

## WALKING INTO THE LIGHT: DANTE AND SEAMUS HEANEY'S SECOND LIFE

by Michael Cavanagh

**T**he convergence of Seamus Heaney and Dante in Heaney's mid-career is determined by several of Heaney's needs and attitudes: by his aversion to the idea that he should as an Ulster Catholic be an "engaged" writer; by his need for a non-Irish Catholic authority; by his powerful sense of loyalty to the dead; by his admiration for the example set by his modern masters as occasional emulators of Dante; by his developing conviction that Dante is the poet *par excellence* for dealing gracefully with the weight of poetic influence; by his conviction that the poetry of someone in mid-career must rise out of cultural detachment, out of what Heaney, after Dante, calls "the second life;" by his interest in an art based on the retrieval of one's past; by his desire to become a more "social," outward poet; by his desire to make his own life representative of the life of his generation; by his desire to create a "light" art, in more than one sense of that word; by his need for a "masculine" voice; by his need for what he calls poetic "equilibrium." Dante's influence is first acknowledged in *Field Work* in 1979; it reaches its most overt expression in *Station Island* in 1985; its final fruit is *Seeing Things* in 1991. Heaney's supreme performance in this mode is Canto VII of *Station Island*.

In a 1989 interview with Carla de Petris in an Italian journal, Heaney recalls that his interest in Dante was initially sparked by a reading of Dorothy Sayers' translation in the year 1972 when he came south to the Republic ("La Pausa" 72). Heaney's friend, the late Darcy O'Brien, has related that Heaney was "inspired" by Lowell's translations from the Brunetto Latini canto, and that this inspiration occurred later in the decade (O'Brien 174). I think it is possible that both Sayers and Lowell were influential, and one common denominator of these influences was the appeal to Heaney of Dante's exile (which is part of the very fabric of the *Commedia*) and the fact that in exile Dante was, though political, ostentatiously non-partisan between Guelph and Ghibbeline. I think what also appealed to him was Dante's authoritative and also renegade Catholicism. Dante's Catholicism: Heaney says little about it to English-speaking critics and interviewers, but in the Italian interview he reveals that in Dante no less than in Milosz he found "the psychological imprint of a common Catholic faith" (my translation, "La Pausa" 72). An allegiance to Dante of all writers mollified whatever guilt Heaney felt at breaking with Ulster Catholic solidarity, while it offered him the sense of membership in a more capacious Catholic tradition outside of that solidarity. In this respect, Heaney's observation about Eliot and Pound, that "they wore his poem like a magic garment to protect themselves from the contagion of parochial English and American culture" also describes to some extent his own relation to Dante: Dante is a fortifier at a vulnerable moment in Heaney's career ("Envies" 16).

Even were it not for this fortification, Dante would have been a writer to be reckoned with simply by virtue of the fact that writers who mattered to Heaney were involved in Dante, and it can be argued that Heaney sees Dante through the lights they provided, either by example or precept. Indeed, it is Dante through Eliot who gives Heaney the idea—an idea altogether compatible with Heaney’s *pius* nature—that predecessors are to be seen not as rivals, but an enabling forbears. It is clear that Eliot’s Dante imitation in the second section of “Little Gidding” is for Heaney a powerful example of Dante modernized. The burden of Eliot’s famous 1929 essay on Dante is to identify him as a universalist poet who has not lost touch with the concrete, a quality that is important to Heaney in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to say that Eliot’s critical distinction between Shakespeare and Dante as two types of poet, local and dense as opposed to clear and universal is at the foundation of Heaney’s entire poetics.

Lowell’s example is more subtle. We must go back *before* Lowell’s Dante translation, which came out in the late 1960s. The 1950s Lowell offered Heaney an example of a poet changing and lightening a style in mid-career, from what Heaney calls the “symbolist opacity” of *Lord Weary’s Castle* to the relaxed, more open style of *Life Studies* (*Government* 135). In turning to his own life in this lighter style, moreover, Lowell, Heaney insists, took a turn towards self-mastery. While it is true that *Life Studies* was remarkable in its time for its candor, what is now apparent, Heaney says, is how public a monument it has become, its characters, including the author, having become people of the age (*Government* 132, 135). Lowell has mastered his desire to preach, Heaney argues, and has taken up a “witnessing function”; he does not address the world in his new-style poem: he “Lowellizes” it (*Government* 140). In his essay written the year *Station Island* was published, Heaney tells us that Dante’s *Commedia* encouraged him in his own confessional poem to “explore the typical strains which the consciousness labors under in this country. The main tension is between two contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self” (“Envies” 19). What I am suggesting is that the example of Lowell’s transformation of his enclosed style to a public style and of his private life to a more “social” one likewise encouraged Heaney in his emerging conception of himself in relation to Dante. The *Commedia* and *Life Studies* are converging and ratifying influences; *Station Island* marries the candor of *Life Studies* to the formal conventions of Dante’s *Commedia*. Lowell offered an even more modern conception of modern Danteism than Eliot could, and must have made Heaney feel that Dante’s manner was not in any way anachronistic.

O’Brien, without explaining, claims that Lowell’s later translation of the Brunetto Latini canto in *Near the Ocean*, 1967, “inspired” Heaney. Why? There are two reasons, I believe: first, even allowing for the relaxation of intensity in Lowell’s style, Lowell’s Brunetto canto is a remarkably plain piece of writing. It is restrained in its use of figures, unventuresome in its diction, and unrhetorical. As such it could only help encourage Heaney’s inclination in the mid-1970s to move beyond his own “heavy” initial poetic style. Heaney’s own translation of Dante’s first three cantos clearly owes more to Lowell than to Sayers. Second, Lowell’s choice of Canto XV must have served to enforce in Heaney’s mind the urbane modernity of Dante’s temper, for the Brunetto canto complexly reveals both Brunetto’s degradation and the affection of the wayfarer for the “*cara et buona imagine paterna*” (Dante 139). It reveals a startling if unstated discrepancy between Brunetto’s old-fashioned

humanism and the wayfarer's resurgent Christianity, but seems to wish to embrace the attractions of both. It shows how Brunetto is simultaneously one of life's losers, naked and scrambling to catch up with his wretched companions, and one of its winners, gathering in the green cloth at Verona. Heaney must have remembered Eliot's tribute to the last lines of XV: nothing better illustrates, Eliot says, the quality of surprise than the way in which Dante "dismisses the damned master whom he loves and respects" (Eliot, *Selected Prose* 213). This complexity, this embrace of opposites, is keenly a part of Heaney's appreciation of Dante: it expresses itself in the omnipresent "and" which seems to appear when Heaney discusses Dante or Dante-like writers. He likes the "vehemence and fondness" of the *Commedia*; he likes the way Dante is "faithful to the collective historical experience and...true to the recognitions of the emerging self" ("Enviés" 18, 19). He likes the way he "could accommodate the political and the transcendent;" he notes the way Dante celebrates "the bonds of friendship and of enmity"; he admires the way in Dante "personalities and values (are) emotionally soldered together—"solder" by the way becomes an important word in Heaney's vocabulary in this period ("Enviés" 18). In the Italian interview, Heaney speaks of the *Commedia* as "an epic poem with the secret beauty of a lyric" (my translation, "La Pausa" 72).

What emerges about Dante is a conception of him as the master of the very oppositions that tormented him before he left Florence, a conception politically meaningful, of course, to Heaney in the 1970s as well as now, in this past decade, as he wrestles with his identity as an Irish poet raised in the English language. We shall hear Heaney in 1989, for instance, erect Dante's inclusiveness into a model for poetry:

Poetry, let us say, whether it belongs to an old political dispensation or aspires to express a new one, has to be a working model of inclusive consciousness. It should not simplify. Its projections and inventions should be a match for the complex reality which surrounds it and out of which it is generated. *The Divine Comedy* is a great example of this kind of total adequacy... (*Redress* 8)

Four years later we shall hear him argue that the residents of Northern Ireland, unlike their politicians, have to their credit become

adepts in the mystery of living in two places at one time. Like all human beings, of course, they would prefer to live in one, but in the meantime they make do with a constructed destination, an interim place whose foundations straddle the areas of self-division, a place of resolved contradiction, beyond confusion. A place, slightly to misquote Yeats, that does not exist, a place that is but a dream... (*Redress* 190).

In the 1990s we have become accustomed to Heaney speaking of poetry arising out of and thriving in a state of equilibrium: a perpetual state of in-betweenness. This idea has its origins, I believe, in Heaney's mid-life reading of Dante. One other thing Heaney says about Dante in the Italian interview invites us to make a connection between Dante and Yeats. Dante gave him, he says, "a more ardent vision of artistic creation" (my translation, "La

Pausa” 72). He goes on to make the connection explicit: “I’d like to follow the way indicated by Yeats and even more by Dante in which will and intelligence are able to operate freely together with the creative impulse (my translation, “La Pausa” 72), a sentiment which in *Seeing Things* becomes “make impulse one with wilfulness” (*Seeing Things* 87), and which constitutes an apology for writing in a spontaneous manner in pre-ordained forms: Dante’s tercets become the building blocks of the poetic units that make up the sequence *Squarings*. Heaney’s fervid mid-career interest in Dante goes hand in hand with an interest in Yeats that grows over the 1980s. It might be said that Heaney’s interest in Dante is a foundation of his reinvigorated respect for Yeats. This is so because, for Heaney, Yeats was always the consummate artist, and the *Commedia* is ultimately the story of the emergence of the life of art, which is the “second life,” and which is associated in the *Commedia* with Purgatory. The poet builds this second life on the selected and retrieved and arranged materials of the first, from which he has detached himself. This isn’t just a modernistic interpretation of Dante; Dante himself insists at the very outset of *Purgatorio*: “ma qui la morta poesi resurga”— ‘but here let dead poetry rise again” (my translation, Dante 320). Heaney provides in his poem “The Biretta” an amusing translation: “poetry lifts its eyes and clears its throat” (*Seeing* 27). As Dante scholar Jeffrey Schnapp has observed, sin in Dante has gravitational pull; the purpose of the ascent of Purgatory is, as he puts it, “the transformation of gravity to levity” (Schnapp 194). Dante’s basic story has two meanings for Heaney: Dante’s rise from the gravity of sin translates for Heaney into a rise from Roman Catholic gravity, that is, excessive awareness of sin, and more broadly it means detachment from the old culture. *Station Island* is the story about emerging cultural freedom. This freedom is for Heaney the *sine qua non* of the art he wants to create, which has levity (or lightness as Heaney likes to put it): it is not pulled down by life, but acts on life, in a spirit of levity, from on high. What it once lived, it now selects and illuminates.

Dante is associated with the encompassing of life, with mastery over life. When Heaney has established this conception of Dante, as the master poet of the second life, he is ready to turn back to a Yeats in a different spirit than he had before. In the 1970s, Yeats had been for Heaney an admirable but rather forbidding figure. By the late 1980s Yeats becomes Heaney’s new modern master. The terms in which Heaney celebrates him in his essay “Yeats’ Nobility” in the American journal *Four Quarters* in 1989 are familiarly Dantean: he is an “and” poet. The essay is about Yeats (and Heaney, we recognize) in his fifties: in this period Yeats has “gathered together the different strands in his make-up; “he has reconciled his “Anglo-Irish heritage of detachment and inner freedom” with “his Celtic heritage of immemorial mystical truth” (“Nobility” 11, 12). Indeed, Yeats “embodies the whole field of forces active in Ireland and the world beyond” in just the same way that Heaney in *Station Island*, imitating Dante, had envisioned himself as his culture’s everyman (“Nobility” 12). In his fifties, Yeats becomes, says Heaney, a “wisdom-speaker and memory-keeper:” he gains a Dantean “second life” (Heaney does use that phrase) as a “creature reborn in his poems” amalgamating “the opposing traditions of Catholic and Protestant,” and joining the “humble and high” (“Nobility” 13). When we consider that Heaney’s Yeats gets through his wife George “messages from ghostly instructors” and that his poetic practice is, in Heaney’s wonderful phrase, to “confront menace with ritual song” the Dantean analogue seems complete (“Nobility” 13).

Dante’s *Purgatorio*, a book about the resurgence of art, is not surprisingly full of artists:

Sordello, Statius, Oderisi, Guido Guinicelli, Arnaut, Bonagiunta, and, of course, the Supreme Being Himself, the fashioner of Purgatory, who sculps the great examples of humility on the walls of the terrace of pride—so forcefully, vividly and concretely that it constitutes for the narrator a “*visible parlare*”—“visible speech” (my translation, Dante 402). We are saved by a process that is analogous to art and it is the Grand Artist (as well as artists) who saves us. This being the case, Dante initiates a period of art-and-poetry veneration in Heaney. With the appearance of *Field Work*, artists and poets—O’Riada, Lowell, Ledwidge, Kavanagh, Hewitt, Joyce, and Yeats of course—begin to appear in his poetry and to be addressed as masters as they are in Dante—or, alternatively people like O’Neill in “Casualty” appear, or William Strathearn in Canto VII of *Station Island* or Heaney’s own father in “The Ash Plant” who are non-artists, but who are artist-like. This extension of the artistic franchise to non-artists is in keeping with the passage just cited in which Heaney essentially gives the residents of Ulster credit for living a poetic (i.e., “constructed”) life. The whole purpose of the Dantean endeavor is to turn random life into purposeful art; on the personal level it is to turn one’s own life to art. One must be, to cite Eliot’s Dantean master, “restored by that refining fire;” one must “move in measure like a dancer” (Eliot, *Poems* 142).

## II.

Heaney associates Dante with a certain style, and it is to that style that I wish to turn my attention. In a recent interview, Heaney indicates that he looks at his career as falling into two parts, in which *Field Work* forms the point of division; before *Field Work*, his style was “broody” and “phonetically self-relishing” (“The Art of Poetry LXXV” 105). His early books “wanted to be texture, to be all consonants, vowels and voicings, they wanted the sheer materiality of words” (“The Art of Poetry LXXV” 106). He connects this style to the tutoring of Philip Hobsbaum at Queen’s University, and he describes it more or less consistently: it is a style associated with locality and fidelity to one’s roots—indeed with the land itself, and particularly with bogs. In an interview with James Randall in *Ploughshares* in 1979, speaking of the volume *North*, he associates the style with a “magnetic, almost entranced relationship” with heads removed from bogs, and he speaks likewise during the writing of the bog poems of a religious feeling of “being bonded to something, being bound to do something” (“Interview” 18). He finds this style in others. He finds it in the early Auden and in his essay on him cites Geoffrey Grigson who defines it as “assonances and alliterations coming together to make a new verbal actuality as it might be of rock or quartz” (*Government* 120). He finds it in the early Eliot and associates it with a sense of “bewilderment and somnambulism” in Eliot’s early poetry” (“Envies” 13). In one place he calls this quality the “canorous note” and “back-echo” (“The Art of Poetry LXXV” 101). He agrees with Eliot that it can be found in Shakespeare—a parochial, “disruptive” and ultimately mysterious element in Shakespeare’s work which is given over to the “genetic energies” of words and which is owing to Shakespeare’s closeness to “folk speech and the hedge-school of the shires” (“Envies” 11-12). This style is associated with submission, heaviness, mystery, and locality. It is associated with the poem as an inexplicable part of reality itself rather than an elucidation of reality. It is associated with the poet as receiver, not maker. It is often associated with youth.

For those who are familiar with Heaney’s criticism, this exposition will recall

Heaney's distinction, back in the early 1970s, between a feminine and masculine poetry, feminine poetry being divinatory and evocative, a style of listening, of "incubation," masculine being a style of "address," of "quelling and controlling" (*Preoccupations* 97, 98). During this period Heaney clearly prefers the feminine style and it is this style, known in Hobsbaum's term "Heaneyspeak" that established Heaney's literary identity. Listen to its bunching of stresses: "the bags gaped/ Where the chutes ran back to the stilled drum" (*Selected Poems* 18); or to the explosive consonants and general cacophony of "the cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/ of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge" (*Selected Poems* 4); listen to the massiveness—reminiscent of Hughes in its note of violence—of "The cap juts like a gantry's crossbeam/ Cowling plated forehead and sledgehead jaw" (*Poems 1965-1975* 30); the clatter of "The splash and gurgle of sour-breathed milk,/ The pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps" (*Poems 1965-1975* 12); listen, in the volume *North*, to this style turn low and dolorous: "Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod,/ Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings" (*Selected Poems* 86). It is almost invariably a thick-textured style; it is often explosive and violent, but, what is more important is the impression it gives of listening to itself, of being intoxicated with its own breath. Here is "Punishment" in *North*:

I am the artful voyeur  
 of your brain's exposed  
 and darkened combs  
 your muscles' webbing  
 and all your numbered bones (*Selected Poems* 85)

The vocabulary of this style is specific and technical: the woman's head is a "brain-firkin;" her modern-day counterparts are "cauled in tar" (*Selected Poems* 84, 85). The effect of a broad vocabulary in this and other early poems is of course to enforce the sense of the poem as impenetrable, as a reality itself rather than an utterance about reality. When Helen Vendler describes the style of Heaney's early poetry as one "so variable that almost any word, image, or turn of phrase might appear at any moment," she brilliantly locates the particular impression of inscape and strangeness ("Echo Soundings" 116). We notice the density of the metaphors as well: in the space of a stanza, the nipples of the Windby girl are compared to amber beads, and her rib-cage to the rigging of a ship. This style does not prevent meaning, of course, and it is not mysterious, but the poem gives off a powerful aura of mystery and of authorial submission to that mystery. It may be addressed to the girl in the bog, but its tone is one of intense privacy; it is uttered or listened to as if in a confessional.

Heaney's determination to break away from this style in the mid-to-late 1970s is largely if not exclusively owing to the new importance of Dante, whom he read "compulsively" ("The Mid-Course" 13). Neil Corcoran cites Heaney's letter to Brian Friel at this time: "I no longer wanted a door into the dark; I wanted a door into the light" (Corcoran 128). As Heaney told Dennis Driscoll, he wanted to sound like his own self in a friendly social situation ("The Mid-Course" 13). The importance of Dante is that he taught a kind of poetry in which the language doesn't speak itself so much as the poet speaks the language, and so in his new mode Heaney would speak as himself, and not be the auscultating bard of *North*. The language of Dante is "casual, swift, and memorable," Heaney says; it has a

“clean-limbed gait” (“Treely” 14). It will not seem to be borrowing its vocabulary from its subject matter, but imposing it from a superior position. This new style is very much authored and refined but it will give the impression of saying less because it is less resonant, and less “creative” in its diction. It is a “bare wire,” as Heaney told Fintan O’Toole (Corcoran 153). It is more verbal than the older style; it moves more quickly. The style will seem to say less also because it borrows something of Dante’s reticence in presentation; except in the explicitly doctrinal passages, Dante typically says less than he means, and he does so to great effect, as we know, for instance, from the end of the Paolo and Francesca canto. Though he expressed mixed feelings about Eliot’s Dantean lines in “Little Gidding,” he was moved by Eliot’s stoical, muted eminently Dantean closure of the scene: “In the disfigured steet/ He left me, with a kind of valediction,/ And faded on the blowing of the horn” (*Poems* 142). We shall hear him echo it in Canto VII of *Station Island*: “and then a stun of pain seemed to go through him/ and he trembled like a heatwave and faded” (*Selected Poems* 200).

Heaney doesn’t stop writing in the first style, but the second style predominates in *Field Work* and *Station Island*. What does it sound like? This: “And was angry that my trust could not repose/ in the clear light;” or “I dab you clean with moss,/... I lift you under the arms and lay you flat;” or “He would not be held/ At home by his own crowd/ whatever threats were phoned/ whatever black flags waved;” or “You followed from Boyne waters to the Balkans/ But miss the twilit note your flute should sound” (*Selected Poems* 107, 114, 117, 144-45). The style isn’t without its own music, as the last line demonstrates, but its main effect is of spareness and casualness. It is an appropriate style for a poet who wants to let characters speak. Here is James Joyce: “‘And don’t be so earnest,/ so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes./ Let go, let fly, forget./ You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note’” (*Selected Poems* 212). Here is the voice of William Carleton, another of Heaney’s masters: “‘I know, I know, I know, I know’ he said,/ ‘but you have to try to make sense of what comes,/ Remember everything and keep your head’” (*Selected Poems* 186). This last passage offers one of the few humorous moments in *Station Island* for in saying “remember everything and keep your head” Carleton seems to mean “learn from your past, but move on.” Heaney’s pilgrim thinks it means “make your mind a catalogue of the past,” and he responds: “‘The alders in the hedge,’ I said, ‘mushrooms,/ dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dunged,/ the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open. . .’” (*Selected Poems* 186). This is a deliberate revisiting of the old thick-textured Heaney, which is startling in the context. We cannot fail to notice how the style is associated with being stuck in and encumbered by the past, in this case Heaney’s own rural past. Carleton’s style and the style of the narrative that presents him is athletic and clean and so it isn’t surprising that Carleton rudely characterizes experience merely as “another life that cleans our element” (*Selected Poems* 186). His exit is clean too: “He turned on his heel when he was saying this/ and headed up the road at the same hard pace” (*Selected Poems* 186). *Station Island*’s theme is the purgation of its protagonist’s disabling past; that cleansing is enacted in its narrative with its “clean-limbed gait.”

I am conscious of the objection that in one essay “Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet,” from which I have quoted, Heaney presents a somewhat different view of Dante than the one here. In this essay, drawing on Eliot’s distinction between Dante as a universal and Shakespeare as a local poet, Heaney offers a dissenting view of Dante

based on Osip Mandelstam's essay "Conversation about Dante." Heaney agrees with some aspects of Eliot's differentiation of the two poets, and he certainly upholds Eliot's distinction between types of poets, but espouses Mandelstam's idea of an essentially lyrical Dante and argues that Dante is in fact a local, instinctual, evocative, private, heavy-textured poet, and he goes on to fault Eliot for turning Dante into a too-refined didactic universalist. Eliot, he charges, does not do justice to the "swarming, mobbish element in Dante's Italian" ("Enviés" 12). Heaney cites the first lines of *Inferno*:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
Che la diritta via era smarrita.*

*Abi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
Che nel pensier rinova la paura!* (Dante 11)

Pointing to these first lines, Heaney would have his reader listen to "*smarrita*. . .which has the force of dirt hitting a windscreen;" the entire line in which it appears is "swarming;" the phrase "*selva selvaggia*" Heaney asserts is "as barbarous as Hopkins;" "*aspra e forte*" suggests "the struggle with the undergrowth" ("Enviés" 12). Dante a grave, universal seer? No so, says Heaney, citing Mandelstam's insistence that Dante is one "who shakes up meaning and destroys the integrity of the image" ("Enviés" 12). His poetry almost Dada-esque, childlike. He is the poetic father of Rimbaud.

One could cite several reasons for finding this conception unwholehearted on Heaney's part and misleading. Heaney's eccentric appraisal of Dante here, besides being inaccurate (for surely Dante is among other things a highly didactic poet), is at odds with almost everything Heaney says and implies about Dante during this period. Moreover, if Dante were as "mobbish" as Heaney says he is, *Station Island*, which was published in the same year as the essay, and which is overtly a poem in Dante's manner, would sound consistently different than it does, more indeed like the Heaney of the early volumes. Most notably, Heaney's own translations of *Inferno*, with very few exceptions present Dante in what I have called Heaney's second manner.

How does Heaney himself translate Dante's "*smarrita*?" In Daniel Halpern's edition of contemporary translations of *Inferno*, for which Heaney contributes the first three cantos, his rendition is "lost sight of"—which doesn't sound like dirt hitting a windscreen (3). I do not think that "*che la diritta via era smarrita*" is "swarming," as Heaney contends, but Dante's line certainly has more music than Heaney's "where the straight road had been lost sight of" (*Inferno* 3). Dante's "*Che nel pensier rinova la paura*" has more music and texture than Heaney's "the very thought of it renews my panic" (*Inferno* 3). Heaney's rendering of Beatrice is typical:

*Io son fatta da Dio, sua mercè, tale,  
Che la vostra miseria non mi tange,  
ne fiamma d'esto 'ncendio non m'assale* (Dante 24)

I am not subject to your misery  
 Because God, by His grace, made me immune  
 And none of the flames burning here afflicts me. (*Inferno* 9)

Granted, we do not have the resources in English to reproduce Dante's exquisite repetitions with so little effort, but still Heaney's version seems to want to establish Dante as an essentially prosaic (and even bland) writer. Heaney's departure from one of his influences, Dorothy Sayers, is also instructive. It was Sayers' intention, as she says in her introduction, to produce a translation fully responsive to the Dante's variety, including the colloquial; generally, though her diction is sometimes old-fashioned, her manner is considerably more *local* than Heaney's and more lyrical. She uses more alliteration and more colloquial, blunt Anglo-Saxon words. For instance, she's not afraid of words such as "slubbered," "crammed," "merry," "Hugger-mugger" and "belch" which not only do not appear in Heaney's translation, but would seem highly out of place in it (Sayers 60-61). Indeed it could be said that Sayers' warning in her introduction about translating Dante applies to no one more than Heaney. Sayers emphasizes the variety of Dante's style, "from the grand manner to the colloquial," and insists, "nothing could be more unfair to him than to iron out all his lively irregularities into one flat level of dignified commonplace" (Sayers 61). It is not my purpose to compare translations of Dante. The few cantos Heaney has translated contain several felicities, but the overall effect is that of a poet trying to avoid the local, the colorful, the babbling, and the textually dense, in favor of intelligibility and dignity. He tones Dante down; he makes him rather plain. So does Lowell.

In order to explain why Heaney, inconsistently with this new direction in his life based on a plain Dante, has argued Dante into a purely intuitive, first-life poet, we must consider some reservations he had about the *Commedia* and indeed about any poet whose primary task is illumination rather than mystery. For Heaney, the impediment to a full acceptance of Dante is his occasional unadulterated didacticism and dogmatism, which Heaney associates in his own life and times with the worst kind of writing-to-order: poetry as ideology. Heaney's strategy for dealing with this uncomfortable aspect of the *Commedia* is to make it an inessential property of the work, or to make it a property read into his work by his commentators, particularly Eliot, who according to Heaney reconstructs Dante's work as an undergirding for his conservative Anglicanism. If Heaney distorts and underestimates Eliot here, painting him as an appropriative Anglican stuffed shirt, I believe he correspondingly overestimates Mandelstam's conception of Dante as a wild lyricist because he sees it as an act of resistance to party-line poetry, which has always been Heaney's anathema. In the end, Heaney does with Dante what he claims Eliot did, and his own act of appropriation serves to put him more at ease with a poet who could on occasion remind him of the world whose grip he endeavored half his adult life to escape.<sup>1</sup>

Heaney's intellectual conception of Dante's endeavor in the *Commedia* is sometimes unstable; his artistic conception of Dante's style is, however, consistent. Here are more lines written in what I have called the second style. "I wanted to grow up and plow;" "As a child they could not keep me from wells;" "I sat all morning in the college sick-bay;" "When you have nothing more to say, just drive/ For a day all round the peninsula" (*Selected Poems* 8, 11, 9, 16). What is remarkable about them in the context of my argument is that they are all

taken from Heaney's first two volumes of poems in the 1960s, that is, before the Dantean influence is supposed to have started. We may infer from the unquestionable presence of these plain, Dantean lines that Heaney was Dantean before he knew he was, or that his critics have quite simply missed conscious stylistic allusions that were there all along. Before dismissing the second possibility, we should take note of the style of the poem, "St. Francis and the Birds," which appeared in the first, but not in subsequent editions of *Death of a Naturalist*:

When Francis preached love to the birds  
They listened, fluttered, throttled up  
Into the blue like a flock of words

Released for fun from his holy lips.  
Then wheeled back, whirred about his head,  
Pirouetted on brothers' capes,

Danced on the wing, for sheer joy played  
And sang, like images took flight.  
Which was the best poem Francis made,

His argument true, his tone light (*Naturalist* 53)

It is debatable why Heaney decided not to re-print this. He may have thought it ingenuous or smug. It has, however, the declarative simplicity of the Dante style; it is written in modified *terza rima*, and it concludes the way Dante concludes his cantos, with a trailing single line that rhymes with the interior line of the previous tercet. The theme, lightness, connects it with the lightness Heaney was trying out in *Field Work*'s style and with the impulsive mode of *Seeing Things*. That Francis can be both true and light makes him an early model of the Dantean inclusive poet. Another poem in the Dantean mode is "Mid-Term Break" about the death, during Heaney's high school days, of Heaney's younger brother (*Selected Poems* 9). Once again, the style is studiously simple. The poem has scarcely any rhyme, but it is written in a non-evocative style with a Dante-style narrative—a swiftly forward-moving story with little editorializing—and is arranged in tercets, with a closing trailing line that rhymes with the last line of the previous tercet. There is something else about this poem. I have mentioned the connection between the Dantean style and Heaney's conception of the masculine mode of writing. It is apparent here, for the poem is about a 14 year-old coming into his own through the apprehension of tragedy and the necessity of maintaining a stoic coolness in its presence. The poem is not about Heaney's brother; it is about the speaker becoming an adult by behaving like a "man" (that is, behaving unemotionally), a test that is seen in light of his father's failure to pass it—the father cries. The poem closes with Dantean concision and reticence, enumerating rather than emoting: "He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot/ No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear,/ A four-foot box, a foot for every year." Or there is "The Other Side" from *Wintering Out* in 1972, again in tercets ending with a trailing line and written in a simple style, depicting a

reticent masculine world and the incipient and hesitating friendship of a Catholic farm-boy and a Protestant landowner (*Selected Poems* 36-38). There is nothing overtly Dantean about the poem, nor are there any allusions to the *Commedia* in it, but it has the simplicity and bareness and social-ness that Heaney was looking for in mid-career—or should we say, looking to reestablish in his work in a more consistent way? There are other poems too.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the Dantean style is, consciously or not, associated in Heaney's mind with the masculine world, with masculinity, with relations between and among men. I believe we would notice this even if Heaney had not once made a distinction between masculine and feminine writing. The masters of *Field Work* and *Station Island*, his most Dantean volumes, are almost exclusively male, and one of the most important of them is his father, who is one of those non-artist artists who appear with some frequency in Heaney's mid-career. Heaney pays him homage in "The Harvest Bow" in *Field Work*. The poem concerns itself with the father's reticence, which is redeemed by his ability to tie a wheaten straw corona in such a way that it communicates who he is and the world from which he comes; in a wonderful phase, Heaney says the bow "implicated the mellowed silence in you" (*Selected Poems* 142). The poem serenely affirms everyday craft and *sprezzatura* and it expresses confidence that everything important finds expression in the visible world and that we may, facing the reticence of the world and particularly of men, have the satisfaction of "gleaning the unsaid off the palpable" (*Selected Poems* 142). I don't know of any phrase that more succinctly suggests Dante's visible but reticent poetic style, a style that, throughout the *Commedia*, transforms feelings into visual images, much as God fashions the images in Purgatory for their "*visibile parlare*." All of these easy-going poems of *Field Work* suggest a truth that is near, not far away: not to be excavated, as in the poems of *North*.

If we are bothered by the apparent contradiction of Heaney discovering Dante in mid-career, in the "*mezzo del cammin*," and evidence that suggests he was mindful of Dante at the outset of his career, we should remember that Heaney's career everywhere evinces recurrence and return: that the dichotomizing of his poetics in the 1980s and 1990s is anticipated in his critical writings of the 1970s; that the idea of a perpetual return to one's origins, the central idea of *Seeing Things*, is anticipated in his earliest essays. The idea of poetry as a threshold, also a more recent idea, is anticipated as early as the 1960s. In a 1978 essay he tells of an experience he had in the late 1960s at Gallarus Oratory on the Dingle Peninsula. In that narrow structure, Heaney says

I felt the weight of Christianity in all its rebuking aspects, its call to self-denial and self-abnegation....But coming out of the cold heart of the stone, into the sunlight and the dazzle of grass and sea, I felt a lift in my heart, a surge toward happiness that must have been experienced over and over again by those monks as they crossed the same threshold centuries ago. This surge toward praise, this sudden apprehension of the world as light, as illumination. . . . (*Preoccupations* 189)

Here is the Dantean motion upwards, the rebuke of heaviness, ten years before *Field Work*. If we don't think that Heaney is reading his present into his past, then the very repetitive re-discovery of light as part of a natural rhythm of life might suggest to us that Dante, or the principle he represents, is a mode of living as well as writing, and a principle of enduring,

and that it is an recurrent phenomenon in Heaney's career as well as one of its specific phases.<sup>1</sup> Canto VII of *Station Island* draws profoundly from the *Commedia*'s themes and manner while at the same time remaining one of Heaney's most characteristic utterances. In it, William Strathearn, one of Heaney's college-mates, speaks of his unmotivated, terrorist murder at the hands of two off-duty Protestant policemen. His narrative is somewhat lengthier version of the kind of story one hears in the early books of the *Purgatorio*; indeed Strathearn, is deliberately modeled on Canto III's Manfredi, the excommunicated Ghibelline hero killed fighting the papacy three years before Dante was born. Dante describes Manfredi as "fair haired and beautiful and of noble appearance, but one of his eyebrows had been severed by a blow" (my translation, *Commedia* 342). Strathearn is his modern counterpart: "Through life and death he had hardly aged./ There always was an athlete's cleanliness/ shining off him," but his brow too is "blown open above the eye" (*Selected Poems* 200, 197). As Manfredi tells the story of his death in battle, Strathearn tells the story of his murder and tells it in a bare, athletic, but graceful style appropriate to a man whom Heaney's narrator remembers primarily as a footballer, a rangy midfielder "the one stylist on the team" (*Selected Poems* 200). It's highly significant that, like the smiling Manfredi (and the smile is unvariably a sign in Dante of spiritual ascension) Strathearn smiles and jokes with Heaney's pilgrim about how much weight the pilgrim has put on in the intervening years. Strathearn might have been like Colum McCartney, a resentful victim hotly chastising or exhorting his survivors, but here his correction is implicit and gentle. Cool and serene, Strathearn is like many of *Purgatorio*'s penitents (including Manfredi) who have detached themselves from the partisan passions of the past: it is in this sense that he presents himself as the pilgrim's master, for it is the lugubrious pilgrim, with his onlooker's liberal guilt, who needs aid and succor, who needs his spiritual weight alleviated. Their encounter is marked by one of those wonderful mis-communications that one finds in Dante, in which the pilgrim gushingly confesses "Forgive the way I have lived indifferent/ forgive my timid circumspect involvement," to which Strathearn replies "Forgive my eye. . . all that's above my head" (*Selected Poems* 200). The canto begs to be compared with "Punishment" written only a decade earlier in Heaney's heavy style, and which better than any poem Heaney's ever written conveys the muck of Northern Irish history and its attractive power as it records the deepening dimensions of the speaker's sympathy with the sacrificial woman and, later, with her persecutors. By contrast, the memorial to Strathearn is light—not mirthful, obviously—but determined to record tragedy straightforwardly, with a sober eye, and to dismiss all other feelings, especially the pilgrim's maudlin confession, as irrelevant. But of course it isn't a memorial in an important sense, for Strathearn is most like a Dantean master in that he is "forgetful of everything," his very fatal head-wound a correlative to his inability to contain backward-looking resentments: "all that's above my head" (*Selected Poems* 199, 200). For Heaney the poet, if not for the pilgrim, he's a purgatorial artist whose example warns Ulster and her children not to become devoured of their past. Or in the words of *Station Island*'s last master, James Joyce: "Let go, let fly, forget/ You've listened long enough: now strike your note."

## NOTES

1. See my discussion of this issue in "Seamus Heaney's Dante: Making a Party of Oneself" in *Lectura Dantis*, 12 (Spring 1993) 8-9.

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