'A Thread to the Afterlife'

Textiles and the Otherworld in Irish Poetry: Yeats, Boland, Heaney and Meehan

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This essay treats modern Irish poetry which uses clothing, fabric and textile imagery to explore the relationship between this life and the afterlife, attending to forms of materialization of the Otherworld in the questing human imagination.¹ Through their recognition that cloth constitutes and manifests a bond of continuity between the living and the dead,² critics have long recognized textiles' use as memorial tool facilitating healing in the bereaved, such as in the AIDS quilts of America or the Troubles quilts of Northern Ireland.³ However, the present essay focuses on fabric motifs in poetry, less as a mode of processing and living through grief, than as a means of mediating conception of alternative lives in various contexts of significant loss.

Opening and closing with elegies by Paula Meehan, the essay interweaves readings of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland with analysis of work from all major stages of the career of their major forebear in the Irish poetic tradition, W.B. Yeats.⁴ Yeats used clothing and fabric motifs to assert the immediate this-world relevance of his thought, vision and art, within that art's orientation beyond this world. During his writing life, he communicated this process through motifs of borrowing clothing, or putting it on and off, as well as spinning, weaving and sewing. In an early poem, 'The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland' (1893),⁵ Yeats pictured his ideal afterlife as 'a woven world-forgotten isle / Where people love beside the ravelled seas'. However, this poem's 'woven changeless' sphere itself unravels and is rewoven many times throughout his career. We will see that at the beginning of his writing life, fabric motifs serve Yeats's garnering of personal power, whereas by the end of it they help him discard a kind of power. This remaking of the basis of his authority is also a journey towards a reconstituted relationship with the afterlife. The achievements of the poems by Meehan, Boland and Heaney treated here – all of which draw their impulse at some level from Yeats – indicate that this journey is one of his greatest legacies to the poets who have followed him.

¹ For the purposes of the present essay, these three forms of describing material covering – clothing, fabric and textiles – will be read as interchangeable, even though the terms have specific different meanings and applications.

² Such a bond is illustrated in Michael Coady's prose piece, 'Nightdress', voiced by a bereaved mother who holds her dead child's nightdress 'Because her scent was on it still': seeking comfort that can neither be found nor done without. Michael Coady. 'Nightdress', *One Another* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press 2003), 44-45, 44. See also John Picton, 'Cloth and the Corpse in Ebird', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 7.3 (2009): 296-313, 302, 307.

³ See Max Carocci, 'Textiles of Healing: Native American AIDS Quilts', *Textile* 8.1 (2010): 68-85 and Karen Nickell, "'Troubles Textiles': Textile Responses to the Conflict in Northern Ireland', *Textile* 13.3 (2015): 234-251.

⁴ The date appended after each first mention of a poem in this essay, is the date of the main poetry collection by the author concerned, with which that text is now associated. Yeats's fifty-year poetry publishing career from 1889 to 1939 – in which his first book came out when he was in his early twenties and the last after his death – is now generally represented by thirteen main collections whose dates are: 1889, 1893, 1899, 1903, 1910, 1914, 1919, 1921, 1928, 1933, 1935, 1938, and 1939.

⁵ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), 64-6.

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Irish poems which offer images of the threads, cloth and materiality of existence as constituted by dense physicality, immediacy and depth texture, also tend to visualize the hem of this cloth as extending well beyond the boundaries and the constraints of our present given conditions and timeframes - this expansiveness then being redirected back towards our lives in the here-and-now. Paula Meehan's elegy, 'Cora, Auntie' (2009),⁶ in its 'urg[ing of] us to treat the nullity of death not as a finality but as a pathway to meaning',⁷ illustrates what I mean. In this poem, Meehan recalls how as a girl, she spent the summer after a beloved aunt was forced to emigrate in seeking out the excess of red sequins that only weeks earlier, a team of female relatives had sewn to the hem of that woman's white satin dress as she modelled it live. This quest for stray sequins was an action of (literal) recollection that is repeated now in imagination, after this same aunt's final leavetaking through death. Yet as critic Anne Mulhall recognizes, the poet-speaker also learns her own life's intimate inter-generational contours, through so following her aunt's memory into the realm of glitter.⁸ Mulhall suggests that these sequins operate as a significant form of familial inheritance in their colour combination of scarlet set against white: redolent both of suffering and its defiance, they symbolize the potential for subversion which persists within systems of patriarchal oppression..⁹ Meehan's sequins, then, can be read as traces of otherworldly possibility locatable within the torn and pierced fabric of one's given, endured, and embraced historical existence: the poet once again hunts for them 'in cracks and crannies, // in the pillowcase.../ in a hole in the lino, / in a split in the sofa'. Through this specifically-localized quest motif, she implies that both her own and her aunt's lives are at once intimately known *and* still to be known in their fullness,¹⁰ for then and now Meehan understands that inside such unprepossessing material, can be found hidden the jewel-like sparks of creative alterity.

Meehan's red sequins are connected to Seamus Heaney's 'glittering reeling chain' of embroidery needles after these are flung into the air by Cuchulain in the legend recorded in Heaney's late poem 'Hermit Songs VI' (2010).¹¹ These needles illuminate the poet's own surreal dream vision about an airlifted set of pen-nibs which connect to each other in the form of 'a giddy gilt corona.' Thus this text suggests that the antecedent to Heaney's creative pen is no longer a gun or spade as it was in his early poetry ('Digging'),¹² but the instruments of intricate, female-associated craftsmanship. Nevertheless, embroidery needles – by way of the dark associations attaching to their other name, crewel needles -

⁶ Paula Meehan, *Painting Rain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), 38. This and other extracts from the poetry of Paula Meehan are quoted by kind permission of Carcanet Press.

⁷ Anne Fogarty, "'Hear Me and have Pity': Rewriting Elegy in the Poetry of Paula Meehan', *An Sionnach: A Journal of Literature, Culture and the Arts* 5.1-2 (Spring and Fall 2009): 213-225, 217.

⁸ As Anne Mulhall argues, 'the red sequins... act as evocative objects, holders of memory, and transmitters of interconnection in the feminine'. Anne Mulhall, 'Memory, Poetry, and Recovery: Paula Meehan's Transformational Aesthetics', *An Sionnach* 5.1-2 (Spring and Fall 2009): 142-155, 147.

⁹ See Mulhall 148.

¹⁰ Mulhall reads this link as between 'the unimaginably archaic and the here-and-now' in this text. Mulhall 149.

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (London: Faber, 2010), 77.

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (London: Faber, 1990), 1. Anne Mulhall has drawn our attention to the difference between Meehan's sequin-work with her female relatives and Heaney's "'digging" with his pen for the roots of his connection to a paternal inheritance' (Mulhall 148).

remain haunted by the suffering supposedly offset by the elaboration they generate: a truth we shall see highlighted in Yeats's poems on embroidered cloths.¹³

This association between human suffering and our desire for transcendence and perfection is central to afterlife imagining. It accounts for the late Heaney's interest in hand-made special clothing whose promise, like the sequined white dress in Meehan's poem 'Cora. Auntie', is impelled by an elegiac imperative. In his poem 'A Suit' from the sequence 'Ten Glosses' (2001),¹⁴ Heaney proposes that his most satisfying form of apparel will come in bespoke mode, created to be perfectly balanced with and on the body of the person for whom it is uniquely made. In Heaney's understanding, a bespoke suit fits the body one has, not the body one wants, whilst also transforming one's sense of oneself within that reality. Therefore this new suit manifests literally Heaney's signature ideal of redress: he anticipates that it will allow 'my whole shape [to be] realigned'. Such an ideal carries beyond this-world concerns to include life after death: the bespoke suit that Heaney is offered is accepted by him more gratefully than ruefully as 'the last thing that I need[]'. In this way, 'A Suit' may be Heaney's nod to Yeats's great poem, 'Cuchulain Comforted' (1939)¹⁵ (a piece of work he greatly admired¹⁶), the new clothes in both poems commanding in exchange that their wearers (in Yeats's words), 'sing the best we can'. As we will later see, 'Cuchulain Comforted' sets the bar high for Irish poets who deal with the theme of this-world / otherworld relations, in its advocacy of an untranscendent afterlife spaciousness of being which challenges us to come to terms with what may be our greatest fear: emptiness.

Because human destiny is traditionally configured through textile associations (classically, the spindle of necessity as wielded by the three Fates who spin and sever the threads of each man's life),¹⁷ clothing imagery allows for unique exploration of the conditions of constraint and subversion central to any consideration of the afterlife. Initially, cloth would seem to be a definitive indicator of our human confinement to the material realm, subject as textiles are to the laws of time and space, both culturally (through the fashion industry) and physically (through cloth's capacity to wear out, be destroyed or rot). As Karen Nickell points out, 'Cloth relates to humanity in its mortality and transience – both cloth and our body can be cut, stitched, age and decay'.¹⁸ Therefore one might think that cloth properly relates to the abstract, non-substantial realm of the afterlife only by way of contrast. For example, Yeats's speaker in 'Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient' (1935)¹⁹ rejects cloth as too vulnerable to time: 'Thought is a garment and the soul's a bride / That cannot in that trash and tinsel hide'. However, since the paradox remains that 'immateriality

¹³ 'Crewel needle' is a term that hovers unused behind the text of Heaney's poem, but which is deployed in Eavan Boland's work, as we shall see.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), 54-5.

¹⁵ Yeats 379-80.

¹⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Yeats as an Example' (*Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, London: Faber 2002, 96-111), 110-11. I am grateful to Adrian Patterson for pointing me towards Heaney's interest in this late Yeats poem.

¹⁷ Daniel Albright notes that Yeats alludes to the three Fates in his reference to 'Plato's spindle' in the poem, 'His Bargain' (Yeats 314, 737).

¹⁸ Karen Nickell, "'Troubles Textiles': Textile Responses to the Conflict in Northern Ireland' *Textile* 13.3 (2015): 234-251, 236.

¹⁹ Yeats 336.

can only be expressed through materiality',²⁰ a more complex connection between faith in an afterlife and attention to cloth as physical object needs accounting for. Accordingly, I propose that Yeats's larger body of work and that of Irish poets following him, supports the alternative 'general rule' advanced by anthropologist Daniel Miller: that 'the more humanity reaches toward the conceptualization of the immaterial, the more important the specific form of its materialization'.²¹

This can be seen in another of Yeats's late poems, 'His Bargain' (1933),²² where the speaker-lover uses thread imagery to assert that before and after this life, an alternative existence waits to be found:

Before the thread began
I made, and may not break it
When the last thread has run,
A bargain with that hair
And all the windings there.

Here, the myriad threads of unending love are symbolized by 'that hair', which, as Hedwig Schwall suggests, links back to 'Berenice's burning hair' of the previous poem, 'Her Dream'²³ – a poem which draws upon the legend of a queen's crowning glory that, when voluntarily cut off by her for love, was transmuted into the eternal glory of a celestial constellation. Equivalently, far beyond the finite, breakable thread of individual mortal existence (including his own), the speaker of 'His Bargain' trusts the living threads of love, unbreakable in their multiplicity and uncontrollability, which each human life also embodies. It is appropriate that those threads be represented by the tangles of the long hair which is metonymous of the speaker's beloved whose essence for Yeats, ever since his early volume *The Rose* (1933), has been co-terminous with that of immortal beauty. Her winding hair stands both anterior and posterior to the logical thread spun upon 'Plato's [morally-dualistic] spindle' of necessity, for it represents the unbreakable threads of a love which is extended through covenant between this-life and afterlife existence – a bargain which is indestructible despite human weakness. 'That hair', through its incarnate force as symbol of the otherworld, paradoxically challenges us to accept both our failings *and* our potential for renewal in this world.

In 'His Bargain', the speaker has entered into a lasting contract with a pre- and afterlife existence constituted through love, through his attention to mortal flesh in the here and now. This contract is symbolized by a woman's winding hair which represents thread that connects real to ideal in a newly inclusive and open-ended way. This ethic is very different to the singular thread of moral-cum-mortal necessity promulgated by binary religious or philosophical systems whose straight line of logic may seem justified in response to mankind's immutable condition of transience. But such linear logic is in fact circular – it is generated by those whose fearful 'talk' of death, itself sets 'Plato's spindle / ... whirling

²⁰ Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An Introduction', *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Duke University Press, 2005), 1-50, 28. Miller argues that 'Material culture has been of significant consequence as the means of expressing [belief in] the illusory nature of the material world'. Miller 1.

²¹ Miller 28.

²² Yeats 314.

²³ Yeats 313; Hedwig Schwall, personal email, 12th May 2017.

round'. In these systems of thought, the fact that 'Time is unwound' is a thread of inevitability which is confused with the systems' own linear logic. This transposed logic then both dominates and trips up those like 'Dan and Jerry Lout' who try to defy it by 'Chang[ing] their loves about', acting out of suppressed fear that 'Eternity may dwindle' (or rather, that the possibility of faith in eternity must diminish) in the face of death's immutable reality. The present poem allows room for compassion for those who practice such infidelity - perhaps because Yeats himself is vulnerable to just such fear and response. However, an alternative ethic is proposed in the above-quoted second stanza of 'His Bargain' - a different way of 'tak[ing] it'.* Just as the breaking of one hair on a human head - or even all of them, as shown in the story of Berenice - becomes irrelevant, so too 'all the windings' of a human love which outsteps binary order, constitutes capacity to accommodate the injury of individual death. Such acceptance of mortality is only possible when love's multiple twists and turns draws human passion in and for this life into alignment with otherworldly faith, rather than requiring these to stand in mutual opposition.

From the outset of his career, W.B. Yeats is challenged to locate the winding threads of such an expansive yet materially-grounded love within the trailing skirts of the ideal or transcendent realm, whose shifting cloths are followed by him in a quest to merge afterlife imagining with the journey of this life. In his early poem, 'To Ireland in the Coming Times' (1892),²⁴ quintessentially, 'Man ever journeys.../ After the red-rose-bordered hem' of the ideal life of the nation that 'Trails all about the written page' of his art, implying a radical literal overlapping of this world and the otherworld. Yet, as we shall see, this space of overlap, for him and other poets, remains politically, aesthetically and philosophically contested.

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How exactly do textiles allow us to talk about our relation with the afterlife? Most obviously, 'Fabric is able to signify "something" without that something ever being fully spoken'.²⁵ This circumvention of reasonable speech is an important basis of cloth's capacity to mediate conceptions of the otherworld, and is well conveyed in Yeats's early poem, 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' (1899).²⁶ Here, the celestial, transcendent realm is conveyed in terms of its covering in fantastically rich cloths of shifting interweaving light, suggesting in turn that the afterlife is a place of wondrous, all-enveloping, mysterious multiplicity. However, on closer reading of this well-loved text, the problem of bad faith associated with reaching for presence within that which is inherently (from a human perspective) ephemeral and ungraspable, becomes apparent.

Fabric in 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' is clearly 'the material embodiment of... the need to transcend limits or transgress boundaries'.²⁷ For the speaker of this poem, the 'heavens' embroidered cloths' occupy the interstices between this world and the alternative realm of being he desires. Therefore cloth for him offers itself as a form of divine intervention: if God is the originating flesh that sustains all human life, S/he is divided from

²⁴ Yeats 70.

²⁵ Anne Hamlyn, 'Freud, Fabric, Fetish', *Textile* 1.1 (2003): 9-27, 24.

²⁶ Yeats 90.

²⁷ Clair Pajarkowska, 'On Stuff and Nonsense: The Complexity of Cloth', *Textile* 3.3 (2005): 220-249, 226.

us, His/her children by His/her own cloths – in Yeats's terms here, the cloths of heaven. Insofar as any such cloths stand in for the ideal transcendent realm, they may become our 'surrogate' focus of desire.

However, Yeats's poem proffers (or prefers?) a double-substitution: here, the speaker-poet asserts that 'being poor', he is forced to exchange those 'actual' otherworldly vestments which remain out of reach, with his dreams. However, from his point of view, these personal dreams are only apparently inadequate - effectively, he here claims them to constitute a commensurate alternative rich cloth, giving the poet the right (and power) to spread his own replacement heaven – his imaginative capacity itself – under his beloved's feet in the traditional chivalric gesture. This conjoined self-sublimating *and* self-elevating move accrues celestial power to the poet himself, as the personal borrows the impact of the transpersonal. In other words, the clothing metaphor allows the poet not to displace heaven in favour of earth, but to replace heaven *with* (his) earth. To the extent that the poet/lover has incorporated the otherworldly as a means of advancing an end (controlling his beloved's response to him), the otherworld thereby has been instrumentalized. It is hardly surprising, then, that his beloved at the end of this poem is under command to 'Tread softly' on these substitute cloths: after all, the only way to fulfill her lover's injunction not to mark or damage them in any way is to compromise her own physicality, thereby ensuring that she (and certainly her power) is de-materialized instead of him and his. This early Yeats artist-speaker appears to admit, but actually effaces, recognition of human beings' concrete material lived conditions, and as a result he disables the key challenge of cloth as symbol of the afterlife: that it is only by way of the double movement, both away from *and* back towards our lived conditions in the here and now, that afterlife imagining can contribute to a re-envisioning of reality and a resistance to injustice.

Cultural theorists have long recognized that clothing is central to the ways in which social orders legitimize themselves.²⁸ However, not all kinds of clothing reference are a basis for communicating the possibility of true and effective political change. In particular, the limitations of conceptualizations of written text as a 'woven fabric' of signifiers producing networks of ideas (as promulgated by Roland Barthes), have been pointed out by critics who argue that reading text as cloth downgrades engagement with actual fabric in favour of what that cloth signifies.²⁹ These limitations are implicit in 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', where (as we have seen) such fabulous fabric can be mobilized to re-instate hierarchical power relations. By contrast, when fabric itself is understood to be a key form of text – in other words, when text is read *in* cloth through a semiotic interpretation which focuses on 'the dialectic between the rational and the intuitive response... [where] cloth has the potential to articulate the gap between the two' – power relations remain open to much more radical re-conception.³⁰ In summary, to the extent that the cloth itself is explored in its materiality - by attending to how fabric communicates meaning through what it is made from and its relative stages of processing, handling and shaping, including

²⁸ See Roland Barthes, *System de la Mode [The Fashion System]* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967) and Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁹ This is a key concern of Sonja Andrews in her essay, 'Textile Semantics: Considering a Communication-based Reading of Textiles', *Textile* 6.1 (2008): 32-65, 35, 42, 45.

³⁰ Maxime Bristowe, '3 Weeks to Turn 348, Three Years to Turn Intuition Towards Understanding', ed. P Johnson, *Ideas in the Making, Practice in Theory* (London: Crafts Council), 114-121, 118, as cited in Andrews 46. See also Pajczkowska 231.

alertness to its qualities of coarseness or fineness, heaviness or lightness, and also to how its colours, textures and patterns evoke mood and feeling and association³¹ - cloth references can mediate real challenge to perceived political wisdom. Such attention to texture, processing, feeling and mood, is, of course, a particular concern of elegiac poetry written by men and women poets.

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Poems by Eavan Boland and Seamus Heaney illuminate this broader value of reading cloth as text rather than text as cloth. In Boland's poem 'The Women' (1986),³² poetic rhythm is both embodied and described in terms of texture and tactility: 'the physical force of a dissonance - // the fission of music into syllabic heat'. The relationship between dissonance and harmony is central to this text's consideration of otherworlds. In 'The Women', Boland recognizes that 'I do my work best, / going up the stairs in two minds, / in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass'. Cloth here operates as a talisman for passage between worlds as it facilitates creative distraction, allowing Boland to recognize her double identity as both creator and human subject. That distraction involves 'leaving something behind, bringing / something with me I should have left behind', denoting the flawed agency and multiple, gapped consciousness of the human subject in history, who remembers by also forgetting, and vice versa. This unsettled transit between realms which are uncannily linked, suggests that the domestic female twilight world attended to in this poem is a space of otherworld-this world overlap.³³ The staircase of the suburban home represents passage between these two spheres, the poet appropriately climbing it at 'The hour of change, of metamorphosis, / of shape-shifting instabilities. / My time of sixth sense and second sight'. Boland's larger work calls for our attunement to such relativity of identity and perspective, especially when we are dealing with seemingly natural continuities of time or responsibility or progress – as she will later say in 'Irish Interior' (2007):³⁴ 'There is always this: a background, a foreground...// there is always near and far'.

As a poet keenly interested in interstices and multiple dimensions, the key to Boland's sustained focus on fabrics is how they direct our attention to the difference between surface smoothness and glossiness on the one hand, and underside roughness and dullness on the other. Boland has a very strong sense that, like paper's verso and recto, cloth has two surfaces, being turned inwards and outwards, upwards and downwards, simultaneously.³⁵ For her, this condition powerfully suggests history's two sides: its overside and its underside, respectively keyed to those who are recognized and deemed important versus those who are forgotten or ignored in national, social, political and cultural consciousness.³⁶ Hence Boland in 'The Women' senses other presences behind or just within the texture of the solid given real - presences implied by the linen and the objects she

³¹ See Andrews 34-5.

³² Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 141. This and other extracts from the poetry of Eavan Boland are quoted by kind permission of Carcanet Press.

³³ Anne Shiffrer sees this in-betweenness as that of 'poetry itself, which is for Boland a negotiation between herself and other women'. Anne Shiffrer, 'The Fabrics and Erotics of Eavan Boland's Poetry', *Colby Quarterly* 37.4 (December 2001): 327-342, 332.

³⁴ Eavan Boland, *Domestic Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 19.

³⁵ Pajackowska makes this connection between cloth and paper. Pajackowska 222.

³⁶ See Shiffrer 337.

herself carries. These are the female ghosts of history who imaginatively materialize in terms of the fabrics they wear: 'silks... lace... nothing'. In her poem, these women wield 'crewel needles' for elaborate (and darkness-haunted) embroidery, but also 'books' and 'wide-open legs': in other words, they can be craftswomen seamstresses *and* artist intellectuals *and* sexual beings, and those different functions do not cancel each other out.

But such inclusivity of identity is rarely recognized in Irish cultural imagining, and so, two thirds of the way through this poem, the speaker must descend from this creative dream-space 'above' to the ground floor, which is instead 'a landscape without emphasis, / light, linear, precisely planned'. This is the unmarked territory of the domestic – a location which in the 1980s was still almost unknown in the Irish poetry canon. Domestic space in this arena is co-terminous with the blank space of its female subject's (post-wedding) afterlife, which has become an underworld of silence.³⁷ In the fixity of positioning to which women were traditionally condemned under patriarchy, such domestic spaces are ones of apparently undisturbable symbolic order, where stacked sheets operate like winding sheets – 'a hemisphere of tiered, aired cotton'.³⁸ However, this is also 'a hot terrain of linen from the iron / folded in and over, stacked high / neatened flat, stoving heat and white' – in other words, though domesticity is a locus of constraint, it is also a hidden space of change constituted by multiple surfaces folded over and waiting, as the contained, interior, hidden layers of history invite entry and disruption.³⁹

Eavan Boland's invitation to disruption through otherworld imagining in 'The Women' is taken up by Seamus Heaney in his own work's handling of fabric sheets in the late poem 'Saw Music', from his sequence 'Out of This World' (2006).⁴⁰ Here, cloth references index another, differently-pitched, lifelong struggle by a major Irish poet with the ethics and necessity of crediting marvels. In this poem, Heaney sceptically tests the possibility of truth in sunbeams arising from a tear in the imaginary fabric between heaven and earth. These beams 'Look like stretched sheets of fluted silk or rayon / In an old-style draper's window.' Following the example of Czeslaw Milosz, in whose memory this poem is written, Heaney both reluctantly and gratefully acknowledges these stretched sheets, which here he names "'godbeams'" (citing his friend the artist Barrie Cooke who paints them). For Heaney, these godbeams are descriptive of the transcendent power of art itself: that is, art as an alternate light made accessible through imaginary force which arises from the conditions of lowliness and darkness we associate with our delimited life experience. Yet the artist reframes this base experience as also signifying the arrival of unearned grace: the gunk and sediment staining the slab from which the painter must work, constitutes 'puddles on the spirit's winnowing floor' left after the kind of sudden, cleansing downpour which typically precedes unexpected sunbeams in Ireland's frequent mixed-weather atmosphere.

³⁷ Boland describes the realm of the suburbs, housing estates, children and women as 'the almost invisible world that everyone knew and no one referred to'. Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), x.

³⁸ Rather than death robes, for Shifrer, the ending of 'The Women' offers 'an almost celestial display of fabric imagery'. Shifrer 332.

³⁹ See Pajaczkowska 224 for a discussion of the significance of the Deleuzian 'fold' to textile analysis. As Hedwig Schwall indicates, in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's poem, 'The Real Thing', similar disruption is invited in the form of the brazen serpent's agency as 'the one free foot kicking / Under the white sheet of history' (Ní Chuilleanáin, 16; Schwall, personal email, 12th April 2017).

⁴⁰ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 50-51.

Heaney's God of art is allegorized in this poem as a shopkeeper who offers heaven through the escape chutes of credulity made up of the 'fluted silk or rayon' on sale in a modest establishment. This shop-front stands both related to and distinct from its more sophisticated down-town department-store equivalents, elaborately decorated as they are for the festive season. Outside the shut door of such larger emporiums, beggar musicians play in the rain for coppers, whilst inside, retail items are promoted with spangled baubles and flashing lights, commodifying the season of divine incarnation with calculated artifice. Yet Heaney recognizes that no matter which type of heavenly dry-goods shop we take shelter in (or against), as human beings we need their products of cloth, not only for the protection of being held and covered which they afford, but also for their pride in display.

Indeed, bedsheets are a particular focus of Heaney's interest in this double function of shelter and show, as seen in the special birth sheets kept for the doctor's visits attending his mother at childbirth in 'Out of the Bag' (2001)⁴¹ – sheets which he notes can double up as a good set of laying-out sheets for the dead. His work thus intimates that the bloody realities of birth and death are not denied by, but rather mediated through, the act of dressing up. Likewise, the draper's display of good sheets in 'Saw Music' – cloths tellingly made both of natural and synthetic fibre (silk and rayon) – communicates our human need to be clothed from the beginning to the end of our lives. This poem signals both our human boundedness to the sufferings of this world *and* our claim to outstep those sufferings as we attempt to keep the good side out (or up) – to allow the ideal to counter-balance the real.

Heaney's fabric godbeams frame the oppositional yet interdependent conditions of human vulnerability and strength, destitution and grace. This relationship is of course more directly implied by the busker's saw music at the center of this poem – music which is at once paltry and indispensable as it alternately signals poverty and richness: 'Flop-wobble grace note or high banshee whine.' The action of the bow across the saw suggests an act of weaving, generating texture between the warp of human truth and the weft of human desire, notwithstanding the artist's reduced life conditions, symbolized here in the worn-out coat he wears.

The poem then returns to one final fabric reference to confront the limitations of art in the face of what most urgently calls to be said: Milosz teaches Heaney that art on the one hand is mere 'Daubs fixed on canvas' on a treated cloth surface – reducing any mystical claims for its nature by attending to its constructed materiality. Yet Heaney's ideal art here, like Boland's earlier, can choose to remain consciously make-shift and provisional – an art both of making do and of make-and-do.⁴² This is because Milosz also teaches Heaney that all art, however seemingly inadequate when placed in the scales with human struggles for justice, dignity, and survival, has the potential to bring transcendence to bear upon that same base-level, seemingly unredeemed reality. Milosz himself proves this to be the case in the most direct way possible: in his ultimate reduced bodily circumstance – lying in his coffin – he witnesses to the artist's final exposure to the claims of the real. Yet by the same token, Milosz now rests within the present as a 'godbeam' – a figure of grace who subsists beyond, because he remains within, the terms of this world. Milosz is then compared to the hauntingly improvised, physical melody of the saw that Heaney imagines the poet might

⁴¹ Heaney 2001, 6.

⁴² See Shifrer 333 on provisionality as central to Boland's art.

have heard in the Poland of his youth – a melody which this exemplary figure ‘would not have renounced, however paltry’.⁴³ In this poem, therefore, brokenness is full of the imagination of its opposite. By linking its various image-sets - painting, weather, retail, music, and human-body - through recurrent references to fabric, ‘Saw Music’ attends as fully as possible to the material bases which ground and regenerate our conceptions of the ideal. It thus powerfully rehearses Seamus Heaney’s career-defining option for a relationship of both/and, rather than one of either/or, between art and reality, transcendence and history.

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By now, we begin to understand that conceptualizations of the afterlife in Irish poetry enable poets to imagine multiple alternative lives in the here-and-now. We have seen that fabric imagery has notable power to channel this possibility of alterity as it centres on a relationship of physical proximity and connectivity rather than one of substitution between the textile objects treated in these poems and the meanings those objects signify. Such a metonymic relationship is indicated by the particular interest shown by Yeats, Boland, Heaney and Meehan in synaesthesia – where one or other combination of the senses of touch, sight, sound and smell interact. Synaesthesia is crucial to textile theorists’ interest in the ‘haptic’ – the ‘inter-relation between the tactile, visual, embodied and symbolic registers of meaning which exists at the center of the subjective experience of culture... [in which] the differentiation between acoustic, visual, kinetic, olfactory and tactile senses will never be complete’.⁴⁴ For example, in Seamus Heaney’s poem ‘Saw Music’, while its title signals that the art of music takes prominence, music is channelled by the art of painting, but painting in turn was first mediated by the art of fabric which remains at the core of Heaney’s imaginative process in this text.

However, W.B. Yeats in his late thirties had still quite a way to go towards such an understanding, as we see when we examine the poem which defines the shift towards plainer style and tougher thought in his early mid-career period - ‘A Coat’ (1914).⁴⁵ Yeats was by this stage a very well known cultural figure in the Irish Revival movement, and the elaborately decorated cloth of his own signature style had come to represent for him and many others the fullness and richness of the quintessential poet’s art - an art of a-historical, transpersonal reach embodied in an aesthetic stitched with mythologies and archaisms, testifying to the richness of the artist’s dreams and his unique calling to serve the ideal. Yet in this poem, the speaker-poet appears ready and willing to divest himself of this coat, in order to checkmate and distinguish himself from those who would steal this precious garment from him - those ‘fools’ for whom its embodiment of transcendence is desired only as compensatory escapism. Yeats’s famous declaration in this poem of the dispensability of his own embroidered style, asserts that abandoning rather than holding onto elaborate dress signals continued adherence to standards of otherworld transcendence in the face of the temptation to accept the limitations of this life. Hence nakedness is his chosen alternative coat, as Yeats directly addresses his own art: ‘Song, let them take it’ – implicitly

⁴³ ‘Saw-Music’ reiterates a key term and key message from Heaney’s 1978 lecture, ‘Yeats as an Example?’ Speaking about Yeats’s poem ‘Cuchulain Comforted’, Heaney concludes: ‘the figure the poem makes is out of this world’. Heaney 2002, 111.

⁴⁴ Pajczkowska 223, 242-3.

⁴⁵ Yeats 178.

detaching his art from the forms which cover it.⁴⁶ However, if this is all that the poem 'A Coat' offers, it does little to challenge underlying structures of social and cultural power, for it simply replaces one over-established poetic style of reaching for transcendence, with another – nakedness here connoting anything but unarmed exposure, as the poet adapts an inverse, more inviolable form of the emperor's new clothes. After all, when Yeats concludes this poem by declaring that 'there's more enterprise / In walking naked', his choice of noun suggests he is obeying the very laws of market value which at this period (as epitomized in 'September 1913'⁴⁷), he particularly claims to disdain.

The limitations of Yeats's position in such an act of substitution become apparent when, alongside 'A Coat', we place a much later poem which also uses fabric coverings to negotiate the terms of exchange between art and audience - Eavan Boland's 'The Room in which my First Child Slept' (2007).⁴⁸ Boland's poem highlights the kind of gender constraints within the Irish literary tradition that are partly underpinned by Yeats's old and new coats. This text begins with cloth and fabric references which frame social relations whose hierarchical nature is suggested through the alternatives of stylized or unstylized surfaces of the clothing through which they are signified. Boland's poem revisits the sources of her art at a key period in her aesthetic when her children were small, a period here represented as 'a small town, known for a kind of calico, / made there'. She distinguishes that living aesthetic from canonical models represented by the symbol of the 'inch or so' of smooth white cotton, on the 'glazed' surface of which 'a bird never landed'. This glazed cotton suggests the inhospitable culture within the patriarchal tradition of poetry as passed down to Boland, as one on which the true spirit of poetry (represented as a 'red-billed bird'), trying to land, cannot get a grip. This smooth and shiny surface starkly contrasts with the rougher calico she here suggests instead as a symbol of genuinely revolutionary art. Calico as a fabric points towards the canonically-disavowed, and biographically and biologically more overt material associated with the women's poetry of her generation. Calico symbolizes an alternative to the established hierarchical poetry tradition represented by glazed cotton: Boland describes it here as a 'strong and unglazed, / ...makeshift of cotton in which the actual / unseparated husks still remained and / could be found if you looked'. Calico thus suggests an aesthetic in which art's qualities of texture, colour and absorption at different stages of its making are fully taken into account in relation to the specific experiential context in which that making takes place, whatever that lived situation may be. Thus Boland advocates moving away from privileging cloth / art as finished product to prioritizing art as an entity which is first and foremost uneven, process-based and stained by history.

That makeshift cotton, which signals inclusive artistic enterprise, was anticipated in Boland's earlier key poem of alternate national remembrance, 'The Achill Woman' (1990).⁴⁹ Here Boland re-enters a scene from her past in which as a student she once went on an Easter-holiday pre-exam study break to Achill. The eponymous central figure who looks after her there, wears a makeshift apron, a 'tea-towel round her waist', signifying servitude.

⁴⁶ Hedwig Schwall reminds me that 'A Coat' thus prefigures the 'tattered coat upon a stick' of 'Sailing to Byzantium', aptly summarizing its nascent ethic as 'the more holes, the more singing'. Schwall, personal email, 12th April 2017.

⁴⁷ Yeats 159-60.

⁴⁸ Boland 2007, 39.

⁴⁹ Boland 2005, 176-7.

This tea-towel bears literally imprinted upon it, the message of its (and its wearer's) practical use-value within the Irish literary tradition to which the young Boland was then still uncritically apprenticed. The tea-towel has written upon it, 'in coarse, woven letters, / the words "glass cloth"', highlighting the fact that the Achill woman – through her act of serving the young Boland – is, like her, employed to shine up the ongoing authority of the crystalline poetics of the court poets of the silver age, then being studied by the young woman poet. However, the Achill woman challenges even as she performs this ratification through serving the self-absorbed young woman poet to whom this older woman was contracted to bring water every day. The Achill woman's glass cloth offers a multi-layered message to the young woman who was then busy absorbing the aesthetic values of these court poets, oblivious to their collusion (and thus, indirectly, her own) in a culture of absolutist power which would bring the forebears of the Achill woman to their knees. The 'glass cloth' the Achill woman wears is a sign which only the older Boland writing this poem, will learn to read, for taken in conjunction with that court poetry, this piece of fabric is itself a powerful 'song[] crying out [its] ironies'.

The term 'court poets' suggests the careful sartorial self-presentation of such patriarchal author-father figures as the torero-like coat-flaunting personage of mid-career W.B. Yeats, at the very moment he is ostensibly casting off his signature embroidered garment. We might note that such figures are well-parodied by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin in her poem, 'Following' (1994),⁵⁰ where alertness to unconscious gender privilege in the 1980s/90s anthology wars in Ireland is a context for this text's warning to women invited to the feast of Irish literature, to suspect this tradition's preoccupation with fine outer-wear – 'clothes all finely laundered, / Ironed facings and linings' – since such criteria leaves ordinary clothing that is normally held closer to the skin and thereby associated with the feminine – 'The square of white linen / That held three drops / Of her heart's blood' – to remain invisible, 'shelved / Between the gatherings / That go to make a book'. Boland's, Meehan's, Ní Chuilleanáin's and Heaney's various gatherings of these intimately owned, often re-worked items of clothing in poetry which testifies to suffered experience, together offer a radical redirection in Irish poetry.

However, Yeats's 'A Coat' has threaded into it, an oblique forward signpost towards just this alternative direction, as it opens room to consider the significance of human vulnerability: a message which will become central to the aesthetics of his future heirs in the Irish poetry tradition. 'A Coat' when re-read in this way, suggests that the error of the charlatan copy-cat artists Yeats has to deal with in the early nine-teens, is that they think that access to the otherworld through power of literary expression will make them unassailable. However, though these fools may wear his coat, this poem implies that they themselves are empty – less than naked beneath it, for they have stolen the artist's coat in order to cover over and obliterate awareness of their own exposure to non-being, which knowledge is a far more important resource for any true artist, thinker or activist (as we have seen dramatized in Heaney's 'Saw Music'). Such denial by Yeats's imitative followers paradoxically arises from their unadmitted fear that the otherworld may indeed be non-containable and indifferent to human desire.

⁵⁰ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Brazen Serpent* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), 32. Extract quoted by kind permission of the author and The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath.

The key difference between Yeats's mid-career and his early work which this poem suggests, is that by the early nine-teens, Yeats is beginning to see us human beings as called to a god-like divine indifference, not so much to others (though this kind of detachment remains part of his armoury in this poem and elsewhere), but rather to our own exposure to mortality. Only by means of this indifference in the face of our inevitable death and degeneration can we achieve integral identity, which, like true art, moves beyond the clutches of the present world's values. Yeats opens himself to this idea, even though later on in one of his key attempts at realizing such indifference to mortality - 'Sailing to Byzantium'(1928)⁵¹ - Yeats finds that dispensing with his own elaborate coat of style with all its potential for consolatory, compensatory and yet illusory power, is not at all so straightforward as 'A Coat' would imply. In that later poem, Yeats adopts a compensatory interior armoury of precious metalwork (a golden corsage⁵²) beneath the tattered coat of his own mortal vulnerability as an 'aged man' exposed to irreversible bodily degeneration. Nevertheless, ongoing exposure to this difficult destiny is admitted by virtue of the conditional, dream status of the voyage undertaken in this poem to circumvent that fate. The very sense of transcendent presence which fine textiles facilitate through their power of bypassing everyday delimited and delimiting human conditions (including the necessity for ordinary communication, interdependence and subjugation to the flesh), is therefore held to question in Yeats. From the mid-nineteens onwards, his work with fabric imagery proposes the following principle: that far more compelling than achieved transcendence, is our human struggle with the experience of void and absence - a struggle underpinning all such efforts towards otherworldly closure. This reality of emptiness is one which cloth insists upon.

We find Yeats in his sixties actively struggling to come to terms with the truth of absence subtending presence, as seen in his despairing of the fabric metaphor altogether in poems like 'The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool'(1928).⁵³ Here, his embroidered cloths have devolved into tangled threads, bitterly representing the likely end of this poet's previous, elaborate, after-life dreams. In this poem, Yeats declares (in the voice of 'The Fool by the Roadside') that he will find 'A faithful love' (or, total satisfaction), not even when time and conventional wisdom unravels - when 'thoughts that a fool / Has wound upon a spool' – spinning order into being – have become again mere 'loose thread'. Rather, he will find such a faithful love only when *all* such individual afterlives are over: 'When cradle and spool are past' – that is, when the fabric metaphor itself unravels and he (and it) are 'mere... / Coagulate of stuff'. The true afterlife of self, then, is the end of the otherworld, when he and it will have become a transparent clot or mass of unravelled threads of identity and meaning and order. For Yeats, this state does not represent being beyond time, but rather, a nameless condition in which time itself (and therefore heaven too) is abolished for ever. Indeed, it may be terror of such a prospect that makes Yeats in 'All Souls' Night' (the final poem from this same 1928 volume, *The Tower*),⁵⁴ counter chaotic unwinding by requiring the protective swaddling assumed by 'some mind that, if the cannon sound / From every

⁵¹ Yeats 239.

⁵² Hedwig Schwall offers this striking term to describe the interior armoury here posited. Schwall, personal email, 12th May 2017.

⁵³ Yeats 265-6.

⁵⁴ Yeats 279-82.

quarter of the world, can stay / Wound in mind's pondering, / As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound'.

Notwithstanding such resistance, one of Yeats's greatest achievements is to communicate this doubleness of presence and absence as integral to all human lives – a doubleness very clearly embedded in man's engagement with cloth. This in turn generates fabric's keenest relevance to our consideration of the afterlife. As Pajaczowska explains, 'The embodied meanings of touch and contact are most present in our experience of textiles. [But] touch 'disappears' when it is continuous and unchanging, and although the meaning of touch is its ability to connote a profound sense of permanence and stability, this meaning is communicated by an experience of transience and movement'.⁵⁵ The poet's mind, then, can neither afford nor will be allowed to 'stay / Wound' in any one kind of clothing. However, the beginnings of a solution to this fear of necessary self-dissolution through unwinding may be offered in Section 2 of Yeats's poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', again from *The Tower*.⁵⁶ Here Yeats remembers Loie Fuller who 'danced in a whirl of draperies manipulated on sticks' at the Folies Bergère in the 1890s.⁵⁷ He describes Fuller in that poem as having 'enwound / A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth, / [such that] It seemed that a dragon of air / Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round / Or hurried them off on its own furious path'. The whirling of cloths here conveys an idea of change and great revolutionary chaos which must be submitted to, even though this change bring about the condition of the unspeakable. Yet if humans in history *are* subject to such fate, this poem points out that we are also the puppeteers of its expression. Thus the dance image here holds out the possibility of balance between the force of moving bodies supporting the cloths (symbolizing human desires and needs and bodily power) and the dragon-like movement of the dark condition of history which these same movements symbolize: in other words, cloth metaphors communicate the sense of the uncontainable, which also – at least temporarily - can be held by being expressed.⁵⁸

We have seen this middle path anticipated in Yeats's otherwise-despairing poem from the same mid-twenties period, 'The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool',⁵⁹ in his use there of the striking verbal noun 'Coagulate' ('of stuff') to describe man's position of posthumous non-entity. An alternative order is already suggested in that word, as it is a term usually used to describe blood in the process of changing from a fluid to semi-solid state. 'Coagulate' therefore implies the forming of something, as though materiality – the basic elements of 'stuff' – were offering itself again in some kind of new beginning. This possibility of (re)incarnation is directly proposed in 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman' from the following volume (*The Winding Stair*, 1933),⁶⁰ where – although the afterlife again means coming to God without oneself, having been fully unravelled in spending oneself in love ('For love is but a skein unwound / Between the dark and dawn'), nevertheless, from this

⁵⁵ Pajaczowska 245.

⁵⁶ Yeats 254.

⁵⁷ A. Norman Jeffares, 'Notes'. W.B. Yeats, *Yeats's Poems*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1996, 3rd Edition), 583.

⁵⁸ I am indebted here to the fine work of Maria Kamyli on dance in Yeats. See Maria Kamyli, *Towards Zero Metaphysics: Eastern Mysticism and the Unfolding of the City, Dancer and Mountain Mandalas in Later W.B. Yeats*. Doctoral Dissertation, University College Dublin, 2015.

⁵⁹ Yeats 265-6.

⁶⁰ Yeats 308.

condition of unravelment, there arises the possibility of being remade: 'I – love's skein upon the ground, / My body in the tomb – / Shall leap into the light lost / In my mother's womb.' One may choose to read these final two lines, either as Yeats declaring that after death he will leap into a heaven denied him through having been born of woman, or, as anticipating re-accessing heaven as a light which had once been available to him exactly *in* his mother's womb. The preceding weaving references (along with the placement of the line-break between the penultimate and final lines before 'In' rather than 'lost') nudge us towards the latter interpretation, since the womb is the primal place of the weaving of the self.⁶¹ This poem thereby implies one must have been already entirely unravelled to so be knitted together in the here and now, and thereby suggests that only the fullest-tolerable disempowerment of self, can authentically re-enable one's possibility of authoritative selfhood.

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Yeats's extraordinary insight in 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman' is that the basis of the afterlife is the condition of radical loss which underpins incarnation. This in turn points towards Freud's theories of the pre-oedipal mother-child relationship – a relationship which is a key aid to understanding why afterlife longing is so powerfully communicated through clothing. As cultural critics have pointed out, the child's first encounter with a non-human surface is usually with the fabric in which they are wrapped, subsequently allowing scraps of fabric to act as key transitional objects (comfort blankets) mediating the child's separation from its parents.⁶² Pajackowska explains that 'In the spectrum of losses that structure life from birth to death, the presence of cloth is a central signifier', for 'we experience [textiles] as neither subject nor object, but as the threshold between'. In this sense, fabric is central to the experience of the Kristevan semiotic - fabric is liminal because it reminds us of the core attribute of tactility: that 'to touch is always also to be touched'.⁶³ Cloth has a particular role here as it becomes a direct surrogate for the mother's flesh in its give, texture and pliability: as Anne Hamlyn argues, 'Fabric is malleable. It lends itself to wrapping, draping, and swathing. It restricts direct access to the naked object, but it also has the ability to suggest, enhance, and draw attention to what it covers over and adorns... hinting at [that object's] presence'. Hamlyn therefore proposes that 'fabric is the ground of some of our earliest subject-object relations', since all textiles are 'the man-made surfaces that envelop the idealized maternal body... Fabric occupies the gap between the needy flesh of the infant and the nurturing flesh on which it depends'.⁶⁴

In this key lesson of loss underpinning incarnation, parental nurturing flesh is that of the father as well as the mother, as seen in Seamus Heaney's poem, 'The Butts' (2010).⁶⁵ The occasion of this poem is a son feeling inside a wardrobe hung with his dead father's suits – the insubstantiality of his progenitor's life being conversely felt through the substantiality of this same man's clothing. Anthropomorphizing his father's suits as primal embodiments of the one who wore them, suit cloth here carries the shape and smell of the man in the very stretch and odour of its fibres, as his father's life force seems to re-

⁶¹ See Pajackowska 241

⁶² Andrews 41. See also Pajackowska 225.

⁶³ See Andrews 46-7 and Pajackowska 229, 230.

⁶⁴ Hamlyn 11, 19, 14.

⁶⁵ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 12.

materialize as soon as the son makes contact with the cloth. This clothing operates both as liminal container and outward sign of a body that is patently absent: the suits in the wardrobe, as though of their own volition, 'Flattened back' and remain 'A bit stand-offish' to his touch. Nevertheless, contact with the suits is recuperative for the son in more than one way.

The stand-offishness and traditionalism of Heaney's father's suits at one level signals back to Yeats's mid-career *Magi* 'In their stiff, painted clothes' – those 'pale unsatisfied ones' who 'Now as at all times.../ Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky' ('The Magi', 1914).⁶⁶ In 'The Magi', Yeats explores the logical extension into bad faith of his own early poetry's use of fabric to signify control through the manipulative exercise of imaginative power borrowed from otherworldly realms (as we saw in 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'). The *Magi* represent a similar unending archaic search for the 'uncontrollable mystery [of the heavens] on the bestial floor' – that is, the revelation of God to man in a form which does not domesticate the mystery. To the *Magi*, human vulnerability, as epitomized in Christ's death on the cross, is unacceptable, and so they search for an alternative Bethlehem. However, in order to sustain this search, they have become as unyielding as their stiff painted clothes, with their eyes fixed and inflexible as they refuse to settle for female physical incarnation of the godhead being. This is a commitment to reject one of the most normal consolations of this life – family life, in all its noise and accident, as dramatized again in the following poem, 'The Dolls' (1914).⁶⁷ The unacceptability of family life is represented by the implied gap between the *Magi*'s formal 'painted', artifice-generated clothing and the swaddling clothes used in the stable: a birthplace necessarily marked with the 'filth' to which the following *Dolls* object. However, by the time Yeats writes 'The Second Coming' six years later in 1919,⁶⁸ such a refusal will itself have invoked the dark and terrifying slouching shape of an exponentially rougher beast closing in on human history.

Heaney in 'The Butts' reprieves this Yeatsian process of reappraisal of the cost of transcendental presence, in the history of his own preceding relationship to his father's suits. He shows in this poem that neither the father nor his power can be recaptured through the son's groping of such authority-signifying cloth. In this text, we discover that the speaker-son at an earlier stage had wanted more of the transcendent from his father, than the suits which represent him would ever give: he digs in his progenitor's suit pockets seeking 'the forbidden handfals.' However, by this point, we realize that the poem's time frame has blurred. The speaker is temporarily operating, not from the perspective of a mature man looking back on his dead father, but rather from that of the adolescent he once was, stealing forbidden tobacco or cigarettes from his living father, in a classic Promethean gesture. Predictably, out of all the apparent promise of these particular cloths of heaven – the many likenesses of power which simultaneously 'surged and gave', at once enticing and escaping his clutch, both yielding to him and suffocatingly enveloping of him - out of the uncanny chillness of these suit's interior spaces, there emerges 'Nothing but chaff cocoons'. Seeking essence, the son-poet speaker discovers that only flimsy covering is available – in other words, he discovers lack in reaching for fulfillment of his desire for the status of

⁶⁶ Yeats 177.

⁶⁷ Yeats 177-8.

⁶⁸ Yeats 235.

stable authority. The poem thus precisely conveys the emptiness that follows upon the quest for the patriarchal transcendent.

At this point the son is ready to learn the key lesson of human exposure to fate. Instead of seeking the emperor's clothing, old or new, the son must enter direct congress and touch with the fabric of his father's actual life: only through this means can he outstep the empty binary option of either direct transcendence or its betrayal. Therefore, instead of the earlier-desired fully re-constitutable power of the father, a much stronger thread to the afterlife is now offered. The son, grown-up, comes into contact with the feel of the body's first clothing near to death: this is his father's skin, which by that point has become 'A paperiness' – a strange texture which the speaker had encountered once before in the 'chaff cocoons' he had found years ago as an adolescent boy (the same cocoons he soon would rediscover as a grieving man going through his father's wardrobe). Yet, paper is what a poet works with every day, suggesting that the son and artist's very failure to grasp the transcendent (via the empty suits and his father's increasing insubstantiality), delivers instead his true vocation to negotiate between the realms of the ideal and the real. Crucially, this is a calling to occupy an in-between space which is constituted both by vulnerability and love – a space where traditional phallic power is entirely redundant. In this space, here allegorized as the room of a dying father, the son must commit himself to serving the intimate care needs of a previously-powerful progenitor who is now wholly dependent and fragile. This means that the speaker, along with others in the team of which he is part, must work 'Closer than anybody liked', at once to the old man's body, each other, and to mortality itself, yet at the same time fully accept the command 'To keep working.' In 'The Butts', therefore – one of Seamus Heaney's own far-reaching final achievements as artist – the poet re-visits the material realm of his father's suits in order to vividly dramatize what a genuine inheritance of authority means: not the passing on of power from father to son in the conventional oedipal economy, but rather a birthright of necessity and strength to keep on heeding the human imperative to inter-generational connectivity and care.

Heaney in 'The Butts' clearly affirms the numinous element of clothing's presence-cum-absence as having the power to communicate oblique relations between this world and the otherworld.⁶⁹ So too in Eavan Boland's poem, 'What We Lost' (1990)⁷⁰ – a key poem on loss of intergenerational connections within Boland's own family on her mother's side. This forfeiture occurred due to the tragedy of her grandmother's early death from childbirth fever, leaving five daughters behind – a loss compounded by the paucity of records of this woman's life (Boland tells us elsewhere that she has never even been able to find her grandmother's grave⁷¹). However, in Boland's poem this near foremother is afforded an ongoing subliminal presence, via the passed-down memory of an act of storytelling about her life, through which this lost woman remains an absent presence as well as a present absence to the poet-speaker. The poem records the fact of a story about this woman having been told to the dead woman's daughter – Boland's own mother – by an adult woman caregiver when Boland's mother was an orphaned child, too young to remember it. Now, only the scene and setting is recalled of this crucial story of the absent nurturer, rather than

⁶⁹ Pajaczkowska argues, for example, that 'Weaving is an activity that is both supernatural/divine and mundane'. Pajaczkowska 233. See also Pajaczkowska 223, 224, 229, 232, and 240.

⁷⁰ Boland 2005, 187-8.

⁷¹ Boland 1995, 9, 22-3.

the contents of that story: as Anne Shifrer notes of this poem, ‘words, stories, histories dissolve into the physics of their happening in spite of attempts to preserve them’.⁷² Yet the multiplication of loss which this ‘fragility of connectedness’⁷³ involves, is partially redressed by the close imaginative focus on that storytelling context, which is offered here in Boland’s text.

Fabric references abound in ‘What We Lost’. We are informed that the storyteller, just before she told the tale that later would be lost, was engaged in ‘mending linen in her kitchen’, suggesting her narrative’s core function of healing rifts and holes in the child’s subject-identity, even while making scar lines across it with her needle as loss is underscored by virtue of this story’s witnessing to the mother in question being gone. This poem is preoccupied with barriers which are flexible yet immovable, permeable yet dense - barriers that exist between precious family memories and those of later generations who need these missing links in their own story. The poem acknowledges that ‘what we lost’ is wrapped in the fabric of time and circumstance and human (in)capacity to remember, thus the treasure of Boland’s grandmother’s life remains ‘veiled’. Yet the idea of veiling suggests the haunting possibility of seeing through – even when (as here) one cannot logically do so because the weave is too close. Appropriately, fabrics are central to this story’s frame of telling: the storyteller’s own back-story as a woman who ‘hangs sprigged,/ stove-dried lavender in muslin’ in her cupboards, wrapping healing plant life in cloth which can filter the outside realm into those interior zones needing refreshment through such interpenetration. More directly still,

Her letters and mementoes and memories
are packeted in satin at the back with
gaberdine and worsted and
the cambric she has made into bodices;
the good tobacco silk for Sunday Mass.

Words here are held literally close to the unconscious corporeal self, and are warmed for use through the sealed cloth bags in which they are held. Like the ‘travelled silks and the tones of cotton / tautened into bodices, subtly shaped by breathing’ that are stored in the same cupboards, these cloth containers of lives are vital (and vitalized) because they themselves are shaped by what they contain. Their fabric moves with the basic rhythms of the experience they hold - reminding us again of Heaney’s father’s suits in ‘The Butts’. All of this implies a different way of knowing in which contents can only be understood through reading containers in all their everyday uncanniness. Thus, in the act of reading to which we are called in this poem, material itself is brought directly to our attention. We might notice (for example) that the satin, gaberdine, worsted, and cambric mentioned in this text are all closely-woven fabrics, but of different connotative meaning and textures – some smooth and fine, some coarse and hard-wearing. A distinction is therefore made between dark and light, smoothness and underside: memories are idealized in satin, but also backed with the practicality and toughness of the gaberdine fabric with its unmistakable diagonal twill weave, with which they come into contact through being likewise stored ‘behind her cupboard doors’. The complexity and force of these memories is signalled: they are at once half-visible beneath the thin white surface of cambric items in the wardrobe yet also

⁷² Shifrer 330.

⁷³ Shifrer 331.

shrouded by the strong, hard wool of worsted garments. Similarly, the high value of these memories is associated with the years of saving and gathering it would have taken to make the 'good tobacco silk for Sunday Mass' also found in this cupboard (a tobacco silk being a small square of silk or satin material inserted in cigarette packets or redeemable through coupons).

In 'What We Lost', we see fabric itself become the woman's diary, as sexual and maternal proximity to texts is facilitated through textiles (letters wrapped in cloth). Note the deliberately bumpy, open-weave texture of the language in these stanzas which are about the close-woven hiddenness of inter-personal realms: the extended assonance on the short 'a' sound combined with bumpy dentals and plosives ('packeted in satin at the back with / gaberdine and worsted and / the cambric...'). Such language calls us to look closely at the surface, to feel the texture of these verbal containers of apparently settled lives that are anything but – an insight confirmed when the sound pattern changes as the stanza moves to describe the countrywomen's inner-to-outer display, at which point the language used to describe the relevant 'bodices' and then 'the good tobacco silk for Sunday mass', shifts into sibilants...

The thread with which the countrywoman is sewing while telling the (future-forgotten) story of the lost mother, is itself significant. This is flax thread – a strong, smooth, straight, flexible and soft fibre associated with human hair (flaxen). The handling of flax required for its processing is significant for the theme of loss in this poem. Flax traditionally is pulled up by the roots to increase its fiber length. It then needs retting (rotting), beating and scutching through hackles, which means the fibres of flax are pulled through a bed of nails (heckling combs). The presence of flax as the material of mending in this poem, therefore emphasizes what has gone into making the smooth thread of life in the hands of women like this long-ago storyteller and the present poet-speaker. The thread's own history of generation through violence and exposure, is crucial to its capacity to provisionally mend family history, allowing us to come to terms with the fact that 'The frail connections have been made and are broken'. Flax is strong, and the woman's stitching in the poem has just been 'put down'; Boland implies it will be picked up again – indeed, it is being picked up in this poem: the stitching *is* the story. It is the afterlife of a maternal line of inheritance which in this text is very deliberately aligned with the creation of fabric and its use-function as packaging, covering, protection, and means of conditional revelation.

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We have seen exemplified in the readings just offered of Heaney's 'The Butts' and Boland's 'What We Lost', that certain Irish poems, by drawing attention to the key difference between reading text *as* cloth and reading text *in* cloth, suggest in turn that a semiotic interpretation of fabric can destabilize inequitable centralizations of power. Crucially for the present essay, such subversive destabilizations tend to be motivated by the hope of re-constituting identity in as-yet unknowable, yet still body-centred, terms – thus this disruption also directs us, directly or indirectly, towards the theme of afterlife imagining. Yeats in his late poem 'Veronica's Napkin' (1933)⁷⁴ offers a striking symbol for this alternative kind of exploration of what he here calls 'The Heavenly Circuit'. This poem

⁷⁴ Yeats 289.

initially presents human recourse to the realm of the afterlife very much in top-down terms: held up by the 'Tent-pole of Eden', heaven's 'tent's drapery' denotes 'Symbolical glory of the earth and air!' This glory is here affirmed through 'The Father and His angelic hierarchy / ... St[anding] in the circuit of a needle's eye.' Such positioning represents a conservative religious conception of the Absolute Godhead as proving Himself by occupying the narrow space of true righteousness (the needle's eye), through which alone, Jesus said in the gospel (Matthew 19:23-26), man may enter heaven. However, the patriarchal principle initially advanced in 'Veronica's Napkin', is not in the end justified by Yeats. His wording ('Stood in the circuit of a needle's eye') itself leaves open the possibility that the Father who is framed by this needle's eye of moral righteousness may Himself be caught in that tiny space, when it is a space where moral display is prioritized over truth. In such a position, God is unable to go either forwards or back, the concept of His power blocking everyone else in the process. Yeats critiques this guaranteeing of the 'glory of the earth and air' through containing it inside the clean tent draperies of a Platonic dualism that can only be kept pristine through narrowing God's 'magnitude and [] glory' to the eye of absolute judgement. Yeats then offers an alternative ethic – of compassion and mercy – communicated through a very different pole and cloth: the cross and Veronica's napkin which famously absorbed blood from the face of Christ crowned with thorns as he was approaching crucifixion. This cloth, by bearing in its fibres the bloodstained imprint of human suffering, simultaneously becomes an instrument of release from *and* record of human subjugation – the napkin at once offering succour and witness, allowing both for suffering's alleviation and the conservation of its dark history (a doubleness we saw was also hinted at in Paula Meehan's red sequins). This in turn implies a new understanding of relations between the afterlife and this life, based on both/and, not either/or thinking.

On the brink of his own death, Yeats extends the invitation of 'Veronica's Napkin' by once more turning to fabric to propose that the conditions of release from and witness to human suffering and lowliness must be conjoined in order to represent true afterlife achievement. In perhaps his most haunting poem of all, 'Cuchulain Comforted' (1939),⁷⁵ Yeats dramatizes what Heaney (speaking of this poem) describes as 'a strange ritual of surrender, a rite of passage from life into death'⁷⁶ where singular individuality is abandoned in favour of undifferentiated communal identity. This involves an unavoidable process of emptying the self, here symbolized and actualized by the act of making one's own shroud. The poem's title, 'Cuchulain Comforted' – suggesting achieved consolation – stands in deliberate tension with the blankness of identity which the poem itself invokes. This is a blankness that would have seemed impossible to the younger Yeats who wove into being his uniquely self-affirming fisherman in 'grey Connemara clothes'⁷⁷ or his post-Easter-1916 Rising generation wearing green,⁷⁸ or even his Free State interlocutors, the Civil War soldier 'Half-dressed in national uniform'⁷⁹ and the 'kind old nun in a white hood' of 'Amongst School Children'.⁸⁰ Instead, a fortnight away from his own death, Cuchulain / Yeats is promised comfort by sewing and putting on his own burial clothes, and by singing with

⁷⁵ Yeats 379-80.

⁷⁶ Heaney 2002, 111.

⁷⁷ Yeats, 'The Fisherman', 197-8.

⁷⁸ Yeats, 'Easter 1916', 228-30.

⁷⁹ Yeats, 'The Road at my Door', 250

⁸⁰ Yeats 261-3.

others 'the best we can'. Yeats now unmistakably affirms that the individualism we necessarily lose at the point of death cannot be regained in the afterlife, for in that realm, different criteria prevail: 'all we do, / All must together do'.

In this poem, the greatest individualist hero Yeats has invoked throughout his career – Cuchulain – crosses to an otherworld, not of heroes but of reprobate cowards and sinners: the community of shrouds. Cuchulain in this poem accedes to the shrouds' request that he, like them, engage in the act of fabric making, by taking up his own burial shroud and sewing it. Yeats's vision here may have been influenced by that of another of his heroes – his forebear poet, John Donne. Donne, a few months before his death in 1631, famously modelled for a drawing in his own shroud, the sketch thus produced later being used to sculpt the upright statue to Donne in St Paul's Cathedral.⁸¹ Much earlier, Yeats had wished that he might 'dine at journey's end / With Landor and with Donne' ('To a Young Beauty'[1919]⁸²), but did he foresee he would do so through the shade of an alter ego now enveloped in the linen coverings of absolute anonymity? For Yeats in 1939, sewing one's own shroud makes one as a hero indistinguishable from anyone else, including characters who have been morally reprehensible in this life.

The shroud in this poem epitomizes what Pajaczkowska calls 'the mundanity of cloth' which hosts 'the recursive inversions of active and passive, subject and object, self and other, proximate and distant, visible and invisible'.⁸³ It is therefore quite unlike the bloody shrouds of the wet-lipped vampires in Yeats's 1933-collected poem, 'Oil and Blood',⁸⁴ who are the repressed unconscious of those 'Bodies of holy men and women' that repose above them 'In tombs of gold and lapis lazuli'. Instead, the shrouds in 'Cuchulain Comforted' are non-violent non-entities, and contact with them requires the hero-artist to dispense with all such temptations of gothic opposition along with his status. Hence the Cuchulain we meet in 'Cuchulain Comforted' has no interest in becoming – as in 'Byzantium' (1933)⁸⁵ – 'A mouth that has no moisture and no breath' only so that he/it may 'summon' other 'Breathless mouths' in a heroic ecstasy of otherworldly consummation whereby this voice can 'hail the superhuman; / I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.' In contrast to 'Byzantium's' elevation of the 'glory of changeless metal' through an ecstatic organic dolphin-borne passage from this world to the next, Cuchulain's act of fabric making in communion with others indicates this very late poem's more complete realization of the possibilities of the afterlife. Whereas in 'Byzantium', entering the afterlife was imagined as the act of 'Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance, / An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve', in which unique distance is forever maintained between this-worldly clothing and the otherworldly vision (flame) brought into close proximity with it, in 'Cuchulain Comforted', in contrast, we find a shared space of direct contact and engagement with the fabric of mortality (literally sewing it). This contact facilitates shared identity amongst the inhabitants of the afterlife, which here is conceived as a space of imperfect singing, of failures, and of submission to lowly work – yet in the end, a space also of powerful transformation into an afterlife voice of living 'birds'. These are the same avian creatures which were so despised by the artificial golden bird of

⁸¹ Philip Cottrell, 'John Donne, Undone, Redone: the John Donne Monument Reconsidered', *Death, Burial and the Afterlife*, eds. Philip Cottrell and Wolfgang Marx (Dublin: Carysfort Press 2014), 33-64, 33-5.

⁸² Yeats 189.

⁸³ Pajaczkowska 233

⁸⁴ Yeats 289.

⁸⁵ Yeats 298-9.

Byzantium 'Planted on the starlit golden bough', even as that elevated figure attempted to adapt the human reproductive power of 'Those images that yet / Fresh images beget' in 'That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.'

Unlike such contradictory sleights of hand, Cuchulain's shroud is specifically *not* the kind of clothing which can simultaneously mediate death and birth while allowing one to undercut the other – it is not the conjoined 'Winding-sheet and swaddling-clothes' of 'Old Tom Again' (1933).⁸⁶ Instead, Cuchulain's shroud facilitates much deeper depersonalization. It goes without saying that it is a very different coat made for his song than that haughtily abandoned by Yeats more than a quarter of a century before, for the 'singing' it generates proceeds in full recognition of the non-perfection of what is produced. This is the case, even though the result may be miraculously transformed in the doing – 'They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds'. At last - and only at the last - Yeats's eternal is truly beyond his agency or his comprehension or his judgement or even his desire.

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Yeats's great challenge in 'Cuchulain Comforted' is powerfully taken up in Paula Meehan's elegy for a tapestry-weaver friend, 'In Memory, Joanne Breen' (2009).⁸⁷ This poem records the burying of the Witmanesque song of that loved woman's body, but suggests her song is buried only as a thread is buried in the emerging cloth, the 'tapestry' of her larger life, then and now: in Anne Fogarty's precise term, 'this cancelled life... is not simply elegized and mourned but imaginatively transposed'.⁸⁸ Appropriately, the poem itself weaves and interweaves its lines, dropping and reintroducing motifs and timeframes as though it were a music score for Meehan's signature incantatory affect of litany when delivering her poetry in oral performance – what she herself has described as 'a kind of catatonic rock... I suspect it goes back to the heartbeat we hear while we're in the womb'.⁸⁹ By such means, this poem vividly illustrates the authority of Anne Mulhall's contention that 'Meehan's words can act on us as signposts to... intangible yet pervasive regions of experience'; these are 'space[s] where woman-to-woman interrelation is made possible, even across the threshold of life and death'.⁹⁰ The present essay will conclude with a reading of fabric – that 'charged network of images by which Meehan imagines death, and attempts to absorb its lack into the flux of her poetic art and transmute it'⁹¹ - by following the momentum of this text as it unfolds.

The opening line of 'In Memory, Joanne Breen' emphasizes tactility in the speaker's situating of herself as 'fingering a length of yarn', prioritizing the direct engagement and active relationship that working with textiles requires. Meehan then goes on to show that although this thread of fate may seem to have a singular given colour (green), its constitutive strands when unwound in this poem 'widdershins' (a German-originating term meaning 'against sense'), reveal the alternative stories (colours) out of which the dominant

⁸⁶ Yeats 320.

⁸⁷ Meehan 35.

⁸⁸ Fogarty 223.

⁸⁹ Paula Meehan, in Theo Dorgan, 'An Interview with Paula Meehan', *Colby Quarterly* 28 (December 1992): 265-269), 266. Qtd in Mulhall 143.

⁹⁰ Mulhall 142, 147.

⁹¹ Fogarty 223.

narrative of the given life that thread represents, has actually materialized: 'I see, spun into the yarn, fibres of blue / & yellow & purple, occasionally orange.' This anti-clockwise movement of 'undoing the magic of the spindle' makes Joanne Breen's life known so that it doesn't slip away, for as Mulhall points out, 'those unravelling threads weave a space of connectivity as well as dissolution'.⁹² For Paula Meehan, 'Unravelling' and winding the multiple fibres of her female subject's identity back onto the distaff side of the historical record, involves faith in the otherworld / afterlife realm as being creatively against the sense of that life's ending. This is because such unravelling involves reversing the fate of the sleeping beauty – waking her again – by taking on the authority of the pivot, rod and axis upon which her friend's life had turned and upon which all our fates revolve.

Unravelling in this poem is a counter-rational action of weaving through unweaving, by dramatizing the process of strands interconnecting even as these same strands are being split so as to record the actual details of major loss: 'The day we buried her, gorse was a golden flame.// We buried the summer with her, we buried / high clouds of May, the swallows we buried'. Meehan's use of chiasmus here augments this poem's larger effect of interweaving, as the text performs what it describes. The poem's over-and-under of repeated words and phrases allows the incantatory rhythms of mourning to proceed, rowing back against the void of death whilst gradually fully acknowledging it. Hence, when Meehan says, 'We buried the summer', she communicates not only that summer is gone with the woman who died, but that summer is temporarily given over to this woman on her journey into death, since she had represented the summer and summer is integral to this yarn the poet is simultaneously unravelling and regenerating.

Meehan picks up on Cuchulain's transformation into a bird in the act of sewing his shroud in her representation here of birds as seamstresses: 'those stitchers of land to sea, those grafters of sky / to the dark earth which opened to her beauty'. In this act of sewing, the birds transpose and connect, so that the dark earth does not swallow the woman they represent, rather it allows itself to be changed by her entry into it. Hence this woman becomes a new strand in the fabric of the land being woven into a tapestry, one which will now forever alter that picture.

Afterlife possibility is dynamically suggested in the very grief which is heavy in Meehan's lines: 'We buried the song of her body and all it promised / of betrothal & children & work'. The ampersands between the words in this last line operate like an elaborate stitch connecting those three key bases of human commitment and meaning – betrothal, children and work - not only across the line of this poem, but across the line of the division between this world and the otherworld. The dead woman herself had suggested such possibility in her own textile work: 'she would weave dolphin & salmon & swan/ in a tapestry out of the land itself / its very warp & woof'. Each of these three natural creatures woven into her fabric of life are highly symbolical of movement between realms.

Gradually in this poem's tapestry, the longitudinal warp thread of death is itself being buried, though we know it must stay ongoingly present and essential - leaving primarily visible the transverse weft threads of a life that is remembered and celebrated. It is further appropriate to the elegiac purpose of this poem about a tragically foreshortened life, that

⁹² Mulhall 153.

the weft yarns in any tapestry need to be discontinuous in order that the tapestry picture tells its full story – weft threads are interlaced back and forth in their own small pattern area and portion of the warp, to form the design. In this way, continuities emerge through and in the discontinuities of the picture's 'stuff, its dye, its fixings'. Furthermore, the tapestry made by one woman's past and presence in and between worlds, can become an extension of 'the land she trod so lightly on.' Unlike the possessive speaker of Yeats's early poem, 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' who claimed a transcendent cloth to interpose between the land and a loved woman, here the land itself as tapestry *is* that richest possible cloth - the land to which this woman has now returned in an organic, non-determined relation.

Midway through the poem, as the season shifts to winter, its opening lines are repeated, like a line of warp steadying the whole structure of this text into which so much rich weft is being woven. The wind crying in the chimney like a pipe during this time is also fate's spindle with its hollow shaft, spinning wind as the breath of life and the sound of sorrow in this coldest and darkest of times. By now in this mourning process, 'the shadow' of Joanne Breen's memory 'sways on the wall' like a silhouette behind the cloth screen that divides this world from the otherworld, or like fibres of stuff on the distaff awaiting spinning into substantial shape. These shadows are very far from the monstrous ones which invaded Yeats's vision at the end of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' ('I see phantoms...'). In Meehan's winter spinning, 'breath snags on memory' creatively - the essence of life is a thread which gets caught on the sharp projection which is human memory, by which means the past is held alive in the present – 'the occluded' being 'lift[ed]... into apprehension',⁹³ thereby painfully affirming that one *is* alive. This textile work, this mourning, this memorializing, involves many such snaggings, bumps and rises, for the pain associated with grief is integral to how we turn for good towards the recreated presence of the one who is gone, as someone who is located now within the depth-texture of ourselves and the wider world: such presence neither can nor should slip smoothly away, for it has opened the door to what Anne Mulhall beautifully describes as 'a shareable, trans-subjective, connective borderspace where traces of one's others vibrate in the self'.⁹⁴

The poem closes as the season moves to Spring and an image of the lost woman as the girl she once was 'in the branches of an old beech in the back field', the cycle starting again as 'She holds fast to the rope and out she jumps'. By now this woman who has died is attached to the yarn of all of life, both connected and swinging free, so that much of that which once made up her world – 'the dog, the clouds, the hedgerows,/ the rooftop, the haybarn, the cows,/ the stream, the starlings, the byre,/ the bees, the hill, the village' - are fibres being swirled and 'spun together' again, just as she herself now spins and twists, 'dizzy and giddy' in a radical movement of integration and renewal, a re-weaving of what has been unravelled, 'swinging out into the arms of our love'. In the end, the warp on which this woman's new weft will be strung is the love both of those who knew her, and of those who will meet her through her own work and that of others who remember her –including but not limited to this Paula Meehan poem. 'Our love', after all, is the only warp that secures her life and all of our lives, here and in the hereafter.

⁹³ Mulhall 150.

⁹⁴ Mulhall 152.

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