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**DELVING 'UNDERGROUND'***Dante, Heaney and their companions*

**ABSTRACT:** More than one contemporary Irish poet becomes anxious when quoting Dante, not only because Dante is the unsurpassable poet of all times, but also because Heaney's improvisations on the Florentine poet appear, in Ireland, to carry more weight than the work of the Italian poet himself. The path Heaney followed in his 'research' mainly meant 'digging' into the depths of history, language and myth. Dante, in particular, had surely not been studied by Heaney before he studied Hopkins and Frost, Hughes and Hardy, MacDiarmid and Larkin, MacCaig and Maclean, all the poets Heaney had read and, in part, even met before producing some of his middle- and late-career masterpieces. From the very beginning, Heaney's 'underground' theme was his personal process of 'digging'. In his interviews and essays, Heaney often quoted the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and his insights into the 'underground' were often presented as spatial and symbolic contraries: surface/underground; high/low; light/darkness, outside/inside, hell/heaven; demon/angel, etc. The attraction to Dante and the presence of the Florentine poet as a background influence on Heaney's poetry is here underlined by exploring some of his key collections and poems.

**KEYWORDS:** Heaney, Underground, Dante, Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, Contemporary Poetry.

In a long early interview, Heaney stated: "I believe that what poetry does to me is comforting... if I read the *Divine Comedy*, the *Purgatorio*, it's in the highest, widest, deepest sense, *comforting*, Great art is comforting, in some odd way" (Haffenden 1981, 68). In his interviews and essays, Heaney often quoted the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* and his insights into the 'underground' were often presented as spatial and symbolic contraries: surface/underground; high/low; light/darkness, outside/inside, hell/heaven; demon/angel, etc. The attraction to Dante and the presence of the Florentine poet as a background influence on Heaney's poetry is evident, at least, from the early Seventies (Oldcorn 1989, 261-7). The poet himself, in an extensive interview with Karl Miller, observed:

I was exhilarated to read Dante in translation in the Seventies, because I recognised some of the conditions of Medieval Florence – the intensities, the factions, the personalities – as analogous to the Belfast situation. Farinata rising out of the tomb could be Paisley. The combination of personality, political fury, psychological realism. All the voices speaking, and the accusations flying, the rage and the intimacy of *The Inferno*. I didn't think, immediately I read the poem, 'Aha! We can work with this.' The poem has the desiderata of high art, it is jubilantly at work in its medium, and at the same time has the interest of realist narrative. Eventually, however, it did present itself as an example, a way to be true to what was going on inside myself and outside myself. (Miller 2000, 34)

According to Kratz, more than one contemporary Irish poet becomes anxious when quoting Dante, not only because Dante is the unsurpassable poet of all times, but also because Heaney's improvisations on the Florentine poet appear, in Ireland, to carry more weight than the work of the Italian poet himself. When dealing with Medieval texts and overlapping new and contemporary concerns, Heaney always sympathised with outsider figures like Sweeney, Dante and Grendel (Kratz 2011, 20). Talking with Carla De Petris, Heaney pinpoints the beginning of his interest as 1972 when he read Dorothy Sayers's translation of Dante. He recalled that he followed that by reading everything he could find about Dante, including the famous *Speech on Dante* by Maldelstam. Through those readings, he became convinced that Dante had managed to marry two apparently unmatchable elements: the contemporary individual 'cry' and the political passion implied in the Italian poet's attacks against corruption and greediness. In short, Dante was capable of mixing the individual's needs with his political context through a dramatic, poetic force (De Petris 1989, 72).

If we pay attention to what Heaney wrote about his 'sense of place' and the way in which he observed and read poets such as Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill, among others – poets who can master their own part of the English landscape and create different "Englands of the mind" – we are reminded how a precise technique of representing and delving into local geographies can mingle with the oral and aural heritage of a place, especially when a passage from surface to underground locations takes place (Heaney 1980, 150-69). Following his train of thought, and the development of his writing career, we can easily discern that Heaney was faithful to those first strategies for a long time. He paid a particular attention to other poets, such as the Scottish writers Norman MacCaig and Hugh MacDiarmid, or the Irish poet Richard Murphy, or the Welsh poet David Jones, because they all contained something intriguing and mysterious – a "kind of image or visionary thing" (Haffenden 1981, 61) – when referring to their respective local cultural identity. Considering his long career retrospectively, Heaney had the County Derry dialect and the Ulster Scots idiom he heard in County Antrim at the back of his ear, as well as the language of the Irish poem *Buile Shuibhne* that he translated as *Sweeney Astray* (1983), the Gaelic Highlands and the oral Scots culture of Sorley Maclean and Iain Crichton Smith, the Old English as registered in the epic poem *Beowulf*, the English patrimony he could read in Wordsworth, Hopkins and Hardy, the American accents of Elizabeth Bishop, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, and, finally, the work of wonderful translators such as Dorothy Sayers, John D. Sinclair and Charles S. Singleton, who had sweated over Dante's *Comedy*.

The path Heaney followed in his 'research' mainly meant 'digging' into the depths of history, language and myth. Dante, in particular, had not been studied by Heaney before he studied Hopkins and Frost, Hughes and Hardy, MacDiarmid and Larkin, MacCaig and Maclean, all the poets Heaney had read, and, in part, even met before producing some of his middle-and-late-career masterpieces. From the very beginning, Heaney's "underground" theme was his personal process of "digging". It inaugurated his "vertical" investigations, his delving into the mystery of writing and ancestry. Heaney's "digging" is

not the only notable trope in his 1966 collection, *Death of a Naturalist*: "...Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf. Digging"; "...I wanted to grow up and plough, / To close one eye, stiffen my arm"; "Love, I shall perfect for you the child / Who diligently potters in my brain / Digging with heavy spade till sods were piled / Or puddling through muck in a deep drain"; "As a child, they could not keep me from wells / And old pumps with buckets and windlasses. / I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells / Of waterweed, fungus and dark moss."; and "...I rhyme / To see myself, to set the darkness echoing"; etc.). There is also the determined descent into darkness in the 1969 collection *Door into the Dark*: "My sleeves were rolled / And the air fanned cool past my arms / As I swung and buried the blade, / Then laboured to work it unstuck"; "All I know is a door into the dark"; "...I rippled and I churned / Where ditches intersected near the river / Until he dug a spade deep in my flank / And took me to him"; "...By day, / only the drainmaker's /spade or the mud paddler / can make him abort. Dark / delivers him hungering / down each undulation"; "It underruns the valley, / The first slow residue / Of a river finding its way. / Above it, the webbed marsh is new, / Even the clutch of Mesolithic / Flints"; and "The ground itself is kind, black butter / Melting and opening underfoot, / Missing its last definition / By millions of years". Again, in his 1972 volume, *Wintering Out*, we encounter: "He fords / his life by sounding. / Soundings"; "Soft voices of the dead / are whispering by the shore / that I would question / (and for my children's sake) / about crops rotted, river mud / glazing the baked clay floor."; and "I could risk blasphemy, / consecrate the cauldron bog / our holy ground and pray / him to make germinate / the scattered, ambushed / flesh of labourers..."; etc. Often, when talking about "darkness", Heaney would stress its possible rewards, its positive aspect, as it happens in the following observations related to his first two books:

I thought of 'the dark' in the second title as a conventionally positive element, related to what Eliot called 'the dark embryo' in which poetry originates. The phrase 'door into the dark' comes from the first line of a poem about a blacksmith, a shape maker, standing in the door of a forge; and, as a title, it picks up on the last line of *Death of a Naturalist*, where the neophyte sees a continuity between the effect he wants to achieve in his writing and the noise he made when he used to shout down a well shaft 'to set the darkness echoing'. There's also the usual old archetype of the dark as something you need to traverse in order to arrive at some kind of reliable light or sight of reality. The dark night of the soul. The dark wood. (Heaney 2008, 95)

The descent into that darkness (Dante's *selva oscura*) is, for Heaney, a descent into the very unconscious dimension of creation and musical resonance (a 'well', an underground 'river'; his local 'bog', etc.), the place where one can set 'the darkness echoing', or where he might experience the physical and psychological crossing of a 'dark wood' that leads to light. This is, possibly, the reason why, quite early in his career, Heaney was attracted to MacDiarmid and his long poem, *On a Raised Beach*, in particular. In that work, MacDiarmid used his newly created 'synthetic English' and managed to relocate the focus of Scottish literature through a complex philosophical and poetical

vision. *On a Raised Beach* is unique in its slowly unwinding argument about the precarious balance between the attentive mind and opaque matter, pushing the reader into unknown areas of conjecture and insight with an intoxicating linguistic mix. In it, the poet's investigation is absolutely vertical: the ambition was to go as deep as possible into the essence of the physical world, to the very *haecceitas* of the stones. This was done mainly through an experimental language which slowly reveals its numerous etymological strata, trying to preserve its oral origins or, as Heaney has it, a "phonetic patterning which preceded speech and authenticated it, a kind of pre-verbal register to which the poetic voice had to be tuned" (Heaney 2002a, 301).

Heaney adopted a similar admiration when reading and writing about Geoffrey Hill in the 1960s and early 1970s: what Hill did with Offa in his *Mercian Hymns* – Heaney wrote that "Offa's story makes contemporary landscape and experience live in the rich shadows of a tradition" (Heaney 1980, 160) – was all-important not only for his own small prose volume called *Stations* but also for his future strategies of "archaeological" excavation and psychological probing into the world of "shadows". Henry Hart noted that Heaney backed "the modernist and formalist tenets that aimed for a mimesis or at-one-ment between dense and verbal constructs and the world's body, between poetic paradox and historical and psychological divisiveness" (Hart 1989, 809). We know now that Heaney's *Stations* was delayed just because of Hill's publication of *Mercian Hymns*, a book that the Irish poet, as one of the first dedicated critics of Hill's poetry, discusses on the basis of those "attempts to touch what Wordsworth called 'spots of time', moments at the very edge of consciousness that had lain for years in the unconscious as active lodes of nodes" (Heaney 1975, 3). Later on, in *Preoccupations*, Heaney writes: "There is in Hill something of Stephen Dedalus's hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations, as sounds to be plumbed, as weights on the tongue. Words in his poetry fall slowly and singly, like molten solder, and accumulate to a dull glowing nub" (Heaney 1980, 160). With regards to his process of excavation into language/s, history and shades, one of the first extensive articles on Heaney as a "digger" contained the following idea: "The spade – whether it be the spade of the archaeologist, farmer, or turf-cutter – descends into darkness to bring what is buried to the light" (Stallworthy 1982, 163).

Of another of his poetical heroes, Norman MacCaig, Heaney observed: "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" (Heaney 2002a, 399). Heaney's use of the fisherman's line under the surface of the water hinted at the obliqueness of his own technique of in-depth exploration when it is used as a tool to probe hidden and internal feelings and dreams, either hauled up "at an angle" from the unconscious or taken up from an historical line "that is a lure". One of the many examples may be *The Salmon-Fisher to the Salmon*, where the angler searches for hidden enlightenment not with a spade or divining rod, but rather with rod and line (Stallworthy 1982, 164). This search, for Heaney, often meant delving into the history of a language or languages, even the lost and forgotten ones, but also the excavation of a larger and atavistic tribal memory that

can be fished through the excitement of “feeling the bite”, the “depth of it”, as he observes in *Stepping Stones*: “But the depth of it was inestimable. The nibble on the worm, the tugs, the arc and strum of the line in the water, the moods of the water and the moods of the weather. I loved being on the riverbank” (O’Driscoll 2008, 94). A few lines from one of the poems (*Shore Woman*) included in his *Wintering Out* are particularly relevant here:

My line plumbed certainly the undertow,  
loaded against me once I went to draw  
and flashed and fattened up towards the light... (Heaney 1972, 66)

Following the same line of influence, Heaney was equally attracted to another great Scottish poet, Sorley Maclean, who he knew by reputation because of his mingling of poetry and politics, his renovation of the Gaelic poetic tradition in Scotland, and the personal and linguistic destiny of his Gaelic community. Then, in the early Seventies, as Heaney himself recalls, “two things occurred which made the spark jump: I read Iain Crichton Smith’s translations, *Songs to Eimhir*, and I heard Maclean himself read his own poems in the original Gaelic” (Heaney 1986, 1). In his poem *Would They Had Stayed*, Heaney remembers his friend by writing:

Sorley Maclean. A mirage. A stag on a ridge  
In the western desert above the burnt-out tanks. (Heaney 2001, 68-9)

Heaney’s admiration and love for Maclean’s poetic gifts led him, finally, to translate one of his masterpieces: “Hallaig”, “a poem with all the lucidity and arbitrariness of a vision... rose like a mist over the ancestral ground in which this poet’s taproot is profoundly lodged, a poem of almost familial intimacy arising out of a naturally genealogical imagination, embodying all the fidelities implicit in the Irish word ‘*dúchas*’” (Heaney 1986, 2). In that visionary poem, Sorley Maclean conjures up the shades of his ancestors and claims support from local places, vegetation, and presences of his own tribe in the deserted island of Raasay. Here, as is the case in many of Heaney’s poems, the path is one of descent into history and conscience. As Heaney himself observed, that poem “belonged to the world of Eliot’s ‘*Marina*’, Rilke’s Orphic sonnets, indeed to the metamorphic world of Orpheus himself” (Heaney 1986, 1). Orpheus’s descent into Hades to see his wife links that ancient Greek story with Virgil’s rendition, but also with Dante’s inclusion of Orpheus into a short list of poet-theologians who could be met in the *Inferno* (IV, 132). Obviously, in Maclean’s “Hallaig” one might find all the tragic historical dimensions of the decadence of original locations together with the clearance of Maclean’s homesteads by a landlord who stands for all those who contributed to the shrinking of the Gaelic language and culture in Scotland and in Ireland:

I will wait for the birches to move,  
The wood to come up past the cairn

Until it has veiled the mountain  
Down from Beinn na Lice in shade.

If it doesn't, I'll go to Hallaig,  
To the sabbath of the dead,  
Down to where each departed  
Generation has gathered.

Hallaig is where they survive,  
All the MacLeans and MacLeods  
Who were there in the time of Mac Gille Chaluum:  
The dead have been seen alive,

The men at their length on the grass  
At the gable of every house,  
The girls a wood of birch trees  
Standing tall, with their heads bowed. (Heaney 2002b)

Maclean's evocation of and dialogue with the shades of his ancestors proved a particular fascination for Heaney, inviting him to reproduce the cadences and cries of a shared tragic mismanagement of a local economy, so that the poem evoked "a setting of deserted wallsteads, houses with roofs fallen in and gardens and outgoings all overgrown with shrubs and nettles, the kind of thing you used to see everywhere in Ireland, in the south and west especially, although there was just such a ruined dwelling on land very close to our own place in Derry" (Heaney 2008, 426). This is an extreme cry for the preservation of a lost and mismanaged local language, a stand of poetic camaraderie and a strategic spinning of a thread that could link his voice not only with his Scottish friends and consciences but with a larger well of influential sources, voices, and shades, Dante included. "If the Beatrice of Dante's *Commedia*", Heaney observes, "is more cosmologically centred, at once more densely allegorical and diaphanous, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*, being closer to the moment of encounter in Dante's life, is closer to the muse of the Eimhir poems" (Heaney 1986, 4). This is strengthened by his reference to the shrinking of Gaelic language and to the battle for its renewal. So, as a kind of extreme cry for the renewal of Gaelic ancestry, Heaney's *The Gaeltacht* rewrites Dante's *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io*, one of the early sonnets written by Dante, even before his *Vita Nuova*, a work dedicated to Guido Cavalcanti. The mysterious atmosphere of Dante's poem is here transposed into the Irish poet's familiar context not only to praise love and personal feelings but to stress the urgency of 'talking Irish', and reunite, on a single boat, friends, a shared language and a local 'gabble' that might function as a larger metaphor to describe a sea voyage through islands and continents. This is achieved through a dive into a personal, linguistic memory:

I wish, *mon vieux*, that you and Barlo and I  
Were back in Rosguill, on the Atlantic Drive,  
And that it was again nineteen sixty

And Barlo was alive

And Paddy Joe and Chips Rafferty and Dicky  
Were there talking Irish, for I believe  
In that case Aoibheann Marren and Margaret Conway  
And M. and M. and Deirdre Morton and Niamh

Would be there as well. And it would be great too  
If we could see ourselves, if the people we are now  
Could hear what we were saying, and if this sonnet

In imitation of Dante's, where he's set free  
In a boat with Lapo and Guido, with their girlfriends in it,  
Could be the wildtrack of our gabble above the sea. (Heaney 2001, 44)

As Panzera observes, in “the closing lines of the poem, Heaney invokes Dante and his company in their sea vessel in order to refine the sound (“wildtrack”) of those former conversations (“babble”) between him and his old friends, heard with the maturity of the ‘people [they] are now’” (Panzera 2016, 207).

In *Field Work* (1979), apart from presenting his attempt to translate one of the most famous ‘encounters’ of the *Comedy*, Heaney had already introduced his first reference to Dante in a poem called *The Strand at Lough Beg*. It was dedicated to his cousin Colum McCartney, killed by loyalist paramilitary troops when walking alone on a mountainous road, near Lough Beg, “the proper place to encounter Colum’s shade” (Heaney 2008, 221). An imaginary meeting is included in the final part of the poem, where Heaney references Virgil wiping Dante’s face at the opening of the *Purgatorio* as he writes of cleansing his cousin’s violated face with dew and moss:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (Heaney 1979, 18)

In fact, Heaney himself revealed that the inspiration for that poem came from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, “describing that little lake and rushy shore where Virgil and Dante find themselves once they emerge from the murk of hell... I couldn’t not connect it with my own strand, so that the last bit of the poem was the first bit to be written” (Heaney 2008, 221). On this poem, Marco Sonzogni has observed that it contains all the shaded tones of an elegy rather than the vengeful ones of a political attack, some years before Colum McCartney cast a dark shadow on the Irish violence in the eighth poem of *Station Island*

(Sonzogni 2016, 1007). It also happens in a fragment (“In the Afterlife”, part of a longer poem called “Bodies and Souls”) where Jim Logue, the school caretaker, is remembered by Heaney through the following words: “Was that your name / On a label? Were you a body or a soul?” (Heaney 2001, 73). Moreover, “An Afterwards” sets Heaney in the ninth circle of the *Inferno*, for “the domestic treachery of too great a devotion to his art” (Corcoran 1986, 129). In the same book, in “Leavings”, we are presented with Thomas Cromwell in one of hell’s circles (“Which circle does he tread, / scalding on cobbles, / each one a broken statue’s head?”) whereas “September Song” opens with a precise translation of Dante’s “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*”.

*Field Work* also included the translation of the final part of Dante’s Canto XXXII and the whole section of Canto XXXIII of *Inferno*, the ones dealing with Ugolino della Gherardesca. Roberto Mercuri has observed that this tale regarding Count Ugolino’s death inside the Muda Tower in Pisa, and his vindication against Ruggeri in the *Inferno*, are a clear denunciation of the tribal fights of the times, when the cruelty of Italian political life caused personal and individual tragedies (Mercuri 2021, 392-3). Heaney relates that while he was reading the *Inferno*, Kieran Nugent, imprisoned in 1976 for hijacking a bus and for being an IRA member, had started his ‘dirty protest’ (refusing prison clothing and refusing to clean out his cell) against the decision of the British Government to treat IRA prisoners as criminals rather than political prisoners (Heaney 2008, 425). Those protests and hunger strikes inspired Heaney, and he remembered that “the whole business was weighing on me greatly already and I had toyed with the idea of dedicating the ‘Ugolino’ translation to the prisoners”. However, after meeting a Sinn Fein spokesman who charged him with the accusation, “You never write anything for us”, he felt that he was being “commanded”, and what he “felt as a gift... was suddenly levied” (Heaney 2008, 258-59). Here, the speaking voice (Dante? Heaney?) offers Ugolino to report his story “in the world above” so that his name can be cleared. Again, the alternation of the two voices in a dialogue stresses the dichotomic movement ascent/descent (“I have no idea who you are / Nor how you ever managed your descent”), recalling *Purgatorio* 14, 1.1 (“Chi è costui che ‘l nostro monte cerchia ...”) and hinting at the possibility that what human languages or communication media report might not be the real ‘truth’, especially when political and economic interests clash with the ambitions of power.

In Heaney’s poems, there are many other quotations, loans and rewritten lines from Dante, before and after his collection *Field Work*. It would take too long to discuss all of the poems here, but a short list might be useful for any kind of perusal: “A Dream of Solstice”; “A Retrospect”; “Alphabets”; “An Afterwards”; “Anything Can Happen”; “Audenesque”; “Bann Valley Eclogue”; “Canopy”; “District and Circle”; “Electric Light”; “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge”; “Keeping Going”; “Known World”; “Leavings”; “Limbo”; “Loughanure”; “Out of This World”; “Sandstone Keepsake”; “Seeing Things”; “Squarings”; “The Ash Plant”; “The Birett”; “The Crossing”; “The Early Purges”; “The Flight Path”; “The Journey Back”; “The Little Canticles of Asturias”; “The Loaning”; “The Mud Vision”; “The Riverbank Field”; “The Schoolbag”; “The Strand”; “The Walk”;

“Triptych”; “Wheels within Wheels”.

Various critics have underlined the evidence that Heaney’s three major works (*North*, *Station Island* and *Seeing Things*) have re-enacted the three books of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. *North*, in particular, represents a descent into the ‘inferno’ of Northern Ireland in the 1970s, a ‘hell’ made up of bombs, killings and terrorism. In those years, as Heaney himself observed, “the Dantesque allowed the barbarities of Belfast and Ulster to commingle with certain Mediterranean translation, the visits and so on” (Carvalho Homem 2001, 28). Like Dante, Heaney lived in a conflicted relationship with his native land. He condemned himself to a kind of self-exile when he decided that he didn’t want to live in his country anymore, looking for other geographical and social alternatives. So, in *North*, Heaney questions the role of his poetry in difficult Irish times and how his poetry could overcome such conflicts, wondering if his decision to leave his ‘north’ was the right one, and feeling guilty for that abandonment. Like Dante, at the end of his collection Heaney finds the spark that might inspire future generations, so moving from the darkness of a violent society to the light of a promising re-surfacing.

The title of the opening poem of *Station Island*, “The Underground”, recalls the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, including a marginal reference to Dido and Beatrice (Kratz 2011, 74-75). In *Station Island*, we are in a kind of *Purgatorio* because here the poetic persona talks with ghosts and shadows, giving them a voice. Stephen Wade has observed that this kind of technique “was quite clearly to link a coherent and unified sequence of poems that have confrontations and reiterations (as in Dante) to the idea of a pre-designed discipline like the Stations of the Cross, with its fourteen poses and disciplines” (Wade 1989, 62). By moving among these ghosts, Heaney, as one penitent among a crowd of pilgrims, constructs a series of dialogues and tries to answer some of his existential questions, even though the “difference between Heaney and the other penitents is that he is no longer a believer” (Vendler 1988, 161). One of the shades has even the courage to accuse him: “What are you doing here ...?”. Maria Cristina Fumagalli has underlined that not only is *Station Island* like the *Purgatorio* but that it can be considered “a sort of miniature of the Divine Comedy”. In fact, by following Dante’s footsteps, Heaney’s persona starts a journey through the underworld, becoming an independent artist with his own personal vision. Heaney himself, in his article called *Envy and Identifications*, confessed that he would not have written *Station Island* if he hadn’t become entranced with Dante’s poem (Heaney 1985, 9), explaining how his attempt to imitate Dante and his will to write about his feelings for his own country could flow into a new poetic strategy. This can be summarised through two “often contradictory commands”:

...to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self. I hoped that I could dramatise these strains by meeting shades from my own dream life who had also been inhabitants of the actual Irish world. They could perhaps voice the claims of orthodoxy and the necessity to recognise those claims. They could probe the validity of one’s commitment. (Heaney 1985, 18)

This is the end of Canto II of the *Inferno*: “Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo / chinati e chiusi, poi che'l sol li 'imbianca, / si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo, / tal mi fec'io di mia virtude stanca, / e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse, / ch'io cominciai come persona franca [...]”, ll. 127-132. In section VI of *Station Island* Heaney directly translates this to communicate his debt to Dante:

*As little flowers that were all bowed and shut  
By the night chills rise on their stems and open  
As soon as they have felt the touch of sunlight,  
So I revived in my own wilting powers  
And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.*  
Translated, given, under the oak tree. (Heaney 1984, 76)

*Seeing Things* opens with a translation of an excerpt from *Aeneid IV*. Here, Aeneas asks the Sybil of Cumae to descend into the reign of Dis and meet his dead father, so Heaney tries to enlarge his vision to those invisible presences in his life, including one of his favourite poets, Philip Larkin:

[...] I alone was girding myself to face  
The ordeal of my journey and my duty.

Whereas the first poem in the *Crossings* section is a projection of Canto I of Dante's *Inferno*, at the end of the last poem the speaker describes his journey back home after a march, with Michael Longley, for civil rights in Newry in the wake of Bloody Sunday, giving us the opportunity to compare it to Dante's crossing of Acheron:

We were like herded shades who had to cross  
And did cross, in a panic, to the car  
Parked as we'd left it, that gave when we got in  
Like Charon's boat under the faring poets. (Heaney 1991, 94)

The massing of shades and presences also recurs in *District and Circle*, the title poem of Heaney's 2006 collection. This is, again, set in the London Underground, as was “The Underground” in *Station Island*. Here, “the classical echoes were going to be heard, and the underground/underworld/otherworld parallels come into play” (O'Driscoll 2008, 410). Andrew Motion has observed that this is a “Dante-esque labyrinth of the Underground... the journey of an alert and nervous individual, as he tries to define what is durable and true about his loyalties. It is a poem about faith, which never uses the word” (Motion 2006). A tin-whistle player is playing, aware of the poetic persona's presence, knowing him as being a poet, possibly a fellow Irish artist. The poem describes not only their shared art, but the progressive descent into darker and darker dimensions of Dante's circles (“a corridor I'd be walking down...”; “another level down, the platform thronged...”; “So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging...”), until a visionary encounter appears in front of the persona's eyes: “My father's glazed face in my own

waning / And craning...". The District and Circle lines of the London Underground frame the contextual dimension of the poem where we cannot forget about 'shadowy' and deadly omens, when the two lines converge at Edgware Road station, the site of the terroristic attack of 7 July, 2005. Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* offers a refreshing inspiration and a model for the encounter with a father, but also a final meeting with death, in the middle of a throng ('a human chain') that has all the sense of the life-in-death progression of TS Eliot's *Waste Land* ("Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, / A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his eyes before his feet..."). Heaney's final part of the poem only offers us a flickering vision, yet a possible mirrored escape up to light:

And so by night and day to be transported  
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict  
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,  
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed  
By blasted weeping rock-walls.

Flicker-lit.

The poem helps the reader to be aware "of the mythical dimensions of all such journeys underground, into the earth, into the dark" (O'Driscoll 2008, 410). McCarthy has underlined that Heaney, once again, has created an opportunity to meet his father, as he had done in *Seeing Things*, if only "this time in his own reflection" (McCarthy 2008, 62), in a place where he could "more or less ghostify myself" because he had learned that, "from the human beginning, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region – not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life" (O'Driscoll 2008, 472). We are facing a kind of prelude to the final descent into the Avernus in *Human Chain* ("silent now as birdless Lake Avernus"), as it happens in the twelve-poem sequence of *Route 110*, where the persona is "parrying the crush with my bagged Virgil", in the middle of the Smithfield Market racks of suits "like their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge". As Boitani has observed, this is a voyage through Hell, and there's no escape towards any kind of light, with no chance or way out to contemplate the stars of Purgatory (Boitani 2016, xcvi).

As his last attempt with Dante's *terza rima* – a metric form Heaney could not manage to keep to for too long, "because I didn't know Italian, because I couldn't gauge tone, because I was at a loss about all the little particles strewn around the big nouns and verbs..." (O'Driscoll 2008, 425), as he himself confessed speaking about his idea of trying to translate the entire *Inferno*, or the entire *Commedia* some years earlier – he wrote his personal memory for his friend Bill Cole, a poet, writer and LPs collector of Irish origins. Following Dante's skills in his triplets, "Bill Cole's LPs" (see *Irish Pages*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014), a revised version of in "Memory of Bill Coles" (which was originally published in the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2001, and subsequently published in *The Clifden Anthology* and *The Irish Time* on the anniversary of Heaney's death) is Heaney's

imagined dialogue with Cole's shade ("...imagined him and me / Meeting again in an earthly paradise"). That get-together is shaped after Dante's entry to Purgatory, when the Italian poet meets his friend Casella's shade. Here, Heaney seems to have followed one of his favourite poets' achievements: Philip Larkin's "Talking in Bed", as Heaney himself noted, "goes back to the greatest foreign poet of the second millennium, to Dante Alighieri and to the rhyme scheme of *The Divine Comedy*", inspiring him to find a perfect triple stitching of the rhymes. Heaney's rhymes musically link the various triplets, resulting in perfect rhymes (Purgatory/memory; song/long/gone; poetry/me/6b; revery/Derry; voice/Joyce; etc.) so that each line insists on the very topic of the poem whose conclusion is triple locked, as in Larkin, by three words: "Beg", "young", "song". It's the portrait of two friends meeting and enjoying themselves inside an off-Broadway flat ("a book grotto, his cove of revery") where singers, LPs, and chats could evoke the very music of their original places: Co Derry, the rivers Moyola and Avonmore, the village of Avoca, etc. This is a final and imagined return to his loved home, the 'omphalos' that had inspired most of Heaney's early works, the place where linguistic music is mixed with the poetical and musical flow of time and memory, crossing influences and models, from the early Medieval European writers up to his contemporary precursors, so that song, youth and water might evoke a joyful re-surfacing from Hell's darkness:

River rhyming, over-brimming, young  
At heart, and younger song by song.

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