# Dante's Legacy:
# Kinship between Languages in Seamus Heaney's Poetics

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**Abstract.** Dante's influence on Seamus Heaney's poetry – generally analyzed from a religious, philosophical, and cultural perspective – has been widely acknowledged by critics and by Heaney himself. Heaney, though, was also fascinated with Dante's stylistic achievements and concern for themes such as land, politics and language. As a conscious innovator of his time, Dante developed the vernacular in literature, demonstrating that it was suitable for poetic expression. He created a universal idiom out of the various Italian dialects, believing that a common tongue was the means to achieve some form of national unity. Following Dante's example, in the place-name poems "Broagh" and "Anahorish" (*Wintering Out*), Heaney reunites both the English and the Irish traditions through a meditation of the semantic elements of both cultures. Moreover, in his collection *Electric Light*, and in his translation of Dante's "Ugolino" (*Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII), the Irish poet places the local aspects of his culture in a universal framework. This article will display how, through his engagement with Dante and through the specific practice of translation, Heaney is able to transcend ethnic boundaries in order to obtain an objective view of the world. Like his medieval predecessor, in his works Heaney locates the global in the local and vice versa, emphasizing the epistemological value of constructively interacting with other cultures and languages, which ultimately enriches an understanding of one's own cultural identity.

**Key Words**. Dante Alighieri, Seamus Heaney, Language, Influence, Translation, European Perspective.

**Resumen**. La influencia de Dante en la poesía de Seamus Heaney – generalmente analizada desde una perspectiva religiosa, filosófica y cultural – ha sido ampliamente reconocida por la crítica y por el propio Heaney. Sin embargo, Heaney también estaba fascinado con los logros estilísticos de Dante, y preocupación por temas como la tierra, la política y la lengua. Como innovador consciente de su tiempo, Dante utilizó la lengua vernácula en la literatura, demostrando así que era adecuada para la expresión poética. Creó un lenguaje universal a partir de los diferentes dialectos italianos, en la creencia de que una lengua común era el medio para conseguir alguna forma de unidad nacional. Siguiendo el ejemplo de Dante, en los poemas toponímicos "Broagh" y "Anahorish" (*Wintering Out*), Heaney aúna las tradiciones inglesas e irlandesas a través de una meditación en torno a los elementos semánticos de ambas culturas. Por otra parte, en su colección *Electric Light*, y en su traducción de "Ugolino" de Dante (*Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII), el poeta irlandés coloca los aspectos locales de la propia cultura en un marco universal. En este artículo se muestra cómo, a través de la relación que establece con Dante y por medio de la práctica específica de la traducción, Heaney logra trascender las fronteras étnicas con el fin de obtener una visión objetiva del mundo. Al igual que su predecesor medieval, en estas obras Heaney localiza lo global en lo local y vice versa, haciendo hincapié en el valor epistemológico de un interactuación constructiva con otras culturas y lenguas, lo que en última instancia enriquece la comprensión de la propia identidad cultural.

**Palabras clave**. Dante Alighieri, Seamus Heaney, languaje, influencia, traducción, perspectiva europea.

Seamus Heaney's early poetry evoked Irish pastoral landscapes and traditions. After the eruption of the Troubles in 1969, his verse began to be pervaded by the complex situation in Northern Ireland. This change, together with the poet's increasing focussing on his symbolic relationship with the Irish land and his preoccupation with a sense of a lost language, caused his poems to be perceived as symbols of national struggle. However, although Irish history and language are embraced and celebrated by the poet, at the same time, rather than articulating a political idea of literature, Heaney tried to find a middle voice that would express both halves of his culture, English and Irish. The poems "Broagh" and "Anahorish", in *Wintering Out*, originate in Irish language placenames, and more than any other poem in that collection, display Heaney's willingness for a reconciliation of the two traditions through a profound meditation on the cultural and linguistic elements of each one. Dante and his belief in the attainment of a sense of national solidarity through the creation of a unitary poetic language were fundamental to Heaney's realization of this project. The Irish poet admired Dante's profound attachment to his local culture and to the vernacular language, but principally, he praised his ability to transcend those aspects by positioning them in a universal framework. In the *Divine Comedy*, the medieval poet had imagined "the cosmological in the provincial" by placing a "constant emphasis on the epistemological function of the mutually enriching confrontation with other cultures and languages, which is ultimately synonymous with an enrichment and not an adulteration of one's own national identity" (Copley 2005: 12). Heaney shared these same aims, and through allusions to Dante, he could transcend ethnic boundaries and create an increasingly cosmopolitan poetry, as displayed in his collection *Electric Light*, in which the specifics of public and personal history are considered alongside those of world culture. Heaney's all-inclusive poetic development was mainly realized through his several translations of various international authors, including Dante. Through translation Heaney comes into contact with other cultures, and this allows him to better understand his time and himself. In his

rendering of the "Ugolino" episode, from *Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII, the Irish poet found the metaphors and emblems that he needed for the poetic message he wanted to convey (Heaney 1980: 56). Dante's experience is translated into Heaney's own personal and cultural experience, and this enables him to address his local concerns through a global framework, extending the universal into the personal and vice versa.

## Between two Traditions

Both Dante's and Heaney's poetics must be understood within the socio-political context in which they originated. Throughout his life, Dante felt a sense of "in-betweenness" with respect to his culture and his language. As a poet, he used Latin, which was the language of the education system. As a man, he spoke the Tuscan vernacular, which was his natural mother tongue. In his treatise, the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante championed the development of the vernacular in literature. As he affirmed, "since nothing provides as splendid an ornament as does the illustrious vernacular, it seems that any writer of poetry should use it" (*DVE* II: i, 2).[1] Being the tongue spoken by everyone, the vernacular was a more suitable language for literature, as it made literature available to all. It was the "*maternam locutionem*" (mother tongue) (*DVE* I: vi, 2 [1960]), "the concrete language of all" (Chandler 1966: 17), in contrast to Latin, which was a secondary speech, a "*locutio secundaria*" (*DVE* I: i, 3 [1960]). Furthermore, Dante believed that a common tongue could be "a pledge of national unity" (Cambon 1969: 28). In the thirteenth century, Italy was divided into several states, with each speaking a different dialect, and in this fragmentation "peoples could not feel a strong sense of national identity based on cultural, linguistic, or racial bonds" (Pullan 1973: 25). Moreover, political parties were continually competing for

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1. The citations in English of the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* are taken from: Alighieri, Dante. 1996. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Transl. Steven Botterill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. While the original Latin quotations are taken from: Alighieri, Dante. 1960. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Ed. Pio Rajna. Florence: Società Dantesca Italiana.

power over the cities, and these conflicts further increased Dante's belief that a common tongue could be the means to achieve some kind of national unity. His project consisted in creating an idiom out of small pieces from all the dialects, but yet with features "common to them all" (*DVE* I: xvi, 4), giving birth to a "dismunicipalized [and] disregionalized" language (Baldwin 1939: 55). However, using vernacular in poetry was not an attempt to discard Latin completely. Latin was the language of Virgil, Horace, Ovid and Statius, the authors from whom Dante had acquired his poetic style. Besides, being an oral idiom, the vernacular lacked structural rules, and Dante embarked on the project of using vernacular with a Latin grammatical structure, thus creating a hybrid language.

Heaney's sense of "in-betweenness" within his own culture is one of the major characteristics that led to his identification with Dante. Living between two different and seemingly opposed cultures had created a sense of displacement in the Irish poet. As he confesses, "I seemed always to be a little displaced; being in between was a kind of condition, from the start" (in Corcoran 1986: 13). Since his early years in Mossbawn, he had been exposed "simultaneously to the domestic idiom of his Irish home and the official idioms [of English education], and already picking up the signs of an existing distress between the two cultures" (O'Brien 2003: 177). Being an Irish man born in British Ulster and speaking an English which is both ideologically alien, and yet habitually familiar, Heaney, like Dante, is well aware of the problematics of language:

> I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations and perspectives of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home. I live off another hump as well (Heaney 1980: 34).

Heaney's major endeavour in his poetry is to find a balance between the two traditions, seeking to "be faithful to the nature of the English language … and at the same time, be faithful to one's own non-English origin" (Heaney 1977: 65). He aspires to a 'singular universal' (71) poetry, which would include the particulars of both cultures. The poems "Broagh"

and "Anahorish" exemplify the poet's achievement of this dualistic loyalty. Here Heaney explores the relationship between the two cultural and language traditions in Ireland, and displays that typical Dantean "local intensity" that he greatly admired in the *Divine Comedy*. As he affirmed:

> Dante was very much a man of a particular place [and] his great poem is full of intimate placings and place-names, and … as he moves round the murky circles of hell … he is recognized by his local speech (1980: 136-7).

In different places of the *Comedy*, the pilgrim is recognized by his use and credit of his mother tongue. In *Inferno* X, Dante meets Farinata, a Florentine politician, who tells him, "O Tuscan, / … / Thy speech declares thy noble country" (*Inf.* X: 18; 21).[2] For Dante, just as for Heaney, the language of the people is embedded in the land. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia,* the poet shows how the "Apennines" divided Italy into two, and that "On each of the two sides, as well as in the areas associated with them, the language of the inhabitants varies" (*DVE* I: x, 6). The peninsula extended to wherever the Italian dialects were spoken; in fact, Italy is "that fair land of the Italian tongue" (*Inf.* XXXIII: 72).

Similarly, for Heaney, "the point about dialect or hearth language is its complete propriety to the speaker and his or her voice and place" (2008: 129). This profound connection between language, people and place is displayed in "Anahorish" and "Broagh", where the poet adopts the Irish poetic genre of *dinnseanchas*, "poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology" (Heaney 1980: 131). These poems, as Eugene O'Brien suggests, "were usually descriptive of the actuality of the place. In this manner, it seems that signifier, signified and referent were fused to create a quasi-organic connection

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2. Dante's Italian quotations are taken from: Alighieri, Dante. 1971. *La Commedia.* Eds. Alessandro Russo and Enzo Schiavina. Bologna: Zanichelli. While all citations in English are taken from: Alighieri, Dante. 1914. *The Divine Comedy of Dante.* Transl. E. Mary Shaw. London: Constable and Company Ltd.

between the people, their language, and the place" (2002c: 71). Heaney's poems have been read by some critics as encapsulating a nationalistic discourse. In David Lloyd's words, they participate in what he defines as "cultural nationalism". He claims:

> language is seen primarily as naming, and … naming performs a cultural reterritorialisation by replacing the contingent continuities of an historical community with an ideal register of continuity in which the name … operates symbolically as the commonplace communicating between actual and ideal continua. The name always serves likeness, never difference (1997: 165).

However, in these poems Heaney seeks "not so much to reterritorialize himself and his culture back onto his native idiom, but rather to deterritorialize the imposed colonial language – to unsettle and disrupt English by infusing it with sonic traces of the discarded Gaelic or Hiberno-English" (Auge 2003: 275), thus creating a hybrid language. Both "Broagh" and "Anahorish" are "transliterations" of the original Irish etymology "*bruach*" and "*anach fhíor uisce*" (O'Brien 2003: 16). Thus the two names are Anglicized versions of their originals, that is, they are a fusion of English and Irish. This attests to Heaney's commitment to use both linguistic traditions, the "forgotten Gaelic music that yields the meanings 'riverbank' and 'place of clear water', and the modern spelling that acknowledges the cultural … English" heritage (Olson 2008: 67). Heaney confirms such commitment in the following two lines, "Anahorish, soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow" (1973: 16). The combination of vowels and consonants is symbolic of the union between Ireland and England. As Heaney affirms, "I think of the personal and Irish pieties as vowels, and the literary awareness nourished in English as consonants" (1980: 37). In these poems, English consonants and Irish vowels live together in a conciliatory combination, signalling to "the possibility of a linguistic rapprochement" (Manganiello 2000: 103).

The harmonious union that Heaney seeks between the English and Irish languages mirrors Dante's project of symbolically marrying the vernacular and Latin *gramatica*. For Dante, the importance of a structured language like Latin was fundamental in order to attain perfection in his mother tongue. In the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he speaks of the longest existing words, and refers to the expression *honorificabilitudinitatibus* (honourableness). The poet considers obvious that a similar word might be used also in the vernacular, and coins the term "*honorificabilitudinitate*" (*DVE* II: vii, 6). By Italianizing a Latin word, Dante demonstrates the kinship between the two languages, and sets up one of a number of linguistic connections between them. The impression created is "a fluid, 'unproblematic' interchangeability between languages – an exchange between equals" (Bara ski 2012: 113). The poet does not superimpose one idiom over another but rather creates an equal interrelationship between them. This is also Heaney's project in the place name poems; he strives to reject hierarchical discourses, and instead create equality between idioms. In "Broagh", the poet brings the three linguistic strains of Ulster:

> Irish, Elizabethan English and Ulster Scots – into some kind of creative intercourse and alignment [intimating] thereby the possibility of some new intercourse and alignment among the cultural and political heritages which these three languages represent in Northern Ireland (Heaney 2002: 351).

The cultural multiplicity of Northern Ireland is displayed by the introduction of dialect words, such as "rigs" (Scots, meaning "furrows in a field"), "docken" (Scots and Irish, meaning "dock"), "pad" (Scots, meaning "path"), and "Boortrees" (Ulster dialect for "the elder tree") (Molino 1993: 192). The presence of these words affirms Heaney's perception of different languages as a single unity, and acts as "a linguistic paradigm of a reconciliation beyond sectarian division" (Corcoran 1986: 90).

In his introduction to *Beowulf*, Heaney expresses his idea of a poetry where no language is banned. His awareness that various languages could be allied in unison started at Queen's University, Belfast, in the lectures about the history of the English Language by Professor John Braidwood:

> Braidwood could not help informing us … that the word 'whiskey' is the same word as the Irish

and Scots Gaelic word *uisce*, meaning water, and that the River Usk in Britain is therefore to some extent the River Uisce (or Whiskey); and so in my mind the stream was suddenly turned into a kind of linguistic river of rivers issuing from a pristine Celto-British Land of Cockaigne, a riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak pouring out of the cleft rock of some prepolitical, prelapsarian, urphilological Big Rock Candy Mountain – and all of this had a wonderfully sweetening effect upon me. The Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Saxon antithesis were momentarily collapsed (2001a: xxiii-xxv).

Heaney's different linguistic perspectives allow him to surmount the barrier of difference between English and Irish. Even in their diversity, the cultures of Northern Ireland have a "shared history" (O'Brien 2003: 137), which can enable them to envision themselves as citizens of one country, and as parts of a higher culture where reconciliation and harmony can coexist.

Similarly, in Dante's time, the Italian regions differed from one another in language, manners, and customs; however, they were "integral parts of the culture of greater Italy [embodying] elements of a higher, quintessential culture: *Italianitas*" (Italian spirit or character) (Lansing 2010: 529). Dante sought to achieve a vernacular bonding by conjoining the various Italian idioms in order to create a language that did not belong to any city in particular, yet which found a "scent" in each city (*DVE* I: xvi, 14). The creation of an "illustrious vernacular" could be the means through which this sense of *Italianitas* could be achieved. However, some modern critics regard Dante's project as an attempt to devalue the various Italian mother tongues. As Margaret Ferguson suggests:

> Dante's theory anticipates a tendency to conflate the ideas of nation and empire in many later discussions of an 'illustrious' vernacular language, discussions that dramatize the violence done to the provinces – and to languages and language speakers defined as provincial or regional or colonial – in the process of nation-building …. Dante, indeed, articulates a theory of the 'illustrious vernacular' through a highly elaborated and socially resonant set of *discriminations* between 'good' and 'bad' types of language (2003: 126).

These assertions are only true if one considers

Dante's assumptions against variation in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where, following the theories of the Bible, he conceives of diversity as a form of punishment, "the loss … of the unified language of Paradise" (Trabant 2012: 25). The confusion of tongues, spread after the building of the Tower of Babel, was a critical second Fall through which human beings had lost their universal language, "so many were the languages by which the human race was fragmented" (*DVE* I: vii, 7). After Babel, all "the vernaculars became … corrupt and incapable of fulfilling the primary function of language – universal communication" (Pertile 1999: 49). Dante displays his theory throughout the *Inferno*, where:

> sighs and weeping, wailing and deep groans
> filled all the starless air with mournful echo;
> …
> Strange words and phrases, both of grief and wrath,
> And hands struck in lamenting. (III: 20-4)

Confusion of voices, cries of anger, and shouts without meaning in all different forms of speech are the results of God's punishment. Dante's denunciation of the story of Babel is rendered explicit in *Inferno* XXXI, where the pilgrim meets Nimrod, the original builder of the tower. He is shouting incomprehensible words, "*Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi*" (67 [1971]), which illustrate his inability to interact rationally. Virgil tells the pilgrim:

> … this is Nimrod, through whose thought perverse
> We do not speak one tongue in all the world.
> Let him alone, and do not waste thy speech,
> For every language is the same to him,
> As his to others, being known to none. (62-6)

Since the linguistic confusion was caused by him, Nimrod's own idiom is now as incomprehensible to others as their idioms are to him, reflecting Dante's idea that the eradication of man's linguistic unity is a transgression against the divine order.

**Transcending Difference**

Rejection of confusion however, does not imply rejection of variation. As Bruno Nardi claims, "the major invention of Dante in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* was to have thought the vernacular languages as governed by variation, something which is in no way seen negatively" (1985: 123). Dante realizes the "quasi-biological

force displayed by language's capacity to change and renew itself over time" (Eco 1999: 40), and this linguistic renewal happens because man changes continually. Dante states:

> our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time. (*DVE* I: ix, 6)

After Babel, man was given free choice to rebuild his own speech (*DVE* I: ix, 6). If confusion is the result of God's punishment after Babel, God did, however, give man "the possibility of reinventing his speech according to his will …. This gave rise to the diversity of vulgar languages" (Rosier-Catach 2012: 44). As Adam tells the pilgrim in *Paradiso* XXVI:

> … the tongue
> I spake, it was destroyed and gone before
> The unfinishable work of Nimrod rose
>
> In vain attempt; for never durable
> Is what the mind inclines to, while man's pleasure
> Changes with changing skies from new to new.
>
> It is a work of nature that men speak;
> But in such fashion, and in such, as she
> Leaves to your fancy. (113-21)

The language Adam spoke was extinguished even before the building of the tower of Babel because human beings and human reason change continually. That men speak is natural, but either one way or another, nature lets them decide themselves, as it pleases them. Adam's words regard multiplicity as a natural phenomenon, and the variety of tongues is no longer considered negative. What we see here is not a "discrimination" between "good" and "bad" types of language, as Ferguson pointed out in her analysis, but rather an acceptance of all forms of idioms.

In *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, the cacophony of Hell is transformed in polyphony, as different languages are placed side by side in harmonious unity, creating, as Heaney would say, a "further language" (2001a: xxv), symbolic of the multicultural tradition both poets are looking for. In *Purgatorio*, Dante overcomes "the obstacles to understanding in different languages", as here the souls use speech "for prayers and guidance, compassion and love" (Jacoff 2003: 188). Latin is seen as "our" language, namely, a communal universal heritage, as when the Provençal poet Sordello says to Virgil, "Thou who didst prove the power of our tongue" (*Purg.* VII: 16). For Dante and his European contemporaries, Latin was the language of poetry, and thus it was considered "their" language, though they did not speak it. The possessive pronoun "our" emphasizes the unity and the sense of historical continuity between Latin and the Romance languages that Dante seeks to emphasize. Latin is spread throughout *Purgatorio*, as in the citation from the Bible, "*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*" (II: 46 [1971]). A number of French words are also Italianised, such as "*giuggia*" (form "*juger*", meaning "to judge") (XX: 48 [1971]), and "*alluminar*" (from "*allumer*", meaning "to switch on") (XI: 81 [1971]). Provençal also finds its place in the great encyclopaedic world of the *Comedy*, as when the poet Arnaut Daniel speaks in "his native Provençal … within the Italian rhyme scheme" (Jacoff 2003: 189), "*Tan m'abellis vostre cortes deman, / qu'ieu no me puesc ni voill a vos cobrire*" (XXVI: 140-41 [1971]). The blending of these different languages supplants the babelian confusion of tongues of the *Inferno* with a pleasant linguistic harmony. Finally, in *Paradiso*, Dante adopts a "universal language, incorporating Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French elements, as well as Italian words he creates" (Jacoff 2003: 188). This idiomatic unity is very close to Heaney's linguistic "riverrun of Finnegans Wakespeak pouring out of the cleft rock of some prepolitical, prelapsarian, ur-philological Big Rock Candy Mountain" (2001a: xxiv), an epiphanic moment in which the poet realizes the sweetness of verbal hybridity. In *Paradiso*, Hebrew is incorporated into a Latin hymn, as the words "*Sabaoth*" and "*malachoth*" indicate, "*Osanna Sanctus Deus Sabaoth, superillustrans claritate tua felices ignes horum malachoth!*" (VII: 1-3 [1971]). From Greek, the poet even invents a word, "*teodia*" (XXV: 73 [1971]), from *theos* ("God"), and *ode* ("sacred hymn"). This blending of languages fits well within the Italian text because Dante is "not trying to put one language over another, but [places] them alongside each other" (Tambling 1999: 183), refusing to hierarchize them.

Dante's non-discriminating, polyglot achievement is greatly admired by Heaney, who parallels the Florentine poet's plurilingual style with his own ability to distance himself from political matters. In an interview with Catharine Malloy, he stated:

> The *Commedia* is … a housing place; it is a documentary world …. The unfinished energies of the world are all there, dramatized. So I like the idea of a poem that could have … historical volubility, the slice of life energy of documentary, and at the same time would have some kind of defined edge, some kind of otherness from the world of history. And so it was the voices, the dialogic element in Dante that attracted me (1992: 61).

Like Dante, Heaney seeks to create a poetry involving "other voices" (in Malloy 1992: 2), through which he can generate a world that is not divided by political boundaries. In this venture, the poet follows not only Dante but also James Joyce. His Irish predecessor had taken Dante as a model in his reappropriation of the English language along with other linguistic idioms. As Pascale Casanova explains, from the first half of the twenty-first century onwards, Irish artists:

> reappropriated the work of the Tuscan poet … as an instrument of struggle on behalf of cosmopolitan and antinationalist Irish poets. Through a sort of reactualization of the linguistic and literary project laid out in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* … Joyce [and other writers] recreated, recovered, and invoked Dante's subversive power (2004: 329).

In his works, Joyce rendered the sense of belonging between different communities through a multitude of methods: a polyglot mixture of styles in *Ulysses,* and of languages in *Finnegans Wake* (Deane 1984: 53). Likewise, in his poetry Heaney aims to establish "a new sense of identity through a brand-new tongue" (Klitgard 2006: 116), getting rid of any notion of nationalism that may originate from a monolingual literature. The adoption of many voices creates a cultural diversity that allows the poet to make a "radical revision of traditional notions of history, identity and language: language is no longer a transparent means for representing a preordained identity, but the means whereby we construct an identity for ourselves" (Kennedy-

Andrews 1998: 55). In *Crediting Crediting Poetry,* Heaney remembers when, already during his childhood in County Derry, the radio carried him on a "journey into the wideness of the world. This, in turn, became a journey into 'the wideness of language'", that from then on opened to the "gutturals and sibilants of European speech" (1995a: 11). This openness is extremely visible in *Electric Light*, Heaney's eleventh collection, and the work of Dante is of significant import to this project.

## Towards Multiculturalism

In *Electric Light* the poet is still concerned with the matters of Ireland; however, here "personal, cultural and political events are seen through the alembic of other cultures, literatures and languages, in such a way as to see them anew" (O'Brien 2002b: 8). Heaney had already addressed the Irish situation through the lenses of other cultures in his collection *North*, from 1975. In the early 1970s, the poet had become acquainted with an archaeological study of Iron Age Jutland, Peter Vilhelm Glob's *The Bog People,* representing the bodies of sacrificial victims found in the bog in Denmark. The resurfacing of the bodies, and their dramatic past, was analogous for Heaney to the sudden dramatic eruption of hostilities existing in contemporary Irish history. In these bodies, he found the 'symbols' that he needed for his artistic message (Heaney 1980: 56). Through poems such as "Grabualle Man", "Bog Queen", "Punishment", and "Strange Fruit", Heaney addressed the Irish experience by refracting it 'through some exterior […] material' (Corcoran 1986: 184), and this allowed him to comment on the Troubles without openly illustrating the violence, thereby offering a new perspective on Northern Irish society. This external perspective is central to the poems of *Electric Light* as well. In "Known World" Heaney links his own culture to the culture of Macedonia – a country that he had visited during a poetry festival. Here, in a place divided by sectarian violence, Heaney relives that "old sense of a tragedy" of Northern Ireland; "Uncomprehended, at the very edge / Of the usual" (2001b: 21). Through the lenses of other cultures and languages the poet can better

understand the events of his home ground, and can try to find a sense, and, possibly, a solution to them. Placing his idiom side by side with other European idioms is symbolic of the poet's envisioning of a world:

> where no language will be relegated, a world … where one will never have to think twice about the cultural and linguistic expression of one's world on its own terms since nobody else's terms will be imposed as normative and official. (Heaney 1995b: 82)

Like Dante, Heaney is not trying to privilege one language or another, but rather, he seeks a communion between the seemingly opposite languages and cultures. The final stanza of "Known World" displays this realization:

> I kept my seat belt fastened as instructed,
> Smoked the minute the *No Smoking* sign went off
> And took it as my due when wine was poured
> By a slight *de haut en bas* of my headphoned head.
> *Nema problema. Ja.* All systems go.
> (Heaney 2001b: 22-3)

The space Heaney creates, where English ("*No Smoking*"), Serbo-Croatian ("*Nema problema*"), French ("*de haut en bas*"), and German ("*Ja*"), coexist together in harmonious unison, is symbolic of his desire for a world "where notions of Irishness are pluralized and opened to different influences" (O'Brien 2002a: 2). Through these influences the poet is able to open the geographical and mental space of his home ground to the "gutturals and sibilants of European speech" (Heaney 1995a: 11), reflecting Dante's project of achieving a polyphony of language in the *Paradiso*.

Crossing time and space, Heaney travels from the present Macedonia to ancient Italy in the poem "Bann Valley Eclogue", which is a reappropriation of Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*. Virgil, like Dante, lived in times of social war and chaos, and in his poetry he sought to find a field of force that would contrast the bloodshed of his time. The dialogue with Virgil, like the dialogue with Dante, allowed Heaney to deal with the situation in Northern Ireland from a quasi-transcendent standpoint. In Virgil, he found work which interacted with both "the agrarian and the political", and which suggested "a guarded optimism that better things might be possible" (Thomas 2001: 135). The *Fourth Eclogue* was written around 40 BC,

during a time in which a Roman civil war seemed to be ending. According to Heaney, the poem was "Virgil's dream of how his hurt country might start to heal" (2004: np). The poem is a hymn to peace, symbolized by the birth of a "child" who "will be the ruler of a world / made peaceful by the merits of his father" (Virgil 2000: 36). Similarly, in Heaney's translation, the birth of a girl child represents hope for peace and human betterment (Tyler 2005: 53):

> Bann Valley Muses, give us a song worth singing,
> …
> Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil
> And the child that's due. Maybe, heavens, sing
> Better times for her and her generation.
> (Heaney 2001b: 11)

Heaney is singing peace for the child and her generation, hoping that war and hatred will soon belong to the past. As Craig W. Kallendorf declares, the parallel influence of Virgil helps Heaney to prevent "pessimism and personal and social disruption". And he continues, "Bann Valley Eclogue" "is not merely a cultural intertext, but also a linguistic one" (2007: 318). Virgil's words resonate in Heaney's contexts:

> Here are my words you'll have to find a place for:
> *Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum, gens.*
> Their gist in your tongue and province should be clear
> Even at this stage. Poetry, order, the times,
> The nation, wrong and renewal, then an infant birth
> And a flooding away of the old miasma.
>
> Whatever stains you, you rubbed it into yourselves.
> (Heaney 2001b: 11)

In a prophetic tone, Virgil envisions peace after war. The description of a pastoral and bountiful landscape is symbolic of this future peace. Whatever "stains" the poet, whatever guilt for "old miasma", and for the "old markings", will be washed away – like the river Bann washes the valley – by "the new baby's birth" (Heaney 2001b: 11). Virgil's phrase, "*ipsa tibi blandos fundent canabula flores*" ("there will be no more snakes and no more deceptive poison plants") (Virgil 1900: np), becomes in Heaney's version, "Let her never hear close gunfire or explosions" (2001b: 12), a translation which has a strong resonance with Northern Ireland's Troubles. The Virgilian

text, with its images of both hope and politics is the perfect setting for Heaney, a poet who has still trust that peace can be achieved in a country ripped apart by civil war.

Other translations of Virgil appear in other collections by Heaney, such as *Seeing Things*, *The Spirit Level*, *Field Work*, and *Human Chain*, which, besides suggesting the importance of the Latin author, also display the importance of translation in Heaney's notion of literature. Translation is for Heaney "an integral part of his making poetry" (Brunetti 2001: 94), because like poetry, it allows his inner self to come into contact with the external reality, and to better understand his time and himself. This is visible in his poem "The Gaeltacht", his version of Dante's sonnet "*Guido I' Vorrei che Tu e Lapo ed Io*" ("Guido, I Wish that You and Lapo and I") (1960), about a magic dream of a journey on a ship with his companions. The sonnet is part of Dante's early works, in which he wrote in the lyric of courtly love, and marks a turning point in Dante's poetic technique, as it represents the birth of the artistic movement that he himself defined *Dolce Stil Novo* (*Sweet New Style*). The sonnet's literal translation reads as follow:

> Guido, I wish that Lapo, you, and I,
> Were taken by some enchantment
> And set aboard a ship, that with all winds
> Would sail the seas at your will or mine
>
> So that no bad luck or bad weather
> Might be of impediment to us
> But by living always together in mutual assent,
> Our desire for close companionship would grow even stronger.
>
> And Monna Vanna, Monna Lagia too,
> With her who's also numbered in the thirty,
> Placed there thanks to the good enchanter,
>
> And there we'd talk about love forever,
> And each of them would be truly happy,
> As I believe we would be too. (My translation)

The main theme of the poem is a desire to escape from the realities of life, and this is enacted in the description of a dream of a courtly life, which allows the speaker to distance himself from the socio-historical context, in search of a fantastic lightness, as the keywords "I wish", "enchantment", "desire", and "love" denote. Dante and his friends, the poets Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni, are united by their passion for love – "we'd talk about love forever" – the theme of *Dolce Stil Novo*, which they explored in their own poetry. The initial individual desire of the speaker becomes, ultimately, a collective desire, shared by all three friends, united by a poetic and spiritual sentiment.

Heaney makes Dante's dream his own by placing the sonnet in rural Ireland, in Co. Donegal. His version is enveloped in the same atmosphere of tenderness and beauty as Dante's poem, and is about a desire for youth and friendship:

> 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 2001b: 44)

The poet expresses a desire to return in the sixties "on the Atlantic Drive" with his friends to speak Gaelic. Dante's line, "and there we'd talk about love forever", becomes "we were talking Irish", in Heaney's version (44). This substitution is symbolic of the profound union that the poet perceives between poetry, love, place and language, and it displays once again Heaney's ability to see his personal concerns through the prism of a universal master. 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" (44). Both poets are thematically connected in the final stanza, as Dante's imagined reunion becomes Heaney's recollected and imaginary reconciliation. Heaney's re-adaptation of the ancient text into his own experience and sensibility allows him to evoke the "wildtrack"

of his culture and friends, reconciling past and present.

## Metamorphosising Language

Heaney's versions of Virgil's and Dante's poems are only two of the abundant amount of translations contained in *Electric Light,* and in his other writings. In fact, as O'Brien points out, for Heaney translation is a "synecdoche of his poetic methodology" (2002a: 130). Indeed, the transposing of the language and the thought of the other into the language and thought of the self, allows him "to achieve a new perspective on his own situation so that he can write about issues that affect him deeply, while at the same time achieving a measure of distance" (110). This is particularly visible in Heaney's rendering of Dante's "Ugolino" (*Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII), placed in *Field Work*. For Heaney this episode had:

> an oblique applicability (in its ferocity of emotion and in its narrative about a divided city) to the northern Irish situation. So one foraged unfairly into Italian and ripped it untimely from its place (Heaney 1989: 12).

Ripping a language from its place is what the poet does whenever he translates. In fact, translation for Heaney is a coherent work in itself, rather than just a form of fidelity to the source-text (McCarthy 2008: 17). From a linguistic perspective, Heaney's rendering represents an "impure" translation. As he asserts, a "pure" translation is that in which the author does "everything that is possible to bring across the unique and beloved features of the original [text]" (1989: 11-2). However, the impure translation:

> has its own *verité*. You are listening through the wall of the original language as to a conversation in another room in a motel. Dully, you can hear something that is so interesting. And you say: 'God, I wish that was in this room.' (11-2)

Translation is a "taking over" of the original, where the "foreign work of art [is carried] across the linguistic frontier by adapting it to the new context" (Gatto 2000: 66).

In this respect, Heaney resembles Dante, whose vision of translation has much "in common with the modern notion of a transformation of one text into another [rather]

than with the prosaic transfer of a text from one language to another that describes most *volgarizzamento* [translation into vernacular] of his contemporaries" (Cornish 2010: 10). This is discernible in Dante's appropriation of Homer's story of Odysseus, located in *Inferno* XXVI. The author makes a number of modifications to the original to display his own artistic message. Dante substitutes the Greek name "Odysseus" with the Latin "Ulysses", placing the ancient hero in a more modern context. While in the *Odyssey*, the hero returns to his Ithaca after the Trojan War, Dante's Ulysses never returns home. His wish for divine knowledge leads him to continue his journey beyond the Pillars of Heracles (the Western limits of the known world), which were forbidden to humans. However, his journey ends in tragedy as his ship is drowned by a whirlwind. Dante bends Homer's story to warn human beings of the danger of going against God's will: Ulysses's thirst for knowledge violated a divine prohibition, and thus he is punished. Dante thought that a language system could not faithfully be translated into another without a degree of stiffness and rigidity. He believed in the "inspiration of something new into a work of art" (Cornish 2010: 152). As he says in *Purgatorio* XXIV:

> … I am a man who, when
> Love breathes beside, takes heed, and as he whispers,
> In that same way makes shift to sing the words.
> (45-7)

This applies also to Heaney, who, when translating, needs, as he affirms, "a note that pays you back … you need to be making a music that doesn't just match the original but verifies something in yourself as well (2008: 425-6).

Heaney found the note for this music in his translation of "Ugolino". As he asserts, "I had that motive … in relation to the 'Ugolino' section that I did from Dante" (1989: 12). In his position as an observer of the Troubles, Heaney had a need for new forms of representation; his dialogue with Dante gave him the opportunity to realize that poetry was not just "a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon, [but it became] a search for images and symbols adequate to [his] predicament"

(Heaney 1980: 56). In Dante's character, he found the ideal symbol through which to voice the situation in Northern Ireland. Ugolino della Gherardesca was a prominent figure in Tuscan politics in the thirteenth century; in an attempt to gain more power for himself, he was condemned as a traitor by his ally Archbishop Ruggieri. He was imprisoned along with his four sons in the Tower of Hunger; all five were left to starve to death. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney informs us that while he was reading the *Inferno*, something similar to the "Ugolino" story was happening in Ireland: Ciaran Nugent, imprisoned for being an IRA member, had started his "dirty protest" (refusing prison clothing and refusing to clean out his cell) to rebel against the decision of the British Government to treat IRA prisoners as criminals rather than political prisoners (2008: 425). This action initiated the campaign that culminated in the hunger strikes of the early 1980s, in which Nugent and other prisoners lost their lives. Heaney confesses: "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" (2008: 258; 259). He refused to submit his art to the dictates of the public; for this reason, he changed his mind and did not dedicate his "Ugolino" to the convicts. As O'Brien affirms, Heaney is "unwilling to speak only the language of his tribe"; instead, he continually demonstrates an "openness to alterity", which urges him to "challenge himself continually with different texts and languages" (2001-2002: 22).

The figures of Ugolino and Ruggieri are illustrative of the seemingly never-ending sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland. Heaney states, "there's an almost sexual intimacy between Ugolino and Archbishop Roger, which seemed cognate with the violence and intimacy of Ulster" (in Hass 2000: 13). Heaney stresses the burning desire for revenge of both Nugent and the medieval count, and parallels them with the sectarian hatred of IRA and Loyalists. Ugolino eats his own kind, "His teeth, like a dog's teeth / ... took hold" (Heaney 1979: 63), an image that for the poet is symbolic of his fellow citizens feeding on and betraying one another. Darcy O'Brien states that "Heaney has rendered the vision of the Florentine poet into twentieth century reality" (1996: 180). As with every translator, Heaney is influenced by the literary conventions of his time, and he affirms: "it is inevitable that people speak in their own voice in translation" (in Hass 2000: 33). His rendition takes into account a range of cultural elements and contains some deliberate modifications of the original. For example, Ruggieri becomes "Roger" in Heaney's translation because Roger, a Protestant name, has associations with the religious Northern Irish conflict (Tsur 2001: 8). The description of Ugolino "gnawing" at Roger's head "like a famine victim at a loaf of bread" (Heaney 1979: 61) has connotations with the Irish famine of 1845-47 (McCarthy 2008: 56). It should be noted that Dante's line did not include the word "famine", but "hunger" ("*fame*") (*Inf.* XXXII: 127 [1971]).

In another passage, Dante's expression:

> … if words
> Of mine may prove the seeds of future fruit
> Of infamy for that traitor whom I gnaw,
> Thou shalt have speech and grief together,
>                     (*Inf.* XXXIII: 6-9)

is syntactically transformed by Heaney into a more contemporary style and lexicon:

> … while I weep to say them, I would sow
> My words like curses – that they might increase
> And multiply upon the head I gnaw. (1979: 61)

His translation creates a more colloquial language, which is more accessible to the modern reader. Moreover, in this passage, Heaney, "has bent Dante's original metaphor of words as seeds to his own 'natural' attitude of perceiving poetry as a form of 'digging and sowing'" (Sperandio 2009: 214). This reflects how intimate has become Heaney's affinity with Dante's poetry, and his ability to use the master's images to his own purpose. Heaney's characteristic sense of place is also visible in the lines:

> Pisa! Pisa, your sounds are like a hiss
> Sizzling in our country's grassy language,
>                     (Heaney 1979: 63)

which in the original read:

> Ah Pisa, you are an insult to the people
> Of this beautiful country where the 'si' is heard.
>                                  (My translation)

Dante's reference to the language, where Italy is identified as the country in which the '*si*' is heard, is transformed by Heaney "into a tiny *dinnseanchas* relating the very hissing sound of the toponym Pisa to the treacherous nature of the town, alluding to the phrase 'snake-in-the-grass'" (Gatto 2000: 71). Heaney recreates the "local intensity" that greatly fascinates him in the *Comedy* through the reverberations of the idiom of his home place. Indeed, he believes that the translator has to transport into a different language, not only the meaning, but also the music of a poem:

> It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the metre might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. (Heaney 2001a: xxvi)

The pitch and the lexicon used by Heaney in his version, transfer Ugolino's social reality from the Middle Ages to that of the present, creating a fruitful conversation with the Irish poet's cultural environment. Heaney's "impure"

translation corresponds to what Walter Benjamin defines the "survival" (2002: 255) of the original text in a new form of poetry. The original flourishes thanks to the translation; however, in this process, the "tongue of the translator is transformed as well" (256). Hence, the relationship between Heaney's version and Dante's original becomes "a natural one, or more specifically, a vital" connection (254). This relation between translation and original is symbolic of the ultimate "kinship of all languages" (255) that Heaney, like Dante, has promoted in his poetry. Heaney's translation of "Ugolino", and his poetry in general, displays his dream of a common universal culture, in which differences between cultural languages and traditions are transcended, and are made part of a higher culture, creating a "kinship" between them. Through allusions to Dante, Heaney is able to transcend ethnic boundaries and create an increasingly cosmopolitan poetry, in which the specifics of public and personal history are considered alongside those of world culture. In this way, the Irish poet, like his medieval predecessor, can create a world that is not divided by political boundaries but is open to the sounds of all the other voices of Europe.

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