) as the transition word between them form an auditory hinge and inject a sibilant, anguine hissing into the center of the poem. The *i* sounds in the first stanza—‘fine-combed’ (1) and ‘lice’ (2)—find echoes in the last stanza in ‘live’ (17), ‘slime’ (18), and ‘time’ (19). Finally, the ‘cable’ of lice is echoed in the ‘horrid cable’ of the last line, wrapping up the interwoven sounds between these two dark fears (8, 20).^{lxix} The enjambment of the final lines that describe the eels, ‘Phosphorescent, sinewed slime / Continued at his feet. Time / Confirmed the horrid cable’ (18-20) not only emphasizes the sinuous curving of the eels but also the continuity between all these dark fears. Although ‘years’ separate the fears of lice and eels, these fears are rooted in the same dark mystery.

These mysteries are closely linked, but they are not parallel, for while the lice threatened to ‘drag him . . . down to the water’ (4-5), the eels rise up from the dark water in a ‘[p]hosphorescent, sinewed slime’ (18). Heaney’s childhood fear would drag him down, but when he bravely faces this feared source, a marvelous, luminescent life rises. The lice are figured as the unrealized fears of the boyish Heaney; their unknown powers increase the fear they inspire, threatening to paralyze him. But the eels are his ‘hatched fears’ (12), fears that are realized and are found to contain a marvelous glow. The eels retain their dark slime, but they—like the worms with their ‘mud coronas’ and the returning eel that was a ‘light [in] the weltering dark’—are also ‘[p]hosphorescent.’ The cable that girdles the earth remains ‘horrid’—Heaney refuses to ignore the ‘complex burden of [his] own experience’^{lxx}—but the unexpected luminosity rising from these dark eels exemplifies what Heaney describes as the ‘impulsive straining towards felicity . . . [that] is a *sine qua non* of lyric power’ (16), and the aural shimmering of Heaney’s poem embodies this surprising turn in its ‘felicity of . . . cadence’ (5).

Heaney’s language in ‘A Lough Neagh Sequence’ follows his tripartite conception of the auditory imagination. He aurally conveys the sinuous, slimy life in the dark depths of the Lough and in the ‘fog’ of the human unconscious. But this feared life turns out to be less revolting than one might expect, and the aural music that enables Heaney’s poetry to reach into the depths of the earth and of human consciousness concomitantly creates a phosphorescence through its sonic felicities. Like the eel returning to Sargasso Sea, Heaney ‘follow[s] / whim deliberately’ (‘The Return’ 3-4), tracing the echoes of his rich language and finding that these sonic patterns ignite a ‘light’ in ‘the weltering dark’ (18, 19).

While Heaney’s later poetry does not probe subaqueous subjects so blatantly, his poetry continues to grapple with the dark facts of life, and his auditory imagination continues to generate

linguistic felicities that provide ‘echo-soundings . . . [and] elver-gleams’ in dark circumstances.^{lxxi}

By his keen delight in the aural properties of language, Heaney successfully accomplishes his goal: ‘to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means’.^{lxxii} He continues to rely on his auditory imagination to enable him to come ‘down hard upon the facts of hurt [and gain] poetic altitude’.^{lxxiii} In ‘The Rain Stick’, a more recent example of this attitude from *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney marvels over the continual ability of ‘grit or dry seeds’ (16) to make ‘music’ (15) as they fall through a ‘cactus stalk’ (3).^{lxxiv} This music-maker is made of dead, dry objects, but each time it is up-ended, it produces sweet music (which Heaney describes in aurally delightful ways): ‘You are like a rich man entering heaven / Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again’ (17-18). Heaney continues to find delight, he continues to enter heaven, through his ear, fulfilling the wish he expresses in an interview published in 2002: ‘I would also, I have to say, like to get back to phonetic pleasure, philological pleasures, word-relish’.^{lxxv}

Heaney seems to have first heard the improbable uplift of aural music in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and his poetry continues to rely on this music to exert its powerful pressure against the darkness of the uncomposed world. Eliot’s narrator ends *The Waste Land* fishing with his back to the ‘arid plane,’ gathering fragments of literary allusion into a rhythmic music to shore against his ruins: ‘Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih’.^{lxxvi} Heaney faces his world, casts his sounding lines into the dark chaos around him, and leaves his readers to marvel again and again at the surprising phosphorescence these lines create.

ⁱ Heaney, *Finders Keepers* 36. Heaney describes his reading of Eliot at an early age in this essay, and in an interview with James Randall Heaney admits, ‘It was only when I started to teach Yeats after about 1966 that I began to think about him and it was not really until 1970-75 that I confronted him in any way’ (13).

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- ⁱⁱ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 150. Heaney quotes here from Eliot's essay on Mathew Arnold in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (118-19).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cuda, 'The Use of Memory', 171.
- ^{iv} Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 155.
- ^v Heaney, *Wintering Out*, 31. Line numbers for poems given in text. In 'Belfast,' Heaney indicates that he sees Irish poetry as assonantal and English as alliterative, but he also expresses his hope that his poetry will bridge this difference (*Preoccupations*, 37).
- ^{vi} Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney', *Viewpoints*, 58.
- ^{vii} Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 82.
- ^{viii} Tyler, *Singing Contest*, 28, 4. See also Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney*, 59; 62-5; and Michael Molino, 'Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality', 181.
- ^{ix} Russell, *Poetry and Peace*, 203.
- ^x *Ibid.* 204-05.
- ^{xi} Cuda, 'The Use of Memory', 153.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, 170-71.
- ^{xiii} Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 150; *Preoccupations*, 47; *Opened Ground*, 14.
- ^{xiv} Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, 92.
- ^{xv} Eliot, *On Poetry*, 22-23.
- ^{xvi} Stead, *New Poetic*, 167.
- ^{xvii} Donoghue, *Words Alone*, 129.
- ^{xviii} Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 30.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, 405-06.
- ^{xx} Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney' in *Talking with Poets*, 60.
- ^{xxi} Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 37.
- ^{xxii} See Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?*; Vernon, *Poetry and the Body* 54-58; Jakobson and Waugh, *The Sound Shape of Language*, 177ff;
- ^{xxiii} Mukařovský, *On Poetic Language*, 26.
- ^{xxiv} Harshav, "The Meaning of Sound Patterns in Poetry," 144.
- ^{xxv} Heaney, 'Unhappy and at Home', 72.
- ^{xxvi} Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 423.
- ^{xxvii} Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 82.
- ^{xxviii} Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 66. Frost's notion of sound certainly influenced Heaney's conception of the auditory imagination, but the definition of the 'sound of sense' that Frost provides in this letter describes imbuing poetry with the natural pitches of human speech. While Heaney achieves this in many of his poems, my interest in this essay is with the echoing, instinctual properties of Heaney's poetry, properties that derive more from Eliot's influence than Frost's. For an excellent analysis of Frost's linguistic influence on Heaney, see Rachel Buxton's chapters on Heaney in *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*.
- ^{xxix} Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 9.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, 5.
- ^{xxxi} Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 275-78; Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 261. Andrew Welsh also describes how the aural imagination can function as a creative, organizing faculty for some poets (3-24).
- ^{xxxii} Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 37.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 39.
- ^{xxxiv} Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 46.

^{xxxv} Ibid., 47.

^{xxxvi} Ibid., 49.

^{xxxvii} Ibid., 48.

^{xxxviii} Each poem in 'A Lough Neagh Sequence' establishes a word or distinctive sound in the beginning of the poem and repeats it at the end. Over one third of the poems in *Opened Ground* also follow this pattern.

^{xxxix} See Helen Vendler 'Echo Soundings', 169; Seamus Deane 'The Timorous and the Bold', 68; and Neil Corcoran *Seamus Heaney*, 44. Daniel Ross even remarks in passing that 'Heaney uses a similar [echoing] technique in a number of poems' ('The "Upward Waft"', 93), but he does not investigate this method further.

^{xl} Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney writes ...'.

^{xli} Corcoran states, 'the title of Heaney's second collection obviously links the book to the final lines of *Death of a Naturalist*' (*Seamus Heaney*, 54), which are those at the end of 'Personal Helicon'.

^{xlii} See Dick Davis, 'Door into the Dark', 32; Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 33; and Helen Vendler 'Echo Soundings', 175.

^{xliii} Hart, 'Seamus Heaney's Poetry', 5. Russell's declaration that 'the dark' in *Door into the Dark* is 'an analogy for the subconscious mind' (*Poetry and Peace*, 188) is correct, but Heaney is also interested in accessing a more extensive, cultural darkness.

^{xliv} Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 29-35.

^{xliv} Stallworthy, 'The Poet as Archaeologist', 165. Russell notes Heaney's use of the aquatic to describe the creative process ('Seamus Heaney's Regionalism', 51). And as Heaney says in praise of Norman MacCaig, 'He was a great fisherman, a master of the cast, of the line that is a lure. And the angler's art – the art of coming in at an angle – is there in his poetry too. He could always get a rise out of the subject. He made it jump beyond itself' (*Finders Keepers*, 433). See especially Heaney's poem 'Casualty' where he turns to fishing in the final section as a response to his grief over a death from the Troubles (*Opened Ground*, 147).

^{xlvi} Foster, "'A Lough Neagh Sequence'", 45. Foster's essay, while brief, provides a good background of the facts about the eels' migration that Heaney drew upon in this sequence.

^{xlvi} Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney writes ...'. See also Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, 58; and Rita Zoutenbier 'The Matter of Ireland', 55.

^{xlvi} Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 150.

^{xlvi} The figure of chiasmus has historically been associated with the crucifix, as George Tate explains in terms of its etymology, '[I]t is most important to recognize that the figure, whose name derives from $\chi\iota\alpha\zeta\epsilon\iota\nu$ ("to mark with a cross"), is based on the visual quality of the Greek letter χ (chi) – a letter which, along with its Latin counterpart (X), was associated throughout the Middle Ages with the Cross and with Christ' ('Chiasmus as Metaphor', 115). Andrew Harvey concurs, stating, 'From the Middle Ages on, the making of a chiasmus, a syntactical X, is always potentially a making of the sign of the cross' (25). While the chiasmus can certainly be used in ways that have no apparent reference to the crucifix, the form is also used extensively in scripture and other literature to purposefully evoke the cross.

^{li} Heaney, 'King of the Dark', 182. The language of this quote seems to allude to an unpublished poem Heaney wrote around this time that depicts this statue, 'Icon'.

^{li} Heaney, 'King of the Dark', 181-82. While I do not address his bog poems in this paper, Heaney represents the bog as a similarly mysterious and threatening origin, a place that preserves the victims of an ancient and violent justice.

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- lii Corcoran offers parallels between Heaney's poetry and the eel fishermen (*Seamus Heaney*, 67).
- liii Moore, *The Poetical Works*, 296.
- liv Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 148.
- lv Heaney, 'An Interview', Randall, 11.
- lvi Heaney, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation*, 29.
- lvii While I compare the eel here with Heaney's poetry, in 'North' (*Opened Ground*, 98-99), Heaney is told to keep his poetic eye 'clear / as the bleb of the icicle' (37-38). This suggests parallels between the poet and the eel that are clarified further in my reading of 'The Return' later in this essay. So I hesitate to draw fixed analogies, as Russell does when he declares, 'I disagree, then, with Edna Longley, who in one of the earliest reviews of these poems argues that "the eel is only one of several portraits of the artist as trail-blazer and torch-bearer . . ."'. The eelsman, not the eel, is clearly the analog of the artist in the sequence' (*Poetry and Peace*, 337 n. 65). The parallels between poet, poem, eelsman, and eel seem more sinuous and fluid.
- lviii Heaney, 'An Interview', Kinahan, 413.
- lix A secondary definition given by the OED lends corona a more religious connotation that becomes significant in the light of the following poem: 'A circular chandelier suspended from the roof of a church'.
- lx Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney writes . . . '.
- lxi Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 82.
- lxii Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 82.
- lxiii Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 343.
- lxiv Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney', *Talking*, 52. Heaney admires much about Yeats, but he thinks that Yeats's declarative stance ultimately fails: '[Yeats's] poetry is a magnificent brave gesture, brave in the heroism of the posture and finally braver still in accepting the defeat of that heroism' ('An Interview', Randall, 10). When Heaney writes about the side of Yeats he admires in 'Crediting Poetry', he describes Yeats in a much humbler, less lofty stage (*Opened Ground* 426-28).
- lxv Heaney, 'An Interview', Kinahan, 413.
- lxvi Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 423.
- lxvii This sexual fecundity points also to the final poem of the sequence, the poem Benedict Kiely describes as depicting 'that inexorable continuity of life' (*A Raid into Dark Corners*, 48).
- lxviii Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 150.
- lxix P. R. King also notes this continuity ('I Step through Origins', 84).
- lxx Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 10.
- lxxi Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 245-46.
- lxxii Heaney, *Redress of Poetry*, 5-6.
- lxxiii Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 75.
- lxxiv Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 371.
- lxxv Heaney, 'Seamus Heaney', *Talking*, 60.
- lxxvi Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land*, 70.

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