

**“O poet guiding me”:
Dante and Contemporary Irish Poetry**

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von
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Poeta che mi guidi,
guarda la mia virtù s'ell' è possente,
prima ch'a l'alto passo tu mi fidi. (*Inf.* II, 10-12)

O poet guiding me
before you trust me to this epic task,
consider if I'm fit to go with thee. (Carson 2002: 8)

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1. Introduction

1.1 Irish Poets and Dante in the 20th Century

a model for all poets

T. S. Eliot, "Dante" (Eliot 1951: 268)

After the revitalisation and popularisation of Dante in English in the Romantic period¹ and the Victorian era, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were primarily responsible for a reinforcement of Dante's influence on literature in English in the 20th century. While Eliot stressed the religious aspect of Dante's work, Pound concentrated on literary style and tradition, which Eliot criticised as insufficient for a profound understanding of the medieval poet (cf. Ellis 1983: 202; McDougal 1985: 72). Both approaches have had their impact on Irish poetry.² Around the same time, W. B. Yeats cultivated his own take on Dante. As Stephen Paul Ellis writes, Yeats's Dante is "less celebrated, partly because references to Dante occur in his prose writings rather than in his poetry and particularly in [...] *A Vision*." (Ellis 1981: 1) His reception of Dante was "more profound" than Pound's or Eliot's "because he regarded Dante's personal history as an exemplar and attempted to relate his own life and writings to it", but at the same time it was "more superficial because his acquaintance with Dante's writing was remote and highly selective and because he did not read him in Italian." (ibid.)

Thus each writer takes from Dante what pleases him most and what applies best to his own life, philosophical or religious beliefs, and work. As a result, their responses to Dante in the critical writings as well as in the poetry are quite different from and at times in opposition to one another; perhaps the main purpose of this is to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries.

In order to avoid a clash with his own beliefs, Yeats had to secularise the *Commedia*: "Yeats had his own beliefs about the afterlife which would rule out a literal reading of Dante. [...]"

¹ The first complete translation of the *Commedia* into English was published in 1802 by Henry Boyd, an Irishman, followed in 1814 by H. F. Cary's immensely successful translation (cf. Wallace 2007: 290).

² Perhaps not as obvious an influence as Eliot or Pound on the Irish poets discussed in this study, Charles S. Singleton (1909-1985) should be mentioned here, since he notably shaped the Dante reception in the 20th century. His work includes a translation of and commentary on the *Commedia* (1970-75), *An Essay on the Vita Nuova* (1949), and his *Dante Studies* (1954, 1958, 1978) (Cf. Singleton 1954 on the *Commedia*'s elements of structure). In 1965, Singleton received the Gold Medal for Dante Studies, which had been awarded to Eliot in 1959.

they project a cycle of reincarnation which is in part a reaction against Catholicism” (ibid. 16). In the context of the poetic use of Dante, the question of religious beliefs or non-beliefs will always have to be considered. Ellis leniently concludes his essay on Yeats and Dante: “The justification of Yeats’s Dante lies ultimately in the poems he wrote in the last third of his life. We can forgive Yeats his Dante for these; we can even forgive him the hieroglyphics of *A Vision*.” (ibid. 17)

James Joyce’s erudite reception of Dante needs to be mentioned as well. It is his prose more than his poetry that had a major influence on other writers, but this influence should not be underestimated, as Seamus Heaney demonstrates most obviously in ‘Station Island’. In her seminal book on Joyce and Dante, Mary T. Reynolds calls the spiritual journey undertaken in *Ulysses* Joyce’s “comedy” and draws a comparison between Dante’s and Joyce’s respective endeavours to symbiotically combine completely different worlds:

Joyce has taken Dante’s pattern and epistemology to reproduce in Dublin a spiritual journey, in conscious emulation of Dante’s similar use of Virgil, whose *Aeneid* in turn adapted Homer. Dante’s syncretism successfully met the challenge of providing a pagan guide for a Christian poet, an achievement closely observed by Joyce. I suggest that his transformation of Dante’s journey required a comparable boldness. He demonstrates simultaneously the continuing presence of Dante’s world in the Dublin of 1904, and the vast gulf between these worlds – a reading of Dante that is continuously informed by a sense of otherness arising from Joyce’s awareness of the relativity of modern man’s view of his universe. (Reynolds 1981: 9)

Reynolds observes a development in Joyce’s understanding of the *Commedia* in the course of his career, reaching its climax with *Finnegans Wake* (cf. ibid. 199ff). Joyce’s secular approach to Dante in his early works evolves in his later fiction into a “larger Dantean vision of society”, combining like Dante personal experience and poetic influences from philosophical and literary traditions (ibid. 219f). John S. Rickard, contrasting Joyce’s and Heaney’s underworlds, stresses the ironising element of Joyce’s art:

Although, as Mary Reynolds has capably demonstrated, Joyce was drawn to the grandeur of Dante’s design, using it as one of the paradigms or shadow structures that underlie such books as *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, generally his literary appropriation of Dante, seen especially in the kind of psychic underworld he creates in *Ulysses*, is not a translation or a veneration, but an ironic and parodic transfiguration. (Rickard 1996: 252)

Beckett's first published essay, "Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce", written in defence of Joyce's *Work in Progress*, later to become *Finnegans Wake*, specifies four major points of comparison between Joyce's work and Dante, which is also revealing about his own understanding of Dante, which figures greatly in his writing and is the subject of various critical works.³ First of all, Beckett writes, Dante and Joyce both created out of various languages or dialects a synthetic language which no one actually spoke at the time, an ideal Dante had already promoted in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and accomplished in the *Commedia* (cf. Beckett 1929: 18). The second point of comparison is "the storm of ecclesiastical abuse raised by Mr. Joyce's work, and the treatment that the Divine Comedy must certainly have received from the same source." (ibid. 20) Thirdly, he addresses "the preoccupation with the significance of numbers", and, finally, Dante's purgatory and the purgatorial aspect of Joyce's work, "the absolute absence of the Absolute", for hell and paradise are static, but purgatory is "a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements. There is a continuous purgatorial process at work, in the sense that the vicious circle of humanity is being achieved" (ibid. 22).⁴

The vicious circle of humanity is a recurrent motif of Beckett's own work, and Dante plays an important role in its portrayal. The novelist Robert Pinget writes in an essay honouring his deceased friend Beckett: "On se voyait souvent à Montparnasse, où la conversation roulait surtout sur Joyce. Et sur Dante, et sur son propre travail" (Pinget 1990: 638). The association of Beckett's with Dante's work comes naturally, as in this blurb of a fairly recent edition of *L'Innommable*:

De même que Dante chemine de cercle en cercle pour atteindre son *Enfer* ou son *Paradis*, de même est-ce, chacun dans un cercle bien distinct, que Samuel Beckett situe les trois principaux protagonistes de sa trilogie, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* et *L'Innommable*, afin qu'ils atteignent, peut-être, le néant auquel ils aspirent. D'un roman à l'autre, ce cercle est de plus en plus réduit. (Beckett 1953/2004)

Beckett first discovered Dante during his private Italian lessons from Bianca Esposito, who would later reappear as Adriana Ottolenghi in his story 'Dante and the Lobster'. Later, R. B. Rudmose-Brown and Walter Starkie further deepened his interest in Dante's work with their

³ cf. for example Caselli 2005, Di Rocco 2005, Pattie 2004, Bryden 2003, Haughton 1998, Robinson 1979.

⁴ Beckett's essay has been criticised for its "highly derivative nature, [its] dependence upon the works and ideas of others (acknowledged or not)" (Murphy 1999: 29). A reason for these weaknesses, P. J. Murphy suggests, might have been that Beckett tried to avoid actual engagement or commentary on Joyce's work (ibid. 30).

lectures at Trinity College Dublin (cf. Cronin 1996: 64f). In his essay on Beckett and Dante, Michael Robinson observes that

Dante provides Beckett with landscapes and images which function as analogues of the often tenuous situations and experiences that he describes. The image of the Wrathful in the Marsh of the Styx, for example, whose sighs make the water bubble on the surface, or Cavalcanti entombed to his chin, appear to stand behind the geography of *How it is* and the *mise en scène* of *Play* respectively, while the figure of Belacqua indolently resting in the boulder's shadow recurs as a motif in almost all the novels and plays. (Robinson 1979: 1)

Robinson argues that when referring to Dante's *Commedia*, Beckett "does not intend the reference to substantiate a system of his own" like Dante's system of certainties, "where each is in his appointed place", because "one torment Beckett's characters have to suffer is precisely this ignorance of where they are and for how long they will remain there". Due to this lack of specificity, images can be taken at the same time from both *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*; *Paradiso* does not apply in a world where "meaning is withheld" (Robinson 1979: 1f). Beckett's Dantesque poem 'Malacoda' will be worth looking at in the context of chapter 2.4.

Beckett was raised as a Protestant, but his work appears rather unreligious or even atheistic. Mary Bryden writes that "the status of Beckett's own religious attitudes remained mobile and provisional. Like many an atheist, he remained fluent in God-talk; like some theists, he remained fluent in the discourse of scepticism." (Bryden 2004: 157) In view of this undefined spirituality, it might seem paradoxical to draw on images of Dante's religiously defined world. Christopher Ricks's answer to this apparent contradiction is "that throughout his work [Beckett] has wrestled with the attempt to rewrite Dante so that literalism is expunged and so that we may see the truths about man, not about God. [...] Beckett's caring inordinately about Dante means his caring about pain." (Ricks 1964: 129f) Again, the writer takes from Dante what he deems to be most important. As Beckett himself mentioned, however, the nature of Dante's religiousness, his faith and his convictions, is at times unorthodox and prone to criticism. This difficult position Dante holds as a Christian poet is part of his attractiveness as a figure of identification for poets like Seamus Heaney who reference him in order to convey their own personal or political dilemmas.

In their enlightening introduction to *The Poets' Dante*, Hawkins and Jacoff identify six main aspects of Dante's work attracting twentieth-century writers: the experience of "love in all its

forms”, his involvement in politics and his ensuing “spiritual and cultural isolation” (i.e. his exile), the *Commedia*’s structural complexity and coherence, the *terza rima*, Dante’s Christianity, “if only as something to be demythologized or reinterpreted”, and the poem’s example, “in the tradition of Homer and Virgil, for how a living poet may speak with the dead.” (Hawkins/Jacoff 2001: xviii-xxiv) All of these aspects will play a part in the course of this study.

As Hugh Haughton wrote in an earlier draft of his essay in Nick Havely’s *Dante’s Modern Afterlife*, the reception of Dante in the twentieth century “has acquired a distinctly Irish accent” (Havely 1998: 6), and the reasons that underlie this Irish tendency to draw upon Dante are interesting to consider. Even if there are various contemporary resonances of Dante in English poetry (Geoffrey Hill; Sean O’Brien - an Irish surname), Scottish poetry (Don Paterson), Australian (John Kinsella - a surname of Irish origin) or American poetry (James Merrill, Frederick Seidel),⁵ the Irish Dante is more strongly linked with Catholicism, its notion of sin, religious and traditional iconography, and national self-assertion, or rather the grappling with or even rejection of national identity from the safe distance of exile.⁶ As David Wallace writes, “an Irish Dante (Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, Heaney) achieves things that are beyond the grasp of the English or Americans.” (Wallace 2007: 281)

There is of course also the question of Irishness, of what makes a poet an Irish poet, which is an increasingly problematic issue. As Pat Boran puts it in 2009:

This, however, is difficult to define, because ‘Irish poetry’ does not neatly fit under a national, or nationalist, banner, is not necessarily made on the island of Ireland, and indeed may not in any direct way concern itself with overtly ‘Irish issues’. (Boran 2009: 7)

⁵ cf. Hawkins 2006: 145. See Wallace 2007 for an insightful survey of Dante in English from Chaucer to Heaney; *Dante in English* (Griffiths/Reynolds 2005) for a chronological anthology from Chaucer to Robin Robertson (including a bibliography of critical writings on the Dante reception); Havely 1998 for critical essays on Dante’s Modern afterlife from Thomas Gray and the Romantics to Heaney. *The Poets’ Dante* (Hawkins/Jacoff 2001) collects poets’ essays about their own take on Dante from Pound to Edward Hirsch.

⁶ cf. Peter S. Hawkins’s and Rachel Jacoff’s essay on T. S. Eliot’s, Derek Walcott’s, Heaney’s, Charles Wright’s, and Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s dialogue with Dante. “The connections made with Dante are extremely varied, as if his celebrated universality has made it possible for poets to engage his work on many different levels, and often on utterly divergent terms” (Hawkins and Jacoff 2003: 451), as we have seen with Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Beckett, and Joyce.

Keeping this in mind, this study not only includes poets in self-imposed “exile”,⁷ such as Heaney, Harry Clifton, and Paul Muldoon, but also second-generation emigrants like Michael Donaghy or Seán Haldane. In his chapter “Out of Ireland: Muldoon and other émigrés”, Justin Quinn hints at where this openness of definition may be headed:

As [Yeatsian nationalist] ideology has withdrawn, there appears to be no means – or indeed desire – to restrict our idea of Irish poetry. The concept will be stretched so thin that it will lose all explanatory power. Perhaps we should listen again to what Patrick Kavanagh said in 1950: ‘As far as I am concerned, Auden and Dylan Thomas, Moravia, Sartre, Pound are all Irish poets. They have all said the thing which delighted me, a man born in Ireland, so they must have a great deal of Irish in them.’ (Quinn 2008: 193)

Perhaps one should not take it as far as that, but it seems fairly reasonable to regard these growing changes, varieties and possibilities as “enrichments rather than limitations” (Boran 2009: 13), as Boran suggests.

A fact that unfortunately cannot be accounted for here, but certainly has to be kept in mind, is that Irish poetry is not only written in English but also in Irish Gaelic. As Thomas Kinsella writes in *The Dual Tradition*, “Irish literature exists as a dual entity. It was composed in two languages.” (Kinsella 1995: 4) In the same book, he suggests that Joyce was the Irish Dante, “look[ing] about him, in English, at the modern Ireland”, something George Moore had pictured differently:

[George Moore] didn’t associate the Anglo-Irish with the fate of the Irish language, but he knew that its fate was decided ‘unless, indeed, genius awakens in one of the islanders off the coast...If such a one were to write a book about his island he would rank above all living writers, and he would be known for evermore as the Irish Dante.’ (ibid. 127)

In spite of all the losses inherent in the use of English in Ireland, it also opens up possibilities, for individual matters can be expressed in a universal language, without necessarily becoming uniform.

Wallace stresses the unique access Irish poets have to Dante through the country’s Catholic heritage:

⁷ In a conversation with the present author in 2008, Harry Clifton somewhat critically remarked on the tendency of calling Irish expatriates “exiles”, whereas those from other countries are referred to as “émigrés”.

The claiming of Dante as poetic mentor and ancestor has obvious advantages for Irish poets writing in English. Irish Catholicism brings them (for better or worse) closer to the urban, national, and universalizing culture of Dante than any American or English poet can imagine. [...] Aspects of Catholic dogma and practice that have long proved a stumbling block to the Anglican English – as comically chronicled by Barbara Pym – offer rare expressive opportunities for Irish poets. (Wallace 2007: 298)

Thus Ireland's oppressive but defining Catholic background, the conflict with British loyalists (whose majority is Protestant) in the North, and a consequent diaspora, explains to a great extent the relevance of Dante and his Christian epic for Irish poets.

1.2 Influence and Intertextuality: Dante as Precursor and Hypotext

It's a theory of mine that the more you admire a person, the less likely you are to imitate them, mainly because you know the tricks of their trade so well that blood rushes into your cheeks when you find yourself passing them off as your own.

Simon Armitage (quoted in O'Driscoll 2006: 158)

This may be why contemporary poets borrowing from Dante generally acknowledge their debt explicitly without passing their inspirations off as their own. Even if they do not acknowledge their debt, however, appropriating Dante does most probably not imply a paucity of admiration.

A study of contemporary Irish poets' use of Dante has to consider how this use is defined and how it can be discussed. A work can, or some might argue must, be seen in relation to all pre-existing works, and all pre-existing works influence a new work just as the new work influences our perception of the older works. In his "Tradition and the Individual Talent", T. S. Eliot insists upon the poet's necessary consciousness of the past, his responsibility towards the past as well as the future of art (Eliot 1975: 38-40). He states, "Poetry [...] is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (ibid. 43); "The emotion of art is impersonal." (ibid. 44) So in order to be original, does the poet have to collaborate with the ghosts of his predecessors? According to Harold Bloom, the awareness of these ghosts creates an inevitable anxiety of influence, which in the case of a strong poet can be fruitful to the artistic endeavour in spite of the inherent risks. "The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such

inundation is wholly evaded” (Bloom 1997: 154). Dante is one such looming predecessor. It takes great courage to approach his work and integrate it, but the grappling with the great might lead to becoming great as well. There is a thin line between arrogation and superiority, between naiveté and genius.

It is no coincidence that Seamus Heaney’s essay on Dante’s influence is called ‘Envy and Identifications’. A poetic example can appeal to us through some particular common ground, but we may also envy it because it must always stay superior, unattainable and at a distance. Heaney writes, “when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures.” (Heaney 1985: 5) He stresses what was mentioned earlier: the perception a poet has of his or her master is highly subjective, for everyone can select different aspects from their predecessor’s work. Thus Mandelstam’s Dante differs greatly from Eliot’s or Pound’s. In his essay, Heaney ascribes a “generating power”, a “long reach into the first and deepest levels of the shaping spirit” to the *Commedia* (ibid. 7). Dante, therefore, serves as a catalyst for Heaney’s own issues to be turned into poetry, for his own art to be created.

A poet’s Dante can be, and in many cases is, influenced by how another major figure perceives him and his work; in the twentieth century this figure is often Eliot or Pound. Given Dante’s many facets and the subjectivity of each writer’s reception of Dante, opposing views can meet and create an amalgam for an original reception. Thus Rickard observes how Heaney is torn between his admiration for Mandelstam’s and Eliot’s Dante:

This combination of ordinary folks and exalted predecessors in his craft reflects in part Heaney’s perhaps unconscious ambivalence about his use of Dante; to some extent he wants to evoke the pungent, local tones that Mandelstam heard in Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, while on the other hand, he seeks coherent and useful answers to important questions he needs to ask about the direction of his art and its relation to matters Irish. (Rickard 1996: 255)

Extensively borrowing from classical authors, the Bible, and many other sources, Dante was already well aware of literary influences. As Stuart Y. McDougal writes when comparing Pound’s chapter on Dante and Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, both writings stress the importance of predecessors. Dante describes “the formation of a work of art as a mixture of ‘natural talent’ and the ‘best’ of what one can ‘extract or compile from others’” (McDougal

1985: 67), and Pound states: “Great poets seldom make bricks without straw. They pile up all the excellences they can beg, borrow or steal from their predecessors and contemporaries, and then set their own inimitable light atop of the mountain.” (Pound 1970: 162; cf. Ellis 1983: 176) Dante’s art of dealing with his predecessors in the *Commedia* is devoid of an anxiety of influence and therefore serves as a source of inspiration for modern poets, trying to assert themselves in a competitive environment:⁸

[...] Dante’s intense interest in the relationship of poets to one another – and thus to questions of origin and descent, poetic paternity and filiation – has offered several models for writers eager to position themselves within and against literary tradition. (Hawkins/Jacoff 2001: xvi)

In their *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, Clayton and Rothstein open “with the generalization that influence has to do with agency, whereas intertextuality has to do with a much more impersonal field of crossing texts.” (Clayton/Rothstein 1991: 4) For the purpose of this study, both points of view, agency and textual structure, will be valuable resources, not mutually exclusive but rather complementing each other, as I hope to demonstrate. Wimsatt and Beardsley in their “The Intentional Fallacy” (1954), for example, may disagree, but I propose that intention, influence, and reception are intricately linked and can all contribute to one’s understanding of a poem as a work of art: without a particular intention, the poem would have turned out differently (or not been written at all); writing without having been influenced at all, at least unconsciously, is impossible; and without the readers’ response, however subjective, the poem does not really exist, for reading is a form of active creating, a part of the creative process. Thus the various strands of criticism, or the various ways of perception and interpretation of a work of art, although contradictory, form a whole (which in itself can never be fully complete, for no perspective is omniscient, i.e. able to comprehend every step of the process). Knowledge about a poet’s intentions, his influences, and his critical reception certainly cultivates biased opinions and prejudice, but it also deepens an understanding and an appreciation of the work of art. Even Bloom himself has become less exclusive of approaches that might once have seemed incompatible with his own. As Sam Tanenhaus observes in a review of Bloom’s new book, *The Anatomy of Influence*, “over time

⁸ Bloom calls the influence not yet impaired by anxiety “generous influence”: “Yet there was a great age before the Flood, when influence was generous (or poets in their innermost natures thought it so), an age that goes all the way from Homer to Shakespeare. At the heart of this matrix of generous influence is Dante and his relation to his precursor Virgil, who moved his epehebe only to love and emulation and not to anxiety.” (Bloom 1997: 122; cf. Orr 2003: 149)

his notion of influence has become more orthodox, growing closer, in its sensitivity to echo and allusion, to the approach of the hated New Critics.” (Tanenhaus 2011: 5)

The study of influence originates in the mid-eighteenth century, when an interest in originality and genius arose. The approach is author-centred and can be restrictive, elitist and subjective, but a broader, more inclusive sense of influence also considers context, allusion, and tradition, as Clayton and Rothstein point out (Clayton/Rothstein 1991: 4-6). In her comprehensive book on intertextuality, divided into the four chapters “Intertextuality”, “Influence”, “Imitation”, and “Quotation”, Mary Orr promotes a preference for ‘traditional’ influence as opposed to Bloom’s “solipsistic and self-serving” approach:

Positive influence, on the contrary, aims at a variety of responses, not more of the same. It is therefore intrinsic to understanding change, revolt, regress and progress, depending of factors such as, for example, censorship or ideological control. These may have both negative and positive effects on artistic production whereas, in periods of stability, consensus and democracy, cultural production may become an expendable part of consumerism and toy mainly with its own putative triviality, proliferation, even obsolescence. Beyond tradition [...] such influence is vital in the establishment of appropriate forms within the wider cultural frame of reception. (Orr 2003: 85)

Employing an apt metaphor, she concludes in her chapter on influence:

Beyond man-made canal (Bloom) or complex irrigation system (intertextuality), we have in influence a force to describe cultural change, erosion, watering, silting up, destruction, increased or decreased pressures due to the ‘geology’ and geographies of its channels. (ibid. 93)

In a similar vein, Christopher Ricks expresses his ambivalence towards Bloom’s work in his *Allusion to the Poets*. He applauds Bloom’s “passion, his learning, and his so giving salience to the impulse or spirit of allusion” but regrets “his melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario, his sentimental discrediting of gratitude, and his explicit repudiation of all interest in allusion as a matter of the very words.” (Ricks 2002: 5)

However controversial *The Anxiety of Influence* might be, I propose to keep in mind, for the present study, Bloom’s six revisionary movements, which according to him occur throughout a strong poet’s career, and to use these terms whenever they seem useful and appropriate (I slightly shorten Bloom’s explanations here):

1. *Clinamen*: poetic misreading or misprision proper; the poet swerves away from the precursor: corrective movement
 2. *Tessera*: completion and antithesis; antithetical “completion” of the precursor: so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough
 3. *Kenosis*: breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; movement towards discontinuity with the precursor: a poet’s self-humbling or emptying out while also emptying out the precursor
 4. *Daemonization*: movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor’s Sublime; generalizes away the uniqueness of the earlier work
 5. *Askesis*: movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude; revisionary movement not of emptying, but of curtailing; parent-poem undergoes *askesis* too
 6. *Apophrades*: return of the dead; final phase of later poet; poem held open to the precursor: reads as if the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work
- (cf. Bloom 1997: 14-16)

The accusations made against influence studies for being elitist, subjective, and for exclusively concentrating on “allusions to celebrated works of the past”, on a “lineage of great authors” (Clayton/Rothstein 1991: 22; 7; cf. 12), are of course irrelevant to this study, since the subject of interest is specifically Dante and his *Commedia*, a great author and his celebrated work, thus any exclusiveness is intended. “In the twenty-first century [...] old anxieties about influence, along with old ideas about preserving boundaries between literatures, have been swept aside” (Bassnett 2007: 189), writes Susan Bassnett in a recent collection of essays about intertextual relationships. In the context of the present study, I suggest that this is not entirely true.

From the point of view of reception criticism, the contemporary poets borrowing from Dante are not only authors under the influence, but also readers of Dante. As Jürgen Müller points out, Hans Robert Jauß’s *Rezeptionsästhetik* strives to reconstruct the processes of literary production and reception, which includes the reader and his *Erwartungshorizont* (“horizon of expectations”) as an active component of literary history. A great divergence between the reader’s horizon of expectations and the actual work can lead to a change in his or her horizon. Furthermore, since the understanding of a work today may differ from how it was received when it was written, the text does not have a timeless or fixed meaning. Reception criticism proposes to examine literature’s historicity on three levels. On a diachronic level, a literary text can be situated within a literary series, and the passive reception of a reader or critic can turn into the active reception and new production of an author. In this subsequent work,

formal and moral problems the earlier work left open or created can be solved and new problems can arise (Müller 1990: 176-181). These effects of the previous work on the author also concern Bloom in his revisionary ratios. On a synchronic level, contemporaneous works can be measured against each other and can be divided into equivalent, opposing, and hierarchic structures, with the aim of uncovering a general frame of reference in the literature of a particular moment in history. These cross-section analyses include quantifying processes (ibid. 181). This second point of view can be helpful for the comparison of the Irish poets using Dante, with Dante constituting a part of the common frame of reference. The third level of Jaub's approach considers how the immanent literary progress relates to the general process of history, ascribing to literature a constitutive function for history (ibid. 181f). If at all, this dimension can only be hinted at in passing, since it would exceed the scope of the present study. While contemporary poetry is certainly influenced by contemporary or past history and this aspect cannot be overlooked here, its influence in turn on contemporaneous and superseding history would require a different kind of study, including other fields of research such as political science and cultural studies.

For the structural examination of the poems considered in this study, I propose to apply the terms and definitions Gérard Genette uses in his *Palimpsestes*, not least in order to establish a homogeneous vocabulary for the different ways of borrowing. In his book, Genette defines different strategies of intertextuality, or, as he renames it, transtextuality. He distinguishes five basic types of transtextual categories: the intertext (including quotation, plagiarism, allusion), the paratext (titles, blurbs, footnotes, etc.), the metatext (commentary, critique about the text), the architext (the reader's notion of the genre), and the hypertext,⁹ which is created through the process of either imitation or transformation of a hypotext, a previous work. His main concern in *Palimpsestes* is hypertextuality, the most complex of them all (cf. Genette 1982: 7-16).¹⁰ While paratext and metatext will obviously come into play, I suggest categorising the intertextual and hypertextual methods of borrowing as follows: the intertext subdivides into allusion without comparison, allusion with comparison (simile), quotation in Italian, and quotation in translation; the hypertext subdivides into transformation (or adaptation), which borrows the topic, and imitation, which borrows the style. Further

⁹ Genette's hypertext must not be confused with computer hypertext, which has generated its own literary genre (for example hypertext fiction and hypertext poetry).

¹⁰ As technical as this may sound, Genette also stresses the allure of multi-layered works of art: "l'art de « faire du neuf avec du vieux » a l'avantage de produire des objets plus complexes et plus savoureux que les produits « faits exprès » : une fonction nouvelle se superpose et s'enchevêtre à une structure ancienne, et la dissonance entre ces deux éléments coprésents donne sa saveur à l'ensemble." (Genette 1982: 556)

categories will be the indirect borrowings, i.e. Dante is mediated through another author, and translations, or rather versions, which can include elements of transformation and imitation.¹¹ Versions may be considered as original works of art in their own right, as becomes evident in Ciaran Carson's *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (2002), for example.¹²

Whichever way one distinguishes different kinds of translation or measures their quality, the process a poet undergoes while transferring another poet's work into a different language cannot leave him unmarked. At least an unconscious influence must be at work afterwards. As Don Paterson writes from experience, "When the poet returns to reclaim their old voice, it either no longer quite fits, or has altered, having apparently kept some strange company of its own in the meantime. Sometimes it has just disappeared." (Paterson 2006: 84)

1.3 In Heaney's Shadow? Contemporary Irish Poets' Dante

The contemporary Irish poets whose examples of Dante reception will be considered in the course of this study are Fergus Allen, Eavan Boland, Ciaran Carson, Harry Clifton, Michael Donaghy, Leontia Flynn, Seán Haldane, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kinsella, Tom Matthews, Alan Jude Moore, Paul Muldoon, Gerry Murphy, and Bernard O'Donoghue. Of these, only Boland, Carson, Heaney, Kinsella, and Muldoon have received noticeable critical attention. The variety of poets originating from both Northern Ireland and the Republic will paint a complex picture of the contemporary Irish Dante, whose appearance is in a continuous process of being shaped and reshaped.

Given Heaney's international success and popularity and the vast amount of critical writings published about him, next to the relative obscurity of some of the other poets mentioned above (with an ensuing scarcity of publications, at least so far, which in the case of Harry Clifton will probably change given his election as Ireland Professor of Poetry in 2010), the inclusion of critical material will necessarily vary greatly in terms of the number of publications that can and must be considered for the discussion of each poet. Not only has

¹¹ About the distinction between translation and version, see Don Paterson's refreshing "14 Notes on the Version". "A translation tries to remain true to the original words and their relations, and its primary aim is usually one of stylistic elegance [...] Versions, however, are trying to be poems in their own right", using their "vernacular architecture", their "local words", and their "local music" (Paterson 2006: 73).

¹² Cf. Peter Denman in his essay on Carson's language and prosodic line: "Carson's versions are generated not by a need to make the already well-known poems of Baudelaire, or Dante, or Ní Dhomhnaill available to an Irish readership, but to enlarge the poetic and linguistic space that the poems occupy." (Denman 2009: 28)

Heaney been a major figure in contemporary poetry in general, but his use of Dante is so prominent that it has both been illuminated critically¹³ and entered the general awareness of poets, critics, and readers of contemporary poetry alike. Consequently, when using Dante, a contemporary Irish poet knows with whom he competes. Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon are, for example, “both careful readers of Heaney” (McCarthy 2008: 165), and although stating that Thomas Kinsella inspired him more than Heaney at the beginning of his career, Harry Clifton said in his lecture on Heaney in March 2011: “If you’re trying to get at your own reality as a poet, you have to negotiate with Seamus Heaney, the all-pervasive Seamus Heaney.”¹⁴ Helen Vendler has pointed out the anxiety of influence Heaney causes in other poets:

Heaney’s influence on his successors has been almost as intimidating as Yeats’s influence on those coming after him; but successful flanking motions have been invented in Paulin’s grittiness of surface, Muldoon’s enigmatic comedy, McGuckian’s stream-of-consciousness imagery, and Ciaran Carson’s long urban line. (Vendler 1998: 5)

Thus by daring to use Dante, they might be trying to make a point, such as, “I can rework Dante in a different, or more original, or even better way”. Involved are the eternal concerns of claiming a territory, struggling with self-confidence, and achieving poetic originality. It will therefore be interesting to compare and contrast throughout this study the Dantesque intertextuality of the poets mentioned above with Heaney’s. David Orr writes in an essay entitled “The Age of Citation”:

When T. S. Eliot quotes Dante and Heraclitus, it’s because Eliot wants to be seen as binding together thousands of years of Western culture. When a contemporary poet quotes the same authors, however, it’s more likely that he wants to be seen (whether he knows it or not) as T. S. Eliot. (Orr 2010: 2)

When a contemporary Irish poet quotes Dante, does this mean he wants to be seen (whether he knows it or not) as Heaney? Or are we dealing with a gesture of defiance? Heaney’s influence might in some way inspire a greater anxiety than Dante’s, because the temporal closeness offers more grounds for direct comparison regarding success, impact, and critical acclaim.

¹³ See especially Pillonca 2006 and 1999, Fumagalli 2001, Manganiello 2000, Cavanagh 1999 and 1993, De Petris 1998 and 1995, O’Donoghue 1998, Reeves 1993 (except for Fumagalli’s book on Heaney’s and Walcott’s Dante, all of these are essays).

¹⁴ http://www.spd.dcu.ie/main/news/lecture_series.shtml

Heaney himself is of course not immune to a poet's anxieties, internal struggles, crises of self-confidence, efforts of self-assertion, and exposure to societal pressures.¹⁵ He explains how a poet, especially one affected by the Troubles, may try to deal with these conflicts by choosing a distant perspective, for which the medieval Dante is a major example:

The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable. This, and the complexity of the present conditions, may go some way to explain the large number of poems in which the Northern Irish writer views the world from a great spatial or temporal distance, the number of poems imagined from beyond the grave, from the perspective of mythological or historically remote characters.

(Heaney 1992: 130)

In his study on Heaney and medieval poetry, focusing on *Sweeney Astray*, *Station Island*, *Beowulf*, and *The Testament of Cresseid*, Conor McCarthy concludes that Heaney draws on medieval texts to deal with contemporary concerns, and that he “identifies or empathises with medieval figures such as Suibhne Geilt, Dante Alighieri, and Cædmon”. In accordance with Heaney’s statement quoted above McCarthy observes: “Both *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island* cover personal and political issues in drawing on medieval texts in part to explore the poet’s role in relation to his society at a time of conflict.” Furthermore, the “subject of exclusion and exile” as well as “outcast figures such as Sweeney, Dante, Grendel, and Cresseid” are sympathised with. “The result is a representation of the Middle Ages as a reality of similar complexity to our own, a view at odds with the received opinion of the Middle Ages as premodern and marginal to the concerns of contemporary existence.” (McCarthy 2008: 169f)

Focusing on Heaney, Giovanni Pillonca aptly summarises the pivotal concerns and difficulties of the Irish Dante reception: first, there is “the general problem of Dante’s reception [...] in Irish culture at large”, “the problem [...] concerning the subterranean links between a Catholic subculture such as the Irish, and the lesson of the major poet of Christendom”, including literary relationships with other poets from Catholic cultures (Milosz, Zbigniew

¹⁵ See Daniel Tobin’s *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (1999) about Heaney’s quest for self-definition, with a chapter on each poetry collection up to *The Spirit Level*.

Herbert, Mandelstam).¹⁶ Second, there is the postcolonial aspect to reckon with: “Siding with Dante, instead of Shakespeare, for example, would then represent a way of defying and escaping the control, jurisdiction and domain of the British imperial tradition”, which goes some way to explain the special appeal of an Irish Dante. Third, Pillonca stresses the “unavoidable critical problem of Dante’s ‘filters’” such as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Mandelstam, or Lowell, and he suggests that “the assessment of the debt’s weight might help explain the different aspects of Dante’s relevance for the modern poet.”¹⁷ (Pillonca 1999: 577f)

In my Dantesque journey through contemporary Irish poetry, broadly focusing on poems published between 1960 and 2010, and particularly on the last thirty years, which is Heaney’s most Dantesque period, I would like to question the Irish poets’ quest, or progress, in a tripartite procedure, and thus to close a gap within the studies of contemporary Dante reception, which have not yet concentrated on an in-depth analysis of the Irish Dante, with the exception of Heaney’s. Following the *Commedia*’s way through hell, purgatory and paradise, I will consider reasons for the poets’ use of Dante, the aspect of his poetry or personality by which they are influenced, the way they borrow from him, the effect the Dantesque intertextuality creates in the poem in question, and the intertextuality’s embeddedness in Irish matters of politics, religion, culture, and tradition. In addition to poetically seeking to retain some of Dante’s spirit, the tripartite structure of this study’s approach has some practical advantages that outweigh its difficulties.¹⁸ By tackling the reception of Dante thematically, immediate parallels and differences between the contemporary poems and poets can be drawn, and an overarching unity of thought is achieved. Structuring the chapters according to the contemporary poets would do Dante’s epic injustice; also, the aim here is not to offer full-length studies of the Irish poets’ oeuvres.

Poems referring to, borrowing from, quoting, or translating a particular canticle can be assigned to one of the three stages, or realms, and in most cases even to a particular scene in a

¹⁶ In an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, Heaney remarks that in Dante’s *Commedia*, his “Irish Catholic subculture received high cultural ratification” (O’Driscoll 2008: 472).

¹⁷ As Conor McCarthy points out, “Heaney’s extensive creative engagement with medieval poetry, then, does not take place in isolation: there are both predecessors and successors to be taken into account.” (McCarthy 2008: 167)

¹⁸ An instance of the difficulties that can arise from thematically following Dante’s journey through the *Commedia* occurs in chapter 2.4.5: in Harry Clifton’s ‘The Crystalline Heaven’, heaven and hell collide. Taking its inspiration from *Inferno* XVI as well as the *Paradiso*, the poem has its place in both chapter 2 and 4. Similarly, for example, Heaney’s ‘Station Island’ is mentioned in the hell section and reappears in chapter 3, i.e. purgatory. In contrast, Heaney’s ‘The Little Canticles of Asturias’ is discussed in chapter 3.1 only, even though it consists of a hell, purgatory and paradise part; since it does not reference particular canti, it seems unnecessarily complicating to tear the poem apart.

particular canto. While the popularity of Paolo and Francesca, Ulysses, and Ugolino has not changed over the centuries, other scenes might also come to the fore in the Irish context. Also, the occurrence of a scene rarely used before is obviously significant. The particularities of the Irish Dante reception in poetry in the last fifty years will be classified in this way, all the while taking into account the enduring motif of the sea voyage and the boat metaphor, the tradition of pilgrimage, and the idea of an afterlife. Applying as a useful tool the categorising theories of Bloom and Genette and including close readings of the poems with attention to form, I will investigate the poets' methods of borrowing and examine how these influence their poetry.

The profound impact of Dante's *Commedia*, its imagery and poetic style, reflects the lasting attraction for Irish poets of traditional forms and classical models. The *terza rima* or, inspired by the visual arts, the triptych, for example, serve contemporary poets as inspiration and guideline. In an interview with Eamon Grennan in the early 1990s, Derek Mahon expresses his need for an external framework when addressing the Northern Irish Troubles:

You couldn't take sides. In a kind of way, I still can't. It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungiven and Magherafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it. In Crane Bag they'd call it "colonial aphasia".
(Grennan 2000)

Thus Dante's political situation, resulting in his exile due to the lasting conflict in Florence between Ghibellines and Guelfs, between White Guelfs and Black Guelfs, serves as a parallel enabling poets to talk about the Northern Irish conflict, which is sometimes done more explicitly than Mahon's statement implies. In the twenty-first century, however, with the worst of Northern Irish history hopefully in the past, a shift of concerns in the poetry borrowing from Dante might be in evidence and will also be evaluated.

2. An Irish Inferno

all hope abandon, ye who go through me (Carson 2002: 15)

An important difference between Dante's journey to the realms of the afterlife and the underworld episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid* is, as Lino Pertile points out, that in the *Divina Commedia* Dante is both protagonist and narrator of his story. It is also noteworthy that Dante chose as his guide a poet, and not, for example, a theologian, a philosopher, or an angel (Pertile 2007: 67; 69), which is indicative of the importance of poetic vision and craft in the *Commedia*. Dante's metaphorical journey towards a regaining of paradise after humankind has lost it becomes a real journey to regain happiness after having lost his home: "it is to this double exile, from heaven and from Florence, that we owe the *Comedy*." (ibid. 68)¹⁹

The line quoted above is from the inscription on the gate of hell, "a divine intertext expressed, not by coincidence, in the *terza rima* rhyme scheme of the poem." (ibid. 70) A doubtful mind might say Dante was quite presumptuous to write as God, but the *Commedia* was of course written as a true account of an afterlife vision in the medieval tradition. In Dante's hell, the sinners are assigned to specific concentric circles according to the nature and severity of their crime.²⁰ The sins are divided into the sins of incontinence, which are punished in the upper part of hell, and the sins of malice, which are punished in the lower part. The city of Dis marks the point of division. Dante's *contrapasso*, which means allocating to each sin a particular matching punishment, has its literary precedents, as in the Irish *Vision of Tundale*, a twelfth-century account of an afterlife vision originally written in Latin by the Irish knight Tnugdalus (cf. ibid. 72-80). Dante treats historical and mythological characters equally as real personae, a feature Eliot defends in his Dante essay from 1929:

the *Inferno* is relieved from any question of pettiness or arbitrariness in Dante's selection of damned. It reminds us that Hell is not a place but a *state*; that man is damned or blessed in the creatures of his imagination as well as in men who have actually lived; and that Hell, though a state, is a state which can only be thought of, and perhaps only experienced, by the projection

¹⁹ Cf. *ED* II, 744 for Dante's various uses of the term "exile": he refers to his own exile from Florence, to the exile from heaven (as experienced in limbo or human life) and, finally, to the Babylonian exile.

²⁰ See Erich Auerbach on the individuality Dante grants his damned, purging and blessed souls, as opposed to the generalities pictured in earlier eschatological visions (Auerbach 2001: 108-111).

of sensory images; and that the resurrection of the body has perhaps a deeper meaning than we understand. (Eliot 1951: 250)

As Michael Thurston points out in his book on the underworld descent in twentieth-century poetry, Dante combines in the *Commedia* the topoi of *katabasis*, the actual descent to the underworld, and *nekuia*, the invocation of the shades of the dead.²¹ A key consistency in the narratives about the underworld is “the emphasis on the fates of those who dwell in the Underworld as a way to criticize the writer’s culture”, as is evident in Dante’s immanent commentary on Florence and its inhabitants. Furthermore, Dante’s “combination of self-examination (through the challenges posed by revenant spirits) and self-encouragement (through the revelations of mentor shades) is a central component of the contemporary Underworld descent poem”, Thurston argues (Thurston 2009: 6-10). He identifies three major reasons for or themes underlying a poet’s use of *katabasis* and *nekuia*:

the poet’s conflict with the literary past, the poet’s conflict with elements of his or her own society, and the poet’s conflict with herself or himself over the degree to which poetry can or should affect contemporary historical and political events. (ibid. 20)

Alluding to or appropriating Dante does not necessarily include *katabasis* or *nekuia* or both, however, wherefore his points do have their relevance but should not be applied as a general, invariable rule to every poem in this study.

Eric Griffiths states in his introduction to *Dante in English* that “for some reason modern imaginations cling” to the *Inferno* (Griffiths/Reynolds 2005: xxix), and as the contents page of this study suggests, the *Inferno* is indeed the prevailing source for Irish poets borrowing from Dante. Valeria Tinkler-Villani’s argument that contemporary poetic examples “clearly and deliberately deny” a poetry of paradise (Tinkler-Villani 1994: 92), however, has been challenged extensively by Maria Cristina Fumagalli’s study on Heaney’s and Walcott’s Dante, *The Flight of the Vernacular* (2001). Although poorer in quantity, the purgatorial and paradisiacal poems of this study support her counter-argument. Pointing out that the *Inferno*’s

²¹ In the first part of his book, *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (2009), Thurston looks at the use of *nekuia* by Pound, Eliot, and the female counter-tradition of Edna St. Vincent Millay, H.D., and Adrienne Rich; at Pound’s *Cantos*, poets inspired by Pound, and poems which use *katabasis* as cultural critique; and at Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ as a turning point for the necromantic tradition through its revision of this tradition: “Eliot inaugurates a specific strain within the twentieth-century necromantic tradition, one that stages through its central episode of encounter a chastisement of the poet and a chastening of poetry itself.” (Thurston 2009: 88) In the second part, he focuses on James Merrill’s ‘Book of Ephraim’, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, Tony Harrison’s *V*, and Heaney’s ‘Station Island’.

“theoretical shortcomings are also its dramatic greatness” as it lends more space to the stories of characters than to explanatory theory, Pertile offers an answer as to why most readers over the last seven centuries have favoured the *Inferno*:

The reason, I submit, is not Hell’s graphic display of divine justice, but rather the tragically flawed humanity of its inhabitants. [...] Dante’s Hell is so enduring because, like the earth we know, it is so much about love gone wrong: Francesca’s love for Paolo, Farinata’s love for Florence, Piero’s love of self, Ulysses’s love of knowledge, Ugolino’s love for his children. (Pertile 2007: 89)

Generally in poetry, suffering and failure are more interesting and moving than bliss and transcendence, and to the reader and the author alike, poetry can have a redeeming value through mutual identification. As regards the poet as a particular kind of reader, there is the all-too-often true cliché of the troubled artist, who might find his or her best inspiration in kindred sufferers. Pain yearns for an outlet and is itself a source of inspiration.

2.1 Departure

2.1.1 Canto I: Poets in Mid-life Crises

“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita” (*Inf.* I, 1),²² at the age of 35, half of the Biblical life expectancy and the approximate age of Christ’s death, is when Dante sets the beginning of his journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. He has become lost in a dark wood, “a metaphor reflecting the confusion of sin and error leading to perdition” (Scott 2004: 173), a dead end he has walked into through a misguided way of living. Two of Seamus Heaney’s poems quote from this very first line of the *Commedia*: ‘September Song’²³ from *Field Work* (cf. Corcoran 1998:85; Rickard 1996: 251) in translation and ‘The School Bag’ from *Seeing Things* in direct quotation (cf. De Petris 1998: 87).

Heaney’s collection *Field Work* from 1979 features his first explicit Dante references, including the famous Ugolino episode to be discussed in chapter 2.7. ‘September Song’,

²² As Pertile points out, by writing “our life” instead of “my life”, Dante signals the “universal value of his experience” (Pertile 2007: 68).

²³ For Fumagalli, the poem’s opening “with the Dantean line *par excellence*” underlines “the fact that Heaney wants to begin all over again” after “the various infernal intimations that have disturbed him during his residence at Glanmore” (Fumagalli 2001: 91).

bearing the same title as the controversial Geoffrey Hill poem from 1968, which Heaney must have known, begins like this:

In the middle of the way
under the wet of late September
the ash tree flails,
our dog is tearing earth beside the house. (Heaney 1979: 38)

In this first stanza, the reader is presented with strong, aggressive verbs: “flails” and “tearing earth”, both recalling work in the fields, on a farm or in a bog, one of the meanings of the collection’s title. Everything is drowning in rain. “And it’s nearly over, / our four years in the hedge-school” is temporally irreconcilable with the more recent memory mentioned in the last three stanzas, but rather than only referring to the historic Irish hedge schools that disappeared in the nineteenth century,²⁴ it might also stand for a personal time of maturing before finally leaving for America. “Remember our American wake?”²⁵ (ibid.) Heaney remembers it as follows in *Stepping Stones*, Dennis O’Driscoll’s book of Heaney interviews:

That was a big party we held in the summer of 1970, before setting out for Berkeley. Karl Miller was over at the time and several other editors and scribes assembled. Herbert McCabe of *New Blackfriars*, John Horgan of the *Irish Times*. ‘Bliss was it’ to be alive in that dawn chorus... (O’Driscoll 2008: 116)

In the middle of the poem, in the third stanza, playing a record of the *Nocturnes* of Irish composer John Field, one of the various dead commemorated in *Field Work*,²⁶ is suggested as an alternative to making music themselves. The solitary atmosphere and the reflection on the composer, “‘Dead in Moscow’”, contrast with the joyful memory of the party given at the Heaney house. The whole poem is an elegy for the past, a melancholy remembrance of the time when Heaney was in his thirties, the approximate age at which Dante finds himself lost

²⁴ At the beginning of the 18th century, after the English government had passed the Penal Laws, which among other things prohibited Catholic schools, local educated men founded the so-called hedge schools in order to secretly keep on teaching Irish history and tradition. Some hedge schools also taught Latin and Greek classics.

²⁵ Corcoran quotes this “oracular rhetorical question” as a negative example of Robert Lowell’s “pervasive [impact] in *Field Work*”. Also, he credits Dante as “the major poetic presence” in the volume (Corcoran 1998: 84).

²⁶ Helen Vendler addresses the difficult issue of defined Irishness, as reflected in these commemorations: “An Irishman living in Sausalito (Sean Armstrong), an American living in Ireland (Robert Lowell), an Irish Catholic serving under the English flag (Francis Ledwidge), John Field, the Irish composer ‘Dead in Moscow’ (as it says on his tombstone, according to Heaney’s note), a Catholic (Louis O’Neill) dying from a Catholic-set bomb – these random situations, brought together by obituary necessity, show that Irishness is not a unitary thing. [...] These facts are inconvenient to the unitary view of both nationalist propaganda and single-minded mythology, but they are the very stuff of cultural interest for an ethnographer or anthropologist.” (Vendler 1998: 64)

in the wood. The poem starts with a tree and ends, after alluding to another lost-in-the-woods story, with a tree:

[...] Inside and out,
Babes-in-the-wood weather. We toe the line
Between the tree in leaf and the bare tree. (Heaney 1979: 39)

“We toe the line” (the *OED* gives “*fig.* to present oneself in readiness for a race, contest, or undertaking; also, to conform, esp. to the defined standard or platform of a party”) might signify a readiness to leave and accept the new challenge, but it also implies the poet’s unwillingness to conform to one side or the other, and his choice to opt for the middle ground. Autumn passes into winter as the poet passes being young, “insouciant”, and innocent like the babes in the wood. As Maria Cristina Fumagalli puts it, “September [...] is a time both of ripeness and loss” (Fumagalli 2001: 91). The use of the word “wake” refers to everything they leave behind when departing for America, but it also strongly resonates with death and finality. This recalls Hill’s poem, which begins with addressing a holocaust victim, but then:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true) (Hill 1985: 67)

Harold Bloom writes, “the great pastoral elegies, indeed all major elegies for poets, do not express grief but center upon their composers’ own creative anxieties” (Bloom 1997: 151). By writing elegies for themselves, Hill and Heaney can experience a kind of rebirth as more mature poets. Dante, at the turning point of his life, imagined his own death, purgation and heavenly ascent and therewith immortalised himself through his most famous work. Another effect the quotation of the *Commedia*’s opening words has, intended or not, is that of suggesting a levelling up of Dante and Heaney onto the same stepping stone, through their shared experience as troubled poets in troubled times. In Bloom’s terms, we might call this a *Daemonization*; the use of Dante’s opening line hints at generalising away the uniqueness of Dante’s text and life journey.

‘The Schoolbag’ from *Seeing Things* (1991) is an elegy for John Hewitt, whom Heaney met in Belfast “probably sometime in 1965 or 1966” (O’Driscoll 2008: 329). It is written in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. When Heaney was still at school, Hewitt was “*nel mezzo del cammin*”. This quotation in line two is echoed in line seven: “And in the middle of the road to

school, / Ox-eye daisies and wild dandelions” (Heaney 1991: 30). Heaney the boy is paralleled with the child in Hewitt, Heaney’s preferred version of Hewitt:

In its earlier form, the poem ended with a vision of Hewitt falling into step with an ancestral line of men and girls on their way to the hiring fair, walking away with them into the world of the local ballad, really. But in the end I thought the image was too pious, too ‘trig’, too like his own pastoral vision of himself, so I changed to an image that conjured up instead the lonely child in him, the *animula* who’s in there at the heart of the Hewitt poems I like best. I made him ‘step out trig and look back all at once / Like a child on his first morning leaving his parents’. (O’Driscoll 2008: 332f)

The ox-eye daisies and wild dandelions recall the three beasts Dante encounters on his path in Canto I of the *Inferno*: a leopard (*una lonza*), a lion (*un leone*) and a she-wolf (*una lupa*); “merely allegorical signifiers, pointing to sins or categories of sins” (Scott 2004: 176). “*Learning’s easy carried!*”, one of the proverbs Heaney’s neighbours used to say (along with “The pen’s lighter than the spade”) when he passed them on his way to school as a child (cf. Heaney 1984a: 42), is confirmed by the lightness of the schoolbag, “unemptiable / As an itinerant school conjuror’s hat” (Heaney 1991: 30).²⁷ In ‘The Schoolbag’, through the quotation of the *Commedia*’s opening line and the allusion to the three beasts, both Heaney and Hewitt are made Dante-like figures on the road to poetic greatness. Again, the elegy includes its composer’s own creative anxieties.

Discussing Heaney’s translation of parts of the *Inferno*, Darcy O’Brien observes that

Canto I [...] provides the key to why he devoted himself to Dante, with an obsessiveness comparable to Dante’s devotion to Virgil.

What Heaney has done, somehow – and this is where analysis stumbles before the she-wolf of great poetry – is to transform Dante’s vision into a dream, or a nightmare, with which the late-twentieth-century reader can identify. [...] He has not cheapened the original but reshaped it and infused it with his own genius [...].

If I may be forgiven the use of a psychobabble term, Heaney has turned Dante’s imagined experience into a “midlife crisis” that is unnervingly familiar to us all and that, surely, reflects the poet’s own. (O’Brien 1996: 181f)

²⁷ Fittingly, *The School Bag* is the title Heaney later gives to the second anthology of poems he edits with Ted Hughes in 1997.

Thus what Heaney wrote about Eliot holds true for himself: “Dante [...] belonged in the rag-and-bone shop of Eliot’s middle-ageing heart” (Heaney 2002: 31f).

Previous to ‘The Schoolbag’, but after ‘September Song’, Bernard O’Donoghue published a poem called ‘Nel Mezzo del Cammin’ in his collection *Razorblades and Pencils* (1984). When O’Donoghue is discussed, the tension of living in England as an Irishman is always brought to attention. In her review of O’Donoghue’s *Selected Poems* (2008), Caitriona O’Reilly stresses his “unease about origins” (O’Reilly 2008: 2), and Michael Parker, noting O’Donoghue’s absence in many anthologies of Irish writing or poetry, argues in his review of the same book for O’Donoghue’s Irishness:

Perhaps to some Irish eyes his long residence in England and the Oxford connection somehow make him ‘less Irish’, which would be somewhat ironic given the fact that his poetry, like Louis MacNeice’s, is suffused with affection for and frustration with his native land. (Parker 2009: 513)

Justin Quinn favourably writes that O’Donoghue’s “poems delicately interleave accounts of professional life in England (he is a mediævalist at Oxford University) with memories of childhood and holidays in Ireland.” (Quinn 2008: 192f) This preoccupation with an Ireland of the past, O’Reilly remarks,

place[s] him firmly in a long tradition of writers for whom Ireland is largely a "state" of mind - indeed contemporary Ireland, even in rural Cork, is almost laughably at odds with the largely fictional but weirdly persistent national construct posited by "strong" (in the Bloomian sense) writers such as Yeats, Joyce and Heaney. It is, to quote Sean O'Brien, an Ireland "where nobody lives". (O’Reilly 2008: 2)

In an interview with Arminta Wallace in 2008, O’Donoghue attributes his preference for Anglo-Saxon elegies, Dante, and Chaucer to his Catholic upbringing in Ireland: “The medieval Catholicism of Chaucer and Dante rang a bell: it was something that you felt you knew your way around, somehow.” (Wallace 2008: 18) It is not surprising, therefore, that Dante found his way into O’Donoghue’s poetry.

‘Nel Mezzo del Cammin’, included in his *Selected Poems*, is a (for O’Donoghue typically) short poem of thirteen lines. The fact that it is only one line short of becoming a sonnet might reflect the poem’s theme of coming short, of the poet realising his own insufficiency:

So the odd poem (two in a good year)
Won't do to make the kind of edifice
I'd hoped to leave. Flush out the fantasy:
The mid-point being passed, the pattern's clear. (O'Donoghue 1984: 16)

Apart from the obvious end rhymes suit/lot/that; year/clear, and maintain/sun, the poem has the recurring sound pattern of an [e] or [æ] sound followed by an [i:] or [I] sound: edifice, fantasy, pattern's clear, way indeed, pencils. So while there is a certain attention to form, there is no perfection, no strict order which might convey self-assurance.

Self-conscious and with ironic self-pity, the poet yearns for an enduring afterlife through his art, a timeless "edifice" of his own creation, a chance he thinks to have passed up. Now older than Dante when he wrote his masterpiece, he has no hope of becoming a major poet. The "good byway" that turned out to be the "main thoroughfare" is now, in a clever pun, a "goodbye way":

Too many holes to fill, not enough time
To start again. 'I wasn't ready. The sun
Was in my eyes.' A goodbye way indeed.
Soon we'll be counting razor-blades and pencils. (ibid.)

The sun in the poet's eyes, here a hindrance, seems an ironic reversal of the empowering bath of light Dante's eyes take in the *Paradiso*. Michael Parker is here reminded of "the language of the playground when" O'Donoghue offers "excuses as to why he has accomplished so little to date: 'I wasn't ready. The sun / Was in my eyes. I thought we weren't counting'" (Parker 2009: 514). Next to irony and humour, a dark undertone is present in the poem. The opening line, "No more overcoats; maybe another suit", may point to the fact that a dead man only wears his suit but no coat, and the last line might as well refer to the counting of a dead man's belongings. The title quoting Dante does not keep its promise: the middle of the journey of life has passed. The object of comparison for the evaluation of the poet's life's work and achievement is not only Dante of course, but also successful contemporaries such as Heaney.

Dublin poet Thomas Kinsella's influences range from Joyce and Pound to C. G. Jung and William Carlos Williams, with Dante lurking between them (cf. Jackson 1995: xii), and regardless of his isolated existence as a poet, he has been an influence on other Irish poets in his own right. Although Thomas H. Jackson's referring to Kinsella as the "most important and

the most compendious Irish poet since Yeats” might be seen as controversial, he surely has a point when arguing that “the work of reclamation [Kinsella] has done furnishes [...] an exemplary base on which other poets can build, whether they particularly like his poetry or not” (ibid. xi), which is especially true in the case of Harry Clifton, for example. This is what Kinsella himself said about the inspiration he draws from other poets, in an interview from 1999:

I don't find other poets 'inspiring' any more. My first awareness of poetry as an efficient and exciting human utterance was with W. H. Auden. I am now rereading Wordsworth: admiring him for the scale of his apprehensions, his emotional range and great linguistic gift. All in balance: the necessary thing said straight, avoiding the rhetorical temptation. Yeats is comparable in emotional and visionary range, but his palpable pleasure in his own skills can interfere. (Badin 2001: 114)

Even if he is not inspired by other poets anymore, this cannot mean he is not influenced by them, albeit only on an unconscious level. In his essay “Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet” (1985), Heaney notes that, in addition to more obvious sources of reference, “the *Commedia* has been part of this poet's mental furniture from early on” (Heaney 1985: 6).²⁸ With Dante's coherent world order in mind, Kinsella has explored “the individual's quest for coherence and integrity in a world of constant disintegration and slippage” (ibid.).

Kinsella's *Songs of the Psyche* (1985), which “has as its object an engagement with the inner life, in an attempt to disengage from the contingent world and to enter the realm of pure spirit”, as Peter Denman states (Denman 2001: 109), is divided into three sections of poems titled ‘Settings’, ‘Songs of the Psyche’, and ‘Notes’.²⁹ ‘Songs of the Psyche’ consists of thirteen songs, or cantos. It is introduced by the poem ‘Invocation’, “a prayer to Psyche for non-moralizing judgement”, in Maurice Harmon's words. The poem, he suggests, “becomes a descent into the dark, nutrient waters of the unconscious. In a ‘reverie’ of submission, invoking the number nine as guarantee of safety and return, Kinsella begins his Dantesque

²⁸ Geert Lernout suggests that Dante first appears in Kinsella's poetry in the poem ‘Thinking of Mr. D.’ from *Another September* (1958). He also deems ‘A Country Walk’ from *Downstream* (1962) to be “Kinsella's first peripatetic poem”, and suggests that ‘Nightwalker’ (1968) “could be read as an Irish *Divine Comedy*” (Lernout 1989: 250f).

²⁹ Peter Denman notes the semantic link between the titles of the three sections: “Both ‘Settings’ and ‘Notes’ punningly extend the musical reference of songs: ‘Settings’ suggests the idea of musical arrangements as well as the childhood locations which the poems describe, and ‘Notes’, of course, includes among its meanings a musical connotation.” (Denman 2001: 102)

journey to Middle Earth, to his encounter with the grin of the goddess” (Harmon 2008: 84).³⁰
The first song (of the Psyche) introduces a character in some sort of mid-life crisis:

Why had I to wait until I am graceless,
unsightly, and a little nervous of stooping
until I could see

through those clear eyes I had once? (Kinsella 2001: 226)

In the eleventh song, the speaker says, “Come with me / o’er the crystal stream”, but “leeches
wrinkle / black in the water” (ibid. 231), leaving everything in the dark. The thirteenth song is
an awakening from the Dantesque descent, including a rewriting of Dante’s first lines:

*I woke suffocating,
slipped through a fault
into total dark.*

No.

*I came to myself
in the middle of a dark wood,
electric with hope.*

Please... (ibid. 232)

This is made to appear as if the first three lines are what the writer started off with, but then thought again (“No.”), and chose the next three lines, which lead in a much more positive direction. Leaving the first three lines on the page, however, also leaves the reader with the suffocating impression that they were supposed to make in the first place, which is obviously intended.³¹ The next three lines in italics parody Dante’s, since Dante’s opening conveys the opposite of hope. The missing words, “nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”, have been suggested already in the first song. If one considers what Kinsella’s intertext, the slightly altered quotation, does with Dante on a more general poetic level, Bloom’s second revisionary ratio comes to mind, the *tessera*: “In the *tessera*, the later poet provides what his imagination

³⁰ See also Harmon 1992: 210, in his earlier essay on Kinsella’s use of water imagery in analogy with the Taoist perception of nature.

³¹ Floyd Skloot perceives this as a humorous moment, the poet interrupting himself once with “no”, then with “please”, “or Puh-leeze, as we might read it. The man knows he can be a handful; his intimidating glower is softened by a mischievous grin” (Skloot 1997, no page numbers given).

tells him would complete the otherwise “truncated” precursor poem and poet, a “completion” that is as much misprision as a revisionary swerve is.” (Bloom 1997: 66) He takes Dante’s first lines, but during the process of appropriation tears them apart and proceeds in a different direction.

The song proceeds with lines reminiscent of the Creation myth, ending with the crucifixion of Jesus by way of mythological figures:

By normal process
 organic darkness would summon
Self firstly into being,

an upright on a flat plain,
 a bone stirs in first clay
and a beam of light

struck and snaked
 glittering across a surface
in multi-meanings and vanishes.³²

Then stealers of fire;
 dragon slayers; helpful animals;
and ultimately the Cross. (Kinsella 2001: 232)

This is the Bible in a nutshell. There is darkness, light, the bone and clay Adam and Eve were made of, and the serpent from Eden (in the word “snaked”), which led to the Fall. Prometheus, the stealer of fire, is another example of the human hubris. The dragon slayer alluded to could be the archangel Michael, who in heaven defeated Lucifer, who is described as dragon, serpent, Devil and Satan (see Revelation 12, 7-9).³³ Lucifer is of course another instance of hubris punished by God. The “helpful animals” could perhaps refer to the story of Samson, who killed the Philistines with burning torches that were attached to foxes’ tails, and with an

³² Denman notes the “syntactical puzzle” created by the verb “vanishes”, for it is unclear what exactly vanishes, and suggests it might even be a “newly-coined noun in apposition with ‘multi-meanings’” (Denman 2001: 104).

³³ Maurice Harmon suggests that Kinsella refers to Heracles here, which to me seems less likely (Harmon 2008: 84).

ass's jawbone (see Judges 15), or to Cain, who in English and Irish traditional belief slew Abel with just such a jawbone.³⁴

The poem's ending once more calls into question what had been written in previous lines, and it is inspired by C. G. Jung, as both Harmon and Denman suggest:

Unless the thing were to be based
on sexuality
or power. (Kinsella 2001: 232)

The Cross, sexuality and power are among the archetypes of the collective unconscious defined by Jung (Harmon 2008: 84). Harmon proposes that Kinsella, in the poem, finds this numerological system wanting and makes the discovery of that failure part of the poem (ibid.). Denman nicely describes the process of the repeated writing and effacing and rewriting, especially visible in song XIII, as "palimpsestic approach" recurring throughout *Songs of the Psyche* (Denman 2001: 105). Like 'September Song' and 'The Schoolbag', 'Songs of the Psyche' reflects a turning point in the poet's career. He pauses in the middle of the way, reminiscing and rethinking the way of life.

To witness another Irish poet's mid-life crisis, I suggest turning to Northern Irish poet Paul Muldoon's 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' from *Hay* (1998). This sequence consists of thirty sonnets. The title alludes to the Jimi Hendrix Experience's 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' from the album *Electric Ladyland* (1968), and as there is a song called 'Voodoo Chile' on the same album, there is a poem called 'The Bangle' near the beginning of *Hay*. To be exact, 'Voodoo Chile' is the fourth track on the album and 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)' is the last. 'The Bangle' is the fifth poem in the collection and 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' is the last. However, the fourth poem in the collection, 'Plovers', only consists of two lines and might accidentally be overlooked. Also, the Hendrix album is from 1968, which is where Muldoon's *Poems 1968-1998* sets in, concluding with 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' from thirty years later. This obsession with numbers in itself is striking in the Dante context, as Beckett pointed out in his Joyce essay.

³⁴ Cf. *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene I: "How the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder! It might be the pate of a politician, which this ass now o'erreaches; one that would circumvent God, might it not?"

Furthermore, the poem sequence itself keeps returning to a poem earlier in the collection, 'Errata', in that it imitates it by giving errata for previous lines. The interesting change here is that no other guide than Virgil informs us of the errata.

"For 'errata,'" Virgil smiled, "read 'corrigenda.'"
(Muldoon 2001: 475)

Moreover, as Clair Wills points out, "each of the thirty sonnets uses six of the ninety rhyme words from 'Yarrow' (rhyming ababcdcdefgefg), in the order in which they first occur in the earlier poem – which gets you to sonnet 15, and then the whole pattern is repeated in reverse." (Wills 1998: 209) She views this structural tour-de-force as "an extraordinary, excessive assault" on the book's issue of the conflict between "the poet's absolute subjection to chance and his absolute control over his material" (ibid.). From the constraints of the form arise chaotic results of content. Wills observes three interwoven narratives that run through the sonnet sequence: a restaurant scene, Aeneas' return to the burning city of Troy and his "attempt to rescue his wife Creusa", and "an imagined version of Muldoon's father's emigration to Australia" (ibid. 211).

In a restaurant in Paris, the speaker drinks various different kinds of red and white wine which are named throughout the poem, his tastes, as Wills punningly puts it, being "pretty 'middle of the road', if not *nel mezzo del camin* [sic]" (ibid. 210). Immediately after sonnet XV, after the middle of the sequence, sonnet XVI starts with "It was downhill all the way after that", the speaker then admits to his "*crise d'un certain age*", he calls out "Creusa, Creusa, Creusa / as the packet reached the midway and turning point" (Muldoon 2001: 467-8), exactly as the sequence has just done. Clair Wills summarises in a pointed way:

Here is another rather hopeless and pathetic middle-aged figure, fondly imagining he still has it in him, fantasising sexual possibilities. Things rapidly descend into chaos after the mid-point of the sequence (sonnet 15), surely another allusion to the poet's mid-life crisis. (Wills 1998: 211)

The threefold repetition of Creusa's name imitates Virgil. In Virgil's *Georgics* 4.525-7, Orpheus' severed head calls Eurydice's name twice and the ensuing echo turns it into three times. When Dante has to bid Virgil goodbye at the end of purgatory, he imitates this by naming Virgil thrice (cf. Scott 2004: 236). In Muldoon's poem, Virgil seems to have to reassure himself of his copyright for the Aeneid. In sonnet I, he says "The beauty of it is that

I delivered them from harm; / it was I who had Aeneas steal / back to look for Creusa” etc., in sonnet V, “‘The beauty of it,’ ventured Virgil, ‘is that it was I who had the sentries / look the other way so that Creusa might brush / like an incendiary”, and so on (Muldoon 2001: 459; 461). This later blurs into the other storylines of the sequence: “it was I who had a Hennessy broach // the subject of joining their fellow nightclubbers / on the Avenue des Invalides / so that Creusa might look up” (ibid. 469), so that Virgil, as Muldoon’s poet guide, seems to claim copyright for ‘The Bangle (Slight Return)’ as well.

In sonnet XXVI, Virgil recounts how Creusa, or the woman the poet-speaker fancies, leaves the restaurant:

The beauty of it is that while the foofoorious pole work of Charon
made the Wooroonooran cloudier
than the Styx or Acheron
and your da scoured the claims of a pig gelder
[...]
Creusa, on whom you still had this adolescent crush,
[...] made a red rush
for the door [...] (ibid. 473)

The river that Charon, who will be dealt with in depth in chapter 2.2, swirls up here is in Queensland, Australia, and the image refers to one of the three quotations at the beginning of the poem sequence, from Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Muldoon quotes the part where Cecily tells Algernon that Uncle Jack would have him “choose between this world, the next world, and Australia”. Algernon replies that he would rather die than go to Australia (ibid. 458). As one can see here, the rivers in hell are clearer than Australian rivers. The mention of the “pig gelder” is a suitable associative link with the speaker’s presumed mid-life crisis, in which he probably feels a little castrated, or impotent. The last line of the last sonnet is telling. Virgil presents further errata, or corrigenda, the last of which is: “For ‘Wooroonooran,’ my darlings, read ‘Wirra Wirra.’” (ibid. 476), which is also in Australia. The corrections, as alienation effect, repeatedly undermine the credibility and the continuity of the narrative(s). The poem contains so many references to other works and to itself that it appears more like a collage than an original work, a desperate clinging to formal and numeral rules to achieve some sense of security. Muldoon would not be Muldoon, of course, if all of these appearances were not intended and did not wittingly undercut and ironise themselves

throughout. Ruben Moi offers an interesting interpretation of what Muldoon achieves in the poem sequence:

In his exploitation of an alternative future for his dead father and his preference for Virgil's epic, Muldoon construes possible memories of his father, refracts the Homeric template of the mythic method from Joyce to Heaney, and balances the victorious figure of Ulysses with the fugitive Aeneas as metaphor for the problems in Northern Ireland in the 1990s. (Moi 2007: 124)

The implication here is that Muldoon makes new what Joyce, Heaney, and others have done before him. To free himself from the weight of his predecessors, he has to show them he can do the same thing differently, and, depending on his reader's tastes, better. While he develops his own style, he does not try to negate completely his immediate influences; but not being on the surface, they have to be dug for. Virgil appearing as a character, not only as intertext, makes Dante, and by extension perhaps also Heaney, an important source.

As an aside, it is interesting to compare Scottish poet Don Paterson's touching 'Waking with Russell' from *Landing Light* (2003) with the poems discussed so far. The poem describes how the speaker was released from his mid-life crisis when his son was born:

Dear son, I was *mezzo del cammin*
and the true path was as lost to me as ever
when you cut in front and lit it as you ran. (Paterson 2003: 5)

The mutual smile that "poured through us like a river" compares to the revelation Dante experiences in heaven. The poem stresses the uplifting happiness that followed the midpoint of the poet's life journey, whereas the other poems concentrate on descent and farewell.³⁵

2.1.2 Canto II: Heaney Girding Himself

After Dante's encounter in Canto I with Virgil, who offers his guidance on a journey through hell and purgatory, at the beginning of Canto II night falls. With it, anxiety arises within Dante. He calls to the muses and asks Virgil whether he honestly thinks Dante is qualified for this demanding journey. As successful examples of famous afterlife journeys, he evokes

³⁵ Eavan Boland's 'The Bottle Garden', which also alludes to Dante's opening line, will be discussed in chapter 2.2.5.

Virgil's account of Aeneas' descent to the underworld as a living man, as well as the apostle Paul's vision of heaven, mentioned by Paul in the Second Letter to the Corinthians and told in elaborate detail by an anonymous writer pretending to be Paul in *The Apocalypse of Paul*, which was "a fourth-century best seller, translated into most European languages", as Lisa Miller writes (Miller 2010: 161). Dante is afraid of not being as worthy as Aeneas or Paul of visiting the afterlife before his own death. In order to give Dante self-confidence, Virgil tells him about Beatrice descending from heaven and finding him in limbo to ask him to be Dante's guide, so that Dante would be able to return to the righteous path. She in turn had been approached by Saint Lucia, who had been told of Dante's distress by the Virgin Mary. Hearing of the three blessed ladies' endeavour on his account, Dante regains courage and follows Virgil to the entrance of hell.

When one addresses the reception of Canto II of the *Inferno*, Seamus Heaney's collection *Seeing Things* (1991) is again of importance. Setting aside the framing translations from the *Aeneid* at the beginning and from the *Commedia* at the end, 'The Journey Back' is the first poem in *Seeing Things*. Apart from the first line, which is an introductory line and the only one not within the single quotation marks of Larkin's shade's speech, the poem is written in *terza rima*. When one takes the first line into account, however, the poem becomes a Petrarchan sonnet with a slightly irregular rhyme scheme. The *terza rima* does justice to the fact that Larkin "quoted Dante" (Heaney 1991: 7), while the sonnet as a whole reflects the fact that this is a sort of elegy for the poet Philip Larkin, who died in 1985.³⁶ Heaney explains how he came to use Dante in the poem he was asked to write for a memorial volume honouring Larkin:

Dante was at the back of my mind since I'd introduced his name in the conclusion of my [sixtieth-birthday] tribute, saying that if Larkin were to write an *Inferno*, it would begin not in a dark wood but in a railway tunnel, that his Mount Purgatory would be a hospital tower block and so on. (O'Driscoll 2008: 337)

Corcoran deems it unlikely that Larkin ever read Dante (cf. Corcoran 1998: 164), but the quotation, uttered by "a nine-to-five man" on his "journey back into the heartland of the ordinary" (Heaney 1991: 7), testifies to Dante's "quotidian approachability" (O'Donoghue 1998: 248). As Joseph Brooker points out, "Larkin's shade surprised me" does not necessarily

³⁶ Douglas Dunn calls it "a poem that marks Larkin's death, rather than an elegy" and criticises it for feeling "pietistic – loaded with Heaney's preconceptions more than Larkin's chosen or unchosen temperament" (Dunn 1994: 209f).

mean that the speaker is surprised about the encounter with a ghost since that had happened before in 'Station Island', but it can also imply astonishment about Larkin quoting Dante (Brooker 2007: 170). Corcoran justifies the factual inaccuracy from the following poetic point of view:

Just as Heaney makes James Joyce Heaney-like at the end of 'Station Island', he is here turning Larkin into a facet of his own poetic sensibility; and one implication of this might be that this is the way poets do survive death: by being transformed in the deferent but different work of others. (Corcoran 1998: 164)

This is also true of Dante's poetic afterlife, of course. Interestingly enough, the lines from Dante Heaney makes Larkin's shade quote, the first five lines from Canto II, are from Heaney's own translation of the *Inferno*, with Heaney's distinct voice shining through (cf. O'Brien 1996: 179). Accordingly, "He quoted Dante" simultaneously means "He quoted Heaney"!

For

io sol uno
m'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra
sì del cammino e sì de la pietate (*Inf.* II, 3-5)

he gives us

I alone was girding myself to face
The ordeal of my journey and my duty (Heaney 1991: 7).

Instead of translating "pietate" with "pity", as it can be found in the versions of Sinclair, Singleton, Sayers, the Temple Classics and Binyon, he choses "duty". This is inspired by Sisson's "dutifulness", as Fumagalli points out. As a classicist, Sisson knew that the Latin *pietas* can also mean 'duty' (Fumagalli 2001: 269). Choosing the word duty smoothes the transition from the quotation into the rest of the poem with Larkin apparently on his way home from work "as rush hour buses / Bore the drained and laden through the city." (Heaney

1991: 7).³⁷ Disappointment, but also reassurance might seep through these lines: “I might have been a wise king”, but “it felt more like the forewarned journey back / into the heartland of the ordinary.” (ibid.) Ordinary is not necessarily negative. In Heaney’s poetry, it is the springboard for poetic insight. Corcoran calls it Heaney’s “insistence on the usual, quotidian world that is always prelude to poetic transformation or translation” (Corcoran 1998: 165). Thus making Larkin’s shade say these words implies the poet’s staying true to himself rather than missing his chance of something better. Heaney explains how the journey depicted in the poem is supposed to be the dead poet’s journey into the underworld or afterlife:

Larkin died in 1985, before Christmas, in the season of Advent, the season when the magi were traditionally believed to have set out on their journey, so I make his shade set out for the land of the dead on a bus in a pre-Christmas rush hour. It’s as if he’s going home from work one more time, and being allowed his own epiphany of himself – ‘A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry.’ (O’Driscoll 2008: 337)

In part, through the poem Heaney allows himself his own epiphany of a man writing about the poetry inherent in the ordinary, the quotidian.³⁸ Drastically put, rather than eulogise Larkin, Heaney builds a monument for himself.

A further instance of intertextuality within the poem concerns Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Sequel*, for it is fair to assume that Heaney was aware of that text. *Autumn Sequel* itself is one of the examples of MacNeice’s own Dante reception. It is written in *terza rima* and consists of twenty-six ‘cantos’.³⁹ Steve Ellis identifies the journey as *Autumn Sequel*’s “governing theme, a sense that intensifies in the second half of the poem as Christmas becomes its destination and the frequently-referred-to journey of the Magi a parallel to the narrator’s own” (Ellis 1998: 138). Heaney’s Larkin parallels his journey with that of the Magi, and of MacNeice’s poet-speaker. Thus in ‘The Journey Back’, Heaney appropriates Dante, Larkin, and, on a subtler level, MacNeice. Overcoming two dead predecessors by making them into a

³⁷ Fumagalli suggests that “duty” refers to the other side of the privilege of visiting the otherworld as a living poet, i.e. to his poetic responsibility. Accordingly, she interprets the poem as a *katabasis*, with Heaney descending and meeting Larkin’s shade there, but I would argue in favour of a *nekuia* (cf. Fumagalli 2001: 234).

³⁸ Carla De Petris refers the poem’s words directly back to Heaney: “*Station Island* was the ‘journey into’ the poet’s past – the Land of the Dead; *Seeing Things* is his ‘journey back / into the heartland of the ordinary’ after having ‘seen poetry’.” (De Petris 1995: 167) I find this opposing generalisation a difficult one to make, since *Seeing Things* is as much a note from the land of the dead as is *Station Island*, especially since it is framed with two of the most famous accounts of the afterlife. Of course, it is so in a different way. (See also Brooker 2007: 179)

³⁹ See Steve Ellis’ essay on Dante and Louis MacNeice for an analysis and defence of *Autumn Sequel* against its being “a mere sequel to an earlier success” (i.e. *Autumn Journal*), as Edna Longley argues (Ellis 1998: 129).

version of oneself may be perceived as presumptuous, but it is also characteristic of a great poet. As Harold Bloom writes, “the strong imagination comes to its painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation” (Bloom 1997: 86).

The beginning of Canto II, when Dante has to face the journey into the unknown, is a poetic vehicle for Larkin’s ghost to enter his afterlife. In section VI of ‘Station Island’ (subject of chapter 3.4), Heaney had already used the end of the canto, when Dante compares his change of heart and regained strength to flowers rising and opening up in the warmth of the morning sun after the cold of the night.

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

He inserts the translated quotation of lines 127-132 of *Inferno II* in italics at the end of the section, which describes him watching a girl from his past.⁴⁰ The last line conflates Dante’s lines 131 and 132, making five lines out of six and swallowing “ch’i’ cominciai” (*Inf. II*, 132), because there is no spoken dialogue in section VI. “My heart flushed” takes some liberty with “tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse” (*ibid.*).⁴¹ Again, the quotation is from Heaney’s own translation (cf. Fumagalli 2001: 136). Nick Havely describes the “rendering of the ‘little flowers’ simile from the end of *Inferno II*” as “audaciously erotic” (Havely 2003: 373), a facet that is not in the original. The quotation in translation is followed by the last line of the section: “Translated, given, under the oak tree.” (Heaney 1984: 76) This last line, in addition to the italics of the quotation, alerts the reader to the fact that these are originally another poet’s lines, that it is another poet’s simile, which Heaney relocates to convey his own feelings. The use of Dante here is as much a gesture of reverence as it is a bold appropriation and self-assertion.

⁴⁰ Heaney indicates the borrowed lines from Dante in his notes at the end of the collection.

⁴¹ For comparison, Dorothy L. Sayers translates it with “therewith ran / Such good, strong courage round about my heart” (Dante 1949: 81), while Ciaran Carson has “a plan / of daring action sprang into my mind” (Carson 2002: 14).

2.1.3 Mere Idiomatic Expression? Carson and Flynn in Dante's Inferno

Carson's long lines and fragmented narratives, borrowing sources as poetic material and competing voices, make possible a poetry which disrupts the very idea of a single, unitary national story or identity. (Murphy 2003: 207)

The first poem in Ciaran Carson's "contemporary classic" (Allison 2008: 123) *Belfast Confetti* (1989), 'Loaf'⁴² is a memory of a summer job in McWatters' bakery. It consists of five stanzas of unequal length, with Carson's notorious long lines stretching beyond the printing space for a line, thus blurring the perception of the actual end of the line. There are only few end-rhymes, but many assonances, alliterations and rhymes within and across a line ("I'd fill her up: a contented slurp like the bread you use to sup up / Soup." (Carson 1989: 15)) Following the reflections on bread, paper and ink in the first stanza, and the conversations about whiskey with "this other skiver", Joe, who had "done time at one time or another for some petty crime" (ibid. 16) in the second stanza, the third stanza illustrates the atmosphere of the bakery with an allusion to Dante, rhyming "Dante" with "pint":

Walking the slippery catwalk from one bake-room to the next – like Dante's
Inferno, the midnight glare of ovens, a repeated doughy slap
Of moulds being filled – we'd think of the cool of the loo or a lunchtime pint. (ibid. 16)⁴³

The rhyme accentuates the contrast of hot and cold here. The workspace is hot and noisy like parts of Dante's *Inferno*, and for Joe, it is as impossible to escape from the bakery and his pattern in general as it would be to escape hell: "My last week. As for him, he didn't know", "he was buried in the past", every memory "stored away in cells" (ibid. 17). Things past linger in his brain cells, but are also with him in prison cells, since he is always "between times". For the cleaning process, the two boys use "*Ajax* and *Domestos*, the Augean pandemonium" (ibid.).⁴⁴ In contrast to Joe, the poem's speaker is not stuck in a hell of the past. The subjects he talks about with Joe are, for him, "clouds on the blue of the future", he is "thinking of the future", he sings "*Que sera sera*". Nevertheless, the last line of the poem reveals that the speaker is fully aware of the ramifications of the past on the future when he

⁴² Ross Moore interestingly notices that Carson's *For All We Know* (2008) also opens with a reference to bread and its texture, albeit in a different way (Moore 2008).

⁴³ I render the line breaks as they are printed in the referenced edition.

⁴⁴ In the mythological story, cleaning Augeas' stables from huge piles of manure within one day constitutes the fifth labour of Heracles, which he manages by diverting two nearby rivers so that they run through the stables. Augeas does not reward him as promised, however, and he is testified against by his own son (cf. Schwab 2001: 152f).

describes aeroplanes flying by: “Tiny specks, the white lines of their past already fuzzing up the blue” (ibid. 18), as was foreshadowed by the “clouds on the blue of the future”. Clouds might not necessarily be bad, but the cleanliness or innocence of a clear blue sky is lost, no matter how strong the cleaning product.

Although claiming otherwise, Carson must have had some idea or received knowledge of the *Inferno*, even though he only came to read it much later when he was asked to translate parts of it:

[...] I started the *Inferno* with absolutely no idea of Dante whatsoever, beyond the fact that he was the author of *La Divina Commedia* and that part of *La Divina Commedia* was called “Inferno”. (Carson 2003a: 331)

His allusion to hell in ‘Loaf’ works as a metaphor for Joe’s hopelessness, but also for the time that is being remembered in the poem. In her inspiring essay on the indebtedness of *Belfast Confetti*’s recurring motifs to Louis MacNeice’s poems, ‘Snow’ in particular, Guinn Batten analyses this permeating intertextuality with MacNeice and furthermore locates Carson’s poems within the context of the restricted life on Belfast’s Catholic Falls Road:

For while hopes and ambitions may rise in the flour loft, it is, after all, an enclosed space; like the Falls neighbourhood in which it is situated, the bakery is a *fal*, a hedged-in space, one whose catwalks over a blazing hell will be echoed in “Ambition,” when the poet’s father describes his internment in a similar but more sinister enclosure. No matter how much living yeast the boy adds to MacNeice’s snow / flour, the sky is not the first limit the young Catholic worker will reach. (Batten 1995)

Later on in the collection, in the prose piece ‘Intelligence’, the reader is given a detailed account of life in the Falls Road area. The ubiquitous devices and methods of surveillance and mutual observation are compared to Bentham’s Panopticon, and, splitting the account up into two parts, a long description of this prison concept is inserted in italics. The gripping and unsettling impressions end in a personal memory, or imagined scene:

[...] suddenly, I have just climbed the Whiterock Loney to Black Mountain,⁴⁵ and my father and I are sitting in the Hatchet Field as he smokes a Gallaher's *Park Drive* and points out, down in the inferno, Clonard Monastery, the Falls Road, Leeson Street, the Clonard Picture-House, and the tiny blip of our house that we both pretend to see [...] (Carson 1989: 81f)

In this passage, “inferno” is used as an English noun, integrated in the language without being an explicit allusion. Here, “inferno” is common usage, signifying hell but also “any place or state resembling hell”, as the Collins English Dictionary defines it. (The *OED* gives “a place of torment or misery compared to hell”, which lacks the former definition’s illustrative generality.) Although the word does not necessarily refer to Dante, the association is obvious, owing to the allusion in ‘Loaf’. With his *Inferno* translation, discussed in chapter 2.6, Carson will come back to his analogy between the situation in Belfast and a Dantesque inferno. Murphy sums up how Carson deals poetically with the Troubles:

[...] there are rapid shifts of perspective between (and often within) poems. In a realistic manner, at once documentary and psychological, the poems convey the disorienting complexity of life during the Troubles, a time when location and locution become key signifiers of identity. Carson’s poetry recounts quotidian instances of interrogation when names, appearances and personal histories are all assessed to ascertain religious (and political) affiliation. (Murphy 2003: 203f)

Location and locution are important determinants for Dante’s identity and work too. Therefore, points of reference and identification are given on several levels.

Leontia Flynn, born in 1974, has been one of Belfast’s major emerging poets in recent years and has been highly praised. Fran Brearton, in a review of Flynn’s second collection, *Drives* (2008), notes her “casual allusiveness free of pretension” and her “affectionate irreverence” towards Northern Irish poetic father figures like Heaney (Brearton 2008). *Drives* contains short poems about travelling, places, and literary forebears like ‘Marcel Proust’, ‘Robert Lowell’ or ‘Sylvia Plath’s Sinus Condition’. The actual journey underlying the collection, however, is, as Brearton suggests, about Flynn’s own ageing father (ibid.).

‘The Human Fish’, preceded by ‘The Little Mermaid’, another kind of human fish, is set in Slovenia, one of the destinations dealt with in the book. “Human fish” is the locals’ name for

⁴⁵ There is a virtual tour of Black Mountain with a surround view at: http://www.virtualvisit-northernireland.com/gallery.aspx?dataid=43811&title=Nature_and_Wildlife

the olm, or Proteus Anguinus as mentioned in the poem. By comparing the tourists in the poem to the olm, Flynn further develops the human resemblance of the creature: “we might be this native beast”, withdrawing from heat and sunlight into shade and the vicinity of water. The pun “we keep our cool” is typical for Flynn’s at times colloquial, “bitty but honest, honed but casual” style (Ravinthiran 2008), and it may as well be read ironically, as the state of being cool contradicts the fact that coolness, in the described holiday, apparently has to be sought after, which implies some sort of stress level. “Left in the dark: wet, colourless and eyeless” (Flynn 2008: 19), the olm might have found a cool retreat but is left extremely vulnerable to environmental changes, and, so the pun implies, oblivious to reality, to enlightenment, to truth. Similarly, the tourists’ retreat to the shade can only be temporary relief to be terminated by new challenges. Flynn, with her “hipster cynicism” (Ravinthiran 2008), depicts the tourists, presumably herself included, as a cowardly herd of fools (“like cows”) out of their element. The poem, consisting of eleven penta- and hexametrical lines with an alternating rhyme scheme resembling a sonnet (4-3-4: only one tercet is missing), ends

in the caves which they say inspired Dante’s *Inferno*. (Flynn 2008: 19)

It could be argued that the allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* is of no relevance to the poem, because it is just local folklore told to lure tourists into the “deep underworld of Zadlaska or Dante’s cave” that “inspired Dante to write the Hell part of the Divine Comedy”, as it says on a tourist website.⁴⁶ Yet Flynn’s poetry is full of literary allusion; *Drives* “has its clever intertextualities” (Brearton 2008), and the strategic placement at the very end of the last line implies a weight that is intended. Final words reverberate. What is more, the first line ends with the word “heat” – a word quickly associated with hellfire. The word it rhymes with, “gravitate”, signifies a downward movement due to weight. “*Inferno*” responds to “volcano”, another burning threat. The unpleasantness of the trip to Slovenia, “another budget destination”, finds its hyperbolic expression in the hellish atmosphere of “drain smells” and “stairwells” and its containment in the apparent paradox that the caves that inspired the *Inferno* protect the human fish from burning in the sun. The pale tourists escape the same fate.

⁴⁶ <http://www.slovenia-tourist-guide.com/caves-in-slovenia.html>

2.2 Crossings

2.2.1 Canto III: Peter of Morrone

In the vestibule of hell, before meeting Charon and crossing the Acheron, Dante sees the Indifferent, or Neutrals, who are neither good nor evil and therefore do not deserve a place in either heaven or hell; they are Dante's own invention (cf. Pertile 2007: 71).⁴⁷ Among the Neutrals, he makes out "l'ombra di colui / che fece per viltade il gran rifiuto" (*Inf.* III, 59-60), "that one whose coward conscience / led him to refuse his sacred duty" (Carson 2002: 17). Generally, this nameless shade is believed to be Pope Celestine V, who was elected in 1294 and resigned after only five months. He was succeeded by Boniface VIII, Dante's arch-enemy. Celestine died soon after and was canonised in 1313 (cf. *ibid.* 248). Scholars are unclear as to whether Dante really refers to him, however, and some sources also suggest Pontius Pilate as a possible interpretation (cf. Dante 1991: 99).⁴⁸

The Irish poet Tom Matthews's⁴⁹ posthumously published collection *Robert Sat* (2008) includes a poem called 'Peter of Morrone', which takes it as a fact that Dante refers to Peter of Morrone, or Pope Celestine, as he was called after he took up office, in the lines quoted above from Canto III:

Peter Celestine
the only honest pope
elected in old age
for his saintliness
was so incorruptible and true
that realising his incompetence
he resigned
the only resigning pope.

⁴⁷ Michael Robinson, in his essay on Beckett and Dante, points out that Beckett's uncollected poem 'Text' draws heavily on Canto III and tells "compassionately of those whom neither Hell nor Paradise will accept" (Robinson 1979).

⁴⁸ John A. Scott argues that "it is virtually certain that Dante, the 'world-judge,' condemned Celestine in *Inferno* 3.59-60 for abdicating and thus betraying the hopes of the faithful that he would purge the Church and the papacy of the desire for worldly power and riches." (Scott 2004: 317) Accordingly, A. M. Chiavacci Leonardi opposes the argument that Pope Celestine was canonised, and therefore not damned, with the fact that the *Inferno* had already been written by 1313, and that Dante does not necessarily conform to the decisions of the Church in his judgements of damnation or salvation (Dante 1991: 99).

⁴⁹ Considering the various non-Irish influences to be found in Matthews's poetry, Frank Ormsby points out in his foreword to the collection: "He is not, however, an 'Irish' poet, except by birth and, very occasionally, in setting and subject. His poetic models were found elsewhere." (Matthews 2008: 5) Kavanagh would beg to differ.

Boniface his successor
put him in jail
Celestine said, I wanted
nothing in this world
but a cell, and a cell
they have given me.

Dante consigned him
nameless to Hell. (Matthews 2008: 39)

The space left before the last two lines, making the first two stanzas look like a Petrarchan sonnet, sets apart and lends weight to the Dante reference (reminiscent in tone of Flynn's poem) and emphasises the injustice suffered by Celestine expressed in the poem. Not calling him by name in the epic poem about eternal justice implies that he was not even worth having his name passed on into the literary afterlife. "The only honest pope", Celestine apparently lacked the self-conceit and insincerity Matthews seems to ascribe to every other pope. The ironic tone of the poem lends the message an air of resignation, now that there is no honest pope left. Dante consigning the pope nameless to hell corresponds to Boniface putting him in a cell, which is accentuated by the rhyme the two words form. The repetition of the word "cell" implies the two meanings the word is given in the poem, the prison cell and the hermit or monastic cell. According to a fourteenth-century biography of Peter, he lived "on the Morrone in a cell outside the monastery", and later on as pope, he lived "in a wooden cell within his palatial chamber at Naples" (Brentano 2000: 90).

Matthews does not specify that Dante, whether or not actually alluding to Celestine, did not even find him worthy of hell but consigned him to the antechamber. "Hell", in the poem, can of course also refer to the title of the first canticle of the *Commedia*, not to the realm alone; thus he is not necessarily incorrect in his allusion, just imprecise. One can read the first stanza in a way that equates "incompetence" with being "incorruptible and true", an association that rings especially true in the modern age, where real success sometimes appears to be impossible without dishonesty and corruption. Taking the medieval figure as an example, Matthews makes a very contemporary statement.

2.2.2 Canto III Continued: Crossing with Charon

Perhaps you found that you had to *queue*
For a ticket into hell,
Despite your sprays of laurel. (Mahon 1968: 4)

After passing through the gate of hell and seeing the Indifferent, Dante and Virgil reach the Acheron, where the souls queue, eagerly waiting to be ferried over to their designated region. At first, Charon, the ferryman, refuses to take the living Dante on board, but Virgil explains that there is an order from high above that Dante visit the souls of the dead. Dante the author cleverly avoids describing how he was able to cross the river and reach the otherworldly realm as a living man, by having himself lapse into unconsciousness and come to only after having arrived at the other bank. Pertile interprets Dante's fainting as a symbolic death, preparing Dante for the journey (Pertile 2007: 71).

Louis MacNeice's 'Charon' from his collection *The Burning Perch* (1963) is probably at the back of every contemporary Irish poet's mind. Here are the last few lines:

And there was the ferryman just as Virgil
And Dante had seen him. He looked at us coldly
And his eyes were dead and his hands on the oar
Were black with obols and varicose veins
Marbled his calves and he said to us coldly:
If you want to die you will have to pay for it.
(MacNeice 1988: 153)

MacNeice's crossing is set in modern-day London, and the river that has to be crossed is the Thames. Charon's hands, "black with obols", are paralleled with the conductor's hands, "black with money" in the first line. The bus journey through London merges into the crossing of the borders of reality, or, as Peter McDonald puts it, "to a place where natural and supernatural are no longer distinct" (McDonald 1998: 51).

In his essay on MacNeice's classicism, McDonald argues that the quality that defines the poetry of *The Burning Perch* lies in an ambiguous tension between MacNeice's Greek and Latin education and the undermining thereof. 'Charon', he writes, combines the "three elements of MacNeice's classicism – its influence on technique, its connection with religious

preoccupations, and its affinities with the darker side of the imagination in MacNeice's nightmare logic" (ibid.). Aside from the classical influences, however, MacNeice recreates the scene from *Inferno* III.⁵⁰ He takes Dante's and Virgil's perspective, arriving at the river and watching the ferryman come ashore. Like Dante, the speaker in MacNeice's poem is still alive, and Charon is aware of it, as is made apparent in the last line. "Just as Virgil and Dante had seen him" introduces the borrowed scene with an allusive simile, and then goes on to recreate, but also transform Charon's arrival. In MacNeice's description, Charon's "eyes were dead", whereas Dante writes about his fiery eyes, "li occhi avea di fiamme rote", and "con occhi di bragia" (*Inf.* III, 99 and 109). The atmosphere MacNeice creates is much darker, colder, and more quietly threatening than Dante's. The parallelisms "the conductor's hands were black with money", "the inspector's / Mind is black with suspicion", and the ferryman's "hands on the oar / Were black with obols" all point to a price that has to be paid, which is confirmed in the last line: "If you want to die you will have to pay for it". Even death costs a fee. In Dante's lines, however, no obol, no fee for the passage is mentioned.

Paul Muldoon's 'The Briefcase' from *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990) conflates the bus journey with the image of the passage into the underworld. Describing a particular moment during the poem's writing process, the poem is a meta-poem of sorts. It is written in the sonnet form, and its interesting rhyme scheme is as meticulously pursued as that in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)' (which, as stated above, also includes Charon's crossing). Every line has its corresponding end rhyme in another line, line 1 rhyming with line 14, line 2 rhyming with line 13 and so on until line 5. Line 6 and 7, however, form a cross rhyme a b a b with line 8 and 9, the whole poem thus creating a whirlpool, a suction towards the middle, illustrating what is imagined towards the end of the poem: the speaker is afraid that his briefcase, which contains "the first / inkling of this poem", "might slink into a culvert / and strike out along the East River / for the sea" (Muldoon 2001: 202). He had been waiting for a bus after having been hit by a heavy downpour, leaving the briefcase's "oxblood or liver / eelskin" soaked and "the sidewalk a raging torrent", which brings the Acheron to mind. While waiting, he restrains the impulse to search his "pockets for an obol", afraid the briefcase might drift away in the water. The poem's strength lies in its exaggeration, and in its ironic and self-mocking undertone.

⁵⁰ As Steve Ellis points out, MacNeice only referred to the *Inferno* in his works, the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* not being "rich enough in story", as he put it himself. Ellis suggests that the fact that MacNeice was not as deeply immersed in Dante as other Modernist poets, and that his relationship with Dante's work did not receive as much critical attention as theirs, can be attributed to MacNeice's scepticism towards literary and political authority (Ellis 1998: 128).

Significantly, the poem is dedicated to Seamus Heaney. In an essay illuminating the referential, seemingly competitive relationship between Heaney and Muldoon and interpreting their resulting poetic inter- (or counter-) action “as furtherance, not hindrance” (Corcoran 1998a: 580), Neil Corcoran applies Bloom’s theory to ‘The Briefcase’. Muldoon and Heaney, he argues, are in various ways both precursor and ephebe to each other, and to hold the briefcase at arm’s length and fear that it might swim away, its eelskin-fabric turning back into its living state, reflects “the fear of belatedness and subsequence and, still, of competition” (ibid. 575). The eel is one of the areas which are “off-limits”, as Muldoon himself puts it before his reading of ‘The Briefcase’ in honour of Heaney’s winning the Nobel Prize. If you pick up an eel and turn it over, he says, you will see “copyright Seamus Heaney” on the underside. In order to pre-empt smart comments about the poem being very Heaneyesque, he thus dedicated it to Heaney, and re-dedicating it to him at this occasion.⁵¹ As Corcoran suggests, the obol in Muldoon’s poem can be seen as a reversal of Heaney’s poem ‘Fosterage’ from the ‘Singing School’ sequence in *North*, where Heaney writes about his indebtedness to Michael McLaverty by using obol imagery in a more mythical and sacramental way, which makes Muldoon’s obol look cheap (Corcoran 1998a: 575). American idioms and setting set Muldoon’s poem apart from Heaney’s style, however, and may help to fend off the presumed anxiety (ibid. 576).

Lars-Håkan Svensson, in his essay on the poetic interrelations of Heaney and Muldoon, notes a deeper, existential level below the amusing surface of the poem, triggered by the word “obol”, which introduces the notion of mortality. “In artistic terms, the obol would seem to be the price the poet has to pay in order to achieve poetic immortality” (Svensson 2004: 30). He furthermore suggests that the poem implies the impossibility of defining “origin” and represents a questioning of identity (ibid. 30f). The poem’s last sentence, “By which I mean the ‘open’ sea”, invites musings about the inverted commas. For Svensson, they suggest that even the open sea is not open and therefore cannot symbolise true independence and purity of origin.

The message for Heaney, then, seems to be that even if the eel is allowed to obey its natural impulse to strike out for the sea and ultimately rejoin its supposed origin it is not a pure Irish eel but an eel that represents the kind of Irishness that Muldoon has opted for and writes about in *Madoc* – Irishness that includes America. (ibid.)

⁵¹ From the celebrations held in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham to mark Heaney's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RMaI29e-0U>

The prominent relationship between Heaney and Muldoon exemplifies the ambiguous nature of the associations, artistic and personal, between (Northern) Irish contemporaries, as Corcoran concludes:

The relationship between Muldoon and Heaney, which is ultimately one element, the most significant one, in a tissue of interrelationships among contemporary poets in Northern Ireland, offers evidence of an exemplary poetic community, in which the option is taken for a set of liberating oxymorons: generous wariness, satirical approbation, deviating recognition [...] (Corcoran 1998a: 579f)

Another Muldoon poem, or rather song, referring to the crossing of the Acheron is 'See If I Care' from the collection of song lyrics for his band Rackett, *General Admission* (2006). Muldoon has also recited it as a poem.⁵² This is the last of the poem's four stanzas:

She said you must be miffed
About crossing the Acheron
I said don't think I'm unmoved
Just that I've moved on
There's a fresh crop of ladies
Over here in Hades
So see if I care
See if I care (Muldoon 2006: 76)

The speaker's chorus-like insisting on his indifference to the woman's rejection throughout the whole poem suggests the opposite. Maybe he even cared so much that he committed suicide and therefore ended up in Hades. Hades here is juxtaposed with Eden in the first stanza, where the speaker retorted "see if I give a fig / I don't give any credence / To your idea of Eden" (ibid.), so it leaves an impression of hell, not of the general Greek term for the underworld, which accommodates all the dead, good or bad. "A fresh crop of ladies", rhyming with Hades (as in the Irish folk song 'Follow Me Up to Carlow'), in addition to its meaning "group" also condescendingly implies a victimisation of women, who can just be harvested like objects, an implication that functions as a kind of self-defence mechanism of the speaker's bruised ego. In the next chapter, Muldoon's precursor and ephebe Heaney is examined with regard to his use of Dantesque crossings.

⁵² A video of Muldoon reading 'Sideman' and 'See If I Care' at Café Improv in Princeton can be found here: <http://matthewsalomon.wordpress.com/2007/12/19/paul-muldoon-side-man-and-see-if-i-care/>

2.2.3 Heaney's Crossings

Poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly approached and constantly departed from, at which reader and writer undergo in their different ways the experience of being at the same time summoned and released. (Heaney 1988: 108)

In *Seeing Things* (1991), all of the original poems are “sandwiched between Virgil and Dante”, as Douglas Dunn puts it (Dunn 1994: 207). Heaney’s translation of *Aeneid*, Book VI,⁵³ lines 98-148, titled ‘The Golden Bough’, in which the Sibyl of Cumae tells Aeneas how to enter and return from the underworld, aptly opens a collection “concerned with a subjective reassessment of the visionary powers of poetry” (ibid.), with “the transition between different worlds, whether physical or imaginative” (O’Donoghue 1998: 248), with “the annihilating force of death” (Vendler 1998: 144), and with “the idea of a perpetual return to one’s origins” (Cavanagh 1999: 129). As Fumagalli points out, *Seeing Things* has an “intensely Dantesque flavour” (Fumagalli 2001: 226).

The title poem ‘Seeing Things’ consists of three parts written in iambic pentameter, unrhymed except for three identical rhymes (“water”, “lines”, “itself”) in part II. Part I recalls a crossing in a ferry from Inishbofin, an island off the coast of Connemara, presumably during a school trip. The speaker’s choice of words shows intense anxiety: the boat moves “Scaresomely”, everyone is “nervous”, “I panicked at the shiftiness and heft / of the craft itself”, “That quick response and buoyancy and swim - / Kept me in agony”, “riskily we fared into the morning” (Heaney 1991: 16). At the mercy of “our ferryman”, he feels as though he is looking down at the scene from another boat floating in the air. Part II describes carvings of Jesus’ baptism⁵⁴ on the stone façade of a cathedral coming alive, sunlight, water and air connecting the scene with the memory in part I. III is an “uncanny memory” of Heaney’s father (Heaney 2003: 358) confirming the dangerous aspect of water hinted at in I, the inherent possibility of drowning. After an accident with the horse-sprayer, Heaney’s father had almost drowned in the river, returning “scatter-eyed / And daunted, strange without his hat, / His step unguided, his ghosthood immanent” (Heaney 1991: 18). The speaker, realising the seriousness of the event, sees his father “face to face” here, echoing ‘The Golden Bough’, in which Aeneas prays for

⁵³ Fumagalli notes that in *Inferno* II, 32, Dante mentions Aeneas’ journey to the underworld to stress his own inadequacy of undertaking the same task (Fumagalli 2001: 231), as mentioned above, which links this translation of Virgil directly with Dante.

⁵⁴ Fumagalli suggests that for this baptism in part II of ‘Seeing Things’, Heaney must have had *Paradiso* XXX in mind, which I will return to in my *Paradiso*-chapter (Fumagalli 2001: 227).

“one face-to-face meeting with my dear father” (ibid. 1; cf. Corcoran 1998: 167). In this case, however, it is the father who returns from the dead alive. He was so close to not returning that he still resembles a ghost, the shock of it lingering in every limb.

‘A Retrospect’, written in iambic pentameter, is divided into two sections. Part I, in *terza rima*, or rather a slightly imperfect version thereof, remembers a flood, thereby taking up the recurring motif of water. The intensity of the wetness is beautifully evoked by terms such as “drains”, “spongy, ice-cold marsh”, “bog water seeping through the nettled weeds”, “mud”, “water-colour”, “full up to the lip”, “brim over”, “swim and flow”, “springs”, “river” (Heaney 1991: 42). In part II, an impression of young married life, the couple is said to take repeated trips to Glenshane Pass, the husband always quoting “Sir John Davies’ dispatch / About his progress through there from Dungannon / With Chichester in 1608:”

‘The wild inhabitants wondered as much
To see the King’s deputy, as Virgil’s ghosts
Wondered to see Aeneas alive in Hell.’ (Heaney 1991: 43)

In a change of perspective, Heaney is now the observer of the couple, whereas part I reads like a personal memory and is written in the first person singular. The doubly indirect allusion to the *Aeneid* through Sir John Davies’s words quoted by the husband further establishes the connections running through the collection, opened by the translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and concluded by the translation from Dante’s *Inferno*. In this case, however, using the famous words by Davies and putting them into the mouth of the husband, who repeats the quotation whenever they come upon Glenshane Pass, ridicules it, or at least euphemises it, in the context of the poem.⁵⁵ “They fell short of the sweetness that had lured them”; the trip is not as exciting and new as it had been the first time, or as it still is for the other unmarried couples coming to “lover country”.

The second part of *Seeing Things* is called ‘Squarings’ and consists of forty-eight twelve-lined poems, which are divided up into four sets of twelve poems each. The sets are called ‘Lightenings’, ‘Settings’, ‘Crossings’, and ‘Squarings’. Heaney explains that “lightening means ‘getting less heavy’, but it also means the process of illumination” (Heaney 2003: 354),

⁵⁵ Alan Robinson points to the significance of Sir John Davies being a Jacobean Englishman and suggests that by quoting him, Heaney seeks to “assert his equal right to the western cultural heritage, following Joyce’s advice in ‘Station Island’ XII that ‘That subject people stuff is a cod’s game’”, whereas earlier Heaney would have found this “politically suspect” (Robinson 1993: 48).

and it refers to “a flaring of the spirit at the moment before death” (O’Driscoll 2008: 321). The first poem of ‘Lightenings’, ‘i’, remembers a moment from Heaney’s childhood when he was staring into an old wallstead, “exposed to the outer reaches of imagined reality” (Heaney 2003: 355). In his reading at the International Dante Seminar in 2003, he describes the terror he felt back then when thinking about “General” and “Particular Judgement”:

The image is of the soul at the verge of eternity, the *animula*, waiting to be called to account. I had been taught the full Catechism as many of us were in the 1940s and 1950s, packed with information about virtues and vices, about mortal sin and sanctifying grace, and so on. (ibid.)

Asked about whether he worried that readers might not know what “Particular Judgement” was in an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, he answers in the negative, for “there’s a strict phonetic clip to it and I’d rely on that to suggest a moment of final spiritual reckoning.” (O’Driscoll 2008: 320). In the *Commedia*, Dante witnesses what particular judgement implies.

In ‘xxi’, the ironic stance and cynicism resulting from the shattered faith of people having to face a constant threat of terrorism and violence is reflected. Ironically, the experience of firing a rifle is here metaphorically expressed in Christian terms such as “as it was in the beginning”, “sin against eternal life”, “new light” (cf. Corcoran 1998: 180). Heaney qualifies the impression the volume might give of a rejection of the afterlife and an agnostic mindset: “It’s still susceptible to the numinous.” (O’Driscoll 2008: 319) But this was said in hindsight. It has to be considered that, when writing *Seeing Things*, Heaney’s relationship with Catholicism may have been more critical, more questioning than it is years later when he has come to terms with his own beliefs, having been able to detach himself from his upbringing “oversupplied” with religion through a process of distancing and poetic analysis (ibid.: 318).

‘xxv’, the first poem in the ‘Crossings’ section, brings the reader back to Canto I of the *Inferno*:

I took a turn and met the fox stock-still,
Face-to-face in the middle of the road.
Wildness tore through me as he dipped and wheeled

In a level-running tawny breakaway.

[...]

I have to cross back through that startled iris. (Heaney 1991: 83)

This recalls the *ox-eye daisies* (only the “f” is missing, and the fox’s “astonished eye” is foreshadowed) and the wild dandelions in the middle of the road to school in ‘The Schoolbag’, but also the “face-to-face meeting with my dear father” from ‘The Golden Bough’ and part III of ‘Seeing Things’. With “Face-to-face in the middle of the road”, Heaney does not only quote Virgil and Dante but also himself, which he is obviously aware of, and which gives the line a self-mocking touch. “Level-running” refers to the fox’s movement, but it also implies that fox and speaker are at the same level, in the same situation in this particular moment, since the “narrator crosses [...] into momentary but total apprehension of a feral other, through the eye of a fox surprised on the road” (Gatrell 1999: 136). The speaker too, in this instance, wants to break away from his life as a modern human and return to the basics, to his instincts and desires, to a natural and primitive state of being. Crossing back through the fox’s “startled iris” is the rite of passage that initiates the process of reversed evolution imagined in the poem.

Recalling the rifle symbol in ‘xxi’, ‘xxvi’ features soldiers having long overcome the fascination with their weapons, “their gaze abroad / In dreams out of the body-heated metal” (Heaney 1991: 84). In what Corcoran calls a “quasi-Dantean image” (Corcoran 1998: 180), the speaker of the poem, driving behind the soldiers’ truck, tries to “concentrate / On the space that flees between like a speeded-up / Meltdown of souls from the straw-flecked ice of hell” (Heaney 1991: 84). There is no crossing back. By putting flecks of straw on the ice of hell, this hell becomes a particularly Northern Irish hell defined by the situation described. ‘xxvii’ strongly recalls the last section of ‘Station Island’, where Joyce’s ghost walks “straight as a rush upon his ash plant”:

‘Look for a man with an ash plant on the boat,’
 My father told his sister setting out
 For London, ‘and stay near him all night

 And you’ll be safe.’ Flow on, flow on,
 The journey of the soul with its soul guide
 And the mysteries of dealing-men with sticks! (Heaney 1991: 85)

It also refers back to ‘The Ash Plant’ from the first part of *Seeing Things*, in which the shade of “the quoted judge” “finds the phantom limb / Of an ash plant in his grasp, which steadies him”, and he can “wield the stick like a silver bough” (ibid. 19), alluding to the golden bough Aeneas is instructed to pluck. Heaney explains in an interview with O’Driscoll that ‘The Ash

Plant' is set in The Wood, where his family lived after moving out of his childhood home Mossbawn, and "imagines what my father saw from his upstairs bedroom window" (O'Driscoll 2008: 25), so the "quoted judge" is his father, the cattle dealer who "was a great judge of cattle" (ibid. 58). The three-lined poem immediately following 'The Ash Plant', 'I.1.87', takes the symbol up again:

Dangerous pavements.
But I face the ice this year
With my father's stick. (Heaney 1991: 20)

Heaney's father died in 1986, but he left him some clues about how to walk on. The memory of his father's ash plant is taken up again in another three-line poem, 'The Strand' from *The Spirit Level* (1996):

The dotted line my father's ashplant made
On Sandymount Strand
Is something else the tide won't wash away. (Heaney 1996: 73)

In this inter-referential web, the father (figure), the figures of the "soul guide" and poetic guide for the poet pilgrim whose *diritta via* is *smarrita* (in 'Station Island' personified by James Joyce), the "fosterer" (see 'Station Island' section V) and "judge" as well as the "ferryman" facilitating the "crossing", are all interwoven. In 'xxviii', another childhood memory, a slide made of ice symbolises a promising passageway towards the light. Ice recurs nearly as often as water, and is of course a form of it. 'xxix' with its "threshold fatal" (Heaney 1991: 87) confirms the book's theme of crossing the border into the realm of death and the imaginary. 'xxxii' speaks for itself by embracing the main themes established by now:

Running water never disappointed.
Crossing water always furthered something.
Stepping stones were stations of the soul.

A kesh could mean the track some called a *causey*
Raised above the wetness of the bog,
Or the causey where it bridged old drains and streams.

It steadies me to tell these things. Also
I cannot mention keshes or the ford
Without my father's shade appearing to me

On a path towards sunset, eyeing spades and clothes
That turfcutters stowed perhaps or souls cast off
Before they crossed the log that spans the burn. (ibid. 90)

'xxxiv'⁵⁶ begins with a quotation from Yeats: "Yeats said, *To those who see spirits, human skin / For a long time afterwards appears more coarse*" (ibid. 92). As Heaney acknowledges, it comes from one of Yeats's letters to Lady Dorothy Wellesley and is not an exact quotation (O'Driscoll 2008: 324). In the lines following, Heaney transfers Yeats's ghostly observation onto the encounter with a passenger in a bus from San Francisco Airport to Berkley who, "Vietnam-bound, [...] could have been one of the newly dead come back" with his "otherworldly brow" (Heaney 1991: 92). The traumatic experiences awaiting the young man and the difficulty of adapting to his former life on returning are implied. Heaney recalls the situation with the boy in the bus:

He looked doomed and there was a pallor on his brow, probably the result of a hangover from a party the previous night in Arkansas or wherever; it gave him that ghost-who-walks look. I'll never forget it. A crossing, for sure. The airport bus as death coach. (O'Driscoll 2008: 324)

The bus as transfer into another world, or the otherworld, is reminiscent of 'Charon' and 'The Briefcase'. Even if the soldier is alive upon his return, after having crossed back into his old world, something inside him will presumably have died and life might become a living hell. Helen Vendler refers this changed perception of life to Heaney after losing his parents: "once the dead are admitted into consciousness, the 'otherworldly brow' is the result, borne like an uninterpretable sign – comparable to Hawthorne's minister's black veil – among one's fellows." (Vendler 1998: 150)

"Disguised into a dream moment", 'xxxvi' is Heaney's memory about returning from a civil rights march in Newry, Co. Down in 1972, in the wake of Bloody Sunday. Heaney remembers taking part in the protest march with Michael Longley, and while walking back with him through Newry, they were surrounded by the police, "flashing their torches, a rare

⁵⁶ Heaney himself calls this poem and the following 'xxxvi' "little dantesqueries" at his reading at the Dante Seminar (Heaney 2003: 357).

sense of menace in the air” (Heaney 2003: 357). In the poem, their situation in this threatening atmosphere is compared to Dante’s crossing of the Acheron, the scene translated at the end of the collection in ‘The Crossing’:

And yes, my friend, we too walked through a valley.
Once. In darkness. With all the streetlamps off.
As danger gathered and the march dispersed.

Scene from Dante, made more memorable
By one of his head-clearing similes—
Fireflies, say, since the policemen’s torches

Clustered and flicked and tempted us to trust
Their unpredictable, attractive light.
We were like herded shades who had to cross

And did cross, in a panic, to the car
Parked as we’d left it, that gave when we got in
Like Charon’s boat under the faring poets. (Heaney 1991: 94)

The torches of the policemen are compared to fireflies in a Dantesque “head-clearing simile”. The simile referred to appears in Canto XXVI of the *Inferno*, where Dante, when looking into the eighth pit of the eighth circle of hell, uses the image of a cluster of fireflies to describe the flames in which the sinners are trapped (cf. Fumagalli 2001: 246). This is Dante’s simile in Ciaran Carson’s translation:

Suppose a peasant, resting on the hillside –
in that season when the beaming face
of him who lights the world least cares to hide,

when gnats buzz in and take the midges’ place –
looks down the vale and sees the fireflies teem
among his vines, perhaps, or by the winepress:

so numerous did the eighth ditch gleam
with tongues of flame, as I become aware,
when first I gazed into that open seam. (Carson 2002: 180)

Here too is the “dark valley”, to be crossed by two poets. Fumagalli suggests that, like fireflies, the torches in Heaney’s poem and the flames in Dante’s lines convey a tempting but unpredictable danger “like Ulysses’ attraction to ‘the deep and open sea’” (Fumagalli 2001: 246). With Heaney’s own simile, “herded shades”, resonates his father’s cattle business, now long extinct; therefore the cattle too are a herd of shades in Heaney’s memory. Heaney confesses to a slight inaccuracy concerning his reference to the crossing with Charon:

Dante doesn’t tell us that Charon’s boat sinks a bit when Dante boards it. But in canto VIII of the *Inferno*, when he’s crossing the Styx, Dante remarks that a human body weighs the boat down perceptibly. I’m afraid Charon just happened to fit the scansion better.
(Heaney 2003: 358)

Thus in order to adhere to the blank verse he preferred Charon over Phlegyas. The fact that Charon is the more familiar of the ferrymen in the underworld is presumably another reason for his choice. O’Donoghue notes the poets’ entering the car as an echo of the boys entering the boat with its “shiftiness and heft” in part I of ‘Seeing Things’ (O’Donoghue 1998: 249).⁵⁷ On a concluding note, in ‘xxxvi’, Heaney cleverly combines three cantos from *Inferno*. He alludes first to Canto XXVI (“Scene from Dante”, “fireflies”), then adapts it (“the policemen’s torches / Clustered and flicked and tempted us to trust / Their unpredictable, attractive light”), then transforms Canto VIII (the car / [...] that gave when we got in”) before alluding to Canto III with a comparison (“Like Charon’s boat”). Heaney obviously associated these poetic borrowings with the actual event only after it happened, as Catharine Malloy suggests. “In retrospect, the event is magnified, clarified by the language of the historical moment, the language of poetry, the language of the spirit.” (Malloy 1996: 171)

‘xlii’ tells of “apparitions” of the dead dwelling in the place where they once lived and worked, “not knowing how far the country of the shades has been pushed back” (Heaney 1991: 102). In the poem, Corcoran observes an affection for the dead that lacks any trace of “Christian consolation, and its ‘shades’ are kin, in the pathos of their incomprehension and abandonment, to those of the Virgilian underworld” (Corcoran 1998: 177f). According to Corcoran, ‘xlv’ adapts in Heaney’s own, modified way the concept of Dante’s *contrapasso*, assigning to every sin in life its according punishment in the afterlife. The ordinariness of the

⁵⁷ I disagree with O’Donoghue calling the scene “a witty conflation of Dante and Virgil” and therefore “a striking instance of the way Heaney takes *Inferno* and *Aeneid* VI as a common source” (O’Donoghue 1998: 249). This view might stem from overlooking the conflation of Canto III and VIII. Certainly Dante and Virgil are both important sources for *Seeing Things*, but ‘xxxvi’ appears purely Dantesque to me.

house-dust at the end of the poem ironically undercuts the metaphysical: “a judge who comes between them and the sun / In a pillar of radiant house-dust” (Heaney 1991: 105).

In recreating, with a difference, the Dantean ‘contrapasso’, the poem is doing what several others in the sequence also do in more minor ways: they frequently reactivate traditional Christian and classical associations in ways that join together secular and spiritual significance or enlarge the apparently routine or trivial beyond its usual bounds” (Corcoran 1998: 180).

O’Donoghue comes to a similar conclusion and argues that the Catholic model, like the pilgrimage in *Station Island*, “acts more as a supporting poetic structure, like Joyce’s *Odyssey*, rather than as a system of faith. The faith of *Seeing Things* is one whose mysteries are world-based things” (O’Donoghue 1998: 250). Nevertheless, if the Catholic model is the supporting poetic structure, it is not necessarily meant to undermine the narrative, its content and implications, but is also part of it.

‘The Crossing’, Heaney’s translation of *Inferno* III, lines 82-129, finally takes up and gives a conclusive meaning to themes, motifs, and concerns recurring throughout the volume, primarily water, crossing, terror, fear of death, judgment, afterlife, transcendence. As a whole, the collection constitutes a unity of poems interlinked through references, similarities, allusions, and recurring words or images. The translation itself dates back to the early eighties, when Heaney translated the first three cantos of the *Inferno*, which were finally published in 1993 (cf. Fumagalli 2001: 260). When Virgil assures Charon that a higher will allows Dante to cross the Acheron in spite of being alive, Charon in Heaney’s translation “shut his grizzled jaws” (Heaney 1991: 111). The words in the original are “fuor quete le lanose gote” (*Inf.* III, 97), which means, translated literally, “the woolly cheeks kept quiet”. Interestingly, Ciaran Carson renders it “shut his grizzled jaws” (Carson 2002: 19), which might not be a coincidence but a deliberate borrowing from Heaney. Heaney’s Charon “herds” all the lost souls in, whereas Dante writes “tutte le raccoglie” (*Inf.* III, 110), which means, among other things, “to harvest”, but not “to herd”, so Heaney’s father’s (ghostly) cattle are back in the picture. The translation is not very unfaithful to the original, since both verbs refer to farm labour. Perhaps in imitation of Heaney, Carson’s Charon “beckons them in urgent droves” (Carson 2002: 20), which can also mean herds of animals. Heaney’s translation ends with the lines:

No good spirits ever pass this way
And therefore, if Charon objects you,
You should understand well what his words imply. (Heaney 1991: 113)

What Charon's words imply is that Dante will not end up in hell, for he will be one of the "good spirits". Ending his book with these lines, Heaney might want to imply the same for his own fate, and might want to stress the possibility of visiting hell and returning safely (cf. Fumagalli 2001: 247), as the opening translation from the *Aeneid* suggested as well. Conor McCarthy, however, suggests that Charon's words convey a more negative message for Heaney's book:

After the confident opening and all these subsequent versions of poetic boundary-crossing, they suggest that the desire to make a physical crossing, the desire of the living to speak with the departed, must still at the end face a strong rebuke at the crossing-point.
(McCarthy 2008: 61)

This might be an instance of reading Heaney's (and perhaps by extension Dante's) crossings slightly too literally: if anything, *Seeing Things* is proof of a possible crossing of the borders of the real, and of some form of communication with the dead, albeit in literary form. Even if Heaney's father does not directly talk to him from the grave, writing about him engages Heaney in a continuing conversation with him. This processing gradually changes his perception of his father and thus their relationship. The friction has to be borne of the "double capacity" of knowing one's boundaries, even embracing them in an appreciation for security, and at the same time accepting the challenge and attraction of what is beyond oneself. "A good poem allows you to have your feet on the ground and your head in the air simultaneously" (Heaney 1998: 622). And good poets, in order to express their double capacity, build on the foundations other poets have lain. As Alan Robinson puts it:

What unites Heaney and Sir John Davies, or Heaney and MacNeice in their allusions to the figure of Charon, is their common reliance on the resources of the literary tradition and of the language itself. The literary source becomes an imaginative resource; its continuing presence down the centuries is one way in which history repeats itself in recurrent structures of feeling.
(Robinson 1993: 48)

History repeats itself in the presence of dead poets like Virgil, Dante, and MacNeice, and their accounts of entering the land of the dead.

There are, of course, versions of Homer, too. Michael Longley, for example, in his haunting poem ‘Anticleia’ from his collection *Gorse Fires* (1991) appropriates Odysseus’ meeting with his dead mother in Hades.⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, the collection is dedicated to the memory of his parents. Also, it includes an elegy for Philip Larkin called ‘Jug Band’. Based on the tradition of the great predecessors, these poetical meetings with the dead help contemporary poets deal with their loss: “here is your mother and even here in Hades / You could comfort each other in a shuddering embrace” (Longley 2006: 183); the physical embrace is denied, however. ‘Headstone’, from *The Ghost Orchid* (1995), is another poem about his parents. “I want to ask him [...] about the towpath / that follows the Styx”; “As though her ashes had been its cargo when the ice-boat / Was rocked [...], / I can hear in the frosty air above Acheron ice cracking”; “The wreck at Thallabaun [...] is my blue-print / For the ship of death” (ibid. 232). After the allusions to Greek myth, the poem receives a distinctly personal and Irish touch with the Irish Thallabaun as the place of inspiration in the closing stanza. The “ship of death” is an Irish one. Longley is fully aware of the enabling power of the literary tradition he draws from:

What Homer did for me was open up areas of my own experience which I found difficult to write about hitherto. I have snatched from the narrative flow moments of lyric intensity in which to echo my own concerns, both personal and political. Moments in the *Odyssey* chimed with emotions that I would have found almost impossible to deal with otherwise: heartbreak, paranoia, bitterness, hatred, fear. Homer gave me a new emotional and psychological vocabulary. (Longley 2010)

In a different approach resembling more the act of dictionary and encyclopaedia research than narrative adaptation, these myths and traditions also give Ciaran Carson a new creative vocabulary. His ‘Je reviens’ from *For All We Know* (2008) is about the perfume of the same name, which “GIs in Paris would buy for their girlfriends / as a promise that they would return” (Carson 2008: 57).

It is based on *narcissus poeticus*, a native
of the underworld attractive to ghostly reflections.

Iris root is an essential ingredient, Iris
a sister of the Harpies, and messenger of the gods,

⁵⁸ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin revises the same story from *The Odyssey* in her poem “Odysseus Meets the Ghosts of the Women” from *The Second Voyage* (1986). In her version, Odysseus does not allow the women to drink from the blood that would enable them to speak to him. Sheila C. Conboy suggests that by stressing the women’s suffering, Ní Chuilleanáin “shows that in Odysseus’ eyes women have value only in their relations to men” (Conboy 1990: 68).

who ferries the souls of dead women to the underworld,
who personifies the rainbow, the iris of the eye. (ibid.)

Narcissus, attracted to his own reflection, drowned and was turned into what might have been a Poet's Daffodil as a punishment for his vanity. It is also the flower Gaia grew for Hades to lure Persephone into the Underworld with its tempting scent (cf. Baumann 1993: 69). Iris is the sister of the Harpies, who, as we learn from Carson's *Inferno* translation, "are pests" (Carson 2002: 84). She guides the souls of the dead across the rainbow into the land of eternal peace (cf. Baumann 1993: 65), but there is no mention of Iris ferrying the souls of dead women to the underworld in Greek mythology, so Carson might have invented it to present a female equivalent to Charon or Hermes; in the poem 'Peace', Hermes is characterised, among other things, as the "conductor of dead souls to the underworld", in an encyclopaedic manner comparable to 'Je reviens' (Carson 2008: 105). After the erotic description of an Afghan rug, 'Je reviens' ends "with helicopters, guns and tanks" (ibid. 58), staples in Carson's frame of reference. Death, with which in Carson's Northern Irish reality helicopters, guns and tanks are automatically associated, inspires suggestions of an afterlife, illustrated by mythological figures and motifs.

2.2.4 Kinsella's Cantos

Kinsella's long poem 'Downstream' from the collection *Downstream* (1962) is, in Alex Davis's words, a poetic journey "primarily concerned with the possibility of art after Auschwitz" (Davis 2002: 62), and according to Thomas H. Jackson explores human consciousness set against a threatening natural world (Jackson 1995: 25). It consists of 94 lines divided into five sections of slightly different length and style. The third, fourth and fifth sections are written in *terza rima*. The *terza rima* is one indication that the poem is not solely based on Ezra Pound's *Cantos* but also directly draws from Dante. In "Envy and Identifications", emphasising the power of the *Commedia*'s deeply rooted influence on the creative process of a writer, Heaney also quotes from 'Downstream'. He states that the *terza rima* helps the poem "to link the boat trip downstream through the Irish midlands with the descent begun in the middle of the dark Tuscan wood", the influence not being restricted to the formal aspect but including the "mythic structure" (Heaney 1985: 6f). Jackson describes Kinsella's poet-speaker, or the position he assumes in his poetry, as "something between the Dante of the *Commedia* and the rather spectral narrator of *The Waste Land* or Pound's

mercurial narrator in the *Cantos*” (Jackson 1995: 136f). Whether the influence in ‘Downstream’ is Pound or Dante is not entirely clear but it can obviously be both. The capitalised allusion to “the Cantos”, however, suggests that Pound is an important medium for the development of the Dantesque scenario (cf. Davis 2001: 38):

We drifted in peace, and talked of poetry.
I opened the Cantos; and chose the silken kings,
Luminous with crisis, waging war
Among the primal clarities. Their names dying
Behind us in the dusk. (Kinsella 2001: 47)⁵⁹

According to Davis and Rosenberg, this plausibly alludes to Pound’s ‘Chinese *Cantos*’, “a monologic digest of imperial Chinese history” (Davis 2001: 39). Davis points out that a couple of collections later, however, Kinsella’s poetry comes closer to William Carlos Williams’s “qualified use of the Pound legacy” than to Pound himself. He finds the allusion to Pound in ‘Downstream’ already “distinctly ambivalent”, as the Chinese emperors’ luminosity is gradually obscured by the “crepuscular setting” (ibid. 53):

I closed the book,
The gathering shades beginning to deceive,
And wiped the dewy cover on my sleeve. (Kinsella 2001: 48)

After that, the book is not mentioned again in the narrative of the poem.

The speaker, like Dante, has a companion, whom he calls “My co-shadow”. As Harmon notes, “the voyagers resemble Dante and Virgil” (Harmon 2008: 17). The memory of a decaying corpse that was once found in the area conjures up “the cold of hell” and triggers thoughts and images about the atrocities of the Holocaust, “the haunt of swinish man”, where “rodents ply, / Man-rumped, sow-headed, busy with whip and maul / Among nude herds of the damned” (Kinsella 2001: 49). The “nude herds” of the dead (quite possibly at the back of Heaney’s

⁵⁹ The version of ‘Downstream’ I refer to is from the *Collected Poems* from 2001. It should be mentioned that Kinsella has continuously revised the poem since it appeared in 1962. Justin Quinn even suggests a deliberate weakening of the allusion to Dante in the course of the revision process: “The poem began as *terza rima*, with a strong obvious allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*, and in the most recent versions, Kinsella has tried to make that allusion weaker, both through typographic rearrangements and through excisions and changes in the rhyme scheme. Kinsella has stressed the importance of process and incompleteness” (Quinn 2008: 106). This raises the question of whether Kinsella perhaps felt uncomfortable about being one of the many poets alluding to Dante, and about being tied down to the use of Dante in Heaney’s essay, for example; it is possible that the constant revisions serve to ensure his work’s originality.

mind when he wrote about “herded shades”) are temporarily combined in a seemingly peaceful image with the “silver hordes” of the stars, reflecting Kinsella’s striving for order in a world of chaos, but also the transitory nature of that order:

Another moment, to the starlit eye,
The slow, downstreaming dead, it seemed, were blended

One with those silver hordes, and briefly shared
Their order, glittering. (ibid. 50)

On a formal level, further undercutting the possibility of order, many of the lines, especially of the sections not written in *terza rima*, are cut in half: there is a caesura in the middle of the line, but the second part of the poetic line only starts in the next typographical line, finishing the pentameter. The only time this happens within the *terza rima* structure, i.e. in the last section, it ruins the otherwise perfect *terza rima*:

- The Mill Hole, its rocky fathoms fed
On moss and pure depth and the cold fin
Turning its heart. The river bed

Called to our flesh, under the watery skin.
Our shell trembled in answer.

A quiet hiss;

Something shifted in sleep; a milk-white breast.
A shift of wings betrayed with feathery kiss
A soul of white with darkness for a nest. (ibid.)

This rupture foreshadows the disappointment at the end of the poem. Immediately after the imperfect tercet, a swan⁶⁰ appears, “a soul of white”, bearing “the night so tranquilly”, leading into the glittering image quoted above. The hellish imagery recedes to give way to an at least purgatorial one, recalling the last line of Dante’s *Inferno*, “e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle” (*Inf.* XXXIV, 139). In Harmon’s words, “the adventurer, Dante-like in his descent into the depths towards the discovery of the evil that men do, moves through and towards insight” (Harmon 2008: 19). By the end of the poem, the Dantesque intensity of the speaker’s dream-

⁶⁰ It is perhaps interesting to note that in his sonnet ‘Leda and the Swan’, W.B. Yeats employs the same line split in the first of the tercets. In Yeats’s poem, however, if the two split parts of the line are counted as one line, the tercet is complete. To leave out the third line surely is a conscious corruption on Kinsella’s part.

like imaginations outweighs any effect Pound's book might have had in the first section of the poem. On a structural level, Kinsella appropriates Dante in various ways in 'Downstream': indirectly, by alluding to Pound's *Cantos*; directly, by formally imitating the *terza rima*, and by adapting the guided journey into the land of the dead to his own hallucinatory boat trip. Nevertheless, as all perfect order might be transitory or illusory to the modern understanding, the "barrier of rock" the boat hits in the last lines is "blotting heaven", qualifying the hope that has arisen from the silver stars and the white swan (cf. Harmon 2008: 19).

2.2.5 Boland's Journey to the Underworld

Eavan Boland, born in Dublin in 1944, has won numerous awards for her poetry and is Professor of English at Stanford University, dividing her time as wife, mother, poet, prose writer, co-editor, and teacher between Ireland and the US. Her long poem 'The Journey' from the collection *The Journey* (1987) is dedicated to Elizabeth Ryle, and starts with a quotation from the *Aeneid*, Book VI, with the "loud wailing of infant souls weeping" at the entrance to the underworld. As Sabina J. Müller points out, the passage in the *Aeneid* Boland quotes is "a mere aside" in Virgil's epic, but for Boland, the babies become the centre of the poem (Müller 2007: 137; 139). The poem, consisting of 24 partly rhyming quatrains in pentameter, begins in a contemporary setting, the poet-speaker's own messy room, where "the book beside me / lay open at the page Aphrodite // comforts Sappho in her love's duress" (Boland 2008: 147). Müller suggests that the book alluded to is Sappho's only complete poem, sometimes called 'Ode to Aphrodite' (Müller 2007: 137). Soon Sappho arises from the book and leads the speaker away, "down down down without so much as / ever touching down but always, always / with a sense of mulch beneath us, / the way of stairs winding down to a river" (Boland 2008: 148). The use of repetitions the moment the figure of Sappho manifests is striking: the stanza following her appearance starts every line with the anaphora "and", followed by the repetition of "down" and "always" quoted above. The repetitions function like a lulling chant marking the entrance into the otherworld: ⁶¹

⁶¹ Sabina J. Müller notes that Boland's use of repetition and enjambement is an imitation of Sappho's style in 'Ode to Aphrodite' (Müller 2007: 138).

and down we went, again down
until we came to a sudden rest
beside a river in what seemed to be
an oppressive suburb of the dawn. (ibid.)

Having descended, the speaker becomes aware of the shadows of women and children, and Sappho advises her not to judge them but to acknowledge their similar past, “like you [...] picking up / teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets” (ibid. 149). Yet there is the difference of her not being dead yet, and thus communication fails: ⁶²

I stood fixed. I could not reach or speak to them.
Between us was the melancholy river,
the dream water, the narcotic crossing
and they had passed over it, its cold persuasions. (ibid.)

The two short sentences in the first line of the quatrain reflect the speaker’s abrupt halt at the borderline, and her powerlessness in view of the women’s fate. The river separates the lost souls from the living speaker, who is left with the responsibility to change women’s possibilities in the world above. Sappho explains that what the speaker has seen cannot be expressed in words, but only communicated through love. “I have brought you here so you will know forever / the silences in which are our beginnings” (ibid. 150). Müller observes the different use of the topos of ineffability in Dante and Boland. While Dante uses it for the beatific vision in *Paradiso*, Boland employs it in view of the suffering of women and children (Müller 2007: 140).

Boland’s undertaking in the poem is to break the silence, and what is more, she claims a classical feature of male literary tradition for herself by visiting the dead and returning (cf. Conboy 1990: 65). Like Dante, upon her return with her poet guide she sees the stars again - “we emerged under the stars of heaven” (Boland 2008: 149) - having escaped the “oppressive suburb of the dawn”. Although not crossing the river (which of course is left out of Dante’s account as well), she crosses the threshold to insight and poetic wisdom on her journey. From a gender-based perspective, Sheila C. Conboy summarises that Boland’s and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s poetry

⁶² Müller suggests that the women cannot speak of their history because they have crossed the river Lethe and therefore do not remember anything, and that Boland denies them any means of miraculously restoring their memory to illustrate “one of her main concerns: data that is lost or has never been recorded in the first place [...] cannot be satisfactorily recovered.” (Müller 2007: 140)

aspires to recover the lost voices of Irish women whose real historical presence has been shrouded by romanticized representations of “Mother Ireland.” The poets’ discovered language utters the hidden power of domestic life to make heroic images of femininity.

(Conboy 1990: 65)

Furthermore, by choosing Sappho as her female poet guide, Boland “addresses the woman writer’s problem of matrilineage” (ibid. 70), which is absent from male-centred approaches such as Bloom’s “parricidal scenario” (Ricks 2002: 5).⁶³ Sappho calls the poet-speaker her daughter, just as Virgil calls Dante his son (cf. Müller 2007: 140). Choosing Virgil as a poet guide, as in Dante’s case, or Joyce, as in Heaney’s case, might in addition to reverence and admiration always include a gesture of empowerment on the part of the later poet: putting words into the mouth of the predecessor that are actually his own. In contrast, Boland’s choice of Sappho seems to be based more on a desire of the recovery and reinstatement of the authority of the ancient poet. She imitates Sappho’s style, whereas Heaney does not imitate Joyce in ‘Station Island’. It suits Boland’s concern for the lost voices of women that most of Sappho’s poetry is lost.

The fact that Boland’s poem ends with the words “and I wept” does not necessarily make for a particularly female ending. After all, Dante weeps upon seeing the pain of the sufferers in Canto III:

Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l’aere senza stelle,
per ch’io al cominciar ne lagrimai. (*Inf.* III, 22-24)

Boland’s focus on women and infants in her poem can be described as *tessera*, completion and antithesis. As in Virgil, infants are barely mentioned in Dante; they linger in limbo, but his canto set in limbo focuses on his pre-Christian male predecessors.

Boland appropriates the journey to the underworld in various other poems. In ‘The Bottle Garden’, for example, she also combines Dante and Virgil:

⁶³ Müller writes, “as the archetypal woman poet and precursor, she constitutes the counterpart to Virgil, Dante’s guide in the *Commedia*”, and “Boland’s speaker is a woman and poet; she therefore requires a literary foremother as guide.” (Müller 2007: 138, 145) I am ambivalent about this polarising gender view, which underlies Müller’s entire study. After all, Aeneas also has a female underworld guide, the Sibyl of Cumae, in the *Aeneid*, and I do not think female poets necessarily require female literary predecessors in order to write good poetry.

And in my late thirties, past the middle way,
I can say how did I get here?
I hardly know the way back, still less forward.

[...]

here I am a gangling schoolgirl
in the convent library, the April evening outside,
reading the *Aeneid* as the room darkens
to the underworld of the Sixth Book –

the Styx, the damned, the pity and
the improvised poetic of imprisoned meanings (Boland 2008: 137f)

Past the *mezzo del cammin*, the poet feels none the wiser and again associates the descent into the underworld with the quest for poetic insight. For Müller, ‘The Bottle Garden’ illustrates Boland’s use of the underworld as a place where “it is difficult to raise one’s voice and make oneself heard” as a woman and a woman poet, which she attributes to Boland’s “cultural inheritance, constituted by ‘fractures of language, country and womanhood’” (Müller 2007: 142). As Müller points out, the memory of reading the sixth book of the *Aeneid* takes place in April, the time of Easter, which is when Dante’s journey takes place (ibid. 146n). In ‘The Latin Lesson’ from *Outside History* (1990), forming nine similarly shaped stanzas, “Easter light” is “in the convent garden” (cf. ibid.), the syllabus has “Today the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid*”, and the girls discover

the pathway to hell and that these
shadows in their shadow-bodies,
chittering and mobbing
on the far

shore, signalling their hunger for
the small usefulness of a life, are
the dead. And how
before the bell

will I hail the black keel and flatter the dark
boatman and cross the river and still
keep a civil tongue
in my head? (Boland 2008: 173)

The difficulty of “keeping a civil tongue in my head” in the confined walls of the convent again expresses the speaker’s unease about the subliminal presence of suppressed words, the female silences of which her version of Sappho spoke. The image of the crossing is a very active one; the speaker imagines “hail[ing] the black keel” like a taxi, and she intends to “flatter the dark boatman” to be taken on board. The crossing, associated with gaining insight, is a mysterious, yet desirable undertaking.

Part two of the twelve poem sequence ‘Outside History’, titled ‘A False Spring’, evokes “spring”, even though it may be “false”. The poem returns to the memory of the young woman “studying / Aeneas in the underworld”, and to the theme of suppressed speech, of not being heard, when Aeneas’ “old battle-foes [...] called and called and called / only to have it be / a yell of shadows, an O vanishing in / the polished waters / and the topsy-turvy seasons of hell” (Boland 2008: 177f).⁶⁴ The speaker fails to communicate with her earlier self; “narcissi, opening too early, are all I find” when she is looking for her. Narcissi, as noted above, grow in the underworld too. In part three, ‘The Making of an Irish Goddess’, “Ceres went to hell”, “but I need time [...] to make the same descent.” It is a “March evening”, and the speaker carries on the agony of “mothers / whose souls [...] went straight to hell” while she is looking for her daughter (ibid. 178f). Boland returns to the story of Ceres and her “daughter lost in hell” in ‘The Pomegranate’ from *In a Time of Violence* (1994).⁶⁵ The speaker remembers that when first reading the story, she “was / an exiled child in the crackling dusk of / the underworld”; later, as a grown woman “searching for my daughter”, she “was Ceres” (ibid. 215).⁶⁶

In her comparative study of the use of myth in Heaney’s and Boland’s poetry, Sabina Müller conclusively distinguishes different functions of the underworld for the two contemporary poets: “For Heaney, it is a place where he can remember the past and grapple with his literary forefathers; for Boland, however, it is a burial-place of memory, where she becomes aware of the absence of female precursors.” (Müller 2007: 149) In his more recent work, Heaney also increasingly uses the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. For example, his translation of lines 349-383,

⁶⁴ Boland uses this scene again in the poem ‘Love’ from *In a Time of Violence* (1994). The speaker identifies with the hero’s “comrades in hell” whose “mouths opened and their voices failed” when she addresses her husband, who she sees “as a hero in a text”: “But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me. / You walk away and I cannot follow.” (Boland 2008: 214)

⁶⁵ For an in-depth study of Boland’s use of the Ceres myth and the mother-daughter story, see Müller 2007.

⁶⁶ Harry Clifton’s poem ‘The Black Door’ might have been inspired by Boland. The woman in the poem might someday escape through the open “black door / At the end of the yard” into an otherworld. “Something tries to come through - / Child-cries, weather, illusion”, and the swallows flying through the black door are “Little Persephones / Bringing themselves to birth / In their own underworld” (Clifton 2007: 167f).

telling the story of Palinurus, appeared in 2008 in the poetry journal *Parnassus*, and in his collection *Human Chain* (2010) the poems ‘The Riverbank Field’ and ‘Route 110’ refer to it.

‘The Riverbank Field’ consists of eight unrhymed tercets and adapts *Aeneid* VI, 704-15, 748-51, which is specified at the end of the poem. Heaney alters those lines from Virgil and transfers them to his home landscape in Northern Ireland, incorporating quotations from the Loeb translation as well as the Latin original. The borrowed passages refer to Anchises explaining to Aeneas how souls forget their sorrows by drinking from Lethe. In his favourable review of *Human Chain*, Peter McDonald describes the ambivalent resonance that arises from using poetry to meet a dead father’s shade, while at the same time experiencing an irretrievable loss:

The human chain of the title is partly that formed by the generations, and if this gives a poignancy to the poet’s vivid evocations of memory – the kinds of long look at the past which he knows can feel like a last look – it also makes triumphant sense of the centrality of the Virgilian father to Heaney’s imaginative scheme. Heaney knows that if memory is a way of meeting the paternal shade again, it is at the same time the confirmation of ultimate parting – that the riverbank field may offer a glimpse of the future, in the generations to come, but must also confirm the finality of oblivion in the waters of Lethe. (Peter McDonald 2010)

In ‘Route 110’, a sequence of twelve twelve-liners, the speaker buys “a used copy of *Aeneid* VI”, the pet shop is “silent now as birdless Lake Avernus”, and on Smithfield Market he passes “racks of suits and overcoats that swayed / When one was tugged from its overcrowded frame / Like their owners’ shades close-packed on Charon’s barge.” (Heaney 2010: 48f) The next poem describes the speaker and other passengers trying to get into a bus according to their respective destinations. Immediately following the underworld simile, the passengers who “flocked to the kerb like agitated rooks” resemble the herded shades queuing for Charon’s crossing, and the “inspector / Who ruled the roost” recalls MacNeice’s inspector, whose “mind is black with suspicion” (MacNeice 1988: 153). The bus Heaney’s speaker takes is the one to “Cookstown via Toome and Magherafelt” (ibid. 50), familiar Trouble-laden places from previous poems. The feeling of embarking on a journey towards hell lingers, owing to the allusions made in the two preceding poems. Poem III, therefore, appears to be a crossing, just as Dante’s crossing takes place in Canto III. Poem IV recalls the blackness from ‘Charon’, with the “coal-black [...] railway guard’s long coat / I bought once second-hand”. The previous owner might also have been the conductor, the inspector, or the ferryman himself. Poem IX recalls specific incidents during the Troubles, wondering what is left to

bury with corpses all blown to pieces. X compares “Virgil’s happy shades [...] on their green meadows” with “teams of grown men” on a “sports day in Bellaghy”, and XI returns to “the riverbank field”, “as if we had commingled / Among shades and shadows”, “needy and ever needier for translation.” (ibid. 58)

The various connotations of “translation” come into play here. Not only Greek, Latin or medieval Italian texts need to be translated into modern languages to reach a contemporary audience; contemporaries speaking the same language also need translations, i.e. interpretations, transformations, conversions, and transfer procedures to enable communication that has been obstructed for various cultural and political reasons. Interestingly, for “translate”, the *Collins English Dictionary* also gives the archaic meaning “to bring to a state of spiritual or emotional ecstasy”, and in theology it means “to transfer (a person) from one place or plane of existence to another, as from earth to heaven”.⁶⁷

Rachel A. Burns writes in her favourable review of *Human Chain*:

“Route 110” is perhaps the most stunning work in the collection. [...] Although the mythology that Heaney invokes has been used by generations of poets before him, he uses this resonance to his advantage. As he pairs the speaker’s ordinary trip with his mythological vision, he focuses on the most striking images from classical mythology. (Burns 2010)

It is indeed remarkable how seemingly overused or all-too-familiar images can still look fresh in these new approaches. Weaving the myths into very personal, at times very ordinary observations, events and memories revives and revalues them for the contemporary consciousness. As William Logan’s less favourable review in *The New York Times* favourably concludes, Heaney “can make buying a copy of Book VI of the ‘Aeneid’, that sturdy companion of young Latin scholars, as haunting as the visit to the Underworld within” (Logan 2010).

⁶⁷ Also, the German word for “translate”, “übersetzen”, when the first instead of the third syllable is stressed, means “to ferry across”.

2.2.6 Heaney in the Underground

The use of modern means of taking journeys and passages as analogies for crossings into the underworld has precedents in Heaney's work. Closest to the imagery of the underworld is, of course, the underground (cf. McCarthy 2008: 62). In her essay on the London Underground as *Inferno* in Heaney's poetry, Maristella Gatto recalls Heaney's participation in the initiative "Poems on the Underground", which was launched in 1986. His contribution was his translation of the first three lines of the *Inferno*.⁶⁸ Heaney's translation hanging in the Underground, she argues, attests to the survival and universality of Dante's poem, as well as to the collective consciousness's association of the London Underground with otherworldly realms. It exemplifies the relationship between the Underground and the *Inferno* in Heaney's poetry but also the image of life as a journey. One of those conceptual metaphors "su cui si fonda l'intera esperienza umana, quella della vita come viaggio assume qui una pregnanza più profonda", because those who read the lines inside the trains are actually on a journey. Thus the metaphor becomes alive here. Furthermore, Dante's lines translated by Heaney and transported into the Underground allude to the journey language undertakes in time and space with every new translation (Gatto 2006: 373-375). She goes on to say that Heaney's two Underground poems, 'The Underground' and 'District and Circle', "scopertamente traducono e riscrivono – ovvero *ex-novo* inscrivono – scenari infernali in questo luogo" to give voice to preoccupations, the anxieties of historical suffering, private disquiet and the poet's constant questioning about the meaning of poetry and life (ibid. 375).

'The Underground' is the opening poem in *Station Island* (1984).⁶⁹ *Station Island* is divided into three parts, Part One consisting of 25 individual poems, Part Two contending the conceptual sequence 'Station Island', and Part Three consisting of 20 poems built around themes from the myth of Sweeney, "the seventh-century Ulster king who was transformed into a bird-man and exiled to the trees by the curse of St Ronan" (Heaney 1984: 123). The centre of interest for the study of Heaney's Dante is of course Part Two, but some poems of Part One are of equal importance.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Heaney's contribution can still be found in the archive of "Poems on the Underground":

<http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl/corporate/projectsandschemes/artmusicdesign/poems/poem.asp?ID=150>

⁶⁹ Asked about why this poem was chosen as the opening poem for *Station Island*, Heaney responds: "The last poem in *Field Work*, 'Ugolino', was an underground poem of a very different sort, so we're into this next book at a run, heading up and away. I liked it because it seemed to have both truth to life and truth to love." (O'Driscoll 2008: 253)

⁷⁰ According to Gatto, the whole collection is an explicit rewriting of the *Divina Commedia* in three parts, which makes Part One the infernal section (Gatto 2006: 376). Contrasting with this interpretation, Fumagalli regards

With ‘The Underground’, consisting of four rhyming quatrains, the reader is plunged *in medias res*; the initial situation is established as infernal. The speaker is running through the London Underground with his partner, apparently in a hurry to arrive in time for the Last Night of the Proms in the Royal Albert Hall. At first, he is running after her, trying to catch up “like a fleet god”.⁷¹ Fleet god can relate to a quick messenger god, but implicit is also the association with a fleet of ships and with the River Fleet, a subterranean river in London. The woman’s “going-away coat” and the possibility of her “turn[ing] into a reed” like Syrinx pursued by Pan reflects the speaker’s anxiety of losing her. “Our echoes die in that corridor” recalls the story of Echo, who had to die because she rejected Pan. After overtaking the woman, the speaker becomes Orpheus, leading Eurydice through the underworld, “all attention for your step following and damned if I look back” (ibid. 13).⁷² In addition to the mythological allusions, there is the reference to the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel. Just as Hansel uses stones “retracing the path back”, the speaker picks up the buttons falling from the woman’s coat. Syrinx and Eurydice are explicitly alluded to, but the longing for the woman resonating in the poem also brings to mind Dido and Beatrice, who are both encountered in the afterlife by the men who love them. To return to Dante with Maristella Gatto, the London Underground in Heaney’s poem can be interpreted as

la selva oscura in cui il poeta si scopre smarrito; è qui che sulle orme di Dante intraprende un percorso di revisione della propria responsabilità come poeta nei confronti della storia; è qui che, sulle orme di Orfeo si confronta con la fragilità dell’arte nei confronti della morte.

(Gatto 2006: 377f)

In an interesting approach, Catharine Malloy’s essay on silence as liberator in ‘The Underground’ challenges the speaker’s authority in the marital relationship and suggests his inferiority concealed, at first sight, by his dazzling use of allusive but monologic language. “Her mute presence subjugates the groom’s perception of his godliness, and her quiet deference to it allows her otherness a significant place as well”; “the bride assumes the

Part Two, ‘Station Island’, as “a sort of miniaturized *Divina Commedia*”, since there are more references to *Inferno* than to *Purgatorio* in the sequence (Fumagalli 2001: 135).

⁷¹ In ‘Crossings xxvii’ from *Seeing Things*, the fleet god imagery is transferred onto the compound father figure motif: “Even a solid man, / a pillar to himself and to his trade, / All yellow boots and stick and soft felt hat, // Can sprout wings at the ankle and grow fleet / As the god of fair days, stone posts, roads and crossroads, / Guardian of travellers and psychopomp.” (Heaney 1991: 85)

⁷² Fumagalli interprets the poem’s speaker as a counterpart to Orpheus, which is how Benvenuto da Imola had described Dante. As “Christian faith gives [Dante] the power to resist the impulse to look backwards”, Heaney’s speaker resists to look back, reflecting Heaney’s newly gained faith in the power of his art. In her opinion, the poem “anticipates Heaney’s reinvigoration and regeneration” in ‘Station Island’ (Fumagalli 2001: 134). I think the poem’s last line leaves to the imagination whether he will have the strength not to look back and does not suggest an overcoming of Orpheus’ fate. The poem’s anxieties are not resolved at the end.

victorious position by choosing not to respond” (Malloy 1993: 21).⁷³ This approach naturally undercuts the “valore salvifico” (Gatto 2006: 377) the poem’s manifold intertextuality might seek to create.

As its title suggests, ‘District and Circle’, the title poem of Heaney’s collection from 2006, returns to the London Underground. It is made up of five rhyming stanzas or sections resembling sonnets. Depending on whether one reads each split line as one line or two, the sections consist of 12, 13 or 14 lines. The first stanza starts with the speaker encountering underground a tin whistle player whom he has apparently seen plenty of times before, and he “’d trigger and untrigger a hot coin / Held at the ready” to be “accorded passage”. Their wordless communication, however, implies the musician’s awareness of the speaker being a poet and thus a fellow song artist; their “traffic [is] in recognition”, and accordingly the speaker does not have to pay the fee and puts the coin back into his pocket.⁷⁴ A mutual nod seals the deal, and the speaker moves on down the escalator. The people trying to get into the underground train foreshadow the title of *Human Chain* as well as the bus scene in ‘Route 110’:

A crowd half straggle-ravelled and half strung
Like a human chain, the pushy newcomers
Jostling and purling underneath the vault,
On their marks to be first through the doors,
Street-loud, then succumbing to herd-quiet...⁷⁵ (Heaney 2006: 18)

As soon as they enter the wagon for the crossing, they become herded shades. The speaker himself becomes “aloof”, “My father’s glazed face in my own waning / And craning ...”, “Reflecting in a window mirror-backed / By blasted weeping rock-walls” (ibid. 19). Apart

⁷³ Heaney is not oblivious to these kinds of critical approaches and acknowledges their transformative effect, his poems being “by no means immune to doctrinal criticism. The ideological feminist approach has been transformative, even if in some cases the methods have been applied pretty crudely. And, naturally enough, like everybody else I too have changed because of the shift in consciousness that feminism effected.” (O’Driscoll 2008: 313)

⁷⁴ Heaney explains that at first, the allusion to the obol was not intended and that he merely wanted to recapture an actual experience and capture the general mood of tube journeys. “Inevitably, however, the classical echoes were going to be heard, and the underground/underworld/otherworld parallels come into play.” (O’Driscoll 2008: 410)

⁷⁵ The fact that in general awareness Heaney is now so automatically associated with Dante can lead to inaccuracies and to a more or less empty use of the word “Dantesque”. Suni Iyengar, in his essay about ‘District and Circle’, allocates this stanza the highest “Dantesque sensibility”, with the “jostling and purling” evoking “the dark flowing of Lethe” (Iyengar 2006), although Lethe, in Dante, does not flow in hell and is therefore not underground. See this essay for a comparison of ‘District and Circle’ with Larkin’s ‘Aubade’ and for a reading of the poem as a vehicle for the creative process.

from meaning “exploded” and its literary meaning “ruined”, “blasted” also has the colloquial meaning of “damned”, which suits the underworld imagery. It also refers to an unnatural, man-made explosion. The “blasted weeping rock-walls” recall Niobe, who wept for her murdered children and turned into stone; but more importantly, they refer to the 7 July bombings (cf. McCarthy 2008: 62). The poem’s title derives from the earliest memories Heaney has of the London Underground, travelling between Earls Court and St James’s Park along the “green and yellow lines that served those stations” every day during a summer work stay. Before Heaney settled on the title, the 7 July 2005 bombings in London happened, in which 52 people were killed and 700 injured. “My first impulse was to change again, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed right to keep faith with the London lines. The result was a deeper dwelling with the motif and a more sustained attempt to re-create the specifics of the underground journey” (Heaney 2006a: 2). Andrew Motion finds the poem “chillingly in sympathy with modern anxieties” and takes it as an example of the healthy effect poetry can still have in a “quizzical and sarcastic age”:

[Heaney] means (among other things) that literature has the chance to comprehend the self and on the basis of that understanding to create an exemplary wisdom. This is the journey that he describes in “District and Circle” in the Dante-esque labyrinth of the Underground, it tracks the journey of an alert and nervous individual, as he tries to define what is durable and true about his loyalties. It is a poem about faith, which never uses the word. (Motion 2006)

And by keeping faith with the District and Circle lines, Heaney pays his last respects to the victims of the attack. In Gatto’s words, the poem expresses an epiphany of human solidarity and *pietas* which finds its perfect vehicle in a cosmopolitan city like London (Gatto 2006: 382). The poem both raises awareness of the threat of terrorism lingering in the air of the London tube and “of the mythical dimensions of all such journeys underground, into the earth, into the dark.” (O’Driscoll 2008: 410) The underground system resembles the dark labyrinth of the psyche, which can be explored by entering and conjuring up memories of the past.⁷⁶ As McCarthy observes, in addition to dealing with political violence, Heaney once again descends into the underworld to meet his father face-to-face, as he had done in *Seeing Things*, only “this time in his own reflection” (McCarthy 2008: 62). In Heaney’s own words, he “ghostifies” himself (O’Driscoll 2008: 472). His own ageing leads him to remember his ageing father and ponder over their similarities.

⁷⁶ Heaney describing underground journeys as “oneiric” (O’Driscoll 2008: 410) strengthens the psychological dimension certainly inherent in this motif in his poems.

In his poem ‘The Other Shore’ from *Secular Eden* (2007), a collection primarily discussed in chapter 3.6, Harry Clifton seeks to meet his dead father but both are unable to cross the water:⁷⁷ “Father, are you listening over there / On the other shore? // If you hear me, start moving / So we can meet”, but the “distance does not diminish”, and he is left “lonely for an answer” (Clifton 2007: 123f). Both poets seem to look for a guiding father figure and deal with unresolved issues and unanswered questions in their poems. The father’s silence leaves a void that literary father figures like Joyce, Dante or Virgil may fill with their echoes.

2.3 Lost in Limbo

2.3.1 Canto IV: Limbo

[...] they are innocent of sin; however,
lacking Baptism, they could not claim
its saving grace, and thus are doomed forever (Carson 2002: 23)

Dante wakes up on the other shore to a crash of thunder, and is faced with climbing down a dark abyss to reach the first circle, limbo. Here he encounters the shades of Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, and he remembers being greeted by them as the sixth great poet (in a list that also includes Virgil), a gesture that signals hubris (cf. Prill 1999: 156f).⁷⁸ Among the many other lost souls he sees in limbo are Aeneas, Orpheus, Caesar, Plato, Socrates, Seneca, and Ptolemy. When Dante asks Virgil whether anyone has ever been saved from limbo, Virgil names Adam, Abel, Noah, Moses, King David, Abraham, Israel, and Rachel among the blessed who were allowed to ascend to heaven in spite of being born before Christ.

As John A. Scott points out, Dante’s limbo is quite extraordinary. In Latin theology, two categories of limbo existed, the *limbus patrum* and the *limbus infantium*, but after Christ’s *descensus ad inferos*, in which he rescues the just souls from hell, only the limbo for the infants remains. Much to the dismay of early commentators on the *Commedia*, however,

⁷⁷ Also, the idea of the price there is to pay for the crossing is present in the first poem of the collection, ‘When the promised day arrives’: “pay your way / With the same blank cheque that floats so many lives, / Your birthright, and your crossing fee, / When the promised day arrives.” (Clifton 2007: 5)

⁷⁸ In his Dante lecture series at Yale University, Guisepppe Mazzotta points out that the green meadow within the walls of the castle, where the classical figures linger and talk, represents a locus amoenus, which, as the hero pauses on his quest, tends to turn out to be the place of temptation, the moment when the snake appears. Thus Dante falls victim to temptation and proudly inscribes himself in the history of Western poetry. <http://www.academicearth.org/lectures/inferno-1>

Dante ignores the souls of unbaptised infants and places the focus on the adult pagans.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the presence of light, reflecting “the truth that had been glimpsed in part by the souls during their time on earth”, was frowned upon, since hell had to be in darkness. The even more criticised presence of the Arab philosophers Avicenna and Averroës according to Scott testifies to Dante’s belief “that philosophy must be independent of theology, just as the empire must be independent of the papacy in temporal matters”. Even so, Scott stresses the fact that even though Dante’s limbo is a “Christianized version of Vergil’s Elysian Fields”, it must not be forgotten that his limbo is situated in hell and that the virtuous heathen souls suffer eternal damnation, a fact that troubles Dante continuously (Scott 2004: 208-210).

A famous example of a borrowing from Canto IV is T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and it immediately follows the reference to Canto III:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
and each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Eliot 1969: 62)

“Death had undone so many” quotes *Inferno* III, 57. Dante’s words in Canto IV, 25-27 are “Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare, / non avea pianto mai che di sospiri / che l’aura eterna facevan tremare”. Instead of the cries of pain Dante hears before crossing the Acheron, in limbo he only hears sighs. Eliot merges the two passages in his stanza.

‘Limbo’ from *Wintering Out* (1972) is one of Heaney’s most famous poems. The concept of limbo is present in every Irish Catholic mind, but Fumagalli also states that Heaney read Dorothy L. Sayers’ version of the *Commedia* in 1972 (Fumagalli 2001: xi). There might have been a temporal overlap. In 1970, Heaney had been the subject of a documentary film directed by Derek Bailey, called ‘Heaney in Limboland’ (cf. O’Driscoll 2008: 149), so with or without Dante, limbo belonged to the poet’s, and other Irish artists’, imagination. In his poem, Heaney takes his inspiration from the deeply rooted Irish belief in limbo “only to revise

⁷⁹ In Gerry Murphy’s ‘Farewell to a Pagan’ in memory of Gregory O’Donoghue, the ghost of a dead fox that has fallen victim to traffic is imagined as a guide for the dead man into his afterlife. “He will guide you like wily Odysseus / through dense thickets of murmuring shades / begging for news of the world. / He will leave you with the poets” (Murphy 2010: 14). As the title suggests, being a pagan poet, O’Donoghue is assigned to Limbo, as Dante would have done it.

sympathetically the traditional moral judgement contained within it”, as Elizabeth Butler Cullingford argues (Cullingford 1994: 49). Probably more inspired by the “orthodox” version of limbo described above, ‘Limbo’ tells of a dead infant found by fishermen in their nets. It raises awareness of the severe Irish problem of illegitimate children being killed by their desperate mothers.

She waded in under
The sign of her cross.
He was hauled in with the fish.
Now limbo will be

A cold glitter of souls
Through some far briny zone. (Heaney 1972: 58)

The infant is described with a fish metaphor: he is “an illegitimate spawning”,⁸⁰ “A small one thrown back / To the waters”, and “He was a minnow with hooks / Tearing her open”. The sea becomes the child’s limbo, every drowned, unwanted child’s limbo. As Helen Vendler observes in her chapter on *Wintering Out*, poems such as ‘Limbo’ and ‘Bye-Child’ “silently reprove the pieties condemning sexuality outside marriage” and shift the emphasis towards the “dark and cruel underside of the culture [Heaney] was bred in” (Vendler 1998: 32; 33). More strongly, David Ward interprets ‘Limbo’ as Heaney’s rejection of the clergy:

Indeed, Heaney's poetry so closely shadows Catholic belief and liturgy that the Church is like an invisible planet still influencing his distant orbit. Heaney's poetry dismisses the clergy, usually with contempt; see, for instance, the brutal rejections of 'Limbo' and 'Bye-Child'.
(Ward 2001: 51)

In the last two lines, Christ is described as powerless, unable to help the woman out of her dilemma, and he cannot descend to limbo and rescue the child: he “cannot fish there” (Heaney 1972: 58).

⁸⁰ Cullingford notes the exceptional nature of the adjective “illegitimate” in the context of the fish metaphor, the word “insert[ing] the harshness of conventional human judgment into the amoral world of spawning” (Cullingford 1994: 51). She stresses the empathy inherent in the lines that follow, spoken by Heaney(’s speaker) on the mother’s behalf (ibid. 52).

Cullingford, in her analysis of Seamus Heaney's and Sinéad O'Connor's⁸¹ contributions to the television drama *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1989) by Irish feminist filmmaker Margo Harkin, interprets 'Limbo' in the context of the film "as an objective correlative for the national trauma" caused by women who murdered their illegitimate children. In the film, the poem is read by a female school teacher to a class that includes a fifteen year-old pregnant girl, and its imagery and scenery is reflected in various scenes.

In appropriating Heaney's art for cultural politics, *Hush-a-Bye Baby* inserts it into the sphere of community activism. By showing Goretta [the pregnant girl] responding to the poem through her own pain, the film also proposes a populist literary politics. Poetry is mimetic and expressive, response is affective, and reading is a process of personal identification. (Cullingford 1994: 55)

The poem thus serves as intertext and hypotext for the film and is reinterpreted for its purpose. Cullingford exemplifies how profoundly Irish artists are influenced by Catholic terminology, iconography and morality even if they rationally question or reject it (cf. *ibid.* 48; 52).

Heaney's 'The Loaning' is an unrhymed tripartite poem in Part One of the (tripartite) collection *Station Island*. In Scottish dialect, a loaning is a place where cows are milked. Section I is about lost words flying around in the air and settling down "in the uvulae of stones / and the soft lungs of the hawthorn". The vocabulary revolves around the themes of sounds, voices and the organs of speech and breath. For the speaker, the loaning is "the limbo of lost words". The sounds of the wind and the trees whisper to him like dead souls. In the last quartet, the loaning is personified: "the loaning breathed on me, breathed even now" (Heaney 1984: 51). Also implied in the title is the act of "borrowing", which Heaney does indeed from Dante. All three sections of the poem will be especially relevant for the chapter on Dante's bleeding wood of the suicides, chapter 2.4.4.

Paul Muldoon's 'Paris' from *Mules* (1977) has the reader believe that "there's no such place as Limbo" (Muldoon 2001: 59), but Muldoon's word obviously can never be taken as indisputable or unambiguous fact. Clair Wills writes about *Mules*: "At the most general, metaphysical level, Muldoon is concerned with the relation between transcendence and immanence, sky and earth, and the uneasy position of poetry suspended midway between the

⁸¹ O'Connor wrote the music for the film and played a minor role in it. Her music includes the song 'Three Babies', which "respond[s] directly to 'Limbo'", "echoing and reversing the pessimistic conclusion of Heaney's poem", and it implies a "coded admission of abortion", as Cullingford suggests (Cullingford 1994: 57f).

two.” (Wills 1998: 42) Midway between what is said and what is meant, there is the limbo of interpretative space where things “aren’t quite all they seem” (Muldoon 2001: 59).

In his keynote address “Go Fish: Six Irish Poets” at the Poetry Now Festival in Dún Laoghaire in March 2010, Muldoon talks about Heaney’s ‘Limbo’ (among other poems that include fish). He points out that although in 2007 the Pope officially declared limbo non-existent, it can still be found in recent newspaper articles and suchlike, and that it is certainly real enough to the girl in ‘Limbo’. The fact that Heaney’s poem mentions the salmon, not the trout or other fish, conjures up the otherworld, he says, because in Celtic mythology, the salmon suggests a capacity to pass between worlds because of its migration between fresh water and salt water. Thus, in addition to its copious Christian iconography, the poem is rooted in Celtic myth. Muldoon furthermore explains that Ballyshannon, where the poem is located, is the birthplace of nineteenth-century poet William Allingham, who in his poem ‘The Faeries’ tells the story of how fairies stole little Bridget, who died of sorrow and who from then on was kept by them in the depth of a lake. In the “briny zone”, there is no possibility of redemption, and not even Christ can intervene. Implying wariness of infallible authorities, Muldoon closes his remarks on the church and the Pope’s attitude towards Ireland with his usual dry wit: “it’s still the fish’s responsibility to get off the hook. Thank you.”⁸² His talk demonstrates that whatever one’s personal beliefs may be, limbo is part of an imaginative thinking not only relevant for or comforting in poetry.

In Harry Clifton’s ‘Hereafter’, the ghost or soul of a dead man “potters about [...], / Thinly partitioned from the living, / Neither in heaven nor in hell, / Revisiting [...] / Those of us without souls to lose” (Clifton 2007: 82). In ‘Red Fox Country’, the speaker drives around in Northern Ireland, “around Lough Neagh / And through to Toome”.

And it calms me, this limbo
Where all, like myself, devoid of Grace
in a wilderness of symbols,

Must wait for the lights to change.
Salvation say the walls.
And I, whose numberplates are strange,
Whose accent anyone can tell

⁸² “Go Fish: Six Irish Poets”, Muldoon’s keynote address at DLR Poetry Now Festival 2010 (audio). <http://hosting.edgecast.ie/media/dlrcoco/dlrpoetrynow-2010-03-25-muldoon.mp3>

For a lost soul, a broken heart
From the Free and Fallen State,
Must colonize my own backyard (Clifton 2007: 129)

“Limbo” rhymes with “symbols”, and those have become hard to decipher. Northern Ireland, for the visitor from the Republic, is a limbo where things hang in the balance. The verb “calm” might strike the reader as an odd choice, but then again, if things are undecided and in limbo, no side had lost yet and there might be hope. Nothing happening also means nothing atrocious is happening.

2.3.2 Alighieri and the Myth of Er

Returning to Dante, we return to Heaney. Heaney’s ‘Loughanure’ from *Human Chain* (2010) is an elegy for the Irish artist Colin Middleton, whom Heaney befriended in 1963 (cf. O’Driscoll 2008: xxii) and who died in 1983. It is a sequence consisting of five twelve-liners, set in tercets and, as Peter McDonald puts it, “an expansive exercise in pushing the bounds of elegy towards a visionary content that surpasses the need to console or be consoled” (McDonald 2010). Poem II opposes the artist’s work to the afterlives described by Dante and Plato:

So this is what an afterlife can come to?
A cloud-boil of grey weather on the wall
Like murky crystal, a remembered stare –

This for an answer to Alighieri
And Plato’s Er? Who watched immortal souls
Choose lives to come according as they were

Fulfilled or repelled by existences they’d known
Or suffered first time round. Saw great far-seeing
Odysseus in the end choose for himself

The destiny of a private man. Saw Orpheus
Because he’d perished at the women’s hands
Choose rebirth as a swan. (Heaney 2010: 62)

After mentioning the two visitors of the afterlife, Dante and Er, Heaney concentrates on the Myth of Er. According to Plato's myth at the end of *The Republic*, Er was a native of Pamphylia who was killed in battle but who awoke after ten days on the funeral pyre to report what he had seen of the afterlife. In Er's account of the otherworld, judges order "the just to take the right-hand road that led up through the sky", whereas the unjust are told "to take the left-hand road that led downwards" (Plato 2007: 361). There they receive the according reward or penalty for a thousand years. Thereafter, the souls linger in a meadow for a while, until they have to leave for the Spindle of Necessity, which represents the structure of the universe. After drawing lots, the souls have to choose, one after another, who they want to become in their next life, before drinking from Lethe in order to forget their past life (ibid. 362-368). As with Dante, the story is about justice after death. As Heaney writes in his poem, among the souls Er witnesses choosing their next life is that of Orpheus, which chooses "the life of a swan; it was unwilling to be born of a woman because it hated all women after its death at their hands", and Odysseus' soul, which chooses last of all. "The memory of his former sufferings had cured him of all ambition" and he chose "the uneventful life of an ordinary man [...] with joy" (ibid. 367). Just as in Dante's account, Odysseus has suffered underground as punishment for his life of hubris, but in Dante's system of belief there is no life after the afterlife.⁸³

That Heaney gives Dante only a brief mention but then goes into detail with Plato's account might be due to the fact that he has sufficiently alluded to Dante's afterlife journey before in order to only have to mention his name now to set the reader's imagination in motion. Defining pronouns or the repetition of the names, however, are avoided after Alighieri and Er are first mentioned, whereby it remains ambiguous whether the remaining lines refer to both of them or not. It is interesting to note that Heaney specifically does not write "Dante" but "Alighieri". This might be to distinguish himself from the various other times he alludes to Dante as "Dante". Some readers might not even know Dante's last name, so the allusion becomes more oblique and sophisticated. Also, in common usage, "Dante" not only stands for the writer or the character undertaking the fictional journey, but also metonymically stands for the *Commedia*. Consequently, the choice of "Alighieri" might put the focus on the pilgrim character rather than the writer and his work, which puts him on the same semantic level as Er.

⁸³ Although "strongly influenced by traditions deriving ultimately from Plato", Dante most probably had not read *The Republic* and consequently not the Myth of Er. The only text by Plato available in Latin in Dante's time was part of the *Timaeus* (Havelly 2007: 79).

Written in tercets, the sequence recalls *terza rima*, and lines 4-7, where Dante is referred to, actually appears as a ghost of the *terza rima* in its barely discernible rhymes, just as “Alighieri” is a ghost of Dante’s name: “Alighieri” - “souls” - “were” - “known”. The assonance of “souls” and “known” links one tercet with the next. Having said that, “stare”, “Alighieri”, “Er” and “were” also rhyme, further entangling the two (or three, counting the painting) afterlife accounts. In another entanglement of myth and history, Plato and Orpheus meet (and meet Alighieri, respectively) in Dante’s limbo.

2.4 Deadly Sins

We honour those who show
due reverence to the divine
but spurn the sinful man:
blinded by his own pride,
he walks a lonely road.⁸⁴ (Mahon 2006: 15)

2.4.1 Canto V: Paolo and Francesca’s Irish Afterlife

To counterbalance the hubris to which Dante succumbed as a poet in limbo, in Canto V he learns of the dangerous and destructive quality of literature, and of the responsibility that comes with writing poetry.⁸⁵ In the second circle of hell, Dante meets the lustful, who for their sin are thrown about by a heavy storm. Among them, he is most interested in the couple Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, adulterers who were driven to commit their sin by intensely reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Francesca gives Dante an account about her life, and about the beginning and end of the fatal love story. After being caught with Paolo, Francesca and her lover were both murdered by her husband, Paolo’s brother.⁸⁶ Moved by pity,⁸⁷ Dante faints at the end of the canto.

⁸⁴ This is from Mahon’s adaptation ‘*Chorus from Antigone*’, from the Greek of Sophocles.

⁸⁵ Cf. Giuseppe Mazzotta’s lecture on “Inferno V, VI and VII” at <http://www.academicearth.org/lectures/inferno-2>

⁸⁶ Francesca’s marriage to Giovanni Malatesta was arranged in order to settle a feud between the two families. According to Boccaccio, Giovanni’s younger brother Paolo had to woo Francesca, because Giovanni was not very attractive. Only after the wedding did she find out she had been tricked, and an affair between her and Paolo ensued (cf. Dante 1991: 155n).

⁸⁷ The word “pietà” occurs three times in the canto (lines 72, 93, 140). In Ciaran Carson’s translation, “pity” even occurs five times (lines 72, 87, 93, 117, 142). In addition to “pietà”, he translates “affettüoso grido” and “pio” with “pity”.

The lovers' story is one of the most famous stories of the *Commedia*, and it plays a central role in the whole poem, positioned as it is at the proper beginning of hell:

Just like the sin of Adam and Eve at the dawn of human history, the sin of Paolo and Francesca presents itself, at the beginning of Dante's journey, as a catastrophe from which all other evils follow [...]. We begin by yielding to passion, and we end betraying and murdering Caesar and Christ: this is the story of humanity and the map of Dante's Hell.

(Pertile 2007: 72)

Francesca presents herself as a victim of love mediated through literature. She abdicates the power of will, which for Dante is the locus of sin, and avoids assuming responsibility for her actions (cf. Mazzotta 2008). Francesca does not only blame the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, however. In her speech, she also quotes from Dante's *Vita Nuova*:

Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.

Amor condusse noi ad una morte.
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense».
Queste parole da lor ci fuor porte.⁸⁸ (*Inf.* V, 100-108)

This does not only allude to the famous conception of courtly love, the rules of which could be found in Capellanus' *De Amore* from the twelfth century, but also almost literally quotes the beginning of Guinizelli's celebrated *canzone* ("Al cor gentil rempaira sempre amore"), which in Dante's time was a kind of manifesto of love poetry, and which in turn is echoed by a line from Dante himself, "Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa" from the *Vita Nuova*. By incorporating all this intertextuality into Francesca's speech, Dante implies the general applicability of Francesca's fate to all mankind, distinguishing it from a solely individual tale (Dante 1991: 156-7n), and by alluding to his own previous work, he raises the question of his own responsibility as a poet (cf. Mazzotta 2008). John Freccero argues that Dante, in his "mythic representation of biography", had to destroy his former illusory self in order to convert and receive a new soul.

⁸⁸ "[...] Francesca's whole being is encapsulated in three *terzine* (*Inf.* 5.100-108), each beginning with the word *Amor*." (Scott 2004: 230; cf. Dante 1991: 156n)

One of the ways in which this destruction takes place in the poem is through a series of ironic autocitations, in which Dante undercuts his own previous work. The most obvious of these is his citation of his own earlier love poetry, placed in the mouth of Francesca da Rimini, who was ill-served by the theory of “love and the gentle heart.” (Freccero 2007: 165)

Seán Haldane’s poem ‘Desire in Belfast’ from the collection bearing the same title (1992) includes Dante’s Francesca story as one of its intertextual sources. Seán Haldane grew up in Belfast, spent a long time in Canada and now lives in London working as a consultant clinical neuropsychologist with the NHS.⁸⁹ David Cameron, in his review of Haldane’s *Always Two: Collected Poems 1966-2009*, commences by writing “Who is Seán Haldane? Like another poet with the initials S H, he grew up in Northern Ireland, but unlike that poet he left before the Troubles started”, and ends with “These poems are very much alive. Read them.” (Cameron 2009: 107; 110) Although as a poet he is “an obscure unknown” (ibid. 107), Haldane was one of the eleven nominees for the Oxford Chair of Poetry in May 2010, which was eventually taken up by Geoffrey Hill.⁹⁰ In an interview with Tim Adams, Haldane talks about the strain he was under, being born in Sussex but growing up in Belfast:

[...] my father had been a major in the army during the war and when that finished he took us back to live in Northern Ireland, where he was from. Belfast then was like living all the time on top of a bomb that was about to go off. I had an English accent, but an Irish name, so both sides tended to give me a rough time to begin with. (Adams 2010)

“An erotic litany of places in that divided city” (Cameron 2009: 110), ‘Desire in Belfast’ reflects the atmosphere of political tension in Northern Ireland at the time, paired with the memory of a love affair set in various locations in Belfast.⁹¹ The poem consists of nineteen rhymed stanzas with a varying number of lines. The first stanza imagines an erotic scene in the Botanic Gardens, while stanza two is set in the library:

⁸⁹ In his candidate statement for the Oxford Chair of Poetry he writes: “[...] I see no conflict between scientific and poetic thought. If elected Professor of Poetry I want to talk about the neuropsychology of poetry, poetry and verse, poetry and 'more-than-coincidence', poetry in different languages, and what Hardy called its 'sustaining power'.”

http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/oxford_people/professor_of_poetry/nominees/statements.html

⁹⁰ See http://www.ox.ac.uk/media/news_stories/2010/100507_1.html for the list of the nominees.

⁹¹ In his review of *Desire in Belfast* in the Irish Times, Derek Mahon misses “a greater historical sense” in poems commemorating a youth in Belfast in the 1950s, when, however, “politics were not high on the daily agenda and middle-class young persons might devote themselves to more urgent matters like the demands of the flesh.” The review is not completely unfavourable though, granting that “the poems are finally *sui generis*” and “can be recommended for [their] wit and formal grace.” (Mahon 1993: A9)

Volumes of desire,
Behind the shelves of the Linen Hall Library,
She sitting on my knee, I reading Dante:
'He kissed my mouth all trembling'
(La bocca mi baciò tutto tremante). (Haldane 2009: 151)

The line in Italian is a quotation of *Inferno* V, line 136, but Haldane changes it into contemporary Italian, perhaps owing to his edition of the *Commedia*. Dante's original line has "basciò" instead of "baciò". The translation in the preceding line might be Haldane's own, but it also resembles, for example, Charles Eliot Norton's prose translation from 1891, which reads "this one, who never from me shall be divided, kissed my mouth all trembling."⁹² "Volumes of desire" recalls the topic of Francesca's speech, the dangerous temptation lurking behind books about love. What Lancelot's story represents for Francesca, Francesca's story represents for the lovers in Haldane's poem. Yet it is unclear whether the speaker reads the passage aloud or whether the girl is oblivious to the content of the book. Given the inverted commas, he could be reading it aloud. If this is the case, he must be reading from a translated version, and the Italian line might have been added for the sake of the rhyme. "Dante" rhymes with "tremante", and so, metonymically speaking, Dante rhymes with Dante.

In stanza five, the girl quotes Rilke, and the young man writes their "story in fallen hawthorn petals, / Printing it in the crushed daisies and buttercups / We made our bed." (Haldane 2009: 151) Stanza thirteen rhymes "Sten guns" with "skin" when desire meets reality. This is, however, the only stanza in which the presence of the "B Specials", the mainly Protestant and Unionist Ulster Special Constabulary, is brought to the reader's, and the couple's, attention. The observation is nonchalantly inserted, in parentheses, in the middle of the memory of the couple making out in a car while it is raining. In stanza fourteen, the notion of sin is introduced (in parentheses), but, as Derek Mahon suggests, "the young lovers are *not* 'ashamed of themselves'" (Mahon 1993: A9):

City of desire,
Us walking hand in hand
('Stand still ye sinners!'
Bellowed at us by a soapbox preacher),
Half a million rages

⁹² See <http://pd.sparknotes.com/poetry/inferno/section6.html> and <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1995/pg1995.html>.

Rising with the smoke from chimneys,
The air sparkling between our eyes. (Haldane 2009: 153)

Literature as the tempting medium is the subject once more in the next stanza. After the opening line “Poems of desire”, Graves, Blake, Rilke, Goethe and Breton are named, and the stanza ends with three lines that might, on the one hand, suggest Haldane’s aligning himself with these poets by his immediate mention of himself after the name-dropping, and, on the other hand, refer to the girl’s loss of virginity:

And from me to her how Spring would pass,
May blossom shivering from the tree
Falling white on grass (ibid.)

The girl’s innocence falls down on the bed of grass he made for her; the “daisy” is “crushed”. In the sixteenth stanza, the reader is taken back to stanza two, it is “us in our blanket, trembling” like Dante’s lovers. In the eighteenth stanza, they are finally “naked”, but getting everything one desires is apparently the end of desire:

Death of desire,
My disgust.
Love had turned to lust –
That sticky, tender love.
Recalled after thirty years
It brings me to tears. (ibid.)

Dante is equally moved to tears when meeting suffering Francesca: “Francesca, i tuoi martiri / a lagrimar mi fanno tristo e pio” (*Inf.* V, 116-117), and Francesca warns that she is going to weep while telling her story: “dirò come colui che piange e dice” (126), because there is “nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / ne la miseria” (121-123). In ‘Desire in Belfast’, nostalgia and pleasure are mixed with regret and pain as a geographic history of desire unfolds, fuelled by poetry. In his interview, Adams asks Haldane whether the poem came to him fully formed, and he replies:

I was driving along an icy road in Canada and I pulled off the road to write it. About two-thirds of it, 60 odd lines, arrived right there. It was triggered by an anniversary actually, I suddenly realised part of it had happened exactly 30 years before. (Adams 2010)

It becomes apparent that however much of an expatriate he is, and although he feels more at home in England (cf. *ibid.*), growing up in Northern Ireland left a deep impression, which accompanies him even on a road in Canada.

The reference to Dante runs through the whole poem. It begins with the quotation in translation and in the original Italian, manifests with the notion of sin, is exemplified in the allusion to all the poets that activate desire through their poetry, is recalled by the repetition of the word “trembling” and ends with the notion of loss and regret and the allusion to the tears in Canto V. Dante’s topic of the temptation of poetry and the sin of carnal lust is transformed into a personal memory and relocated to Belfast in the 1950s. The final conclusion that could be drawn from the intertextuality, however, namely that what the lovers did was a sin and deserves its according punishment in hell, is not inherent in the poem. The tone is more light-hearted than that, and the Dante in the poem has to be taken more ironically, or as an analogy that is not meant to be entirely consonant. After all, it is less guilt than bittersweet nostalgic regret for what is lost to the past that drives the poem from memory to memory.

Fergus Allen also alludes to Paolo and Francesca in the poem ‘Southern Ocean’ from his collection *Before Troy* (2010). Allen was born in 1921 to an Irish father and an English mother. He graduated from Trinity College Dublin and moved to England during the Second World War. After retiring from his job as Director of the Hydraulics Research Station and First Civil Service Commissioner, he started publishing poetry on a regular basis (cf. Allen 2010). *Before Troy*, his fifth poetry collection, is divided on the contents page into five sections called “Foreign”, “Celtic”, “Disquiet”, “Predicaments”, and “Reckonings”, making ‘Southern Ocean’ the last poem in the “Foreign” section. The poem is unrhymed and comprises three stanzas, with the first and the third consisting of six lines each, framing the middle stanza of eleven lines in form as well as in content. The middle stanza is set in London, observing pleasant music, soft laughter, and a Cocktail maestro at work, whereas the two framing stanzas conjure up a stormy ocean with dark creatures, the “Force ten Antarctic gales” in stark contrast with “in Berkley Square the nightingale” (Allen 2010: 18), a more pleasant kind of gale. In the last stanza, the speaker associates the stormy ocean with the torment of Dante’s two lovers’ in the winds of hell:

But the Southern Ocean is still here, you know,
Far off, boundless and screaming to itself
In the darkness, with Paolo and Francesca

And turbulence beyond our understanding –
And still alive with leopard seals and creatures,
Eternally eating and being eaten. (ibid.)

The leopard seals, already mentioned in the first stanza, recall the leopard from the first canto of the *Inferno*. Outside of or beyond the pleasantries of the city, there is danger, corruption, confusion, or simply the laws of nature to be reckoned with. An abyss lurches beneath the familiar and visible. The reference to Paolo and Francesca has turned the ocean into a metaphor comparable, in its implications of transgressing boundaries, to the story of Ulysses (which will be discussed in the next chapter, 2.5). The scene from Dante to which Haldane and Allen allude is of course a famous one to be referenced, and it is worth mentioning that Heaney has not used it yet.⁹³

Immediately following ‘Southern Ocean’ as the first poem of the “Celtic” section is ‘Counshingaun’, referring to the corrie lake in the Comeragh Mountains in County Waterford, Ireland: “A lake so black you’d think that surely Dante / Could have found some evil-doer to punish in it” (ibid. 19).⁹⁴ The two references to Dante in the volume are only six lines apart, and a possible link between the two poems is the fact that the surface of the dark lake is constantly rippled by the wind, as the Southern Ocean is beaten by a storm, so both poems centre around turbulent and unfathomable waters. The speaker notices that Counshingaun has not changed in fifty years, but he has grown old: “But now the aurora is rarely visible, / Given our weak sight and the daylong mists” (ibid.). Just like the caves in Slovenia visited in Flynn’s ‘The Human Fish’, the natural phenomenon evokes Dante’s hell.

2.4.2 Canto VIII: The Hellish Bogs of Styx

Before they reach the Styx, Dante and Virgil encounter in the third circle the gluttonous, tortured by hailstones, snow and rain, and attacked by Cerberus. Pluto reigns over the fourth circle, which accommodates the avaricious and the prodigal, among them various men of the Church, who have to heave heavy loads and bang them against one another. In the fifth circle,

⁹³ As Buttigieg points out, Beckett’s poem ‘Hell Crane to Starling’, published in the anthology *The European Caravan*, alludes to Canto V (Buttigieg 2003: 325).

⁹⁴ The poem is somewhat reminiscent of Robert Frost’s ‘The Mountain’, in which a mountain called Hor is compared to an Irish mountain: “He said there was a lake / Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top.” (Frost 1979: 43)

the wrathful are wrestling in the marsh of Styx, “a melancholy bog” and a “dreary fen” (Carson 2002: 48), while under its waters the sullen gurgles their song. After passing those sinners, Dante and Virgil make out a tower, which is sending signals out to the other side of the Styx. In Canto VIII, Phlegyas⁹⁵ arrives on his boat and, after a quick fit of rage, agrees to take them on board and ferry them across the Styx. On the other shore, the City of Dis is located, forming the sixth circle and marking the entrance to lower hell. Demons keep watch on the walls of the city.

As was mentioned before, Heaney uses the scene in which Virgil and Dante enter Phlegyas’ boat in his poem ‘Crossings xxxvi’, although he names the ferryman Charon for the sake of the scansion: “the car / [...] gave when we got in / Like Charon’s boat under the faring poets.” (Heaney 1991: 94) Dante’s lines in Canto VIII read:

Lo duca mio discese ne la barca,
e poi mi fece entrare appresso lui;
e sol quand’io fui dentro parve carca. (*Inf.* VIII, 25-27)

Only when Dante enters the boat does it move the water, for only a living human body can weigh it down. In the *Aeneid*, Charon’s boat creaks under Aeneas’ weight and sinks down into the marshy water (cf. *ibid.* 247n): “gemuit sub pondere cumba / sutilis et multam accepit rimosa paludem.” (Virgil 1965: 244) Even if unintentionally, Heaney thus also borrows from Virgil. Like Dante and Aeneas at the time of their journey, Longley and Heaney are not gods, ghosts or shades when they enter the car, therefore the car gives way under their weight.

Heaney’s collection *Electric Light* (2001), like *The Spirit Level* (1996) before, only has a few explicit Dante references. Nevertheless, by translating and alluding to Virgil’s Eclogues throughout the volume, the connection continues to exist.⁹⁶ Introduced with a Latin quotation

⁹⁵ In Greek mythology, Phlegyas was the son of Mars and Chryse, and was condemned to Tartarus for having set fire to the temple of Apollo at Delphi because Apollo had seduced his daughter Coronis. For this he was killed by Apollo. In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, he dwells in the underworld. It is unclear what his exact purpose in Dante’s Hell is; possibly to consign the wrathful to particular places within the bog (cf. Dante 1991: 265-6n).

⁹⁶ In his essay on text, canon and context in *Electric Light*, Ruben Moi suggests considering the Virgilian borrowings as new poetic beginnings in the aftermath of the Northern Irish conflict: “Canonical classical figures such as Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Dante have of course provided important stimulus to writers in Ireland as elsewhere, but of these four Virgil tends to be the least prominent in Heaney’s poetry and perhaps in contemporary Irish writing at large. Together with Muldoon’s exploitation of the *Aeneid* in *Hay* (1998), Heaney’s recourse to Virgil hints at aesthetic reorientation and contextual changes.” (Moi 2007a: 179) Heaney writes about *Electric Light*: “The book could even carry a Virgilian epigraph: it is full of mortalia, by people and things we must pass away from or that have had to pass away from us. Deaths of poets and of friends, and of friends who were poets. Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.” (Heaney 2001b: 1) In addition to

of the invocation of the Muses from Virgil's *Eclogue IV*, 'Bann Valley Eclogue' is a dialogue between a poet, presumably Heaney himself, and Virgil, which is obviously inspired by Dante. The poet calls Virgil his "hedge-schoolmaster" and in the same passage quotes the opening words of two of the Christian gospels, "*And it came to pass*" and "*In the beginning*" (Heaney 2001: 11), again merging heathen classic with Christian tradition, a conflict continuously present in Dante as well. Referring to Virgil as hedge-schoolmaster evokes images of the pastoral, characteristic, of course, of Virgil's *Eclogues*, but also of the picturesque vision of the hedge school lessons taking place outdoors, surrounded by nature.

'Known World' begins with a memory of Heaney's first visit to the Struga Poetry Festival in Macedonia in 1978 (cf. O'Driscoll 2008: xxiv), turning into a reflection on a refugee track:

I see its coil again like a syrup of Styx,
An old gold world-chain the world keeps falling from
Into the cloud-boil of a camera lens.
Were we not made for summer, shade and coolness
And gazing through an open door at sunlight?
For paradise lost? Is that what I was taught? (Heaney 2001: 20)

The "syrup of Styx" echoes the memory of the sticky flypaper in Heaney's home in the fifties, "honey-strip and death-trap, a barley-sugar twist" attracting black flies, and the "congregations blackening", like the flies, "the length / And breadth of summer roads" (ibid.). The refugees are analogous to the flies and the mourners, and all of them suffer like the lost souls in the muddy waters of hell. O'Driscoll actually asks Heaney "*Were we ... made for summer, shade and coolness / And gazing through an open door at sunlight?*" at the end of his book of interviews, and Heaney answers in the positive, saying that the "sudden joy" he experiences in realising the beauty of familiar places makes him "credit the prelapsarian" in himself. "It seems, at any rate, a greater mistake to deny him than to admit him." (O'Driscoll 2008: 475) In the poem, observations of orthodox religious tradition and pilgrimage in Greece, Russia and Serbia are blended with memories of Heaney's Irish Catholic past.

In *District and Circle* (2006), images of underworld and afterlife are continuously present, mixing Classical Greek influences and Dantesque undertones. In 'To George Seferis in the Underworld', Heaney writes that Seferis is "intent upon an otherworldly scene"; "spiky

revisiting Dante and other themes from his earlier poetry, Heaney confirms this Virgilian bias in *Human Chain* (2010).

bushes” remind the Greek poet of a scene from Plato, “A harrowing, yes, in hell” (Heaney 2006: 20). ‘Out of this world’ is a tripartite poem in memory of Czeslaw Milosz. The first part, framed by inverted commas, is about the speaker attending Holy Communion. The second part significantly tells of a pilgrimage to Lourdes; a purgatorial undertaking. In the third part, titled “Saw Music”, Irish painter Barrie Cooke “has begun to paint ‘godbeams’, / Vents of brightness that make the light of heaven / Look like stretched sheets of fluted silk or rayon” (ibid. 50), and the Polish poet, “who lies this god-beamed day / Coffined in Krakow”, is “as out of this world now / As the untranscendent music of the saw / He might have heard in Vilnius or Warsaw” (ibid. 51). The poet’s ascent to heaven is accompanied by light and music, as in Dante’s *Paradiso*. ‘Cavafy: “The rest I’ll speak of to the ones below in Hades”’ is a version of a poem by C. P. Cavafy, in which a proconsul and a sophist, spurred by a line from Sophocles, converse about the underworld. The title poem, ‘District and Circle’, as elaborated upon above, is an underground journey alluding to the London bombings. In ‘Anything Can Happen’ “after Horace’s *Odes*, I, 34”, which Heaney appropriates by including a reference to the 9/11 attacks (“Anything can happen, the tallest towers // Be overturned”), the “River Styx” reappears (ibid. 13, cf. Heaney 2006a: 1). Hell and terrorism are intertwined in the twenty-first century.⁹⁷

2.4.3 Canto XII: The Boiling Blood of Phlegethon

Having passed the heretics in their glowing coffins in the City of Dis, among them Farinata Uberti and Guido Cavalcanti’s father, Dante and Virgil descend to the seventh circle of hell, guarded by Minotaur, where they find a rift valley filled with boiling blood. From its shores, centaurs aim at sinners who dare to surface from the blood. Nessus carries Dante across the stream and informs him of the souls that are drowned underneath, the violent against their neighbours. They are dipped into the blood to varying degrees according to the severity of their sin. The river of boiling blood, “la riviera del sangue in la qual bolle / qual che per violenza in altrui nocchia” (*Inf.* XII, 47-48), is Virgil’s Phlegethon (cf. Dante 1991: 368n). It is not called by its name until canto XIV:

⁹⁷ Cf. Rachel Falconer’s essay “Hell in our Time: Dantean Descent and the Twenty-first Century ‘War on Terror’” about how the concept of hell shapes and informs the experience of world events as portrayed by the media (Falconer 2010). Rebecca Solnit, in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, focuses on the positive ramifications of disasters regarding people’s social behaviour; one of her five chapters is on September 11 (Solnit 2009).

And I: 'Then, master, where is Lethe? Where
is Phlegethon? For one you've left aside;
the other's made from tears, so you declare.'

'Good questions, and well put,' approved my guide,
'but you can answer one of them, I guess,
if you recall the boiling blood-red tide. (Carson 2002: 98)

Heaney's 'Sandstone Keepsake' from the first part of *Station Island* (1984) alludes to one of the sinners in canto XII. The poem consists of six irregularly rhymed quatrains, partly in iambic pentameter. The poem's speaker is walking along a beach after sunset in the vicinity of an internment camp on Inishowen, lifting a "russet", "ruddier", "red stone" up from the sand and reflecting upon it:

A stone from Phlegethon,
bloodied on the bed of hell's hot river?
Evening frost and the salt water

made my hand smoke, as if I'd plucked the heart
that damned Guy de Montfort to the boiling flood –
but not really, though I remembered
his victim's heart in its casket, long venerated. (Heaney 1984: 20)

In 1271, Guy de Montfort murdered Prince Henry, son of Richard, Duke of Cornwall, and nephew of Henry III of England during High Mass. A statue of Prince Henry is said to have been erected on London Bridge, with a casket containing his heart placed in its hand; other sources find it more likely that his statue was placed on his tomb in Westminster Abbey, in which case Dante's "su Tamisi" would indicate the city of London in general, a usage common in Dante (cf. Dante 1991: 380n; Dante 1949: 148n). Guy de Montfort is one of the sinners punished by being immersed in the repulsive bloodbath they themselves have caused in their lifetimes (cf. Dante 1949: 146). While carrying Dante across the Phlegethon, Nessus singles him out as an example of a violent killer:

Mostrocci un'ombra da l'un canto sola,
Dicendo: «Colui fesse in grembo a Dio
lo cor che 'n su Tamisi ancor si cola». (*Inf.* XII, 118-120)

Heaney presumably takes the word “venerate” from Dorothy L. Sayers’s translation: “‘There stands the man who dared to smite / Even in the very bosom of God, the heart // They venerate still on Thames.’” (Dante 1949: 145) Carson renders it more faithful to the original: “‘That one in God’s sanctum stabbed the heart / that by the Thames drips blood still unatoned.’” (Carson 2002: 82).⁹⁸ It suits Heaney’s purposes perfectly to allude to the seventh circle of hell, where the violent against their neighbours are damned. Irish Catholics and Protestants likewise are neighbours causing bloodbaths. The speaker in ‘Sandstone Keepsake’ watches, and is being watched from, the watch-towers, but then he is “dropped by trained binoculars”, because he poses no threat, he is “not about to set times wrong or right, / stooping along, one of the venerators” (Heaney 1984: 20). All he does is venerate the hearts of the victims of the pointless killings. In her chapter on *Station Island*, Fumagalli ends her paragraph on ‘Sandstone Keepsake’ with the observation: “As in *Field Work*, political victims and political murders seem to be still at the centre of Heaney’s relationship with Dante.” (Fumagalli 2001: 135) This will become evident in the dissertation’s chapter on Ugolino.

For Corcoran, the poem is a “meditation in which Heaney paints a wry self-portrait of the artist as political outsider which is characteristic in its shrug of uneasy self-deprecation” (Corcoran 1998: 114). Heaney struggles with his political self as he considers the possibility of cowardliness as a result of not assuming a distinctive position. His embarrassment, or even inferiority complex, is emphasised by the concession he makes regarding the Dante comparison, “but not really” (cf. *ibid.*).⁹⁹ His “self-deflating contemplation” (*ibid.*) ends with the realisation that he is an irrelevant figure in the eyes of the guards, “a silhouette not worth bothering about” (Heaney 1984: 20), which is expressed in a language interspersed with intertextual references, irony, and ambiguity:

The incapacity for the political role is rebuked in those lines by the pun which makes over the ‘Irish Free State’, which was bitterly fought for in a revolutionary and a civil war, into a phrase

⁹⁸ Giovanni Pillonca takes Heaney’s choice of “cola” as “venerate” instead of “‘still dripping blood’, and, therefore, still exacting vengeance” as an example for the complexity underlying the poetic process of ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, regardless of whether Heaney was aware of the two disputed possibilities of translation. Rather than simply deflating himself, he argues, Heaney performs the “duty of the poet who has to give [the victims] a voice and that voice is not meant to claim revenge but justice tinged [...] with that special attitude which the ancients called *pietas*.” (Pillonca 2006: 354)

⁹⁹ O’Donoghue relates this concession to the central sequence ‘Station Island’, raising the question of how seriously the whole pilgrimage can be taken, an undertaking called ‘infantile’ by the ghost of Joyce, and “linked to the political question of involvement with the ‘infantile’ demands of nationalist and community politics.” He finds the allusion to Montfort fitting because of its “sacrilegiousness: a charge which Heaney’s *poetic* version of pilgrimage is always open to.” (O’Donoghue 1998: 246)

for the disengagement of poetry, and by the allusion itself which refuses the obligation Hamlet finds so overwhelming, to 'set right' the times that are 'out of joint'. (Corcoran 1998: 114)

However self-deflating, the pun, "from my free state of image and allusion" (Heaney 1984: 20), also stresses the relief Heaney possibly sought, and gained, in his self-imposed exile, and in his poetry. With the move to the Republic, the immediate pressure to produce politicised poetry decreases, but the bad conscience remains and expresses itself through the poetry.¹⁰⁰

At first, Heaney alludes to Dante in a way that suggests they are equal poets; the stone is a medium, a message or reminder from the medieval poet to the contemporary poet. The following musing, "as if I'd plucked the heart" and so on, turns the stone from hell into Prince Henry's heart, and implies that the heart could have fallen into the Thames and swum to Ireland (as does Muldoon's eel-skin briefcase), again as a Dantesque message for Heaney. The qualification "but not really", however, rather suggests that Dante is venerated as an influence, that he can be alluded to or imitated, "but not really" reached in his greatness as poetic predecessor. In addition to the poetic difference, there is the political one. Dante assumed a distinctive political position, including the risk of the death penalty. While working on these personal evaluations, Heaney, by transforming Dante's canto, portrays in 'Sandstone Keepsake' the Northern Irish conflict as a pool of blood in which the violent against their neighbours suffer in a state of hell, further suggesting that some hearts might have hardened to stone. "Indifferent cruelty – a lack of pity" is also what Thomas Kinsella bemoans in 'Argument' from *Man of War* (2007), and he imagines a punishment from "a just Observer" which would send the violent "on to another world" (Kinsella 2007: 10):

And there are forms of violence
sanctioned, or required, within the group
among aggressive males – in ordered strife
for mate, terrain or power; the choice established,
peace established while the victor rules.

But there is a mark not shared with the dumb beast:
the willed, and mass, occasional destruction
of others, face to face, of the same kind. (ibid. 9)

¹⁰⁰ In his interview with O'Driscoll, Heaney confirms the feeling of guilt and the self-accusation during the time of the hunger strikes, which is when *Station Island* was written, and stresses the distance he felt from the "realpolitik", the "sacred drama" that was going on, living in Dublin at the time, "away from it all" (O'Driscoll 2008: 259).

2.4.4 Canto XIII: Heaney in the Bleeding Wood

The next area in the seventh circle is a bleak wood inhabited by harpies. Hearing sighs, Dante assumes they emerge from souls hiding within the wood. But Virgil tells him to break off a twig, and so he learns that the sighs he had heard came from the trees themselves, for the tree he hurts bleeds and moans. It is Pier delle Vigne, one of the violent against themselves, the suicides, who have been turned into trees. He tells Dante about his life and his unjust imprisonment, where he committed suicide out of despair, and he explains how the souls of the suicides are thrown into the wood by Minos, grow into trees, and have to suffer the harpies eating their leaves, which, however, is not purely painful but also pain relief because it allows them to moan. The wood is an image “della disperazione che porta alla rovina”, “senza alcuna bellezza” (Dante 1991: 393n).¹⁰¹ Dante takes the idea of the bleeding wood from the third book of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas breaks a twig off the bush Polydorus had been turned into, and blood and words seep from it. Dante admits to the source by making Virgil refer to his own work when addressing Pier (cf. Dante 1991: 398n; Prill 1999: 166):

‘Had he at first believed, O injured soul,
a scene that only in my verse he’s scanned,
my sage responded to the wounded bole,

‘against yourself he’d not have raised a hand;
but so incredible was it, I had to hurt
myself as much as you, to make him understand. (Carson 2002: 86)

Heaney alludes first to Virgil’s bleeding tree in ‘*Sibyl*’, which is the second part of ‘*Triptych*’ from *Field Work* (1979), then to Dante’s bleeding wood in ‘*The Loaning*’ from *Station Island* (1984) and in ‘*Canopy*’ from *Human Chain* (2010).

‘*Triptych*’ as a whole is obviously worth mentioning for its tripartite structure alone. Every part consists of five unrhymed quatrains. Part I, ‘*After a Killing*’, begins with the spotting of

¹⁰¹ Don Paterson translates, or rather adapts the canto in ‘The Forest of the Suicides’ from *Landing Light* (2003). He inserts an epigraph from Sylvia Plath’s ‘Winter Trees’ and turns Pier into a female suicide. Instead of *terza rima*, he employs cross-rhymed quatrains (Paterson 2003: 9-14). Robin Robertson’s ‘The Wood of the Suicides’, “*after Dante*”, from *Slow Air* (2002) offers another nice twist by telling the episode from the shade’s point of view: “Two men have come amongst us: / sight-seers; voyeurs. One takes / the twig of my finger in his hand / and snaps the bone.” (Robertson 2002: 26)

two young men with rifles,¹⁰² has the speaker asking “Who’s sorry for our trouble?”, and merges into a tender description of Irish scenery and home. In ‘*Sibyl*’, the speaker asks: “What will become of us?”, and the sibyl answers in her function as a seer that mankind will change its form because people only think of money:

Unless forgiveness finds its nerve and voice,
Unless the helmeted and bleeding tree
Can green and open buds like infants’ fists
And the fouled magma incubate

Bright nymphs [...]

The ground we kept our ear to for so long
Is flayed or calloused, and its entrails
Tented by an impious augury.
Our island is full of comfortless noises.¹⁰³ (Heaney 1979: 13)

The scenario the sibyl sees for the Irish people is a hellish and rather hopeless one, with the “helmeted and bleeding tree” simultaneously symbolising violence and suffering, and “fouled magma” covering everything that blossoms and that is alive. People are nothing but ants unless they find a way to forgive each other. Without piety, without faith, she suggests, there is not comfort. The figure of the sibyl is probably inspired by Virgil. In Book VI of the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl of Cumae guides Aeneas through Hades. She pacifies Cerberus by throwing him cakes. Dante in turn alludes to this scene in Canto VI of the *Inferno* when Virgil throws Cerberus a handful of mud (cf. Dante 1991: 182n). “Sibilla” is explicitly mentioned in the last canto of the *Paradiso*, where Dante the poet uses her leaves, dispersed by the wind, as a simile for fleetingness, for in Book III of the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl writes her oracles on leaves, which are scattered in the wind (cf. Dante 1994a: 916n).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² This alludes to the 1976 assassination of Christopher Ewart-Biggs, the UK ambassador to Ireland. As Heaney recalls, “the news that morning on the radio mentioned two men with rifles running up the hill from the site of the explosion. Whether or not this was ever confirmed, I’m not sure, but it stayed with me as a kind of dream image” (O’Driscoll 2008: 211).

¹⁰³ Note in this line the allusion to Shakespeare’s Caliban in *The Tempest*: “Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises” (cf. Corcoran 1998: 90).

¹⁰⁴ A famous example of the appearance of the Cumaean Sibyl in modern poetry is the epigraph to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a Latin quotation from the *Satyricon* of Petronius (cf. Eliot 2000: 2369n). Pillonca suggests that Heaney’s Sibyl might be read as an allusion to Eliot’s epigraph (Pillonca 1999: 583). Heaney also reworks the Sibyl in ‘Electric Light’: “a littered Cumae”, “sibilant”, “sybilline English” (Heaney 2001: 80). “Allusions to the Cumaen prophetic function as a reminder of old age and death, a personalization of the ‘Sibyl’ of *Field Work*, who is asked to predict the uncertain future of a bomb-ridden society” (Moi 2007a: 186).

Neil Corcoran suggests that the “helmeted and bleeding tree” derives from the bleeding trees in Virgil’s underworld of the *Aeneid VI* (he apparently confuses Virgil and Dante here), and “from the frontispiece drawing by David Jones for his poem about the First World War, *In Parenthesis*, which entangles a naked but prominently helmeted soldier in a landscape of blasted trees” (Corcoran 1998: 89). Part III of ‘Triptych’, ‘*At the Water’s Edge*’, deals with helicopter surveillance and penitence, set in a monastic ruin.

In the explicit Dante reference in part III of ‘The Loaning’, the image of the bleeding tree is linked again with the image of a green tree, but the hope that might arise from a greening tree is burned:

When you are tired or terrified
your voice slips back into its old first place
and makes the sound your shades make there ...
When Dante snapped a twig in the bleeding wood
a voice sighed out of blood that bubbled up
like sap at the end of green sticks on a fire. (Heaney 1984: 52)

The allusion to the bleeding twig is beautifully foreshadowed, through transformation, by “the spit blood of a last few haws and rose-hips” in the last line of part I, by the men taking “twilight as it came / like solemn trees [...] with their pipes red in their mouths” in part II, and by “the surface noise of the earth / you didn’t know you’d heard till a twig snapped” in the first stanza of part III, and it is echoed by the “blood-red cigarette” that “startles the shades, screeching and beseeching” in the last two lines of the poem. The Dantesque simile (“like sap at the end of green sticks”) to which Heaney refers reads in the original:

Come d’un stizzo verde ch’arso sia
da l’un de’ capi, che da l’altro geme
e cigola per vento che va via,
sì de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme
parole e sangue [...] (*Inf.* XIII, 40-44)

Dante writes that the burned stick groans (“geme”) like a living creature, and from the twig he snapped exit “parole e sangue”: words, or word fields, that recur throughout ‘The Loaning’. At the end of the poem, the shades are startled by the burning cigarette like the stick is startled by the fire. While part II is a childhood memory taking place in a kitchen, part III is set in the

poem's present ("Stand still. You can hear / everything going on"; "somewhere now"). The last quatrain is set in a prison and thus ends with the political reality of the time. "At the click of a cell lock somewhere now / the interrogator steels his *introibo*": the reference to the liturgical term sarcastically portrays the interrogator as priest, but one without authorisation, for he steels his entrance, and it is not the altar of God he is facing, rather a sacrificial chamber.

In his essay on Dante and Heaney, Bernard O'Donoghue has the end of the poem represent "a decidedly modern-sounding form of retribution, in an era when charges of juridical torture were being made" (O'Donoghue 1998: 246). Pillonca states that the reference to the *Inferno* in 'The Loaning' gives "voice to the suffering of known and unknown victims of dictatorships all over the world", the prisoners being associated with the shades of the suicides (Pillonca 2006: 353). Immediately following the Dante reference, the prison scene's similarity with Dante's hell is implied. Heaney's "dark wood of the larynx" proves a suitable image for the entire poem (cf. Reeves 1993: 266). The speaker in part II, probably a little boy, closes his eyes in order to "make the light motes stream behind them" like the lost words streaming in part one. He imagines himself sitting in a tree, which is reminiscent of Sweeney, who was exiled to the trees and is the subject of the third section of *Station Island*. It also recalls the Harpies, creatures with the head and trunk of a woman and wings and claws of a bird, which sit on the trees in the bleeding wood. They also appear in Book III of the *Aeneid* (Dante 1991: 395n). Reeves stresses Heaney's repeated use of a "particularly Virgilian episode in the *Commedia*", as the bleeding wood is inspired by the *Aeneid*, and thus places Heaney

in a long line of poets to have used the episode as an image for the pain which the poet guiltily renews, and in which he participates; and the very act of alluding to this Dantean incident, resonant with the poetic involvement of Virgil and so many others, is emblematic of how poetry reaches back beyond the individual practitioner, 'the voice slipping back into its old first place', 'making the sound' that the shades of other poets make in 'the limbo of lost words'; of how, on the other hand – and this is the defence that lies buried in all such confessions by Heaney – it gives voice to the importunate blood. (Reeves 1993: 266f)

In *Human Chain* (2010), poetry reaches back beyond the individual practitioner once again. Positioned right before 'The Riverbank Field' and 'Route 110', 'Canopy' returns to the imagery of Canto XIII, but transforms old songs into "new airs":

Dante's whispering wood –
The wood of the suicides –
Had been magicked to lover's lane. (Heaney 2010: 45)

At the end of the poem is an indication that it was written in 1994, about a decade after the poems in *Station Island*. Furthermore, it is set at Harvard in the United States, whereby a temporal as well as a geographical distance is gained from the political problems in Ireland. The speaker witnesses a sound installation in Harvard Yard in springtime, with “trees [...] turning a young green”. “David Ward”, rhyming with “Harvard Yard”, “had installed / voice boxes in the branches [...] that made sibilant ebb and flow, / Speech-gutterings, desultory // Hush and backwash and echo.” This is reminiscent of the loaning, where lost words “settled in [...] the soft lungs of the hawthorn”, and of the sibyl, with “urgent, sibilant / *Ails*, far off and old”, and the “eddy of sybilline English”, but not really. This time the theme is not death or the struggle with the poet's voice, and the tree actually bears green leaves. “Earth was replaying its tapes,” (ibid. 44) with a slightly different outcome:

If a twig had been broken off there
It would have curled itself like a finger
Around the fingers that broke it
And then refused to let go

As if it were mistletoe
Taking tightening hold.
Or so I thought as the fairy
Lights in the boughs came on. (ibid. 45)

Heaney gives Dante's story a new spin. This time, the twig fights back; it does not let go. It does not let the poet renew the pain, or rather, it is imagined to punish his attempt to do so, and accordingly, ‘Canopy’ is not about political issues. The poet seems to insinuate “Give me a break, things have changed”. The poem's concerns might be healing, and the hope that spring symbolises, and it is about love. The last two lines, however, qualify or de-mythologise this hope by bringing back the old familiar air of self-questioning: “so I thought”, (but I could be wrong).

2.4.5 Canti XIV-XVI: Two Murphys and Two Dubliners in the Abominable Sand

In the third area of the seventh circle, encircled by the bleeding wood and the river of boiling blood, linger the violent against God, nature and art. Flames rain down on a pit of sand in which the sinners lie, crouch or walk according to their sin. In Canto XIV, Dante and Virgil meet Capaneus, one of the Seven against Thebes, and whom Jupiter killed with a thunderbolt because he had mocked the gods. His story is told in the writings of Statius (among others), one of Dante's favourite authors, and one of Dante's guides in the *Commedia*. Capaneus is Dante's example of the human arrogance of rebelling against God, portrayed in the light of Christian faith (Dante 1991: 433n).¹⁰⁵ Kevin Brownlee concludes his remarks about the *Thebaid*'s function for, and the Theban character of, Dante's hell as follows:

The poetics of Dante's *Inferno* thus involve a Christian recontextualization of Statius' Thebes as the epitome and emblem of human history without Christ – which is also, quite literally, the state of the damned: an endlessly repeated cycle of violence and suffering with no redemptive value or power. (Brownlee 2007: 150)

The Irish poet Gerry Murphy, born in Cork in 1952, and according to Theo Dorgan “inexplicably under-rated” (Dorgan 2010), opens his latest book *My Flirtation with International Socialism* (2010) with ‘New Arrivals Eighth Circle’, an obvious Dante reference to be discussed later, and includes a poem called ‘Capaneus’, a paraphrase, as Tom Hubbard calls it (cf. Hubbard 2010: 97), of the Capaneus episode in Canto XIV.

Who is that, stretched out yonder, all rippling muscle,
steeling himself against the constant flame,
as if the fiery hail would merely glance off him?

Lowering his voice, Virgil turned to me and said:
“That is Capaneus, one of the seven kings who invested
Thebes, he held and obviously still holds

God in some contempt and flaunts it ceaselessly,
but, as I told him, his frothing blasphemies make
a fitting badge for such an obdurate breast.” (Murphy 2010: 15)

¹⁰⁵ John A. Scott points out that “it is remarkable that Dante should have selected a pagan as the only example of blasphemy in his Christian hell. This surprising choice should make us reflect on Dante's belief that all humanity must obey and fear God under whatever mask he may be known.” (Scott 2004: 253)

In fact, this is more a faithful translation than a paraphrase, but there is an ellipsis of lines 49-66 of Canto XIV after the first tercet; Dante's question is first answered by Capaneus himself, who is then harshly addressed by Virgil, telling him it only serves him right to be punished harder and harder by the same pride that confined him to hell. Having said that, he turns to Dante, which is rendered in the second and third tercet of Murphy's poem. Capaneus' name is not mentioned there in the original, but appears earlier in line 63, when Virgil addresses Capaneus: "O Capaneo, in ciò che non s'ammorza / la tua superbia, se' tu più punito" (*Inf.* XIV, 63-64). Significantly, the consequence of the ellipsis in Murphy's translation is that Capaneus is not given a voice.

It is noteworthy that Murphy does not mention his source, the poem being so faithful to Dante's original, and given the high number of poems that are subtitled "after" another poet in the same collection. There are "too many poems 'after' the work of others", as Nolan in fact writes (Nolan 2010). Perhaps it can be attributed to, as Thomas McCarthy puts it, the collection's modernist "definition of art as both discourse and recovered conversation" (McCarthy 2010) that some of its references are left unacknowledged, but it certainly lends Dante a particular weight or significance that he is the anonymous source within this discourse and recovered conversation.

In Canto XV, Dante encounters the violent against nature, the sodomites. Among them is his teacher Brunetto Latini, whom Dante recognises in spite of his burnt face:

E io, quando 'l suo braccio a me distese,
ficcai li occhi per lo cotto aspetto,
sì che 'l viso abbrusciato non difese
la conoscenza süa al mio 'ntelletto;
e chinando la mano a la sua faccia,
risposi: «Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?».
E quelli: «O figliuol mio, non ti dispiaccia
se Brunetto Latino un poco teco
ritorna 'n dietro e lascia andar la traccia». (*Inf.* XV, 25-33)

While he has to keep moving through the sand in order not to increase his punishment, Brunetto tells Dante about his future and names some of the sinners present around them. While Brunetto's foretelling is "a sombre vision of Florence's history and its obdurate,

‘Fiesolan’ character”, Havely suggests that “it also hints at a possible way out of the claustrophobic ‘lair of destruction’”:

It does so by means of a vivid and paradoxical image: that of the ‘noble’ plant, seeding itself in the midst of the ‘litter’ in which the ‘Fiesolan beasts’ live (73-7).¹⁰⁶ At one level this can be taken personally: the noble seedling can be seen as Dante himself [...]. At a wider, communal level, however, the tender and vulnerable plant deriving from the stock of ancient Rome could also be read as a tentative sign of possible civic recovery. (Havely 2007: 138)

In life, Brunetto Latini enjoyed great prestige in the cultural world of thirteenth century Florence and had a particular influence on the intellectual development of the young Dante (Dante 1991: 460n). He was a militant Guelph, a statesman, notary, writer, and fosterer and promoter of philosophy and rhetoric. Between 1260 and 1266, the fortunate years for the Ghibellines, he was banned and lived in France. He died in Florence in 1294 (ibid. 476n). In spite of consigning Brunetto to hell, possibly for homosexual relations, Dante describes their meeting in the seventh circle in reverent and loving terms (ibid. 460n). As Karlheinz Stierle points out, Dante has his teacher to thank for the idea of writing the text that enabled him to ensure his eternal life, his literary afterlife (cf. Stierle 2007: 336).

T.S. Eliot alludes to the Brunetto Latini episode in the second section of ‘Little Gidding’, the fourth of his *Four Quartets*, written in 1942:

I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.
So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another’s voice cry: “What! are *you* here?”
[...]
And he a face still forming (Eliot 1969: 193)

The indentation of every second and third line imitates Dante’s *terza rima*, and the meeting with a “compound ghost”, here composed of W. B. Yeats and Jonathan Swift (cf. Eliot 2000b: 2391n), is obviously referencing Dante’s encounter with his dead master. The “brown baked

¹⁰⁶ Carson’s translation reads: “O hardy plant, that rises through // their piles of bullshit” (Carson 2002: 102).

features” echo “lo cotto aspetto”,¹⁰⁷ and “What! are *you* here?” translates “Siete voi qui, ser Brunetto?” (cf. *ibid.*). Thirteen years earlier, Eliot’s influential Dante essay was published. In his section on the *Inferno*, he names the episodes of Brunetto Latini, Ulysses, Bertrand de Born, Adamo di Brescia and Ugolino as the ones that leave the greatest impression after a first reading:

[...] they certainly remain in my memory as the parts of the *Inferno* which first convinced me, and especially the Brunetto and the Ulysses episodes, for which I was unprepared by quotation or allusion. [...] the first is Dante’s testimony of a loved master of arts, the second his reconstruction of a legendary figure of ancient epic; yet both have the quality of *surprise* which Poe declared to be essential to poetry. (Eliot 1951: 247)

Probably inspired by Eliot, Heaney transforms Dante’s encounter with his teacher into an encounter with the ghost of his own teacher in section V of ‘Station Island’ (cf. O’Donoghue 1998: 247):¹⁰⁸

Barney Murphy shuffled on the concrete.
Master Murphy. [...]
I moved ahead and faced him, shook his hand.

Above the winged collar, his mottled face
went distant in a smile as the voice
readied itself and husked and scraped, ‘Good man,
good man yourself,’ before it lapsed again
in the limbo and dry urn of the larynx.

[...]
the mists of all the mornings I set out
for Latin classes with him, face to face,
refreshed me. (Heaney 1984: 72f)

¹⁰⁷ Allen Mandelbaum’s translation from 1980 reads “his baked, brown features”.
<http://www.danteonline.it/english/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR>

¹⁰⁸ Fumagalli points out that Robert Lowell, one of the American poets Heaney admires most, published “Brunetto Latini”, a version of Dante’s canto, in his collection *Near the Ocean* from 1967 (Fumagalli 2001: xiii), so Lowell’s poem might also have been at the back of Heaney’s mind.

Bernard Murphy was the school principal of Anahorish Primary School, which Heaney attended from 1944 to 1951, and he taught him in his senior classes, giving him his first lessons in Latin (O’Driscoll 2008: xxi; 30). He is the first of the three “fosterers” Heaney meets in this section, the other two appearing as another teacher and the poet Patrick Kavanagh. The dead master has trouble speaking with his “weakened voice”, the “dry urn of the larynx”,¹⁰⁹ and the “adam’s apple in its weathered sac / work[ing] like the plunger of a pump in drought” (Heaney 1984: 72). The imagery built around the organs of speech is reminiscent of ‘The Loaning’. The larynx, in Heaney’s Dante essay a “dark wood” (Heaney 1985: 18), is here a “dry urn” and a “limbo”. A limbo for the lost words, reduced to ashes, never to be spoken; a concern reminiscent of Boland. One could also interpret it as an image for libraries destroyed by fire or intentional book burnings. Being “face to face” with a dead fosterer, or father figure, of course foreshadows the face-to-face meetings in *Seeing Things*. Dante similarly merges intellectual guide and father figure: he makes Brunetto Latini address him with “O figliuol mio” (*Inf.* XV, 31) and “O figliuol” (37) and refers to “la cara e buona imagine paterna” (83).¹¹⁰

In ‘Leavings’ from *Field Work* (1979), Heaney had already alluded to the seventh circle of hell. In the poem, Thomas Cromwell is assumed to be dwelling somewhere in hell.¹¹¹ Passing a chapel destroyed by Cromwell, the speaker wonders: “Which circle does he tread, scalding on cobbles, each one a broken statue’s head?” (Heaney 1979: 57) “Scalding on cobbles” might indeed refer to the Abominable Sand, where the violent against nature, God and art suffer. Fumagalli suggests that Cromwell might fit in here because he “is violent in his attacks on art as he despoils the English monasteries of their riches and tradition” (see the usurers in Canto XVII), as Heaney observes in the poem, and the punishment Heaney assigns to Cromwell corresponds to Dante’s concept of the *contrapasso* (Fumagalli 2001: 92f).

In Canto XVI, between the seventh and eighth circle, Dante and Virgil meet the shades of three politically important Florentines called Guido Guerra, Aldobrandi and Rusticucci (cf. Sayers 1949: 172n). They form a wheel in order to talk to Dante while simultaneously moving, as they are forced to do. As mentioned in the introduction, Harry Clifton’s ‘The Crystalline Heaven’ alludes to this canto. The Dublin-born poet, elected Ireland Professor of Poetry in

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Psalm 22,15: “My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.” Some versions based on the original Hebrew give “mouth” or “throat” instead of “strength”.

¹¹⁰ Sayers translates “The dear, benign, paternal image of you” (Dante 1949: 164); Robert Lowell significantly has “your fatherly and gentle face” (Lowell 2003: 415).

¹¹¹ As Peter Paul Schnierer points out in his study of the diabolic in English literature, Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* has been interpreted by some as representing Cromwell (Schnierer 2005: 80).

2010, immersed himself in Dante's *Commedia* while he was living in Italy. He mentions the book in his account of the year he spent in the Abruzzi, *On the Spine of Italy* (1999), but the beach was certainly not the place where he delved into it:

I had brought a copy of Dante to the beach, much to the priest's amusement. Comics, yes, but the *Commedia*? As the sun beat down and the glassy little waves broke ceaselessly along miles of yellow sand, I began to see his point. [...]

'When Goethe visited Italy,' the priest said to me, 'the Italians told him, "You have a sad expression on your face – it's because you think too much!"'

So I put away Dante. (Clifton 1999: 32)

Published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in May 2007, his poem 'The Crystalline Heaven' starts, contrary to the expectation the title might provoke, with a quotation from *Inferno XVI*, line 73: "*The new people, the quick money*". In the canto, the complete sentence reads "La gente nuova e i sùbiti guadagni / orgoglio e dismisura han generata" (*Inf. XVI*, 73-74), "the new people, the quick money have generated pride and gluttony", referring to the families that moved to Florence from the countryside and quickly became wealthy through commerce (cf. Dante 1991: 497n). It is the answer Dante gives the three Florentines when one of them asks him about the state of Florence, for they have recognised Dante as a fellow Florentine by his attire. Before parting company they ask Dante to mention them in his account once he has escaped hell and reached the stars.

Clifton's rhymed four-stanza poem is set in Dáil Éireann in Dublin, at the time he was employed there as a civil servant. Setting, characters and idioms are distinctly Irish, with O'Snodaigh "relaxing over a fag", saying "Let Charlie [Haughey] soon start shiting golden eggs / Or the country's fucked". Set against this is the speaker himself, "high as Dante" up in the "crystalline heaven", the glass dome above Dáil Éireann, observing the political and personal happenings from above, looking down "On the dog-eat-dog of Florence, or Dublin town" (Clifton 2007a: 7). He watches the circular rows of seats filling up with deputies and compares them to concentric hells filling up with sinners. The sins are not specified but might be insinuated by the opening quotation. What is above the speaker is described in stark contrast:

Above, the forces that govern the universe,
Light, reason and love, a Dantean vision,
Stream through the windows. I am alone up here
In the public gallery [...] (ibid.)

He gives the impression that he feels superior to, literally above, the business of state, detecting a lack of light, reason and love, a lack the deputies presumably do not even notice. The atmosphere is oppressive, and he longs to be outside in the sunlight. Dublin's politicians, just like Florence's, live in hell, whereas poets like Dante and Clifton's poet-speaker are privileged to have at least a vision of heaven. The parallel or comparison with Dante, however, is qualified in the last stanza of 'The Crystalline Heaven':

[...] Afterwards, in the lobby,
[...] I'll know myself a snob,
A shadow of Dante, the chip on my shoulder,
Disinheritance, crystallising to heaven
High and light as the dome above Dail Eireann,
sitting in judgement on Dublin, and getting older. (ibid.)

He now diminishes himself into a mere "shadow of Dante"; shadow signifying someone that pales in comparison and is only a follower, but simultaneously one of Dante's shades, blemished by pride. There is bitterness in these last lines. The glass dome is the glass ceiling symbolising his own limitations, his ultimate inability to become as great as Dante. This glass ceiling, the poem suggests, has been formed by his own arrogance and excludes him from the paradise of being a writer comparable to his admired predecessor. He reads Dante in the light of himself, through the chip on his shoulder, which is transformed into the glass dome distorting Dante's light. The expression "Sitting in judgement" reveals that the speaker is aware of the arrogance of feeling superior to the deputies; the ironic expression reflects the hubris, because being a "minor civil servant", he obviously does not have the authority to convict anyone, and not being Dante, he cannot condemn anyone to hell. Ageing compels him to reflect on these shortcomings. There is, however, a certainly intentional ambiguity about who is "sitting in judgement" here. Grammatically, it may as well be the crystallised chip, the dome, or even Dante himself, looking down on Dublin and assigning everyone to their proper circle. The dissatisfaction, or distaste, that shines through this infernal Dublin poem points to the longing for escape Clifton eventually realises through self-chosen exile. His longing for

travel and knowledge is also present in another Dantesque poem of his to be discussed in chapter 2.5, ‘The Canto of Ulysses’.

The depiction of a hellish Dublin with its sinful inhabitants recalls Thomas Kinsella’s title poem from *Open Court* (1991), “a dark satire on literary ambition” (Sirr 1992: A9) in eighty-four rhyming couplets, which may well have been an influence on Clifton’s poem. Hell, in Kinsella’s poem, is situated in a Dublin pub, and the speaker finds inside the ghosts of dead writers such as “ruined Arnold”, “ruined Auden”, and “a ruined, speechless Oscar Wilde” (Kinsella 2001: 316). The shade called “Anonymous” is, according to Maurice Harmon, Patrick Kavanagh (Harmon 2008: 182). Full of regret, he speaks:

Now, too late,
here in Hell I count the cost:
simple conviction that I lost
in bothering with Dublin’s loud
self-magnifying, empty crowd. (Kinsella 2001: 318f)

The “pints of beer” served in the pub are the exception to the rule that “even if it is within sight of the Brewery, [Kinsella’s] Dublin will sell few beers”, as Peter Sirr puts it when remarking on Kinsella’s “intense and multi-faceted relationship with several Dublins” (Sirr 2006: 14). The final couplet sounds mock-Yeatsian, possibly referring to a second coming of the vomit outside the pub:

The dark is kind, where day will bring
some dew-drenched, green, revolting thing. (Kinsella 2001: 320)

Harmon describes the poem as yet “another descent into the crowded and contentious Dublin underworld” (Harmon 2008: 182).

Similarly, in ‘The Back Lane’ from *Poems from Centre City* (1990), the speaker walks through an infernal Dublin.¹¹² As Harmon points out, “the analogy is with Dante, the chosen model, whose condemnation of the citizens of Florence parallels Kinsella’s response to the

¹¹² Peter Sirr’s *Irish Times* review of *From Centre City*, which compiles the Peppercanister pamphlets from 1988 to 1991, is actually called “The inferno of the city”. “No other poet inhabits the city like Kinsella, makes of it a living inferno haunted by ghostly failures and the spectacles of greed and stupidity”, Sirr writes (Sirr 1994: A9; cf. Harmon 2008: 177).

inhabitants of his native city.” (Harmon 2008: 167f) He also suggests that the book mentioned in the poem is the *Commedia*, and that the three lamps reference the three canticles (ibid. 176):

Three Corporation lamps lit the way
 along the wall to the far corner,
and I started down the middle of the Lane

with the book at my heart
 and the pen patted in its pocket. (Kinsella 2001: 299)

Also, the speaker walks “in the middle of the Lane”, and the whole poem is written in tercets, alluding to *terza rima*; thus the poem combines quotation from, imitation of and allusion to Dante. Gerry Murphy, Heaney, Clifton and Kinsella play God (or Dante) by putting the violent against God, nature and art (Capaneus, Master Murphy, Cromwell, politicians, and misguided or disillusioned poets) in an Irish hell.

2.4.6 Canti XVIII-XXXI: The Malebolge

In order to descend into the eighth circle, Virgil and Dante have to climb onto the back of the monster Geryon, a symbol for the fraud of which the sinners here are guilty. The eighth circle is called *Malebolge*, “evil bags”, referring to the ten subsections, or ditches, of the circle, which are the setting of the Canti XVIII to XXXI. Each ditch contains its separate punishment. In the first ditch, for example, the sinners are flagellated by horned devils, “demon cornuti” (*Inf.* XVIII, 35), with tears running down the sinners’ cheeks.

2.4.6.1 Canto XXI: Malacoda

As was pointed out in the introduction, Dante’s influence on Samuel Beckett is pervasive, particularly in his earlier works, and has been thoroughly explored and discussed. His poem ‘Malacoda’¹¹³ is of interest as a short pre-contemporary interlude in the context of the *Malebolge*:

¹¹³ See Ackerley 1993 for a detailed and inspiring interpretation of the poem.

thrice he came
 the undertaker's man
 [...]
 this incorruptible in the vestibule
 this malebranca knee-deep in the lilies
 Malacoda knee-deep in the lilies
 Malacoda for all the expert awe
 that felts his perineum mutes his signal
 sighing up through the heavy air
 [...]
 stay Scarmilion stay stay
 [...]
 all aboard all souls
 half-mast aye aye

nay

(Beckett 1984: 26)

Malacoda (“evil tail”) appears in Canto XXI of the *Inferno* and is the head of the Malebranche, the “evil claws”, in the fifth ditch of the Malebolge. The Malebranche are devils armed with forks, surveying and immersing the corrupt, who are thrown into boiling pitch. The bridge Dante and Virgil have to cross at this point has been destroyed, and therefore Malacoda accompanies them to the next bridge, which is also impassable. In the last line of the canto, Malacoda breaks wind, which Dante illustrates in a humorous way: “ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta” (*Inf.* XXI, 139). This “segnale di partenza”, along with other scenes in this canto, has been interpreted as a parody of military life (Dante 1991: 649n). It might also have inspired Heaney in section V of ‘Station Island’, when Kavanagh’s ghost disappears at the end of the section, perhaps to be called canto: “And then the parting shot.” (Heaney 1984: 74)

In Beckett’s poem, the undertaker’s assistant is identified with Malacoda, just like him letting off his “signal”. “Stay Scarmilion stay stay” is a translation of line 105 of Canto XXI, “Posa, posa, Scarmiglione!” (*Inf.* XXI, 105; cf. Ackerley 1993: 62), so in addition to transforming the canto and adapting it to his own experience, Beckett also quotes from it. Scarmiglione is another one of the Malebranche. The lilies and the reference to the ship of death at the end of the poem thicken the atmosphere of morbidity. Ackerley compares Beckett’s strategy in the poem with that at the end of his story ‘Dante and the Lobster’, for in both works pity is

withheld,¹¹⁴ “and the final impression is that of the cruel absurdity of death” (Ackerley 1993: 63).

2.4.6.2 Canto XXIII: A Hypocrite

In Canto XXIII, Dante and Virgil encounter the hypocrites in the sixth ditch of the Malebolge. They have to walk around in heavy leaden cloaks, which are covered in gold. Dorothy L. Sayers explains the significance of the *contrapasso*: “The image of Hypocrisy, presenting a brilliant show and weighing like lead so as to make spiritual progress impossible, scarcely needs interpretation.” (Dante 1949: 217n) As mentioned above, Gerry Murphy’s latest collection opens with a poem called ‘New Arrivals Eighth Circle’, following the epigraph ‘Nothing is Lost’. It consists of two tercets:

But who are you, whose cheeks
are sorely runneled by such copious tears?
What hideous garment shines on your stooped shoulders?

And he replied: “This glowing Charvet shirt
is lead-lined and sizzles against my skin.
And so heavy it creaks likes [sic] a disused conscience.” (Murphy 2010: 11)

This is a translation, with some liberties taken, of lines 97-102 from Canto XXIII. Again, the source is not indicated, as opposed to the many poems “after” another poet.

The sinner Dante speaks to here is the Bolognese Fra Catalano of the Cavalieri Gaudenti, a religious order (cf. Dante 1991: 694n). Murphy puts the “shoulders” in Dante’s mouth, whereas in the original, they are implied by Catalano in the image of the creaking scales. For the image Dante puts in Catalano’s mouth, “li pesi / fan così cigolar le lor bilance”, he inserts his own simile, “it creaks like a disused conscience”, which the hypocrites obviously have. Also, the Charvet shirt is of course Murphy’s own. Carson also interprets Dante’s scale image with a reference to the conscience: “they sound like creaking stays, / or scales made ponderous by massive guilt” (Carson 2002: 159). Taking the divergences into account,

¹¹⁴ Cf. Canto XX, 28: “Qui vive la pietà quand’ è ben morta”; the pious man is not supposed to pity the sinners (cf. Dante 1991: 602n).

Murphy's poem is a version rather than a translation of Dante's two *terzine*. The mention of a conscience meanwhile may well refer to a deliberate passing off of Dante's lines as his own.

Val Nolan warns against a simplifying interpretation of the poem's intention, implying that there is no straight line between the innocent and the guilty:

It seems like an easy dig at the establishment, especially when one remembers that the Eighth Circle is entered by riding a monstrous personification of fraud itself, but nothing in Murphy's work is ever so straightforward. The reader is right down there with the speaker of the poem, lost amongst the counterfeiters, hypocrites, seducers, and simonists of the Malebolge. There's only one place left to go from here, downward again to the Ninth Circle, the home of traitors, and Murphy is taking you with him. (Nolan 2010)

Before the descent to the ninth circle, however, one of the most famous *canti* of the *Inferno*, still set in the Malebolge, will be the subject of the next chapter.

2.5 The Canto of Ulysses

The figure of Ulysses, guiding his companions towards death, exemplifies with his speech in Canto XXVI the effect of the power of rhetoric used, or misused, towards the goal of the quest, the human urge to explore, discover, conquer:

Remember who you are, what you were made for:
not to live like brutes, but for the quest
of knowledge and the good." I said no more;

for, encouraged by this brief address,
my comrades were so keen to journey on
I scarce could hold them from the final test;

and with our stern set firmly towards the dawn,
we made wings of our oars for that mad flight,
forever gaining on the port horizon. (Carson 2002: 184f)

In Dante's retelling of Homer's story, Ulysses himself meets his fate in drowning with his men and ship, with the earthly paradise in sight, yet unattained. In the canto, Dante encounters Ulysses' shade in the eighth ditch of the eighth circle, where each evil counsellor is punished

by being enclosed in a flame.¹¹⁵ As mentioned in chapter 2.2.3, Heaney borrows Dante's firefly-simile in 'Crossings xxxvi' and transforms it. He compares the policemen's torches with fireflies, making the scene he describes "more memorable" by using Dante's "head-clearing simile". Dante, when arriving at the eighth ditch, compares the "tante fiamme" with "luciole" (*Inf.* XXVI, 31 and 29) while he gazes down at them from a bridge. Ulysses, who shares one of the flames with Diomedes, then tells Dante his story, part of which is quoted above in Ciaran Carson's translation. McCarthy suggests that Muldoon in 'The Briefcase' also alludes to Canto XXVI, his "open sea" echoing Dante's "mare aperto" (100), thus perhaps "offering an intertextual glance towards a medieval text by way of responding to Heaney." (McCarthy 2008: 166)

The popularity and literary importance of Canto XXVI of the *Inferno* and the myth of Ulysses in general reflects the continuing relevance of the theme of the quest for meaning or knowledge, of manipulation of people through a clever use of language, and of the recurring myths about the consequences of pride. In her enlightening essay on Dante's Ulysses, Teodolinda Barolini considers recent strands of contemporary Dante criticism, which is divided on the topic of Ulysses. One of the critics she names is Bruno Nardi, who suggests "that Dante's Ulysses is a new Adam, a new Lucifer, and that his sin is precisely Adam's, namely *il trapassar del segno*. Ulysses is thus a transgressor, whose pride incites him to seek a knowledge that is beyond the limits set for man by God". (Barolini 1997: 113) John A. Scott, despite granting Dante an awareness of his own intellectual hubris, observes a "clear and striking" contrast between Ulysses' voyage, contravening "the natural limits imposed by the deity he knew and should have respected", and Dante's own voyage, enjoying God's blessing (Scott 2004: 255).¹¹⁶ Barolini, however, strictly separates the notions of Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet, focusing on the immense authority assumed by the poet who ventures to describe the indescribable, the vision of paradise, approaching the Godlike as a *scriba Dei* (Barolini 1997: 116): "if the pilgrim learns to be not like Ulysses, the poet is conscious of having to be ever more like him." Writing the *Paradiso* means *trapassar il segno*, "the poetic

¹¹⁵ In Canto XXVII, Dante meets another sinner enclosed in a flame, the shade of Guido da Montefeltro, who was the counsellor of Boniface VIII. The epigraph to T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' is a quotation, in the Italian original, of lines 61 to 66 of this canto, when Guido agrees to tell Dante his shameful story only because he assumes that Dante will not be able to return from hell to pass it on (Eliot 1969: 13).

¹¹⁶ For Dante's similarities and differences with his own version of the Ulysses persona, see also Havelly 2007: 195f. John Freccero argues that "it is perhaps the canto of Ulysses that constitutes Dante's most important and most critical autocitation", referring to the "parallelism between the attempt of Ulysses to reach the absolute and Dante's attempt, in the *Convivio*, to outline a guide to happiness through the pursuit of secular philosophy", both of which failed (Freccero 2007: 165).

equivalent of the *varcare* (passing beyond, crossing over) associated with Ulysses and his mad flight: ‘il varco / folle d’Ulisse’ (Par.27.82-3).” (ibid. 119) Thus the poet’s progress, from a moral perspective, is the inverse of the pilgrim’s progress.

As regards narrative techniques, Barolini notes a corresponding movement from linear narration in the *Inferno* to anti-narrative writing in the *Paradiso*, including a deliberate poetical stasis reflected in the death of the *terza rima* in the triple rhyme of *Cristo/Cristo/Cristo* in *Paradiso* XIV, 103-8 (ibid. 120-2). She emphasises the structural and thematic significance of Ulysses for the whole *Commedia*, since he is mentioned in each canticle (*Inf.* XXVI, *Purg.* XIX, *Par.* XXVII) and “invoked [...] through surrogate figures like Phaeton and Icarus; through semantic tags, like *folle*”, and “through Ulyssean flight imagery”. A figure textually and poetically privileged by the poet (ibid. 115), Dante’s Ulysses serves as a “hermeneutic lodestone of the *Commedia*, associating it with the voyage metaphor that keeps the Ulyssean thematic alive even in the hero’s absence” (ibid. 126).

In his essay on Dante, T.S. Eliot similarly notes and praises the “continuous straightforward narrative” and the resulting readability of the Ulysses episode, contrasting it with Tennyson’s Ulysses poem, inferior to Dante’s “simplification” in its forced poetics.

Thus the line about the sea which

moans round with many voices,

a true specimen of Tennyson-Virgilianism, is too *poetical* in comparison with Dante, to be the highest poetry. (Eliot 1951: 248)

As outlined in the introduction, Joyce’s *Ulysses* is an important example not only of the use of the Odysseus myth, but also of the writer’s Dante reception; Reynolds even calls it Joyce’s “comedy”. Irish drawings on the Ulysses theme will always be informed by this modern classic. Declan Kiberd writes in his introduction to the Penguin edition that Joyce sought to challenge the myth of the ancient military hero and therefore depicted his book’s hero, a modern Odysseus, as a very ordinary man with very ordinary occupations, in order to create a contrasting alternative to the Irish national visions of such writers as Yeats and Pearse (Joyce 1992: x-xi).

Seventy-two years after the publication of *Ulysses*, another Dubliner comes across Dante and the universal theme of the quest for knowledge, reflecting the urge to escape and explore foreign countries, and therefore himself, in self-imposed exile. Clifton, who returned to Dublin in 2004 after years of living abroad, published a poem called 'The Canto of Ulysses' in his collection *Night Train through the Brenner* (1994). It later served as the eponymous poem of a collection of French translations of his poems, published in 1996, *Le Canto d'Ulysse*. Calling the poem 'The Canto of Ulysses' not only alludes to the reading of said canto happening in the poem and to the canto itself, but also implies that the poem might be about Ulysses, or from Ulysses' point of view. In consequence, the poem's speaker can be said to identify with the Greek hero, and the two men merge into one.

'The Canto of Ulysses' consists of seven stanzas of eight lines each, following a rhyme scheme that slightly changes from stanza to stanza. It is set in the Italian home of the poet and his wife. Here, the speaker reflects upon the approaching departure from that temporary home. There is a palpable tension between the impossibility of settling and an anxiety about what is to come:

As the eye reads, from left to right,
Ulysses' canto, what comes next,
The day, already spread like a text
On the ceiling above me, asks to be read.
Anxiety, or increasing light,
Whatever wakes me, fills my head
With the oceanic billows
Of a slept-in marriage bed.

The shutters go up, like thunder,
On the street below. If the soul fed
On coffee, aromatic bread,
Niceties raised to the power of art,
We would long ago have knuckled under
To perfection, in the green heart
Of Italy, settled here,
And gone to sleep in the years.

But what was it Dante said
About ordinary life? My mind wanders
Like Ulysses, through the early sounds,
A motor starting, taps turned on,
Unravelling Penelope's skein,
Unsatisfied, for the millionth time,
With merely keeping my feet on the ground –
As if I could ever go home! (Clifton 1994: 69)

The text in front of the poet conflates with his contemporary surroundings; forces of nature, especially the sea, are evoked by the sound of the shutters and by the sheets rumped up after a storm of passion or a marital fight. Something in the speaker's soul is stirring, preventing the return home. His wife becomes Penelope, home and hearth, ordinary life. In stanza four, he remembers Dante's passage "women will all be widows to the quest", but he cannot see it clearly. The text in front of him is blocked by a hampering feeling of impotence, of ageing. This is where his reality diverges from the text: unlike Ulysses, he takes his wife, his "one satisfaction / At the heart of the known world" with him, wherever the journey takes him, and he admits to a certain "cowardice" in his "need to be gone". As the similarity to the Greek hero becomes blurry, the "sail of Ulysses, west of the Sun" is "dwindling in ptolemaic skies" (ibid. 70). Obviously, the role of women has undergone some changes, as has the notion of virility.

The last stanza, the ultimate recognition that departure is looming, reeks of regret. Ordinary life is associated with peace and enjoyment; parting becomes an exhausting undertaking. The price of adventure, of constant dissatisfaction, has not changed over the centuries, apparently. The flood, conceivable in the form of a nervous breakdown, punishes the lack of humility, and so 'The Canto of Ulysses' ends with the final words of the canto of Ulysses, Canto XXVI of Dante's *Inferno*, "infin che 'l mar fu sovra noi richiuso" (*Inf.* XXVI, 142):

Any day now, we hand back the key
To habit, peace, stability,
The seasonal round, festivities
Of wine and cherry. Think of the fuss
Of what to take, and leave behind –
Shade for the soul, our miniature trees
Of olive, oak, and southern pine –
Before the seas close over us. (Clifton 1994: 70)

Dante's line is transformed into the present tense, and "until" is substituted with "before"; this either effects premonitions or implies the chance of escaping Ulysses' fate after all. In any case, the changes create an open ending. The "green heart of Italy" might live on in the form of miniature trees, as a keepsake, for memory's sake. But any "mad flight" has its consequences.

The poem is a transformation of Dante's canto, and also integrates the intertext of quotation and allusion. Imitation would have happened if Clifton had written the poem in *terza rima*, or as part of an epic, or with the same number of lines as Dante's canto. 'The Canto of Ulysses' might be regarded, in Genette's terms, as one of the copious hypertexts of the *Divina Commedia*, which itself is a hypertext of the *Aeneid*, which in turn is a hypertext of the *Odyssey* and also the hypotext for Joyce's *Ulysses*. Genette regards *Ulysses* as transformation and the *Aeneid* as imitation, arguing that the latter process is more complex (cf. Genette 1982: 14f).

In Carson's translation of the last lines of Canto XXVI, stern and prow of Ulysses' ship have female possessive pronouns, as is of course the custom in the English language, but not in the Italian original. What is more, he closes with a markedly female pun:

Three times it whirled her with tempestuous force;
and at the fourth time round, her stern rose,
her prow went down, as pleased Another. Thus

the waters broke above our heads, and closed. (Carson 2002: 185)

Once again, a shift in male perception, or absorption, of female influence and presence might be in evidence.

Clifton's 'Benjamin Fondane departs for the East' from his collection *Secular Eden* (2007) proves a useful companion piece to 'The Canto of Ulysses'. The motifs of departure, migration, and the poet's self-questioning or mid-life crisis reappear, as does the figure of the wife. Benjamin Fondane, the Romanian poet, critic, translator, film director, and playwright, who died in 1944 in Auschwitz before finishing his "Projet Ulysse", merges into Clifton's poet-speaker, who muses about an afterlife achieved through his poetry, which shows the human anxiety of not leaving a mark on the world, on the future. The poem consists of six

stanzas of ten lines each, with an irregular rhyme scheme and the second line of each stanza shorter than the rest. The “postcards drifting like dead leaves / Back from that other world we are asked to believe in” in the second stanza foreshadow the leaves of the Sibyl of Cumae alluded to in the last stanza. Fondane, like Clifton an immigrant in Paris, is “uprooted”; both are “transmigrating like souls” (Clifton 2007: 200). The cliché of the Irish exile is paralleled with that of the Jewish exile.¹¹⁷ Clifton writes, “Athens and Jerusalem, Ulysses and the Wandering Jew— / There we all go, the living and the dead, / The one in the other” (ibid.). Athens and Jerusalem refer to the polemic philosophy of Shestov, whom Fondane admired. Athens is Shestov’s allegory for Reason and intellectual hubris, as discernible in Plato or Hegel, for example, whereas Jerusalem stands for the “absurdists”, like Shakespeare or Dostoevsky (Weingrad 1999). The Wandering Jew, sometimes called Ahasuerus, is also mentioned in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, when the citizen compares Bloom to Ahasuerus (cf. Joyce 1992: 439). Clifton seems to imply that in constant flight, or transmigration, they all become equals, equally driven to move, to wander, to sail on.

Clifton is one of those Irish writers whom Barbara Freitag might accuse of being anachronistic, “guilty of creating and perpetuating a culture of exile”, most of them like Joyce “voluntary cultural exiles, émigrés or expatriates” but “draw[ing] on the traditional picture of enforced exile”, their “salutary value of distance from the object of literary art” ensuring an “originality of vision” (Freitag 1997: 72f). The culture of exile becomes a culture of intercultural and intertextual transmigration, and one poet lives on in another.¹¹⁸ Paths cross in anachronistic journeys, like Dante walking with Virgil through imaginary afterlives.

And now they tell me ‘Hide your poems, wait—
Somewhere in Nineteen Eighty
Readers will find you...’ I see a Paris street,
Old letterbox, a drop-zone for the infinite
In a leaf-littered hallway, where a publisher long ago

¹¹⁷ Michael Weingrad, in his essay on Fondane, comments on the dangers of such a cliché, which also apply to Irish poets perhaps: “Fondane will be grist to the mill of those ready to mythologize the relation between Jews and exile, a common occurrence in contemporary discussions of literature. Here we see a lamentable confluence of the hoary Christian myth of the Wandering Jew and the romantic stereotype of the poet as outsider. Many of the most admiring treatments of figures such as Celan and Jabes lapse often and easily into this rhetoric, underwritten by the equation: poet=Jew=exile.” (Weingrad 1999)

¹¹⁸ In her review of *Secular Eden*, Alissa Valles criticises the book’s “tendency to collapse all forms of movement into a vision of modernity-as-rootlessness. It’s a concept so familiar as to flirt with banality, and it hardly does justice to the subtlety and complexity of Clifton’s mind. [...] the cumulative effect of the book is to suggest that Fondane’s “departure” for the concentration camp where he will meet his death is simply the most extreme of many “displacements” on a continuum that includes Clifton’s own experience and (in the least charitable reading) redounds on him.” (Valles 2010)

Went out of business, and a young man searches
In the sibylline mess and the overflow
For a few lost words—*my own soul-sister, my wife*
Till death us do part, in the Eastern Marches...
And that, my friends, will be the afterlife. (Clifton 2007: 201)

In his Dante essay, Heaney, another voluntary exile, or “inner émigré”, admires (political exile) Mandelstam’s perception of (political exile) Dante “as the apotheosis of free, natural, biological process”, “a woodcutter singing at his work in the dark wood of the larynx” (Heaney 1985: 18), a further example of perpetuating and romanticising a culture of exile to kindle the creative process. The flight metaphor, the motif of the sea journey or pilgrimage, and the fascination with political exile all reflect the poets’ need to express an inner restlessness and the continuously re-emerging question of identity in a divided and profoundly changing country.

For many contemporary Irish poets, Homer’s *Odyssey* itself, rather than a later hypertext, is an important inspiration, as in Derek Mahon’s ‘Circe’s Cup’ from *Somewhere the Wave* (2007) and ‘Calypso’ from *Harbour Lights* (2005), Michael Longley’s ‘Odyssey’ from *No Continuing City* (1969) and ‘Paper Boats’ from *The Weather in Japan* (2000), Paul Muldoon’s ‘Making the Move’ from *Why Brownlee Left* (1980), Seamus Heaney’s ‘Glanmore Revisited’ from *Seeing Things* (1991),¹¹⁹ and Ciaran Carson’s ‘Siren’ from *On the Night Watch* (2009), to name but a few.¹²⁰ John A. Scott writes that for Dante, “only a figure from the remote past of classical antiquity could provide such a complex web of allusions and parallels”. (Scott 2004: 259) With classical antiquity, Dante, and subsequent texts as a treasure trove of hypotexts, how much more complex, and confused, is the web that can now be spun.

[...] Dante’s Ulysses stands as a perpetual reminder of the vitality of ancient myth in our Western culture. Like Dante’s Virgil, his Ulysses is also a constant reminder of the tragedy of ancient, pagan civilization: even as Virgil is obliged to leave the Earthly Paradise as soon as his role as guide is complete, so Ulysses and his companions are doomed to die a terrible death by drowning as they arrive in sight of that same paradise. (Scott 2004: 260)

¹¹⁹ Fumagalli argues that Heaney identifies with Homer’s Odysseus, who appears in these poems, rather than with “Dante’s compulsive wanderer”. The poems in ‘Glanmore Revisited’ that refer to Odysseus deal with his return, and the sequence’s title itself suggests the motif of (Heaney’s own) return, as it is a “reprise” of ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ from *Field Work*. (Fumagalli 2001: 247) See also Neil Corcoran on the Homeric parallel, finally refused, in Heaney’s poem ‘Damson’ from *The Spirit Level* (1996) (Corcoran 1998: 189; 194).

¹²⁰ For a detailed discussion of most of the poems mentioned, cf. Kratz 2009.

In an age of confusion characterised by increasing secularisation as well as spreading religious extremism, Ulysses' doom appeals ever more. Although science and the quest for knowledge are constantly progressing, nothing is as defined as it was in Dante's age, and consequences keep catching up. With certainties of belief and purpose being shattered, the roles of the sexes reversed or blurred, globalisation and migration uprooting the feeling of belonging, Irish poets, with their backward yet reassuring religious background, reflect these arising doubts and crises in a never-ending poetic journey. Classical texts offer inspiration and guidance for the creation of something new on the groundwork of the old.

2.6 Canto XXVIII: Carson's Sectarian War Inferno

The exigencies of art, life and death come across with more immediate apprehension when read against the inferno of the Troubles. (Moi 2007a: 173)¹²¹

In Canto XXVIII, Dante and Virgil arrive in the ninth ditch of the eighth circle, where the sowers of discord are continuously slashed by devils with swords, and then regenerate. Among the sinners are Muhammad, "classed as a Christian schismatic" (Dante 1949: 250n), his nephew Ali, and the troubadour Bertrand de Born, who carries his head like a lantern. Lino Pertile points out that this canto "illustrate[s] in exemplary fashion" the concept of the *contrapasso*. Just as the sinners during their lifetime "'parted' those who were joined", they are now literally divided in two (Pertile 2007: 77).

Ciaran Carson writes that at the back of his poem 'Siege' "lay Dante, a roadway through the *Inferno*", and he "was reminded especially of Canto XXVIII" (Carson 2003b: 62). *Breaking News* (2003), which includes 'Siege', in contrast to his preceding collections largely consists of very short-lined poems. They were inspired by the journalist William Howard Russell, "generally regarded as the father of the art of war correspondence" (Carson 2003: 74), and William Carlos Williams, after whom 'The Forgotten City' is written (ibid. 44, cf. Manson 2003: 1). In his concluding discussion at the International Dante Seminar in 2003, Carson remembers the creative process of his short-lined war poems:

¹²¹ Statements like these exemplify the close identification, on a socio-linguistic level, of the idea of an inferno with the Northern Irish situation.

There was that helicopter over my house again. I live on the verge of an interface between one part of Belfast and another, between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods. And the helicopter observes you, what's going on down there. Anyway, I ended writing these very short-lined poems, which seemed to emerge from the rhythm of the helicopter noise. [...] These new short lines, it seemed to me, were also influenced by some bits in Dante, which to my ear were very staccato. (Carson 2003a: 343)

He explains that war poems like 'Siege' were clearly influenced by Dante's wars, which he underlines by reading lines 7-16 from his translation of Canto XXVIII from the *Inferno* (ibid.), a passage in which Dante alludes to wars and battles that took place in Apulia, among them the Punic Wars. In *Echi danteschi*, he also quotes from the canto, but in the Italian original, and finds the words "every bit as vivid as Russell's war correspondence" (Carson 2003b: 62). The sin of sowing discord is not only the sin the initiators of warfare in Dante's time committed, but also applies to the protagonists of Carson's Northern Irish reality, as well as those of the Crimean War to which Carson analogically refers in 'Siege': "the road / to Sevastopol // is paved / with round-shot", echoing "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions" (ibid. 61).¹²² The poem 'Home' focuses on surveillance:¹²³

my eye zooms

into the clarity

of Belfast

streets

[...]

British Army

helicopter

poised

motionless

at last

I see everything (Carson 2003: 12f)

¹²² The association of Belfast with the Crimean War is not arbitrary and not solely based on Russell's book. As Ciaran O'Neill points out, "Carson's consciousness of the Crimea had the strange paradox of emanating from precisely Belfast origins. Indeed, this familiarity had spanned several decades – from Carson's first childhood encounters with local Belfast street names such as 'Balaclava' and 'Sevastopol' which are among many that memorialise battles of the Crimean War." (O'Neill 2009: 207)

¹²³ This is of course not a new topic for Carson; cf. Wheatley 2001: "Military intelligence, surveillance, and codes play a ubiquitous role in Carson's work".

The poem develops the notion of being observed by the helicopter into the idea of observing the observation: “I see everything” in addition to being watched. The speaker’s eye “zooms” into the streets of Belfast, thus assuming the perspective of the observers. This point of view deliberately opposes itself to the helplessness of being observed as pictured in Heaney’s ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, for example.

‘The War Correspondent’, drawing on Russell’s descriptions of the Crimean War, concludes *Breaking News*. In the poem sequence’s fifth section, called ‘Kertch’, the devastation of the town is described from the point of view of the invader. The deserted and destroyed buildings are “now empty shells, hollow and roofless”; all is

[...] deadly silent
save for the infernal noise
of soldiers playing on pianos

with their boot-heels (ibid. 66)

A patchwork of war experiences and descriptions, ranging from Dante’s to Russell’s to Carson’s own, forms a collection of poetry Peter Manson calls Carson’s “act of recovery” (Manson 2003: 3). The poem ‘Exile’ explicitly creates this amalgam of various war infernos:

night
after night

I walk

the smouldering
dark streets

Sevastopol
Crimea

Inkerman
Odessa

Balkan
Lucknow

Belfast
is many

places then
as now

all lie
in ruins

and
it is

as much
as I can do

to save
even one

from oblivion (Carson 2003: 51f)

Relating the Irish war to other wars allows the poet to place himself within a tradition of war poetry and journalism. Furthermore, it enables him to poetically share suffering and preserve the memory through mutual identification processes. Dante is one of the mediums through which this is possible.

When Carson was asked in 2000 to translate a Canto from the *Inferno* for a programme of contemporary poets' responses to Dante (cf. Carson 2002: ix), he started "with absolutely no idea of Dante whatsoever" (Carson 2003a: 331). His efforts having encountered a favourable reception,¹²⁴ however, he was encouraged to translate the entire *Inferno*, which was published in 2002 as *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*. His translation imitates Dante's *terza rima* faithfully, as rhyme in Dante's *Commedia* is for Carson "a powerful force which carrie[s] the poem through on wings" (ibid. 332). He immersed himself in the translation of Dante with the idea of song in mind, with the idea of "words impelled by music, by anxiety, by passion, by fear, by exile" (ibid.), driving forces he could relate to himself. A traditional musician as well as a writer of poetry and prose, Carson associates poetry with song and is connected with Dante in this respect and, of course, as regards political experiences (cf. ibid. 333; 338). In an

¹²⁴ The canto he translated for this commission was Canto XXXI (cf. Carson 2003a: 342).

interview with Thomas Rain Crowe in 2000, Carson attributes his use of Irish song to the characteristic Irish feature of perceiving all song, music, storytelling, and literature as “part of the whole” and making “no separation between life and art” (Crowe 2000: 7).

The objective to express himself in his “own words” proved difficult for him, having learned Irish as a first language and English only as a second. This tension, already taken as a theme for his poetry collection *The Irish for No* (1987), he also discovered in the Irish ballads of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for their lyrics were written in English but “reflect the internal assonance and rhyme of Irish language poetry” (Carson 2002: xx). Perceiving in the *Inferno* a “ballad-like energy” and a combination of both colloquial and formal aspects, Carson started to take the Hiberno-English ballad as a model for his translation. “It would allow for sometimes extravagant alliteration, for periphrasis and inversion to accommodate the rhyme, and for occasional assonance instead of rhyme; it could accommodate rapid shifts of register. So I tried to write a *terza rima* crossed with ballad” (ibid. xxi), at times, as Ian Thomson puts it, in “an exaggerated scatology” (Thomson 2002: 2), stressing explicitly the colloquial, vernacular element in Dante. As Elisabeth Delattre puts it, “La langue utilisée par Carson est, comme celle de Dante, « plurilingue », où se mêlent le bizarre, le trivial ou le grossier” (Delattre 2003 : 201).¹²⁵

Florence, in Carson’s distinctly Irish translation, becomes Belfast, because both Carson and Dante are marked by political trouble and injustice, with two parties fighting against each other, be it Ghibellines against Guelfs (or Guelfs against each other) or Catholics against Protestants (cf. Carson 2003a: 333).¹²⁶ In both cases, the reality in which the poet lives and writes was essentially caused by political-religious divergences. During the translation process, Carson is constantly reminded of the situation in Northern Ireland and is thus led to

¹²⁵ David Gibbons notes the social and political implications of Carson’s choice “to seek to recover the lost elements of the Dantean text by using a native Irish poetic tradition, the oral narrative ballad, as his model”. While this choice conforms to recent re-evaluated aspects of Dante studies, i.e. the eclectic nature of Dante’s own language and the endeavour to remove him from the ivory tower into a more realistic biographical and historical context, something other than style is lost in the translation, he argues. “The opportunity cost of presenting a Dante who is relevant to the Irish situational context at the dawn of the twenty-first century [...] seems to be felt most keenly at what we might call the allegorical or theological level”, and anachronism is “one inevitable result of [Carson’s] policy of avoiding archaicism”. He concludes on a favourable note, however: “In refusing the traditional role of the translator’s invisibility, Carson also makes a case for the dignity of poetry vis-à-vis scholarship, as well as an important statement about resisting English hegemony in linguistic and also political terms.” (Gibbons 2003) Similarly, Nick Havely disapproves of Carson’s portrayal of Virgil as a result of his stylistic choices, but grants that his translation will, “like Steve Ellis’s *Hell*, help to reclaim the *Inferno* from academe.” (Havely 2003: 375f)

¹²⁶ There is a poetic continuity to the Belfast analogy in Carson’s oeuvre; Fran Brearton has observed in 2001 already that Belfast, in Carson’s poetry dealing with war, “works as both literal and symbolic site in which past and present co-exist in perpetual flux, as more than one place at more than one time” (Brearton 2001: 373).

compare both worlds, both landscapes, similar to the way the trench landscape of the Great War previously offered terms for describing the geopolitical landscape of the Troubles (cf. Brearton 2001: 380f):

As I write, I can hear [a British Army helicopter's] ratchety interference in the distance; and, not for the first time, I imagine being airborne in the helicopter, like Dante riding on the flying monster Geryon, looking down into the darkness of that place in Hell called Malebolge. 'Rings of ditches, moats, trenches, fosses/ military barriers on every side': I see a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences. For all the blank abandoned spaces it feels claustrophobic, cramped and medieval. (Carson 2002: xii)

Carson's intuitive, innocent approach differs from Heaney's, who begins his poetry reading at the International Dante Seminar in 2003 with the following words: "My relationship with the Master was slightly more reverent than Ciaran's. I was more like an acolyte in the presence of the celebrant" (Heaney 2003: 345). Nevertheless, Carson's devotion to Dante's text is evident in his love for details, including inventive plays of language:

*Yin twa maghogani gazpaighp boke!*¹²⁷
the awful gub began to roar and bawl,
for gibberish was all he ever spoke. (Carson 2002: 218)

Asked about how translating Dante influenced his own poetry, Carson replies that Dante inspired him "to observe war with such clear eyes" (Carson 2003a: 343), the result of which can clearly be seen in *Breaking News* (2003), in poems such as 'Home'. In her introductory note to Carson's *Inferno*, Mary Burgess compares Carson's achievement to Heaney's adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (*The Cure at Troy*, published in 1991), because both poets find "a new way to write about the Troubles" by "weav[ing] into that translation a brilliant treatise on the recurrent nightmare which is the Northern Irish Troubles." (Burgess 2003: 330). "Clearly, Carson's translation is an interpretation, but an illuminating one" writes Maryvonne Hutchins-Boisseau in her close examination of Carson's first canto, which she compares step by step with the original (Hutchins-Boisseau 2003: 56). Gibbons opts for "an

¹²⁷ This is Carson's "Ulster Scots, pseudo-Gaelic Irish, and Ulster English" (Carson 2002: 290) translation of Dante's "*Raphèl mà amècche zabì almi*", spoken by Nimrod in an unknown language in *Inferno*, Canto XXXI, 67 (Dante 1991: 925). Havelly contrasts Carson's "inspired version" of these lines with the safe approach of Michael Palma's translation, which leaves Nimrod's words as they are in the original (Havelly 2003: 374); cf. also Neal Alexander's comparison of Carson's "idiosyncratic refashioning of Nimrod's gobbledygook" with Robin Kirkpatrick's "more literal translation" (Alexander 2010: 203f).

extended ‘dynamic equivalence’, rather than a ‘formal correspondence’” (Gibbons 2003), while Thomson sees “a creative transformation that deserves our highest admiration and respect.” (Thomson 2002) Rather than interpretation, equivalence, or transformation, all of which obviously have their justifiability depending on the context, I suggest regarding Carson’s text as a version, in Paterson’s sense of the word. Nevertheless, it is certainly interesting to consider the variety of the attempts made to label Carson’s unconventional endeavour.

2.7 Canti XXXIII-XXXIV: Poets in Ice

I lie here in a Hell improved by my own making (Bloom 1997: 45)

The ninth circle of hell is the lowest sinners can fall in Dante’s cosmology. Here suffer the traitors, plunged in the ice of the frozen lake of Cocytus. Among them is Count Ugolino, whose verses constitute one of the most famous episodes of the *Commedia*, and the one most often translated into English (cf. Wallace 2007: 281). As Chiavacci Leonardi points out, in this most inhuman area of hell, the profoundest human emotions are evoked; “l’amore paterno e filiale, la morte, e l’impotenza di fronte alla morte, stanno alle radice stesse dell’umanità.” (Dante 1991: 974) Joan Ferrante notes that the canto of Ugolino, Canto XXXIII, is the longest in the *Inferno*, Ugolino being “the arch symbol of the damned who all in some way betray society and destroy themselves and those around them” (Ferrante 2007: 184), and his speech is the longest in the *Inferno* (cf. Scott 2004: 226). T.S. Eliot alludes to Ugolino in line 412 of his highly influential *The Waste Land*; “I have heard the key / Turn in the door” (Eliot 1969: 74). His own notes indicate that this refers to *Inferno* XXXIII, line 46, “io senti’ chiavar l’uscio”, when Ugolino talks of his imprisonment with his sons in the tower.

Heaney’s poem ‘An Afterwards’, positioned before his own translation of the Ugolino episode which concludes *Field Work* (1979), is a personal, domestic adaptation in cross-rhymed quatrains of Dante’s verses on Count Ugolino in Canto XXXII and XXXIII of the *Inferno* (cf. Quinlan 1983: 23). The poet-speaker’s wife condemns her husband to dwell in the ninth circle of hell, along with all the other traitors. The sin the wife accuses the poet of is

neglecting his duties as husband and father in favour of a proud dedication to his art.¹²⁸ The poem is also, as Heaney points out, about the sin of literary jealousy (cf. Heaney 2003: 359):

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain;
For backbiting in life she'd make their hell
A rabid egotistical daisy-chain.

Unyielding, spurred, ambitious, unblunted,
Lockjawed, mantrapped, each a fastened badger
Jockeying for position, hasped and mounted
Like Ugolino on Archbishop Roger.

And when she'd make her circuit of the ice,
Aided and abetted by Virgil's wife,
I would cry out, 'My sweet, who wears the bays
In our green land above, whose is the life

Most dedicated and exemplary?' (Heaney 1979: 44)

The poet is under pressure from both his neglected family and the competitive literary environment.¹²⁹ Lernout fittingly interprets Heaney's image of the daisy-chain of poets:

Apart from the obvious biographical references, the image of the poets assembled in the lowest circle in hell is also a concrete version of Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence", since poets not only backbite, but also feed on each other and Heaney is clearly picking Dante's brain here. (Lernout 1989: 261)

With the adjective "mantrapped" resonates a "trapped man", who obviously longs to escape. Assuming the wife's point of view, however, the poem has an ironical, indeed comical tone, qualifying the seriousness of the pressure that is inflicted upon the poet (cf. Tinkler-Villani 1994: 90). As Heaney humorously points out, this "particular bigamy" of tending to a real family and to the family of poets "is manageable" (O'Driscoll 2008: 206). The wife is given godlike status, having the power to assign the sinners to their according circle. The parody is

¹²⁸ Fumagalli furthermore suggests that Heaney "puts himself among the traitors because he is conscious that by translating Ugolino's episode and by placing it in a totally different (Northern Irish) perspective he radically transforms, or somehow 'betrays', it." (Fumagalli 1995: 132)

¹²⁹ For Valeria Tinkler-Villani, "the poet, in Heaney, has no choice: he is a traitor by definition because he lives in a post-Dantean world, because he has eaten of the gourd, the sweet fruit of Dante's hell." (Tinkler-Villani 1994: 91) Reality, of course, allows for a compromise.

complete when the wife's guide in the underworld is not Virgil (or indeed a female poet like Sappho), but Virgil's wife, whose existence Heaney invented here (cf. *ibid.*). Scott calls Dante's Ugolino scene "a bestial parody of the Eucharist (*Inf.* 32.133-34) that serves as a terrifying example of the way in which [Dante's] contemporary Italians are doomed to mutual destruction" (Scott 2004: 315). In 'An Afterwards', the destruction of a family is humorously hinted at by transforming Dante's canto into a personal parody, but in the Ugolino appropriations that follow, Heaney in a more serious manner addresses the mutual destruction of contemporary Irishmen.¹³⁰

'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', the penultimate poem in *Field Work*, commemorates the Irish poet who, in spite of being friendly with some of the leaders of the Easter Rising, enlisted in the British Army and died in Belgium during the First World War (cf. Heaney 1979: 66). As a memorial to the Irishmen who died in the First World War, a bronze statue, also described in the poem, was erected on the Portstewart promenade (cf. Quinlan 1983: 24). In the poem, Ledwidge is imagined wearing his "Tommy's uniform" with "a haunted Catholic face", "ghosting the trenches with a bloom of hawthorn or silence cored from a Boyne passage-grave" (Heaney 1979: 60). The middle path Ledwidge chose, fighting for the British although he was Irish, seems to be an impossible solution; the poem's speaker misses "the twilight note your flute should sound", eventually finding himself "underground" exactly like "these true-blue ones" (the Unionists; cf. Quinlan 1983: 24) and regarded by the Irish people as "dead enigma" (Heaney 1979: 60). Curtis proposes that Ledwidge's dilemma, that of feeling obliged to fight for the British while his own country was preparing for a revolution to gain independence, is emblematic of Heaney's own dilemma, and that Heaney's intention is to learn from him: "Over sixty years later [Heaney] determines to reflect and influence events in Ireland in a way that the older poet never did" (Curtis 1994: 121-123). Helen Lojek points out the difference between Ledwidge and Heaney, who did not have to fight with arms and whose life "has in many ways been protected and privileged by the sacrifices of others", and the difference between World War I and the Troubles, "a very different sort of armed conflict" (Lojek 2006: 129). An unresolved ambiguity remains about whether Ledwidge is actually accused, in the poem, of fighting for the wrong side, and whether Heaney accuses

¹³⁰ Donald Davie addresses Heaney and his poem 'An Afterwards' directly in his poem 'Summer lightning' (cf. Tinkler-Villani 1994: 84f). In the second part of his poem, Davie borrows Heaney's image of "poets as a daisy chain of cannibal Ugolinos, consuming and regurgitating the previous poets' brains" and "produces such a chain himself" (*ibid.* 85). One phrase is particularly interesting in the context of the anxiety of influence: "Heaney, I / Appeal to you who are more in the public eye / Than us old codgers" (Davie quoted in Tinkler-Villani 1994: 85). It reflects the immense awareness contemporary poets have of Heaney's presence.

himself of not fighting for the right side.¹³¹ As Helen Vendler observes, Heaney portrays four different kinds of Francis Ledwidge in his poem, and the irreconcilable natures within each being is part of the tension of the poem, suggesting that there is no simple solution of right or wrong (cf. Vendler 1998: 63).

Quinlan draws a connection between the Ledwidge poem and the last poem of *Field Work*, Heaney's translation of Dante's Ugolino episode. The Ugolino episode, he argues, is not simply "an exercise in poetic imitation" but is related to the Northern crisis, for immediately following the Ledwidge poem, where "the final consorting underground might seem to render the surface differences of living human beings relatively unimportant", it suggests "that the hatred and bitterness continue into some future state". Therefore, despite being "flat", the translation becomes important through its "strategic placement" (Quinlan 1983: 25). It would probably possess the same importance and link with the Northern Irish situation if it was not placed immediately after 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge', as Maristella Gatto's article on Heaney's translation demonstrates (Gatto 2000). Fumagalli, however, makes a convincing case for the deliberate placing of the translation after the Ledwidge poem. Heaney's translation starts with line 124 of Canto XXXII, "Noi eravam partiti già da ello". "Ello" refers to Bocca, to whom Dante speaks before encountering Ugolino, and "in the same way, in Heaney's 'Ugolino', 'him' could be Francis Ledwidge, the protagonist of the elegy immediately preceding [sic] the translation." (Fumagalli 1995: 133)

In his translation, Heaney loosely imitates the *terza rima*. The stanzas largely follow a rhyming pattern of aba cdc efe, gesturing at *terza rima* but not admitting its interlacing effect. Heaney, unlike Dante, divides the episode into five stanzas of different lengths, according to contents and point of view, starting with Dante's introduction, leading into Ugolino's speech and returning to Dante's concluding reflection. Using pentameter, he comes close to Dante's hendecasyllable. Quinlan compares the state of Roger and Ugolino to that of the Protestants and Catholics, represented by the bronze statue built for the Irish victims of World War I. They too are "soldered together" (Quinlan 1983: 25).

We had already left him. I walked the ice
And saw two soldered in a frozen hole
On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,

¹³¹ Heaney's mode of self-accusation, caused by a feeling of guilt at not being able to help solve the Irish problem, will still pervade *Station Island* (cf. O'Driscoll 2008: 259).

Gnawing at him where the neck and head
 Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,
 Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread.
 So the berserk Tydeus gnashed and fed
 Upon the severed head of Menalippus
 As if it were some spattered carnal melon. (Heaney 1979: 61)

Heaney's translation of "come 'l pan per fame si manduca" (*Inf.* XXXII, 127) as "like a famine victim at a loaf of bread" obviously alludes to the victims of the Famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1849.¹³² As Corcoran observes, "the picture of enemies eternally locked in a literal enactment of 'devouring hatred' has [...] its relevance to Northern Ireland, just as dying of hunger has its reverberations in Irish history and politics" (Corcoran 1998: 87).¹³³ "Sweet fruit of the brain" and "some spattered carnal melon", not in Dante's original but Heaney's version, recall the imagery of the bog poems in *North*, for example 'Bog Queen' or 'Strange Fruit'¹³⁴ (cf. Quinlan 1983: 25; Tinkler-Villani 1994: 88f). In the second stanza, Heaney adds another image he also uses in 'An Afterwards' ("jockeying for position, hasped and mounted like Ugolino on Archbishop Roger"), confirming Gatto's claim of a "fertile osmosis between poetry and 'impure' translation in Heaney's works" (Gatto 2000: 65, cf. *ibid.* 76; cf. Tsur 2001):¹³⁵

Still, you should know my name, for I was Count
 Ugolino, this was Archbishop Roger,
 And why I act the jockey to his mount
 Is surely common knowledge; [...] (Heaney 1979: 61)

¹³² Gatto suggests that Sayers's translation of the tower with the "titol de la fame" (Dante 1991: 984) with the capitalised "Famine" might have been a possible source for Heaney's choice of words. For "titol de la fame", however, Heaney writes "is called Hunger" (cf. Gatto 2000: 70). Carson translates it as "the Famine Tower" (Carson 2002: 230).

¹³³ The "picture of enemies eternally locked in a literal enactment of 'devouring hatred'" can also be applied outside the Northern Irish context, of course. In Scottish poet Mick Imlah's 'Guelf' from *The Lost Leader* (2008), a boxer is compared to Ugolino in his cannibalistic love for hate, and the poem ends with a quotation from Robert Browning's 'One Word More', which tells of an incident in Dante's life (Imlah 2008: 21; cf. Sister Rosa 1944: 419).

¹³⁴ The title references the song of the same name, most famously sung by Billie Holiday. As in Heaney's poem, the strange fruit of the song is a metaphor for a murdered human being; the song was written as a stand against the lynching of African Americans.

¹³⁵ As Gatto explains, Heaney himself "distinguishes between 'pure' and 'impure' translation according to the translator's motives." He defines an impure translation in the sense of "translation as 'taking over', appropriation, desire to carry the foreign work of art across the linguistic frontier by adapting it to the new context." (Gatto 2000: 66)

Heaney remembers translating the Ugolino episode in the late 1970s in Belfast, when the so-called “Dirty Protest” took place in the Maze prison: “Republican prisoners were holding out for ‘political status’ and there was a sense of violence, intimacy, almost erotic danger in the air. The thick murky atmosphere of the *Inferno* was right for that time” (Heaney 2003: 346). Perhaps the jockey and his horse can be interpreted as an image for the British government and the Irish people, the latter repeatedly revolting against the former’s imposed supremacy, or obediently fighting for the oppressor’s race, as did Francis Ledwidge.

Heaney’s last stanza disguises in its address to Pisa an appeal to the Irish people with its “grassy language”. Dante’s lines read instead “vituperio de le genti del bel paese là dove ‘l sì suona”. Dante refers to the disgrace Pisa has brought onto the people inhabiting Italy, the country where the “*volgare di sì*” is spoken, thus called in his *Convivio*. The affirmative particle defined the language, just as the *langue d’oc* was Provençal and the *langue d’oil* was French, a distinction Dante, like historical linguists today, makes in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (cf. Dante 1991: 993n). Heaney introduces the simile of the snake as an image for the disturbing intruder: “Pisa! Pisa, your sounds are like a hiss / Sizzling in our country’s grassy language.” (Heaney 1979: 63) Fumagalli convincingly argues that the snake alludes to the English in Ireland, the “snake ‘sizzling’ in the grass of Ireland [...] carr[ying] the double negative connotation of betrayer and dangerous intruder” (Fumagalli 1995: 136). Gatto interprets the image without its reference to the English and Irish, but the two interpretations are both convincing and do not necessarily exclude each other:

the Irish poet transforms Dante’s reference to the language, where Italy is identified as the country in which ‘si’ (yes) sounds, 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’s translation ends with lines 88-90 of Canto XXXIII: “Your atrocity was Theban. They were young / And innocent: Hugh and Brigata / And the other two whose names are in my song.” (Heaney 1979: 64) Heaney explains that he liked ending with “the other two whose names are in my song” at this point in the canto, because it was a conclusion not only of Dante’s account of his meeting with Ugolino, but also referred to the many elegies for the dead in *Field Work*, Heaney’s “song” (cf. Heaney 2003: 346). Curtis regards the “apocalyptic vision at the end of ‘Ugolino’”, the deluge over Pisa and its population, as a “terrible prophecy of Ireland’s fate if a solution is not found to the ‘monstrous rut’ of the present strife”

(Curtis 1994: 124).¹³⁶ When reading Curtis's conclusion to his essay on Heaney's *Field Work*, one is inclined to think that Heaney himself has accomplished what he admires so much in Dante:

The Troubles in Ireland, the involvement of the British Army again, the breakdown of democratic rule, these are highly charged subjects in the British Isles. Seamus Heaney's fifth book constructs an Irish landscape at once politically-charged, shared and relevant. At the same time it carries the considerable weight of personal emotion, grief and anger. (Curtis 1994: 126)

Many terms have been found by many critics for defining Heaney's translation. Fumagalli describes his strategy as "appropriating the register of the early English Dantean tradition in a completely original, almost idiosyncratic way" (Fumagalli 1995: 140), and finds that "Heaney's version, far from being inert, provides the original with an alternative which creatively renews it and gives it a new life beyond the moment and place of its creation." (ibid. 141) After George Steiner's definition, she suggests viewing it as an "original reproduction" (ibid. 142). For Joseph Heininger, "Heaney responds to Ugolino and to Irish situations by making a version in his proper acoustic: through diction, rhyme, contemporary tonalities, and allusive language, he creates a translation which revisits and allegorizes Dante's scenes of treachery" (Heininger 2005: 53); he creates an "allegory of Irish genocide [...] perpetrated from within and perpetuated by Irish political self-divisions and sectarian violence." (ibid. 60) Appropriation, version (in his proper acoustic), renewal, original reproduction, revisitation, allegorisation, or impure translation; all of those terms are valid descriptions of Heaney's use of Dante's episode, and they reflect the difficulty of evaluating the product of the creative act of translation.

In *The Spirit Level* (1996), Heaney returns to Ugolino's story. 'The Flight Path' is divided into six parts of different lengths, altogether summarising geographical stages of Heaney's life: Derry, Belfast, the United States and the Dordogne (cf. Corcoran 1998: 190). The first section is a memory of Heaney's father folding a paper boat. With the completion of the boat, "a dove

¹³⁶ On a more poetical level, Giovanni Pillonca suggests reading the episode "as the poet's [Heaney's] farewell to a dimension of atrocity distinguished foremost by the trait of cyclicity" (Pillonca 1999: 603); thus for Heaney's work, when understood as ongoing progress, it is less an apocalyptic vision than a final hellish allegory before he embarks on his artistic pilgrimage in *Station Island*. Darcy O'Brien even attributes to the episode a "purgative" effect, "a kind of exorcism of the anxiety-ridden interlude that followed the publication of *North*." (O'Brien 1996: 185) The danger of trying (or taking the freedom) to identify perhaps too quickly every artistic stage of a poet influenced by Dante with stages in Dante's tripartite poetic voyage becomes apparent here, as the possibilities seem endless and at times contradictory. In Beckett's words, "The danger is in the neatness of identifications." (Beckett 1929: 3)

rose” in the child’s breast, only to sink again because he “knew the whole thing would go soggy once you launched it” (Heaney 1996: 26). The recurring image of the paper boat, which Heaney used before in ‘The Biretta’ from *Seeing Things* (1991), recalls the sea voyage as a metaphor for poetry. A poet undertakes his (imaginary) voyage on paper; hence, a paper boat.

In section 4, noticeably longer than the other sections, Heaney quotes three lines from his own translation of the Ugolino episode in *Field Work*. In the new context, O’Donoghue finds confirmed the “metonymic connexion” of Ugolino gnawing Roger’s skull as the “obsessive chewing over of political obsession” (O’Donoghue 1998: 250). Dealing with death by hunger, ‘Ugolino’ in *Field Work* had been “horribly prophetic” of the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981, which were set in motion by Ciaran Nugent’s “dirty protest” (Corcoran 1998: 190).¹³⁷ The analogy with Dante is introduced with a simile:

The gaol walls all those months were smeared with shite.
Out of Long Kesh after his dirty protest
The red eyes were the eyes of Ciaran Nugent
Like something out of Dante’s scurfy hell,
Drilling their way through the rhymes and images
Where I too walked behind the righteous Virgil,
As safe as houses and translating freely:
When he had said all this, his eyes rolled
And his teeth, like a dog’s teeth clamping round a bone,
Bit into the skull and again took hold. (Heaney 1996: 30)

Corcoran points out that “translating freely” is a pun describing a translation “unconfined by literal rendering” as well as a translation undertaken from a safe distance “by an unconfined poet aware to the point of moral exacerbation and self-recrimination of those who are incarcerated” (Corcoran 1998: 190f). The embarrassment arising from this privileged condition is reflected in the image of Nugent’s eyes that see through the poet and inspect his words.¹³⁸ Section 6 concludes the poem with a sense of hope, in the natural and peaceful

¹³⁷ Ciaran Nugent was one of the IRA prisoners at Long Kesh, who after 1976 lost ‘special category’ status and were treated like ordinary criminals instead of political prisoners. This led to the ‘dirty protest’ initiated by Nugent, during which prisoners refused to wear prison uniforms and to use the showers and toilets. The protest was followed by the hunger strikes, during which Bobby Sands and nine other prisoners died (cf. Connolly 1998: 252).

¹³⁸ Heininger interprets Nugent’s stare differently: “Although Ciaran Nugent does not die in prison but is released from Long Kesh, he is still seen as a vengeful hater who attempts to enlist the poet’s sympathy and thus figuratively turns to gnaw his enemy’s neck after recounting his mistreatment and imprisonment.” (Heininger 2005: 63) He possibly confuses Nugent with “this one I’d last met in a dream” (Heaney 1996: 29), a school

surroundings of a place of pilgrimage, Rocamadour. The image of the rising dove, the symbol of peace, is taken up again in the final line: “And somewhere the dove rose. And kept on rising.” There is “a distance still to go” (Heaney 1996: 30f) in the life of the poet; the pilgrimage has not come to an end yet, but the concluding impression is one of hope.

It is interesting to consider the ways in which Heaney incorporates Dante into his own subject matter. In Clifton’s ‘Canto of Ulysses’ or Haldane’s ‘Desire in Belfast’, for example, the hypotext has implications for and parallels with the borrowing poem, but it remains a separate text within the text that is dealt with as such, making the speaker a reader of Dante. In Heaney’s poems, however, Dante’s text becomes Heaney’s text. It is appropriated in a bolder way; the roles of Dante and Virgil are taken over by women, and he quotes his own translation, which has a certain note of arrogance, or, to put it more positively, self-confidence. “I too walked behind the righteous Virgil” implies “I am exactly like Dante”, or “I am as good a poet as Dante was”.

In *Electric Light* (2001), Heaney’s imagination returns to the frozen lake of Cocytus. ‘Audenesque’, an elegy for Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, is an adaptation of the four-beat quatrain of Auden’s elegy for Yeats (cf. Hammer 2001: 2), ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ (1939). This is suitable because Brodsky died on January 28, as did Yeats, and he was friends with Auden. Heaney announces what he is drawing on from the first stanza:

Joseph, yes, you know the beat.
Wystan Auden’s metric feet
Marched to it, unstressed and stressed,
Laying William Yeats to rest. (Heaney 2001: 64)

He then proceeds to explain how he is going to imitate Auden’s poem, while already doing it from the beginning, of course.¹³⁹ What happens to Auden’s poem is exactly what Auden wrote about Yeats’s poetry; “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.”¹⁴⁰ (Auden 2009: 89) The metre and rhyme scheme imitate section III of Auden’s

friend of Heaney who was trying to get him to deliver a proxy bomb, or Sinn Féin spokesman Danny Morrison, who reproaches him for not writing decidedly for the Irish cause (cf. O’Driscoll 2008: 257f).

¹³⁹ O’Driscoll praises the poem for its additional imitation of Brodsky: “Heaney’s imitative ingenuity in ‘Audenesque’ is both formal and linguistic: formal in its borrowings from “Wystan Auden’s metric feet,” the trochaic tetrameter employed in the third section of “In Memory of WB. Yeats”; linguistic in the way it affectionately and accurately captures the clumsiness of Brodsky’s English verse.” (O’Driscoll 2002)

¹⁴⁰ What is fully digested here in the guts of Heaney, the living poet, are Auden’s and Yeats’s middle names.

elegy, and the cold setting is also taken from it. As Heaney writes in this meta-poem, “Repetition, too, of cold / In the poet and the world” (Heaney 2001: 64). Yeats’s “physical decay” is met with the “damage time has done to” Brodsky. “Time” in Auden’s poem “worships language”, yet in Heaney’s, “worshipped language can’t undo / Damage time has done to you”.

Barbary Hardy finds that the similarities with Auden’s poem are only superficial, and that Heaney does not manage like Auden to write “a tombeau in which self is subdued to the other”.

The connections of time, place and weather justify structural pastiche, but links are slight, the rhymes and rhythm less varied and less fun than Auden’s brilliant modulations, the allusions private and exclusive, the critical intelligence less fully engaged with the subject of poetry. The ‘esque’ of the title may disclaim ambitious imitation but risks comparison.

Heaney’s Audenesque poem hasn’t much to do with Auden [...] (Hardy 2007: 196)

In most cases, Hardy argues, Heaney’s “allusions are a habitual part of serious self-history and self-projection.” (Hardy 2007: 207) The question is whether this is really a bad thing or simply a mark of a healthy self-confidence. As was mentioned in the context of ‘September Song’ and the elegy for Larkin, Bloom attributes an elegy-composer’s self-centredness to a strong author.

In the seventh of the seventeen quatrains, Heaney alludes to Cocytus after painting the frosty image of “*rigor mortis*” in Brodsky’s breast:

Ice of Archangelic strength,
Ice of this hard two-faced month,
Ice like Dante’s in deep hell,
Makes your heart a frozen well. (Heaney 2001: 65)

This corresponds to Auden’s “And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in each eye” (Auden 2009: 90), but the allusion to Dante is Heaney’s own. In Heaney, the heart is frozen, in Auden, the eyes. Pity presumably originates in the heart and is reflected in the eyes; thus Heaney goes to the source. Pity is withheld, as it is in the ninth circle of Dante’s hell.

After the encounter with Ugolino, Dante reaches the third section of the ninth circle, where the sinners lie with their backs on the ice so that their frozen tears cannot flow away, of which Auden's line is reminiscent. Here Dante encounters Fra Alberigo, who invited two relatives he was in a feud with over for a meal. At the end of the meal, he called "Bring the fruit", which was the signal for his men to enter with their weapons and kill the guests (cf. Dante 1991: 997n). Dante finds out that Alberigo's soul already dwells in hell even though his body is still alive. When Alberigo asks Dante to have pity and remove the frozen tears from his eyes for temporary relief, he refuses.

Bernard O'Donoghue's 'Fra Alberigo's Bad Fruit' from his collection *Outliving* (2003) translates this episode from *Inferno* XXXIII and sets in exactly where Heaney's 'Ugolino' leaves off, after line 90. The collection's acknowledgements specify that "'Fra Alberigo's Bad Fruit' was read at the Dante Project for Poetry International 2000". It was part of a series of recordings of passages from *Inferno*, edited by Nick Havely in 2000. As Pat Boran states in his review of *Outliving*: "always interested in narrative forms, O'Donoghue knows that the point of entry into a story itself colours the ultimate meaning" (Boran 2003: B12). One colour of this ultimate meaning might be the deliberate point of entry *after* "the passage from Dante most frequently translated into English" (Fumagalli 2001: 94), notably by the most famous contemporary Irish poet. This would be a literal version of Bloom's second revisionary movement, *tessera*; "a poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 1997: 14).

O'Donoghue's translation is semantically faithful; compared to 'Ugolino' it could be called, in Heaney's terms, a "pure" translation. He renders "che qui riprendo dattero per figo" (*Inf.* XXXIII, 120) as "Now I'm fed here with an even sourer fruit" (O'Donoghue 2003: 50), but rather than transforming Dante's content, this paraphrases the meaning only to clarify it for contemporary readers; they do not necessarily know that Dante's line refers to the fact that dates are worth more than figs, which implies that the punishment exceeds the deed (cf. Dante 1991: 998n). O'Donoghue's tercets do not rhyme, but he more or less uses pentameter, which is close to Dante's *endecasillabo*. Preceding 'Fra Alberigo's Bad Fruit' in *Outliving*, the poem 'Alzheimer Fruit' already draws attention to the image of the bad fruit:

In that underworld you ambled off to
On your own, you must have drunk or eaten

Something prohibited so that your memory
Of this life faded. But where could that place
Have been? And what was the fruit? [...] (O'Donoghue 2003: 4)

This sounds like a reversal of the fruit from the tree of knowledge; once you eat of the Alzheimer Fruit you unlearn everything, and this fruit cannot be found in Eden but in the underworld. The symbolism of the forbidden fruit in this poem is echoed in the Dante translation later in the collection, which could be a reason for the choice of its title, which might as well simply have been 'Fra Alberigo', just as 'Ugolino' is not titled 'Ugolino's Sweet Fruit of the Brain'. There is, however, particular emphasis on the fruit here. 'Fra Alberigo's Bad Fruit' and Dante's Canto XXXIII end with the speaker's awareness that it is possible still to be alive while one's soul is already in deep hell. Similarly, a victim of Alzheimer's disease might be in hell while still alive. The victim of this disease is not necessarily guilty of a sin though (except perhaps of the original one linked symbolically, again, with a forbidden fruit), which might account for the fact that O'Donoghue prefers "underworld" to "hell" in this context.

In Canto XXXIV, Dante reaches the fourth and last section of the ninth circle, Giudecca, the zone of Judas. Here are the traitors to their benefactors, completely immersed in the ice. Lucifer, with his upper body sticking out of Cocytus, is chewing in his three mouths Judas, who betrayed Christ, and Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Caesar. O'Donoghue's multilayered 'The Potter's Field' from his collection *The Weakness* (1991)¹⁴¹ takes its inspiration from this last area of hell, and exemplifies O'Donoghue's creative engagement with the "impossible task" of "amalgamat[ing] [...] an estranged Irish nature and English nurture", as Thomas McCarthy puts it; "this effort to make such lost worlds cohere is what fills his work with stress and creative tension." (McCarthy 2008a: B11)

The poem consists of four stanzas of seven lines each in iambic pentameter. The first three stanzas focus on the story of Judas Iscariot, "a traitor, / Forever gnawed by thin-lipped Dante's Satan" (O'Donoghue 1991: 56). "Once a century, / Judas" is supposed to arise from the dead, "lips refleshing", and to be sitting on the islet of Rockall, an interesting choice of location: the disputed rock in the middle of the North Atlantic is, among other nations, claimed by both Ireland and the United Kingdom. Judas, sitting on the rock, is "craving the

¹⁴¹ McCarthy remembers first reading the poem in the Gallery Press *Poaching Rights* of 1987 (McCarthy 2008a: B11).

beads of water” in the “endless avenues of seaboard fuchsia”, a flower especially associated with the West of Ireland. The last stanza switches to the speaker:

My tears-of-god bloom as red here beside
The Queen Elizabeth and Iceberg roses
As on their native drywall back in Kerry.
The soil’s hospitable; the air is delicate.
So I think that now I’m well enough heeled in
To rate a plot inside the graveyard wall,
Escaping Guidecca. Accursèd be his name! (ibid.)

In Ireland, fuchsias are called “Deora Dé”, which is Irish for “tears-of-god”, so the poem’s speaker has managed to cultivate his Irish flowers in English soil, next to English roses. He and his flowers have adjusted so well that he hopes to deserve to be buried among Englishmen, not in the potter’s field with other foreigners, “Iscariot’s cemetery for foreign nationals”, as the inscription on the gate of the potter’s field says in the poem; the “thirty silver pieces” Judas received for betraying Jesus were used as payment for a potter’s field. “Escaping Guidecca” suggests that the speaker feels he cannot be regarded as a traitor to his home country anymore, being so English now.

Escaping Guidecca, Virgil in Canto XXXIV carries Dante while swinging around Lucifer’s middle, passing the centre of the Earth, and then starting to climb up Lucifer’s legs. At the end of a dark crevice Dante, following Virgil’s lead, reaches the light of the sky and exits at the antipodes.

tanto ch’i’ vidi de le cose belle
che porta ‘l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle. (*Inf.* XXXIV, 137-139)

As Giovanni Pillonca remarks, Heaney’s ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’, which will be dealt with in depth in the next chapter, alludes to the last line of the *Inferno* in its fourth line, with “out beneath the stars” (Heaney 1979: 17). The phrase “points to the purgatorial climb that lies in wait for the ‘faring poets’ reminding the reader that the ascent is still in danger of being called off.” (Pillonca 1999: 582) The poem’s “shifting between references to *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*” is

a mode apparently consistent with the structure of Heaney's entire collection [*Field Work*], which carries a direct quote from *Purgatorio* at its very beginning and closes – topsy-turvy, as it were – with Ugolino's lament, indirectly confirming the retrospective reading. (ibid. 583)

3. A Purgatorial Island

In their suffering is hope (Eliot 1951: 256)

As is the case with limbo, the concept of purgatory is deeply rooted within the Irish imagination, even without taking into account Dante's influence. Apart from being a place or state after death, purgatory or rather purgation through penance can also be pursued in this life, for example with pilgrimages to places like Croagh Patrick, Lough Derg, Knock, or Skellig Michael, which is believed to be a threshold between this world and the next (cf. Maignant 2007: 24). The Irish history of Christian penitence, pilgrimage, and tales of voyage is rich and still alive, as the chapter on the literary reception of the site known as St Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, and the chapter on the *immrama* will demonstrate. As Catherine Maignant points out, Irish pilgrimages today function less as an affirmation of faith and tradition but "question[...] established truths and rituals whilst seeking new ways to the sacred [...] using the power of imagination" (ibid. 20).

The vocabulary of purgation in Seamus Heaney's poetry, for example, can be found as early as in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). 'The Early Purges' is a kind of initiation story, in which the speaker as a little boy learns of farm life's necessity of killing as he watches kittens being drowned. "In town", in contrast, "they consider death unnatural" (Heaney 1966: 11). The poem is written in a for the most part consequent *terza rima*. A more recent example of the pervasion of the idea of the religious cleansing would be Thomas Kinsella's 'A Proposal' from *Man of War* (2007), which muses about ways to abolish warfare. The vocabulary it uses is "purging", "cleansing", "sacrifice", "a debt borne with the flesh", "greed", "malice", "Curse", "naked against each other in a pit" (Kinsella 2007: 16f), with an imagination that does not seem too far removed from Dante's. Another example is Harry Clifton's 'Early Christians', set in an attic space in Dublin:

Energies float here, heavens or hells,
But the slow purgatories
Of daily living you leave to everyone else (Clifton 1992: 49)

As Eliot explains, the difference from suffering in the *Inferno* is that "in purgatory the torment of flame is deliberately and consciously accepted by the penitent" (Eliot 1951: 255), which is

also true of the actual pilgrimages believers undertake in this life. In the hope of salvation people suffer cold, hunger, and physical and emotional exertions.

Dante's *Purgatorio* is the most original part of the three canticles, as the concept of heaven and hell was fairly well established through tradition and art, but the picture of purgatory was not as clearly developed in people's imaginations in the thirteenth century (cf. Schnapp 2007: 91). As Jacques Le Goff puts it in his seminal study on the creation of purgatory, "*Il Purgatorio* is the sublime product of a lengthy gestation." (Le Goff 1984: 334) In Dante's imagination, purgatory is an island consisting of a mountain, the terraces of which lead concentrically up to the summit, where the earthly paradise is situated. Above the ante-purgatory, seven terraces each offer penitence for a deadly sin, starting with pride and ending with lust, in reverse order from hell. In contrast to the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*, the *Purgatorio* is about movement, the purging sinners' movement upwards ever closer to heaven, and time is of the essence (cf. Schnapp 2007: 94). One central theme is that of reunion, "not only the reuniting of individuals with their Creator, but also the reconvening of broken families and dispersed communities, whether political, spiritual, moral, or linguistic." (ibid. 96) Another important feature of the canticle is Virgil's parting, for he does not have access to the earthly paradise or to heaven, being a pagan. Beatrice takes his place as Dante's guide:

The transition from Virgil to Beatrice encapsulates the poem's overall movement from time to eternity, nature to the supernatural, Latin to the vernacular, and (for the *Commedia*'s author) poetic apprenticeship to poetic mastery. (ibid. 100)

Beatrice, as Schnapp convincingly argues, is portrayed as Dante's personal Christ (ibid. 102f).

3.1 Canto I: Morning Dew, Girdle, and Boat Metaphor

Fresh out of hell, Dante enjoys the sight of the sky and the stars. The sun is about to come up. Dante and Virgil encounter Cato,¹⁴² guardian of the entrance to purgatory, and Virgil convinces him to let them pass by mentioning Beatrice, who was sent from heaven to

¹⁴² It might appear contradictory that a pagan suicide would be at the entrance of Purgatory, which means that his soul was saved from hell. But, as Giuseppe Mazzotta explains, Cato stands for the choice of freedom over division, for he refused to take sides in the civil war between Pompey and Caesar. Therefore, he embodies the virtues of exile, Dante also being on the search for liberty; cf. Virgil's words in Canto I, line 71: "libertà va cercando" (Dante 1994: 23). Lucan made Cato a hero in his *Pharsalia*. (Mazzotta 2008)

authorise Dante's journey through the realms of the afterlife. Cato allows them to proceed but advises Virgil that he should girdle Dante with a rush and wash the infernal stains off his face.

Heaney's 'The Strand at Lough Beg' from *Field Work* (1979), an irregularly rhymed poem in iambic pentameter with two stanzas of, respectively, 16 and 28 lines, begins after its dedication to Colum McCartney with a quotation from Sayers's translation¹⁴³ of lines 100-102 from Canto I:

All round this little island, on the strand¹⁴⁴
Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand. (Heaney 1979: 17)

This is from Cato's speech, when he tells Virgil where to find the rush with which to girdle Dante. Tony Curtis notes that by opening with this quotation Heaney establishes Ireland, "this little island", as a kind of purgatory, and he "takes an elevated view, as if looking down on his country."¹⁴⁵ The effect of the quotation includes "set[ting] Heaney the task of rising through the pain of the experience [...] and establishing a [...] perspective [...] that contains hope, transcendence even", which is the exact concern of Dante's *Purgatorio*. "The strength of this quotation", Curtis suggests, "is that it directs both the poet and the reader." (Curtis 1994: 110f)

Heaney's poem remembers, or endeavours to remember, the killing of his second cousin Colum by Loyalist paramilitaries at a fake roadside block in 1975, and merges into the memory or imagined scene of herding the cows at the strand at Lough Beg near Colum's home, which Heaney used to do with his father. In the last few lines, the connection with and significance of the epigraph become apparent:

I turn because the sweeping of your feet
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.

¹⁴³ This is indicated in the acknowledgements at the beginning of *Field Work*.

¹⁴⁴ Pillonca notes that the paratextual items, the title and the epigraph, have the element "strand" in common, and that a "strand" is again mentioned in relation to Dante in 'Sandstone Keepsake' (Pillonca 1999: 581).

¹⁴⁵ A further reason for Heaney being reminded of the strand at Lough Beg by the beginning of *Purgatorio* is the little island with a church on it, situated in the middle of the Lough (O'Driscoll 2008: 221).

I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud. (Heaney 1979: 18)

In these lines, Heaney takes over Virgil's role, who washes Dante's face with dew and girds him with a rush, and Colum becomes Dante, with the "blood and roadside muck" from his infernal journey still on his face (cf. Pillonca 1999: 585).¹⁴⁶ Making Dante's girdle into "scapulars" adds an ecclesiastical element, with a hallowing effect. In Neil Corcoran's words, the "green scapulars" have "connotations at once patriotic, Christian-resurrectionary and pastoral-elegiac", and the Dantesque ending "attempts to restore to the violated place an element of quasi-sacred ritual" (Corcoran 1998: 93f). Curtis notes "obvious associations with the laying out of Christ" (Curtis 1994: 112). In 'Station Island', however, Heaney questions his previous poetic efforts in his elegy for Colum by having his cousin accuse him of having "saccharined my death with morning dew" (Heaney 1984: 83). In addition to a sweetening or simplifying of circumstances, this perhaps also implies an awareness of the arrogance of having portrayed himself (or rather his alter ego speaker) as the righteous Virgil. "With rushes that shoot green again" refers to the very last lines of Canto I:

Quivi mi cinse sì com'altrui piacque
oh meraviglia! ché qual elli scelse
l'umile pianta, cotal si rinacque
subitamente là onde l'avelse. (*Purg.* I, 133-136)

The plant symbolises a magical rebirth (cf. Pillonca 1999: 586), which is what purgatory is about, and so the last lines of Heaney's poem recreate this hope of spiritual rebirth or redemption. The greening rushes of course also recall the imagery in 'Sibyl', where the "bleeding tree" has to "green and open buds like infants' fists" to bring about forgiveness and comfort (cf. *ibid.* 583). In 'The Strand at Lough Beg', this actually happens, or appears to happen, and the intertextual mediator through which the healing process is set in motion is Dante. Pillonca makes a fair point to suggest that the quotation at the beginning of the poem

¹⁴⁶ Heaney explains how this scene from Dante offered a way for him to deal poetically with Colum's death: "I felt sorrowful for his death but didn't know how to lament it. And then I remembered that beautiful moment at the start of the *Purgatorio* when the poets come up out of Hell and Virgil washes Dante's face with the morning dew and ties a new girdle of green rushes round him" (Heaney 2003: 346).

and the transformation of the Dantesque scene at the end of the poem (Pillonca calls it “a paraphrase with a number of inversions”) overemphasise the intertextual relation.¹⁴⁷

What one finds in Colum’s elegy is a blunt correspondence between the epigraph and the letter of the poem. Such a linear directness is rather unusual in modern poetry; paratextual quotations usually have only an oblique subterranean connection with the poetry which they introduce. Certainly, the epigraph acts as both a homage and an acknowledgement: a homage to the poet with the re-affirmation of an influence and an acknowledgement or expression of a preoccupation. (Pillonca 1999: 584f)

In Canto V of *Purgatorio*, Dante encounters the souls of some victims of violence,¹⁴⁸ among them Manfredi, Iacopo del Cassero, Buonconte da Montefeltro, and La Pia.¹⁴⁹ Pillonca points out that this makes the reworking of the beginning of *Purgatorio* all the more fitting, since Colum is the victim of a violent death as well. Apart from the obvious references to Canto I, Pillonca reveals particular parallels of Heaney’s poem with Iacopo’s story in Canto V. He similarly falls down among the reeds at the water’s edge, where a lake is formed by his blood (Pillonca 1999: 598):

Corsi al palude, e le cannuce e 'l braco
m'impigliar sì ch'i' caddi; e lì vid' io
de le mie vene farsi in terra laco». (*Purg.* V, 82-84)

The differences between Iacopo and Colum, namely that in Colum’s case the water’s edge is not the place of his murder but it is where his “resurrection is alluded to”, and the fact that Colum is “helped, cleansed, lifted, and put to rest”, are interpreted by Pillonca as “a vindication of sorts, a symbolic nemesis”, during which the pilgrim Dante from Canto I and the shades of Iacopo and Colum merge into one (Pillonca 1999: 599). One of his conclusions about Heaney’s appropriation of purgatory is the following:

The subcultural inferences associated with purgatory as a paradigm of the intermediate cannot be overlooked in the case of a poet like Heaney so much influenced by the act of reconciliation, by ritual of appeasement. (Pillonca 1999: 602)

¹⁴⁷ Fumagalli interprets the quotation in relation to the end of the poem positively: “it introduces the image with which Heaney will conclude the poem, giving it clearer connotations” (Fumagalli 2001: 83).

¹⁴⁸ Cf. line 52: “Noi fummo tutti già per forza morti” (Dante 1994: 145).

¹⁴⁹ La Pia’s “Siena mi fé, disfecemi Maremma” (Dante 1994: 161) is parodied by Eliot in line 293f of ‘The Waste Land’, “Richmond and Kew / Undid me” (cf. Eliot 2000: 2379n).

'The Strand of Lough Beg' in some respects recalls Thomas Kinsella's 'Butcher's Dozen' from 1972. Written mostly in rhymed couplets, interspersed with a few rhymed tercets and quatrains, the long poem is Kinsella's answer to the Widgery Report, which was published by the British as a report of the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972, during which thirteen civilians were killed by British soldiers during a civil rights march.¹⁵⁰ The Widgery Report sought to justify the soldiers' having proceeded when it was never even proven that any of the murdered civilians were armed.

Kinsella in his lines returns to the site of the tragedy and has the victims appear as ghosts: "There in a ghostly pool of blood / A crumpled phantom hugged the mud" (Kinsella 2001: 133), which immediately recalls Iacopo, and which may have inspired Heaney's picturing of Colum. "More voices rose. I turned and saw / Three corpses forming, red and raw / From dirt and stone"; this recalls Eliot's "face still forming", and like Kinsella's speaker here, Heaney turns around to see the ghost in the dirt. Kinsella's ghosts give their account of the Derry shootings and of the desperate attempts of the British to find traces of firearms or bombs on the bodies. Kinsella has one ghost directly accuse the British of forging evidence: "four elusive rockets / Stuffed in my coat and trouser pockets" (ibid. 134), an unresolved incident which is also mentioned in the Widgery Report (cf. Herron and Lynch 2007: 90). Another ghost's "dead hair plastered in the rain" again bears comparison with Colum's hair. After harsh accusations against the British oppression have been made, the thirteenth and last ghost strikes a more conciliatory note: "pity is akin to love", "their cursed plight calls out for patience", "doomed from birth, a cursed heir, / Theirs is the hardest lot to bear", and

Good men every day inherit
Father's foulness with the spirit,
Purge the filth and do not stir it. (Kinsella 2001: 137)

Neville F. Newman thus finds an "element of hope in the ghost's apparent despair":

The very details whose significance the members of the tribunal would try to change would be revealed as part of the process of rewriting history. And this is the inherent weakness in the

¹⁵⁰ Herron and Lynch point out that 'Butcher's Dozen' has "all the features of the impure and indecorous public poem": "Born as it is from a moment of emergency, the language and the form of the public poem are [...] impure, tending towards the mnemonics of the ballad or rhyming couplets, to insistent and at times forced rhythm, to declaration rather than introspection; to doggerel". As he pointed out himself, Kinsella took his inspiration from the *aisling*, a "dream or vision poem", "the poetic form *par excellence* of the native dispossessed", in its parodied form in Brian Merriman's *Midnight Court* (Herron and Lynch 2007: 83-85).

British propaganda that the ghost identifies. For the pictorial evidence exists alongside the words of the tribunal, and those on the mainland who consider the events will not be deceived by the tribunal's report [...] (Newman 1999: 175)

As Tom Herron and John Lynch point out, the poem would serve as one of the convincing and lasting reminders of justice and truth in opposition to the Widgery Report (cf. Herron and Lynch 2007: 83; Newman 1999: 174), and the yearning for justice, at least in the afterlife, is one of the reasons underlying the invention of purgatory (cf. Le Goff 1984: 5). In contrast to Widgery, Herron and Lynch emphasise, “Kinsella insists upon heteroglossia, upon a diverse dialogism between the ghosts themselves, and between them and the poem’s narrator.” (Herron and Lynch 2007: 93) They attribute this “multiplicity of voices” to *The Midnight Court*, but the same applies to Dante’s *Commedia*. Dante similarly tries to paint a convincing picture of the characters he encounters by giving them personalised speeches, and it is fair to say that Dante’s literary meeting with the dead also lay in the back of Kinsella’s mind when he wrote ‘Butcher’s Dozen’. In spite of the copious criticism Kinsella received for displaying ventriloquist and propagandist traits, Herron and Lynch view the poem’s “spectral burlesque” as the “most provocative and complex response to Bloody Sunday and its narrativisation in the Widgery Report” (ibid. 95; 87; 82).

In ‘The Biretta’ from *Seeing Things* (1991), Heaney references the first lines of Canto I of the *Purgatorio*. The poem in ten chiastically rhymed quatrains is a reflection upon a biretta, a clerical cap “divided / Into three parts”,¹⁵¹ “like Gaul” (Heaney 1991: 26). The speaker remembers the first time he saw a biretta, comparing the priest who wore it to a figure in an El Greco-painting:

The first time I saw one, I heard a shout
As an El Greco ascetic rose before me
Preaching hellfire, saurian and stormy,
Adze-head on the rampage in the pulpit. (ibid.)

These memories of Catholic rituals, at once eerie and mocking, recall Joyce’s approach to such topics.¹⁵² “Saurian and stormy” can refer to “hellfire” as well as to the priest, ironically pointing back to the “saurian relapses” the Sibyl foresaw in *Field Work*. In the seventh stanza, the explicit allusion to Dante appears:

¹⁵¹ O’Driscoll observes the tripartite cap’s symbolic reflection of the Holy Trinity (O’Driscoll 1999: 76).

¹⁵² Cf. for example chapter 3 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916).

Now I turn it upside down and it is a boat –
A paper boat, or the one that wafts into
The first lines of the *Purgatorio*
As poetry lifts its eyes and clears its throat. (ibid. 29)

The first canto of the *Purgatorio* opens with Dante’s metaphor of the ship of poetry, in which the poets leave the infernal ocean and approach Mount Purgatory (cf. Dante 1955: 73):

Per correr miglior acque alza le vele
omai la navicella del mio ingegno,
che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele (*Purg.* I, 1-3)

Not without, still, a certain trace of hubris, Dante calls it the “boat of my talent” or “my genius’s boat”.¹⁵³ This ship of poetry is the boat “that wafts into the first lines of the *Purgatorio*” in Heaney’s poem. Poetry, in a personification, like Dante “lifts its eyes” up to the mountain, where the sinners are purged of their sins as the throat is cleared of infernal ashes, at once recalling the “dry urn of the larynx” from section V of ‘Station Island’, and the face-cleansing later in the canto as used in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’. Stressing the middle ground the poem occupies compared to other poems by Heaney, the following observation by Dennis O’Driscoll from his essay on ‘The Biretta’ confirms the function of purgatory as intermediary realm:

Heaney is so well known for his downward glance towards spongy bog and squelching mud, and for his increasingly upward gaze towards the dazzling and visionary, that it is easy to overlook how much of his writing takes place at eye level. Although “The Biretta” evokes an item of priestly headdress, it is not one of those poems in which an artifact seen at eye level is also envisioned at spirit level. (O’Driscoll 1999: 74)

The image mentioned before Dante’s boat, the “paper boat”, links ‘The Biretta’ with ‘The Flight Path’, another poem featuring Dante as well as a paper boat (cf. O’Driscoll 1999: 77).¹⁵⁴ In the Dantesque stanza quoted above, “boat” rhymes with “throat”: a rhyme combining two important metaphors for poetry, one widely applied, one very Heaneyesque.

¹⁵³ Sayers has “my ship of genius” (Dante 1955: 73).

¹⁵⁴ O’Driscoll also brings to attention the image of the ship of death, which is implied by the painting mentioned in the last two stanzas of ‘The Biretta’, and he names previous examples of “Heaney’s flotilla of funerary vessels”, not forgetting the “precarious voyages” pervading *Seeing Things* from the crossing of the Stygian lake in ‘The Golden Bough’ to ‘The Crossing’ of the Acheron concluding the book (O’Driscoll 1999: 76). Accordingly, he suggests that ‘The Biretta’ is “a poem of memory and mourning”, in which “Seamus Heaney applies words with a healing scrupulousness” (ibid. 79).

Heaney's 'The Gaeltacht' from his collection *Electric Light* (2001) does not appropriate a scene from Dante's *Purgatorio* but a sonnet from his *Rime*. As it also includes a boat as a metaphor for poetry, however, it is appropriate to speak of it at this point. 'The Gaeltacht' is a memory about going to school and university with Seamus Deane, when they used to address each other as "*mon vieux*" and go to the Gaeltacht, the Gaelic-speaking district, with friends and girlfriends (cf. Heaney 2003: 360). As Langdon Hammer observes, the poem is about literary fame and the "desire for release from it and a return to primal things" (Hammer 2001: 2). In Heaney's words, the poem is "a variation played on Dante's Lapo and Guido sonnet" (Heaney 2003: 360), which is explicitly mentioned in the sestet:

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

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

As Hammer notes, Heaney cannot physically return to the past, but he can make the descriptions of lost experiences more vivid with inventions like the Anglo-Saxon compound "wildtrack" and his preference for onomatopoeic words like "gabble" (Hammer 2001: 2). The sentimental yearning for a quaint Ireland of a youth that has long passed is reminiscent of O'Donoghue's. Taking Dante's sonnet as an example, the poem is imagined as an actual means, a "wildtrack", to escape reality and relive the carefree days of youth. Dante's original sonnet, *Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io*, imagines a magical voyage in a boat with friends and their girlfriends, a wishful thinking similar to Heaney's, likewise addressed to poet colleagues:

Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
 fossimo presi per incantamento
 e messi in un vasel, ch'ad ogni vento
 per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio (Dante 1987: 99)

Dante's poet friends are Guido Cavalcanti, to whom the sonnet is addressed and who wrote one in response, and Lapo, who according to Scott is probably the minor poet Lippo Paschi de' Bardi (Scott 2004: 66). Heaney's first line is a version of Dante's first line, leaving out

Guido's name and substituting it with *mon vieux* (referring to Deane), substituting Barlo for Lapo, and, most interestingly, putting himself first: "I wish, *mon vieux*, that you and Barlo and I" (Heaney 2001: 44). This reversal cannot be for reasons of scansion, as it does not really make a difference in that respect; perhaps there is a hint of *kenosis*, a deliberate breaking-device to avoid a mere substitution of names, putting an original stamp on it.

Dante's wish is to talk always about love, whereas Heaney does not specify a topic but a language, imagining his friends "talking Irish", which is of course already implied in the poem's title. Dante's imaginary voyage in a boat is transformed into an imaginary voyage in a car "on the Atlantic Drive", "above the sea". In addition to being more contemporary, the car journey also conveys a feeling of separation from the water. They look on to the sea from a safe distance, and thus do not have to consider "vento", "fortuna od altro tempo" as does Dante. Furthermore, Heaney doubles Dante's number of friends and of women. While Heaney's direct allusion to Dante's sonnet, making Heaney's poem a meta-poem, might not seem very elegant, his actual imitation and transformation of the sonnet succeed in recreating the original's atmosphere of melancholic longing while at the same time remaining distinctively Irish and personal.

Another Dantesque poem from *Electric Light*, 'The Little Canticles of Asturias' consists of three unrhymed sections of fourteen, twelve, and ten lines, representing a miniature version of Dante's tripartite poem of hell, purgatory and paradise, as the title programmatically announces, and it was inspired by a family holiday in Spain. In Heaney's words, the "infernal landscape" with "furnaces burning, burning, burning" in the first part is followed by the "purgatorial grace" of a "beautiful Spanish landscape" in the second part, and the poem concludes with "the paradise bit" (Heaney 2003: 360), alluding to Santiago de Compostela, the final destination of the famous pilgrimage.

Recounting a journey through Asturias, the poem begins in the "burning valley of Gijon", with "its blacks and crimsons", which triggers a memory of burning newspapers, the pieces of which are "small air-borne fire-ships / Endangering the house-thatch": paper boats again, flying and burning and dying. The travellers "almost panicked there in the epic blaze" and "cursed the hellish roads." (Heaney 2001: 24) In the second part, the speaker "felt like a soul being prayed for" when passing by the workers on the field "on the way to Piedras Blancas" (ibid.). As Le Goff points out, "Purgatory is an intermediary other world in which the trial to

be endured by the dead may be abridged by the intercessory prayers, the ‘suffrages,’ of the living.” (Le Goff 1984: 11) In the poem, however, the speaker not only feels like a soul that is prayed for, but is also at the same time a living pilgrim like Dante:

I was a pilgrim new upon the scene
Yet entering it as if it were home ground,
The Gaeltacht, say, in the nineteen-fifties,
Where I was welcome, but of small concern
To families at work in the roadside fields
Who’d watch and wave at me from their other world
As was the custom still near Piedras Blancas. (Heaney 2001: 25)

Bringing Irish memories to Spain with what O’Driscoll calls his “localizing tendency”, Heaney compares the Spanish scene with the Gaeltacht (O’Driscoll 2002), which links the poem with ‘The Gaeltacht’ and thus again connects Dante to the notion of local speech, the Irish vernacular. Heaney plays on the different associations with an “other world”: as a dead soul, he is already in the other world; as a pilgrim comparing himself to Dante, he has the privilege of travelling through the other world without having died yet; for the Irish traveller, Spain as a foreign country with a foreign language is another world; the workers on the field, be it at home or in Spain, experience a different world from that of the poet, whose only spade is a pen.

Part three of ‘The Little Canticles of Asturias’, inspired by Dante’s *Paradiso*, plays with light (“bright”, “sunlight”, “glittered”, “gloom”), and with religious vocabulary and imagery:

[...], gulls *in excelsis*
Bobbed and flashed on air like altar boys
With their quick turns and tapers and responses
In the great re-echoing cathedral gloom
Of distant Compostela, *stela, stela*. (Heaney 2001: 25)

The echo of the word “Compostela” is reminiscent of the Italian word for star, *stella*, with whose plural Dante ends all three of his canticles. Santiago de Compostela of course also signifies the destination, the coming to an end of a pilgrimage.

3.2 Canto XXVI: *Il miglior fabbro*

In Canto IX, Virgil and Dante leave the ante-purgatory and enter actual purgatory. In Canto XXVI, on the terrace of the lustful, Dante's poetic predecessor Guido Guinizzelli, to whom Dante refers as "il padre / mio e de li altri miei miglior" (*Purg.* XXVI, 97-98), his father and father to those who are better than he, informs him why there are two groups of shades moving in opposite directions: one is the group of the sodomites, the other the group of those whose "peccato fu ermafrodito" (82), referring to the heterosexual. After Dante praises Guinizzelli's poetic style, Guinizzelli humbly points out the "miglior fabbro del parlar materno", whose love poetry and romances surpassed everyone else's (117-119). When he disappears into the purging fire, Dante compares what he sees to fish diving to the bottom of the water, "come per l'acqua il pesce andando al fondo" (135), which indicates the closeness of the two elements, the "symbolic coupling of fire and water" in purgatory (Le Goff 1984: 9).¹⁵⁵ When Dante politely asks the poet that was pointed out to him for his name, he introduces himself in his Provençal mother tongue as Arnaut Daniel - "*Ieu sui Arnaut*" (*Purg.* XXVI, 142) - and asks Dante to remember his pain. The last line of the canto, "Poi s'ascose nel foco che li affina" (148), is famous for being quoted in the last lines of *The Waste Land*, which is dedicated to "Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*" (Eliot 1969: 59), who wrote a chapter on Arnaut Daniel in his *The Spirit of Romance*, first published in 1910. The title of the chapter is "Il Miglior Fabbro", and it opens with the following praise for Daniel:

The Twelfth Century, or, more exactly, that century whose center is the year 1200, has left us two perfect gifts: the church of San Zeno in Verona, and the canzoni of Arnaut Daniel; by which I would implicate all that is most excellent in the Italian-Romanesque architecture and in Provençal minstrelsy. (Pound 1970: 22)

As Pound suggests, the first line of Dante's imitative speech for Daniel's shade alludes to "the three lines by which Daniel is most commonly known" from his tenth canzo:

Ieu sui Arnaut qu'amas l'aura
E chatz le lebre ab lo bou
E nadi contra suberna.¹⁵⁶ (Pound 1970: 36f)

¹⁵⁵ In Heaney's "The Walk" from *The Spirit Level* (1996), the lovers are compared to "Two shades who have consumed each other's fire, / Two flames in sunlight that can sear and singe" (Heaney 1996: 74), reminiscent of the purging flames for the lustful in this final cornice of the *Purgatorio*.

¹⁵⁶ Pound gives the following translation: "I am Arnaut who loves the wind, / And chases the hare with the ox, / And swims against the torrent." (Pound 1970: 36)

The first poem in Bernard O'Donoghue's *Outliving* (2003), 'The day I outlived my father', reworks these three lines. After the realisation of the void his father left, of the loss of guidance, the grief gives way to the possibilities that this sudden independence might offer:

at liberty at last like mad Arnaut
to cultivate the wind, to hunt the bull
on hare-back, to swim against the tide. (O'Donoghue 2003: 1)

Given that O'Donoghue is a medievalist it is probably fair to assume that he takes the liberty of reversing the bull and the hare, possibly to underline the madness and the freedom of choice, and does not translate the original wrongly as such. The slightly transformed translation is introduced by a simile, "like mad Arnaut". The choice of the epithet "mad" suggests an association of liberty with madness, as though one could go mad with a lack of fatherly guidance, free to do whatever one pleases. The alternative would have been "to follow you / in investigating that other, older world", but he is "lacking maybe / the imagination" to do so (ibid.). Another change O'Donoghue makes to Daniel's lines in addition to riding the hare is "cultivate the wind", again stressing some kind of madness, and perhaps implying that some things simply cannot be accomplished. The wind is elusive, and riding a hare is even more unlikely than swimming against the tide. It is possible to do all these things in poetry, however, as Daniel has shown.

In his review of *Outliving*, Adam Newey fittingly describes the last seven lines of the poem as "an object lesson in poetic compression, in the kind of jack-in-the-box surprise that only the most accomplished poet can spring". He relates Daniel to Dante, Pound, and Eliot, and also detects some Beckett:

Not only do we hear the echoes of Beckett's swirlingly bleak affirmation at the close of *The Unnamable* - "You can't go on, I must go on, I'll go on" - but we are plunged into Dante's Purgatory with its exquisite balance of shame and hope, penitence and determination. One of the things Dante admired about Arnaut was his use of common language for uncommon purposes, and *Outliving* is a good example. (Newey 2003)

Thus, in one short poem, an accomplished poet can digest myriads of predecessors without being unoriginal. And it may sound anachronistic, but 'The day I outlived my father' is Dante mediated through Arnaut Daniel. As Eliot suggests in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent',

chronology of publication can be irrelevant in matters of reading and influence; “the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” (cf. Eliot 1975: 39)

3.3 Canti XXVII-XXX: Lethe, Lilies, Flames, Flakes

In Canto XXVII, Dante and Virgil arrive at the wall of fire every soul has to cross to reach the earthly paradise located on the summit of Mount Purgatory. It takes Virgil some time to convince Dante to step into the fire. Ensuring Dante that no hair of his would burn even if he stayed within this fire for a thousand years cannot free Dante from his doubts, but mentioning that Beatrice is waiting on the other side of the wall, that the only obstacle between Beatrice and him is this wall,¹⁵⁷ finally enables Dante to overcome his fear. Virgil enters the fire first, Dante follows, and Statius goes last. Dante is able to endure the heat by hearing Virgil talk of Beatrice. On the other side of the fire, after more strenuous climbing, night is falling, and the three bed down for the night. When they reach the last step the next day, Virgil announces that his time as Dante’s guide is over, and the Canto ends with the very last lines Virgil will utter in the *Commedia*:

Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio». (*Purg.* XXVII, 139-142)

Dante’s will is free, and Virgil crowns him master over himself, a situation resembling O’Donoghue’s speaker’s after the death of his father.

In the next canto, Dante proceeds through a beautiful wood with fragrant blossoms and birds singing in the trees until he arrives at a clear stream. On the other side of the river there is a woman, who approaches the riverbank when Dante asks her to let him listen to her song, adding that she reminded him of Persephone when her mother had lost her. Her name, Matelda, is only mentioned in Canto XXXIII of *Purgatorio* by Beatrice.¹⁵⁸ She explains that he is in Eden, and that this river is Lethe, which erases all memory of sin, and that there is a

¹⁵⁷ "«Or vedi, figlio: / tra B atrice e te   questo muro»." (*Purg.* XXVII, 35-36)

¹⁵⁸ The identity, historical or mythological, of the figure of Matelda has not been uncovered (cf. Scott 2004: 291; Dante 1994: 824f).

second river called Eunoe,¹⁵⁹ which restores the memory of the good pursued in life. This garden, she explains, was perhaps what the ancient poets dreamed of when thinking of the Golden Age, and here was the innocent root of humanity. It is always spring, every fruit available, and the nectar, whereby she is referring to the river water, is the one of which poets speak (cf. Dante 1994: 846n):

Quelli ch'anticamente poetaro
l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
Qui fu innocente l'umana radice;
qui primavera sempre e ogne frutto;
nettare è questo di che ciascun dice". (*Purg.* XXVIII, 139-144)

At the end of her speech, Dante turns around and the reader finds out that the two poets, Virgil and Statius, are still with him and have heard everything the woman has said. The imagery shows many elements of the pastoral, and the overall impression that is given approaches the paradisiacal. As Le Goff underlines, Dante “rescued Purgatory from the infernalization to which the Church subjected it in the thirteenth century.” This canto conveys that, for Dante, purgatory “is a place of hope, of initiation into joy, of gradual emergence into the light.” (Le Goff 1984: 346)

Ciaran Carson’s sequence *Letters from the Alphabet* includes a poem of five long-lined couplets for each letter of the alphabet; first published in 1995, it was then included in his collection *Opera Et Cetera* (1996). The poem ‘E’ reads like a mystery novel, with someone called Carter, who opens “Tutankhamun’s reliquary”, his “Doppel-Gänger” named Carter, and the veiled “mater”, who does not reveal to Carter the destination of the “noiseless E-type black Felucca” that “came for him across the water” (Carson 1996: 15). The third couplet observes in the rotation of a record the flux of the river Lethe:

The stylus ticked and ticked like it was stuck in one groove of eternity. The disc-
Warp wobbled, river-dark and vinyl-shiny. Dust was in its Lethe dusk. (Carson 1996: 15)

The darkness and “eternity” of Carson’s Lethe suggests that he probably had the Greek river Lethe in mind, which was situated in Hades and equally caused forgetfulness. In Dante’s

¹⁵⁹ The river Eunoe is Dante’s invention (cf. Le Goff 1984: 355).

Purgatorio, nothing is eternal; every soul eventually reaches heaven. The couplet creates the tranquillising effect of the eternal, circular movement of the record and, accordingly, the river of forgetfulness. The black sailing boat might as well be a ship of death, ferrying Carter over to the land of the dead. The “Lethe dusk” might foreshadow the evening of his life and time running out.

A definite purgatorial image appears in ‘Slate Street School’ from *The Irish for No* (1987), in the form of snowflakes:

*These are the countless souls of purgatory, whose numbers constantly diminish
And increase; each flake as it brushes to the ground is yet another soul released.*¹⁶⁰
And I am the avenging Archangel, stooping over mills and factories and barracks.
I will bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow: inches, feet, yards, chains, miles.
(Carson 1988: 46)

The metaphor beautifully illustrates the transitory nature of the souls’ stay in purgatory. As soon as some souls ascend to heaven, more enter purgatory and start their purification process. Ironically, the difference is that the direction in Dante is upwards, whereas the souls released in Carson’s poem have been falling down from heaven. The burial of Belfast under snow strongly recalls the end of Joyce’s ‘The Dead’, the last story in *Dubliners* (1914): “His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”¹⁶¹ (Joyce 1992a: 225) In his comparison of Heaney’s ‘Alphabets’ and Carson’s ‘Slate Street School’, Tim Hancock finds that, in contrast to Heaney’s, Carson’s student is “a Blakeian visionary looking out towards the elemental forces of nature and the dark matter of the city”, and

a sullen rebel, a primitive trapped in the purgatorial classroom and longing to escape, to abandon the dry ‘chalky numerals’ of education for the flurry of snowflakes that he moves to the window to see. Where Heaney mourns the destruction of his school, the birthplace of his ‘poet’s dream’, Carson’s aversion to rote-learning prompts him to turn iconoclastic destroyer in a radically cleansing poetic vision (Hancock 2009: 145)

¹⁶⁰ The italics are Carson’s. For reasons of space, the Bloodaxe edition has additional line breaks after “constantly”, “soul”, “mills and” and “inches”, which is not necessary here.

¹⁶¹ In his associative way, Muldoon cleverly explores snow imagery in Irish literature in *To Ireland, I* (2000), with copious writers ranging from, for example, Elizabeth Bowen to C.S. Lewis to Louis MacNeice in alphabetical order, with a “tendency to keep coming back to James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’” (Muldoon 2000: 5). Moreover, in his own poem ‘History’, and in the section ‘Carson’ (which is followed by ‘Louis’) from his poem sequence ‘7, Middagh Street’, he alludes to MacNeice’s famous poem ‘Snow’ (cf. Muldoon 2001: 87; 188).

Like purgatory, school is not a permanent state.

Eden and snow converge in Michael Longley's 'River & Fountain' from *The Ghost Orchid* (1995). Memories of his early literary life and poet friends are pondered in twelve numbered, unrhymed sestets. In I, snowflakes cover each other, "white erasing white"; in V, critic Adam's "Eden was annotation and vocabulary lists". VI alludes to Derek Mahon's poem 'The Snow Party': "his was the first snow party I attended". VIII has the poets' wings "melted in the sun" in an Icarus image which is taken up again in the very last line, which also points back to the snowy beginning: "When snow falls it is feathers from the wings of Icarus." (Longley 2006: 236-238) Ascent, or hubris, is followed by fall. In Mahon's 'The Snow Party', set in Japan in Bashō's time, snow "is falling / Like leaves on the cold sea" while "thousands have died" (Mahon 1999: 63).¹⁶² In 'Lights' from *Night Feed* (1982), Eavan Boland employs Eden imagery in a setting of snow:

This was the Arctic garden.
A hard, sharkless Eden
porched by the North.
A snow-shrubbed orchard

with Aurora Borealis –
apple-green and icy –
behind an ice wall.
But I was a child of the Fall (Boland 2008: 98)

The rhyme of "North" and "orchard" is even stronger when pronounced in an Irish way, i.e. when the "th" is pronounced as a "t". In this memory of sailing home for Ireland, Boland's arctic Eden's wall is made of ice, whereas Dante closes the earthly paradise off from sinners with a wall of fire. Coldness pervades the poem throughout, although it is set in August. In the present of the poem, the speaker is not a child anymore but has a "child asleep beside me".

¹⁶² The imagery of snow in relation to death, and to flower petals or leaves, sometimes in combination, can be found in various other poems, probably many of them having 'The Dead' in mind, where the snow may be seen as a shroud covering Ireland. Cf. e.g. Mahon's 'Spring Letter in Winter': "Hearing the grey snow gather on the horizon, / The danse macabre of leaf-skeletons" (Mahon 1968: 11); Longley's 'Madam Butterfly': "Death is white as your lover's uniform, as snow / When it covers the whiteness of almond petals" (Longley 2006: 166); Boland's 'Malediction': "whose flower is snow / And where the wild dead lie wintering / Forever" (Boland 2008: 13); Boland's 'The Winning of Etain': "blossoms tumbling from their brief stations, / Wrapping the flamboyant grass in a shroud / Like snow" (ibid. 31); C.L. Dallat's 'In a Cold Climate': "*flakes again, as large and light as maple leaves*" (Dallat 2009: 56; his italics). Cf. also Jonathan Allison's brilliant essay on Carson's 'Snow' from *Belfast Confetti*, with "fragments [...] obviously and outrageously borrowed" from MacNeice's 'Snow'. Snow, roses, confetti, and funerals link the two poets (Allison 2008: 125; 127), and not only them.

There is no more “apple-icy brightness”, but “doubt still sharks / the close suburban night. / And all the lights I love / leave me in the dark.” (ibid. 99) No sharks lived in the icy Arctic garden, but in suburbia, doubt lingers below the surface like sharks, ready to attack. Made into a verb, “sharks” rhymes with “the dark”, the unknown, the impalpable, the unconquered. The portrayal of Ireland as a home one is separated from by water links the poem with ‘The Briefcase’ or ‘The Potter’s Field’, for example.

In Canto XXIX, Dante witnesses a strange procession. He follows Matelda upstream, as a radiant light appears, and music sounds through the forest. As it turns out, the light derives from huge candles, and those moving candles are followed by white-clad people. Among the members of the procession are twenty-four elders wearing lilies on their heads:

Sotto così bel ciel com'io diviso,
ventiquattro seniori, a due a due,
coronati venien di fiordaliso. (*Purg.* XXIX, 82-84)

A poem by Ciaran Carson employs the image of the lily, or rather its stylised version fleur-de-lys, like Dante’s “fiordaliso”, in the context of purgatory. Tellingly following the opening poem ‘La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi’, despite its French title the only poem in Irish in *First Language* (1993), ‘Second Language’ is a poem consisting of 25 long-lined rhyming couplets about learning English as a second language, as Carson did. Ironically, a large range of Latin terms and Latinate vocabulary are employed and, although written from a child’s perspective, the language is extremely eloquent and sophisticated (cf. Alexander 2010: 180). As Jerzy Jarniewicz points out, the many foreign terms undermine the Englishness of the poem:

how English is the Italian noun ‘campanile’, or the adjective ‘sienna’? How English are Greek ‘helices’ or Latin ‘lamina’? And such words and phrases from the same poem as ‘Araphoes’, ‘Nimrod’, ‘I-Ching’, ‘Ad altare Dei’, ‘che sera’, ‘fleurs de lys’, ‘Pharaonic unguents’, do they really come from English? The poem looks like a multilingual *bricolage*, an example of the post-Babelian confusion of the tongues, exploding any possibility of a homogenous and pure diction, and unveiling the essentially hybrid nature of English; in fact, of any language.” (Jarniewicz 2009: 218)

In a memory of Holy Mass, the poem’s speaker stares at lilies embellishing a personified pulpit. As a symbol of purity and innocence, the lilies possibly indicate the purity of the word

of God spoken from the pulpit, of the Virgin Mary, and of Christian doctrine with its intention of purgation, after which the sinners regain innocence:

I inhaled *amo, amas, amat* in quids of *pros* and *versus* and *Introibos*
Ad altare Dei; incomprehensibly to others, spoke in Irish. I slept through the Introit.

The enormous Monastery surrounded me with nave and architrave. Its ornate pulpit
Spoke to me in fleurs-de-lys of Purgatory. Its sacerdotal gaze became my pupil.
(Carson 1993: 11)

The pulpit speaks and gazes, and in a reversal of point of view, the speaker turns into the pulpit, his pupil is the pulpit's pupil, which is underlined by the strange rhyme the two words form, including elements of assonance, consonance, and eye-rhyme. As the following stanza suggests, pupil of course also means student, which further stresses the reversal of roles.¹⁶³ Furthermore, "fleur-de-lys", if pronounced the French way, rhymes with "Purgatory", if the o is not pronounced. This can be extended to "Spoke to me" (and "Monastery" and "surrounded me") in an elegant rhythmical pattern. Ambiguously, "Spoke to me" can either mean that the pulpit appeals to the speaker because of its beautiful ornament, or that it rebukes the speaker (for sleeping through the Introit, for example). As Neal Alexander puts it, "part of the point of the poem's extravagantly diverse lexicon is to undermine any ostensible purity that the English language might be said to possess." (Alexander 2010: 180) Cleverly, the purity of the poem's language is undermined by the impurity of the French "fleurs-de-lys", a symbol for purity.¹⁶⁴

As concerns Dante, lilies also appear in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio* in a quotation from *Aeneid* VI, 883 (cf. Dante 2003: 523),¹⁶⁵ called out by the members of the pageant. In this passage Dante, like Carson, inserts Latin expressions into his poetry, liturgical adjoining pagan:

Tutti dicean: '*Benedictus qui venis!*',
E fior gittando e di sopra e dintorno,
'*Manibus, oh, date lilia plenis!*'. (*Purg.* XXX, 19-21)

¹⁶³ Speaking of teacher and pupil, or master and acolyte, the intertextuality with Heaney in 'Second Language' is worth mentioning. As Stan Smith points out, the Arapahoes' "unforked tongue" in the sixth couplet "alludes to Heaney's use in *North* of the 'forked tongue' as an image of Northern Irish duplicities" (Smith 2009: 112).

¹⁶⁴ Death and snow both appear as well in the childhood memory trip of 'Second Language': "statues wore their shrouds of amaranth", "sepulchral", "sarcophagi", "I foot the snow and almost-dark" (Carson 1993: 11f).

¹⁶⁵ Dante adds the "oh" in order to adhere to the hendecasyllable (Dante 1994: 884n).

What further stresses the symbolic meaning of the lily for Dante is that a white fleur-de-lys on red ground was the old coat of arms of Florence, turned into a red fleur-de-lys on white ground by the Guelfs in 1251 (Dante 2003: 538).

In Canto XXX, Beatrice finally appears, wearing a red dress covered by a green mantle, and a white veil and olive branches on her head. Despite the veil, Dante recognises her through the power his old love for her still holds. He turns to Virgil and famously says “conosco I segni de l’antica fiamma” (*Purg.* XXX, 48),¹⁶⁶ but Virgil is gone:

Ma Virgilio n’avea lasciati scemi
di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo padre,
Virgilio a cui per mia salute die’mi (49-51)

Dante’s threefold repetition of Virgil’s name is inspired by Virgil’s *Georgics* IV, 525-7, in which Orpheus’s severed head calls out Eurydice’s name, which is echoed by the riverbanks (cf. Scott 2004: 236; Dante 1994: 888n). As suggested in chapter 2.1, Muldoon possibly echoes this with “my calling out ‘Creusa, Creusa, Creusa’” (Muldoon 2001: 467) in the sixteenth sonnet of ‘The Bangle (Slight Return)’. At the realisation of Virgil’s departure, Dante starts to cry, but Beatrice advises him to save his tears for what is to come, and she calls him by his name, “Dante”, which is the first and only time in the *Commedia* that his name appears (Dante 1994: 889n).¹⁶⁷ In the following canto, Beatrice reproaches Dante for his sins and expects him to confess and be fully penitent before he can drink from Lethe to forget them. So Dante weeps and regrets deeply, and eventually faints, full of remorse. He regains consciousness when Matelda immerses him in the waters of Lethe. At the request of four women personifying the cardinal virtues (cf. Dante 1994: 922n), Beatrice unveils herself for Dante.

An explicit reference to Dante’s *Purgatorio*, arguably the last few canti in particular, occurs in Harry Clifton’s ‘Lacrimae Christi’ from *Night Train through the Brenner* (1994). The poem, written in nine quintains with slightly differing rhyme schemes, recounts a train journey through Italy, undertaken by the poet-speaker and his newly-wed wife. Bottles of the wine from the poem’s title are resting between their knees, but also trigger, in combination with the landscape, reflections about sins and repentance:

¹⁶⁶ The line is a literal translation of Dido’s words in *Aeneid* IV, 23 (Scott 2004: 236; Dante 1994: 888n).

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Nohrnberg 2003 about Dante’s autobiographical “necessity” of giving his name.

Now, for my sins,
Must I take them in, the brown and yellow races,
Exploited girls, and temporary wives,
To trouble our wedded afterlives?

For maybe this is purgatory —
Dante's hills of Tuscany
Riddled with tunnels, electrified
For the passing of twentieth-century trains —
As if I had died

And come back again, to see once more
Conscience, unearthly bride (Clifton 1994: 17f)

The hills are now modernised, but as in Dante's Eden, there are "fruits of intensity". Christ is directly addressed twice in the poem. The first lines echo Beatrice's words to Dante when she tells him to save his tears: "Christ, if you weep for me, / Bottle your tears" (ibid. 17), because not only are Christ's tears gathered in the bottle of wine, but the expression "to bottle up" also reverberates here. The second address parodies Christ's breaking of the bread: "Christ, divide / the spoils between us" (ibid. 18). If Christ has to weep because of the poet's debauchery "In brothels and oases", at least good wine may result from it. Travelling through Tuscany, the poet is haunted by Dante's medieval system of justice.

3.4 Purgatorial Voyages: Lough Derg

Lough Derg [...] is the place where the pressure of conformity clashes most violently and productively with the pressure of individualism. (O'Brien 2006: xxiii)

As Peggy O'Brien has shown in her excellent *Writing Lough Derg* (2006), the perception of St. Patrick's Purgatory, the site of pilgrimage on an island in the middle of Lough Derg, a lake in the northwest of Ireland, has been culturally shaped by writers, whose perception in turn has been influenced and modified by those who preceded them.¹⁶⁸ O'Brien focuses

¹⁶⁸ As Philip Edwards points out, Station Island on Lough Derg in County Donegal in Ireland, also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory, was famous in medieval times. Dante is said to have been influenced by the legends circulating around the site for his *Commedia*. With Croagh Patrick, it is still one of the most famous and most frequented holy sites in Ireland. The present ritual of penance takes three days and includes fasting, praying, waking, confessing, and walking the circles of ancient cell foundations without shoes. In contrast to writers in

chronologically on the works of Anglo-Irish writers William Carleton, Denis Florence MacCarthy, D. Canon O'Connor, Shane Leslie, Alice Curtayne, Seán O'Faoláin, Denis Devlin, Patrick Kavanagh, and finally more elaborately on Seamus Heaney, with a comparative glance to the side at Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz. She examines the paradox of how for modern writers, Lough Derg's

rituals of self-mortification and self-hypnosis, aimed at eroding personality and easing assimilation into a collective identity, produce the opposite effect: the determination to fight even more aggressively for an inviolate individuality that resists any form of imperialism. (O'Brien 2006: xxii)

More recently, Terence Dewsnap revisits Kavanagh's, Devlin's, and Heaney's Lough Derg poetry in *Island of Daemons* (2008). While stressing the poets' Catholic background and their works' uniqueness among the numerous writings on Lough Derg for being "long poems, monumental poems" (Dewsnap 2008: 20), he pins down "three kinds of demons" they have to face during their allegorical pilgrimage:

First there are the ghosts and devils, the Dantesque content, even when not specifically alluded to. Second are the social problems, Irish politics and institutions as reflected in the pilgrims' lives. Third are the inner demons, conscience, frustration, internalized ghosts and devils. Each poet asserts his selfhood as he emerges from an encounter with darkness. (ibid. 200)

For this present study of Dante in contemporary Irish poetry, too, Denis Devlin's 'Lough Derg', Patrick Kavanagh's 'Lough Derg', and Heaney's much discussed 'Station Island' in particular, are of interest. As Dewsnap writes, "the authors are midlife questers like Dante" (ibid. 22).

3.4.1 Before Heaney

A short insight into the two Lough Derg poems by Irish Catholic poets Devlin and Kavanagh will illustrate some of the influences of which Heaney was aware, and about which he may have been anxious when approaching the topic and setting of the site, had he not taken Dante as an example of how to deal with predecessors (cf. Tobin 1999: 178).

post-Reformation England, pilgrimage for Irish writers in the 19th and 20th centuries was not a metaphor but reality reflected in their work (cf. Edwards 2005: 153-6).

Denis Devlin was born in Scotland of Irish parents in 1908 and returned to Ireland with his family in 1920. He led a successful academic life at Belvedere College, University College Dublin, and the Sorbonne, his poetry was praised by Beckett, he translated French poetry, travelled Europe and America extensively, lived among other places in Paris, Rome, and New York, and was, among many other diplomatic achievements, named ambassador to Italy in 1958. He died of leukaemia in Dublin in 1959. *Lough Derg and Other Poems* was published in 1946 (cf. Devlin 1989: 16-21). ‘Lough Derg’ consists of nineteen sestets in iambic pentameter with the regular rhyme scheme ababcc. The poem’s speaker talks about the pilgrimage as if he stood to one side of the pilgrims, in “safe isolation” from their “threatening collectivity”, as O’Brien puts it (O’Brien 2006: 117), observing but not taking part: “they kneel; / All is simple and symbol in their world” (Devlin 1989: 132), “The pilgrims sing” (ibid. 135). To begin their pilgrimage, they have to cross the lake to get to the island. The tenth stanza observes their arrival:

Water withers from the oars. The pilgrims blacken
 Out of the boats to masticate their sin
 Where Dante smelled among the stones and bracken
 The door to Hell (O harder Hell where pain
 Is earthed, a casuist sanctuary of guilt!). (ibid. 133f)

The lines mobilise the senses of sight, taste and smell with their wetness, blackness, food for thought, and the stench of hell. Dante is imagined scenting or tracking down like a dog the entrance to hell on this island of penitence. The scene of the pilgrims leaving the boats to “masticate” gives the impression of a herd of animals and is slightly debasing and ironising. As O’Brien suggests, “The poet is embarrassed that present-day Lough Derg represents a falling off from the site celebrated by Dante” (O’Brien 2006: 121f). As Justin Quinn points out, however, “the sharp satirical tang of some of these passages (Ireland is described as ‘doughed in dogma’) is contrasted with a profound sympathy for the pilgrims” (Quinn 2008: 98), and the woman in the last lines of the poem, “This woman beside me murmuring *My God! My God!*” (Devlin 1989: 135), “parallels Devlin’s own desire for a life of the spirit unsullied by the degeneration he finds in the Ireland of his time, for it is to a Catholic god that Devlin ultimately prays.” (Quinn 2008: 98f) After the experience of World War II, he is fully aware of humanity’s failure and its culpability for its living in an earthly hell: “O earthly paradise! / Hell is to know our natural empire used / Wrong, by mind’s moulting, brute divinities.” (Devlin 1989: 134)

In *To Ireland, I*¹⁶⁹ Muldoon establishes links between Dante, Beckett, and Devlin:

The connection between St Patrick's Purgatory and Dante, who reputedly made a pilgrimage to this isolated lake in County Donegal, would have had a particular appeal to Beckett, crouching like Belacqua at his feet, while Devlin's phrase 'to masticate their sin' surely plays on the mastication/ masturbation nexus in a way that Beckett picks up on the banana/erection of *la banane* and *La Dernière Bande*. (Muldoon 2000: 29)

The difficulty with Devlin is that his position is, as O'Brien writes, a combination of the modernists' "renewed interest in Dante and the Renaissance" and a faithful adherence to Irish Catholicism, an ambivalence for which Lough Derg and the Virgin Mary, his "Matriolatry", are the perfect vehicle (O'Brien 2006: 109). Irish Catholicism is not, of course, incompatible with an interest in Dante. Thus rather than comparing Devlin's Dante to the modernists' Dante, it is more useful to see in it the harbinger of the contemporary Irish poets' Dante, which is closely linked to Catholicism and particularly Irish concerns.

Patrick Kavanagh, born in Inniskeen, County Monaghan, in 1904, came from a poor rural Catholic background and only left farm life in 1939 to pursue his literary career in Dublin. As a poet speaking for, and from the point of view of, the majority of the Irish population, he proved a successful and threatening counterpoint to the "colonial" writings of the Irish Revival led by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge, even though AE, also an Irish Revivalist, had been responsible for the beginnings of Kavanagh's poetic career (Kavanagh 1996: xii-xx). 'Lough Derg', written in 1942 but only published after Kavanagh's death in 1967, "represents a conscious attempt to write in 'the unwritten spaces between the lines' of previous Irish literature, to reproduce an Irish Catholic sensibility", as Antoinette Quinn writes in her introduction to his *Selected Poems* (Kavanagh 1996: xxi). The posthumous publication of Kavanagh's poem suggests that he and Devlin wrote their 'Lough Derg's oblivious of each other's endeavour. As Quinn remarks, upon its appearance Kavanagh reviewed Devlin's poem "unenthusiastically" (ibid. 159).

Kavanagh's poem is a long poem of irregular metre, rhyme scheme, and stanza length. It is a narrative of two days of Lough Derg pilgrimage, again from an observer's point of view, and includes portrayals of individual pilgrims including their particular prayers, "And some deep prayers were shaped like sonnets" (ibid. 61). After this announcement follow four prayers in

¹⁶⁹ The title of the book refers to *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 3.

the form of Shakespearean sonnets. As in Dante's *Purgatorio*, the stars and the position of the sun shape the progression of the days: "The sun through Fermanagh's furze fingers / Looks now on the deserted penance rings of stone"; "The Sacramental sun turns round"; "The Evening Star / Looked into Purgatory whimsically"; "And the day crawled lazily / Along the orbit of Purgatory." (ibid. 46; 52; 60) At the end of the poem, the poet identifies himself in the third person singular as "one of them". Throughout the poem, the awareness is present of a world war going on while the pilgrims are doing their personal penitence, and the poet claims his poem's historicity and factional truth:

All happened on Lough Derg as it is written
In June nineteen forty-two
When the Germans were fighting outside Rostov.
The poet wrote it down as best he knew (ibid. 65)

However much of a failure 'Lough Derg' might be poetically, notwithstanding a few radiant moments, any writing on Lough Derg is usually a necessary transitory and penitentiary step in a writer's oeuvre, as O'Brien argues (O'Brien 2006: 143f). For O'Brien, "the crucial difference between Devlin and Kavanagh is that Kavanagh makes the bold leap into a compassion toward himself and others" (O'Brien 2006: 137), which is epitomised in his portrayal of the "three sad people" who by the end of the poem "had found the key to the lock / Of God's delight in disillusionment." (Kavanagh 1996: 66; cf. O'Brien 148)

Preceding Heaney's 'Station Island', there are other examples of the profound imaginative connection Irish poets have with penitential pilgrimages, and Lough Derg in particular. Muldoon's collection *Knowing My Place* (1971) contains a poem called 'Leaving the Island',¹⁷⁰ consisting of four tercets in which he muses about the art of Japanese poetry and about God, and concludes with the remark that "these poems, / Composed on that island, are guesses / At the truth" (Muldoon 1971: 15). Given that the poem is underwritten with "Lough Derg, 1969", the island in Lough Derg is most probably referred to here (cf. O'Brien 2006: 265). Ciaran Carson's first collection *The Insular Celts* (1973) includes the phrase "the fluttering of surplices pinned to our lines describe the flesh stripped bare for penitence" (Carson 1973: 4) and in short lines deals with the Celtic past, St. Ciaran, an island or the island of Ireland (as the collection's title suggests), and escapism. The rural, earthy vocabulary and the style are reminiscent of Heaney. Ciaran Carson says in an interview with

¹⁷⁰ In Peggy O'Brien's edition, the poem is apparently called 'The Island' (cf. O'Brien 2006: 265).

Kennedy-Andrews that by the time he was writing the poems for *The Insular Celts*, he “had overcome my discomfort with my upbringing in Irish: now I saw it as a uniquely empowering heritage”, and he “fell deeply in love with the music of Early Irish.” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 15) The title of Heaney’s *Stations* (1975) also testifies to this deep-rootedness in Irish heritage and tradition. In his foreword to the collection, he writes: “I think of the pieces now as points on a psychic turas, stations that I have often made unthinkingly in my head.” (Heaney 1975: 3) In ‘Station Island’, he will make stations again.

3.4.2 Heaney as Pilgrim Poet: ‘Station Island’

Confronted with the vast amount of criticism on Heaney’s work and on ‘Station Island’ in particular, one is tempted to open in the humble way in which Le Goff introduces his chapter on Dante’s *Commedia*: “It would be absurd for me to presume to add my meager contribution to the already dense commentaries on the *Divine Comedy* by specialists in Dante.” (Le Goff 1984: 334) In spite of risking some redundancy, however, an inclusion of the poem sequence is indispensable to a study of contemporary Irish poets’ Dante reception. To restrict the matter for this purpose, the focus shall be on the explicit intertextual references to Dante.

‘Station Island’ consists of twelve sections of different length and form. In a “milieu at once literal and metaphorical” (Heaney 1983: 17), the poet pilgrim, undergoing the penitential stations of the pilgrimage on the island in Lough Derg, also called St Patrick’s Purgatory or Station Island, encounters like Dante various ghosts from the past. Most of them he knew personally, but there are also the ghosts of literary predecessors he did not meet in their lifetime. In an early journal comment following an extract of ‘Station Island’, preceding the publication of the collection *Station Island*, Heaney writes that by taking the *Commedia* as an example, he was able to “stir the old pool of Irish Catholic sub-culture in the light of Dante’s great vision”, and the model offered “ways of dramatizing inner conflicts about politics and commitment by summoning other voices whose function it is to rebuke or instruct” (ibid.).

Like Dante’s, the poetic account of the pilgrimage is told in the first person singular. Like Devlin, Kavanagh, and possibly Dante, Heaney had done the pilgrimage in real life. In *Stepping Stones*, Heaney remembers undertaking the pilgrimage three times as an

undergraduate, mainly out of curiosity (O’Driscoll 2008: 232). Asked about Dante’s role in the writing of ‘Station Island’, Heaney replies to O’Driscoll:

Dante was the first mover of the sequence, no doubt about that. The experience of reading him in the 1970s was mighty, and translating the Ugolino episode was like doing press-ups, getting ready for something bigger. [...] What I conceived of was a poem-cycle, with a central protagonist on his fixed route through the pilgrimage. The three-part Dantean journey scaled down into the three-day station, no hell, no paradise, just ‘Patrick’s Purgatory’, which is how the place is known to this day. (ibid. 234f)

In section I, fifteen loosely rhymed quintains, Heaney’s poet-speaker has a conversation with the first ghost, Simon Sweeney, a figure composed of “a traveller called Simon Sweeney” and “an old neighbour called Charlie Griffin” (ibid. 240). He advises him to “Stay clear of all processions” (Heaney 1984: 63). In section II, written in sometimes compromised *terza rima*, the pilgrim comes “face to face” with the ghost of William Carleton, who published his own account of the pilgrimage in the story ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’ in 1828. It was “the record of an experience” which “put Carleton off the Catholic Church forever”, as Peggy O’Brien writes (O’Brien 2006: 29).¹⁷¹ Heaney makes him say that “hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots / made me into the old fork-tongued turncoat / who mucked the byre of their politics”¹⁷² and makes him advise the pilgrim to “try to make sense of what comes. / Remember everything and keep your head.” (Heaney 1984: 65f) With his divided, critical, and ironic attitude towards Irish religion and politics, Carleton is a writer with whom Heaney can identify in his struggle and his search for a credible position as a poet caught up in the traumatic entanglement of the Troubles. As Heaney puts it, Carleton “had all the qualifications” of a Virgilian guide figure:

he was a cradle Catholic, a Northern Catholic, a man who had lived with and witnessed the uglier side of sectarianism, but still a man who converted to the Established Church and broke with ‘our tribe’s complicity’. He had a wide-angle understanding of the whole Irish picture and a close-up intimacy with the vicious Northern side of it. (O’Driscoll 2008: 236)

¹⁷¹ William Carleton (1794-1869) undertook the pilgrimage in his Catholic youth and, after converting to the Established Church, dealt critically with it in his fictional and autobiographical story ‘The Lough Derg Pilgrim’, “the first detailed literary account of the pilgrimage” (Edwards 2005: 156f).

¹⁷² Heaney used the word “fork-tongued” before in ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’ from *North* (1975) in a specifically sectarian context (“leaves us fork-tongued on the border bit”), to which Carson alludes in ‘Second Language’, as Stan Smith points out (Smith 2009: 112, cf. chapter 3.3).

Section III, consisting of eight rhymed quatrains, has no ghost appear but is full of ghostly memories. The second quatrain includes a Dantesque “head-clearing simile”:

There was an active, wind-stilled hush, as if
in a shell the listened-for ocean stopped
and a tide rested and sustained the roof. (ibid. 67)

Corcoran suggests that there is a ghost in the section nevertheless: “The ‘ghost’ of III is the inanimate ‘seaside trinket’ which, to the poet as a child, had been redolent of the death of the girl who owned it (her original was Agnes, the sister of Heaney’s father, who died of TB in the 1920s).” (Corcoran 1998: 117) In section IV, written in a very loose *terza rima* (the first and third lines of the tercets only rhyme occasionally, and the tercets are not linked by rhymes), a dead priest appears and converses with the pilgrim. The pilgrim accuses him, “You gave too much relief”, but the priest retorts:

‘And you,’ he faltered, ‘what are you doing here
but the same thing? What possessed you?
I at least was young and unaware

that what I thought was chosen was convention.
But all this you were clear of you walked into
over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn. (Heaney 1984: 70)

The priest’s questions reflect Heaney’s own self-doubt, as will become even more explicit in some of the following sections. Heaney keeps accusing or questioning himself by having the ghosts say specific things that they probably would not have said in their lifetime. This manipulation of the plot and of the pilgrim’s reactions by the ghost’s speeches is of course the same that can be found in Dante. According to Corcoran, the original for the priest’s ghost is a man called Terry Keenan, whom Heaney knew as a clerical student, and who died working as a foreign missionary, the hardships of which Heaney lets him talk about in the poem (Corcoran 1998: 117). In the poem, the priest points out that times have changed and that the pilgrimage has lost or at least changed its meaning.

In section V, the pilgrim meets three masters or “fosterers” of his literary career. The first two are Heaney’s teachers from Anahorish School, among them Master Murphy (cf. chapter 2.4.5), and the third is Patrick Kavanagh. The pilgrim points out to Murphy that he probably does not

have to be here, since he repented enough in his lifetime: ““You’d have thought that Anahorish School / was purgatory enough for any man,’ / I said. ‘You’ve done your station.’” (Heaney 1984: 73) Kavanagh’s ghost then accuses the pilgrim of stagnation, of a too easy imitation of his writing about the pilgrimage. “Forty-two years on / and you’ve got no farther!” (ibid.). Kavanagh wrote his ‘Lough Derg’ forty-two years before Heaney published ‘Station Island’. Kavanagh’s accusation implies Heaney’s lack of originality, or his anxiety of being accused thereof, in using the pilgrimage on Station Island as a poetical motif. At the same time, there is a stubborn undertone proclaiming that Heaney is accepting the challenge and will prove Kavanagh wrong by adding new twists, such as, for example, adding encounters with the dead. Kavanagh’s “parting shot” at the end of the section recalls Malacoda’s parting signal at the end of Canto XXI in the *Inferno*.

As was pointed out in chapter 2.1.2, Heaney includes the flower simile in his translation of *Inferno* II, lines 127-132, in section VI. Seeing the ghost of a girl from his past, and remembering past lovers, has the same encouraging and reviving effect on Heaney’s poet pilgrim as hearing of Beatrice’s and the other two blessed ladies’ intervention has on Dante’s. Corcoran argues that by walking in the opposite direction to the other pilgrims, and by using at this moment of the pilgrimage Dante’s lines “to describe the poet’s own sexual awakening after the enforced virginity of his Irish Catholic adolescence”, Heaney

turns the tradition of the vision-poem on its head, making sexual not divine love the object of the exercise; but it reminds us too that Dante’s great poem of Christian quest discovers its images of heavenly bliss in transfigured womanly form. (Corcoran 1998: 121)

Carolyn Meyer similarly suggests that Heaney reverses Dante’s “movement from profane to sacred love”; not only at this point, she argues, but generally, which she substantiates by referring to Joyce promoting a “work-lust” in the last section (Meyer 1995: 210). Fumagalli suggests that the quotation, marking Dante’s passage from a feeling of inadequacy to a renewed thirst for action, reflects Heaney’s anxiety of approaching the well-used topic of Lough Derg, an anxiety Dante as a model and master helped him to overcome (Fumagalli 2001: 144f). As Heaney writes in his Dante essay: “I would not have dared to go to Lough Derg for the poem’s setting had I not become entranced a few years ago with *The Divine Comedy* in translation” (Heaney 1985: 18).

In VII, again in imperfect *terza rima* (the tercets do not interlock), a victim of a sectarian killing, shot in his own shop by two RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) men who were “also active Loyalist paramilitaries” (O’Driscoll 2008: 248), makes his ghostly appearance and talks about the night of his murder. The dead man is based on William Strathearn, with whom Heaney played football when he was younger (cf. Corcoran 1998: 117). Heaney’s pilgrim recognises the ghost, realising in shock that “His brow / was blown open above the eye and blood / had dried on his neck and cheek.” (Heaney 1984: 77) This recalls the ghosts in ‘Butcher’s Dozen’, still showing their bleeding wounds, but especially the shade Dante encounters in Canto III of the *Purgatorio*, King Manfred, who was excommunicated by the Church and died in battle against the Guelfs in 1266, when he was thirty-four (Dante 1994: 101n). Heaney’s “I turned to meet his face” echoes, or even translates, Dante’s “Io mi volsi ver’ lui e guardail fiso”, and the injured brow echoes “l’un de’ cigli un colpo avea diviso” (ibid. 90f).¹⁷³ ¹⁷⁴ The final lines of the conversation with the ghost again convey Heaney’s self-doubt and his shame for not being more involved in political matters:

‘Forgive the way I have lived indifferent –
forgive my timid circumspect involvement,’

I surprised myself by saying. ‘Forgive
my eye,’ he said, ‘all that’s above my head.’
And then a stun of pain seemed to go through him

and he trembled like a heatwave and faded. (Heaney 1984: 80)

Gareth Reeves observes that the last two lines exemplify the way Heaney imitates Dante’s concept of constantly making the souls relive their pain, and they present “a ‘stunning’ image for the perpetually renewing conflict and agony of the sectarian brutality” (Reeves 1993: 267). As O’Donoghue correctly remarks, the final line “captures perfectly the typical canto-ending” (O’Donoghue 1998: 247).

In VIII, two ghosts converse with the pilgrim. First there is the appearance of the shade of an archaeologist, based on Heaney’s friend Tom Delaney, who died of a heart complaint in 1979,

¹⁷³ For Schnapp, Manfred’s wounded brow “suggests that the dream of empire has been injured and humbled”, for the ideal of the Roman empire pervades the whole *Commedia* (Schnapp 2007: 97).

¹⁷⁴ Pillonca further notes that in addition to the injured brow, there is another similarity between Manfred and William Strathearn: “The same attitude of detachment, a complete lack of animosity, let alone spirit of vengeance” (Pillonca 2003: 132).

and whose section of 'Station Island' was the first to be written (O'Driscoll 2008: 235). Second, Heaney's second cousin Colum McCartney, whose death Heaney had already dealt with in 'The Strand at Lough Beg', returns to test the poet once more.¹⁷⁵ At his poetry reading at the Dante Seminar in 2003, Heaney introduces the Colum episode as follows:

His ghost comes back and gives me a bit of stern instruction. It so happened that on the day I heard the news of my second cousin's killing, I was attending an arts festival in Kilkenny [...] I stayed on and did my job in Kilkenny, very conscious all the while of the funeral and the wake and so on up in Derry. (Heaney 2003: 351)

Colum's accusations are even harsher than those made by the preceding ghosts. Corcoran calls this moment "the supreme instance in Heaney's self-corrective work of the poet blaming himself for the act of writing" (Corcoran 1998: 95):

'You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The Protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you
who now atone perhaps upon this bed
for the way you whitewashed ugliness and drew
the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*
and saccharined my death with morning dew.' (Heaney 1984: 83)

As is obvious from Heaney's introduction too, he feels guilty about drawing the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio*, about dealing with the situation only theoretically, literarily. It seems that he is blaming himself for hiding in the secure realms of literature, in a safe distance from the harsh reality of the streets. The attempted sweetening of reality is underlined by the created verb "saccharined", but of course, saccharine is an artificial sweetener and therefore cannot be real or wholly satisfactory. The cleansing ritual Heaney performed in 'The Strand at Lough Beg', inspired by Dante, is now questioned, and rebuked for constituting a hiding behind literature, behind Dante's lines. Not only can one close off reality by drawing the blinds and hiding behind them, but the adjective "blind" also reverberates. If the blinds are drawn, one cannot be seen, and one cannot see either. In Colum's speech, Heaney accuses himself of

¹⁷⁵ Pillonca suggests that "one of the reasons why the elegy on Colum elicits a palinode" lies in the "element of indecision" in *Field Work* as to whether reference to *Inferno* or to *Purgatorio* provides a more adequate pool of images to relate to violence. He proposes that Colum implies "that using *Purgatory* was not entirely justified from a poetic and an aesthetic point of view, besides being a sentimental and inadequate way to deal with violence." (Pillonca 2003: 127f)

being a coward. In contrast to every other stanza in VIII, the stanza quoted above ends with two perfect *terza rima*, linked with each other by the end rhymes “you”, “drew” and “dew”, which renders the allusion to the *Purgatorio* even more Dantesque.

The act of whitewashing, in its literal as well as its metaphorical meaning, reappears in ‘Keeping Going’ from *The Spirit Level* (1996). The “whitewash brush”, “an old blanched skirted thing”, after the drying process makes the walls “whiter and whiter”, “like magic” (Heaney 1996: 13). In the fifth of the six sections, there suddenly is “blood / In spatters on the whitewash” because a man was shot leaning against it. The section is framed by the word “blood” at the end of the first and the last lines, underlining the atmosphere of sectarian cruelty. In the last section, the poet addresses his brother, who kept on living in this place of terror. Obviously, the brother “cannot make the dead walk or right wrong”, but the poet admires his strength in coping with the past, in “keeping going” (Heaney 1996: 16). As Corcoran points out, the poet himself found a way of “keeping going” by leaving the place (cf. Corcoran 1998: 196). In ‘Keeping Going’, the continuation of daily routine keeps “whitewashing” the blood and terror of sectarian killing in order to make it bearable, which is what Heaney had intended to do in ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’: making his cousin’s death more bearable by attending to his daily routine of writing poetry. In hindsight, whitewashing can never equal the proper removal of the blood; it can only be a cover-up. Therefore Colum accuses Heaney on his purgatorial pilgrimage of “whitewashing ugliness”.

An imagery of whitewashing can also be found in Muldoon’s ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ from his collection *Quoof* (1983): “*wrap / yourself in the soiled grey blanket of Irish rain / that will, one day, bleach itself white*” (Muldoon 2001: 106).¹⁷⁶ The “soiled grey blanket” alludes to the blankets the prisoners wore during the Dirty Protest, and “watery grey” is also the colour of the whitewash before it dries out in ‘Keeping Going’. There is also “dewy grass” in Muldoon’s poem (ibid. 105). Whitewashing, bleaching, cleansing, and purging constitute profound needs in a violence-ridden society, and the imagery shows that beneath different style and locality, Heaney and Muldoon obviously share very similar roots and influences.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Muldoon’s italics.

¹⁷⁷ In *To Ireland, I* Muldoon connects the cover of snow in ‘The Dead’ with an Irish legend: “Cú Roí is betrayed by his wife, Blathnaid, daughter of Connor MacNessa, to her lover, Cuchulainn, who waits outside the fort for a signal from her. The signal is the whitening of a stream when Blathnaid pours a churn of milk into it. This whitening is replayed, I think, in the ‘general’ whitening of Ireland, which Gabriel Conroy takes to be a direct signal for action, so that ‘the time had come for him to start out on his journey westward’.” (Muldoon 2000: 63)

To return to ‘Station Island’, the ghost speaking in section IX is based on the hunger-striker Francis Hughes, whom Heaney did not know personally, but knew relatives of. Ironically, Heaney was in a British cabinet minister’s room in Oxford when Hughes died as the second hunger striker, which clearly testifies to the predicament he was in at the time (O’Driscoll 2008: 259f; cf. Corcoran 1998: 118). The pilgrim feels a “blanching self-disgust” (note the synonym for whitening), and he repents his “unweaned life that kept me competent / To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust” (Heaney 1984: 85). According to Fumagalli, the hatred expressed by the pilgrim against his home country (“I hate where I was born”) reflects Dante’s against Florence and Italy expressed in the sixth cantos of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, “the ‘political’ cantos” (Fumagalli 2001: 138).¹⁷⁸ The “lighted candle” rising “like a pistil growing from the polyp” is reminiscent of the candles leading Dante’s pageant in Eden.¹⁷⁹

The “inanimate ghost” of X is a coffee mug (Corcoran 1998: 118), and the section is framed by “sunlight” in the first quatrain and “sun-glare” in the last. In XI, the pilgrim meets the ghost of a monk, who tells him to “read poems as prayers” and asks him to translate “something by Juan de la Cruz” for his penance (Heaney 1984: 89), so the pilgrim translates the poem ‘Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe’ (ibid. 122). Obviously, it is questionable whether this can count as penance for someone who usually translates poetry voluntarily.

The final encounter with the ghost of James Joyce in XII is both ending and climax of the pilgrim’s progress, as befits a process of purgation. When Heaney started writing ‘Station Island’, he imagined that “Carleton could be a sort of Tyrone Virgil and Kavanagh a latter-day County Monaghan Cavalcanti”, but it turned out differently, seeing as the poet does the pilgrimage on his own. Bearing Dante’s example in mind by having the literary predecessor guide his own work, however, helped him to overcome the anxiety of the influence of the previous Lough Derg writers (Heaney 1985: 18). Thus Dante might be seen as an invisible poet guide on Station Island. In addition, Joyce appears as a kind of modern Virgilian father figure, encouraging the poet to set himself free of the constrictions of predecessors, traditions, conventions, and political expectations. Peggy O’Brien suggests that Joyce’s ghost also serves

¹⁷⁸ Cf. for example Dante’s “celebre invettiva” in *Purgatorio* VI, beginning in line 76 with the words “Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello”, reflecting Dante’s passionate disgust with political abuse and injustice, one of his primary reasons for writing the *Commedia* (Dante 1994: 183 and 183n).

¹⁷⁹ O’Donoghue suggests that these lines are “based on the flame of *Ulysses* in *Inferno* 26” (O’Donoghue 1998: 247).

as a bridge between the different kinds of exile Heaney and Dante experience: Joyce's leaving his home was self-chosen, like Heaney's (O'Brien 2006: 209). The fact that the pilgrim only encounters Joyce when he has already left the island stresses the unorthodox and challenging role Joyce fulfils at the end of the sequence (cf. O'Driscoll 2008: 236; 249):

[...] the choice of Lough Derg as a locus for the poem did, in fact, represent a solidarity with orthodox ways and obedient attitudes, and that very solidarity and obedience were what had to be challenged. And who better to offer the challenge than the shade of Joyce himself? He speaks [...] to the pilgrim as he leaves the island, in an encounter reminiscent of "Little Gidding" but with advice that Mandelstam might have given; yet the obvious shaping influence is the *Commedia* (Heaney 1985: 19)

The diverse triumvirate of influences mentioned here, Eliot, Mandelstam, and Dante, is of course symptomatic of Heaney's approach to Dante.¹⁸⁰ In the last section, the relationship between guide and guided is ambiguous from the very beginning. The pilgrim cannot be certain "whether to guide or to be guided", for Joyce's ghost "seemed blind" (Heaney 1984: 92).¹⁸¹ After that, the ghost speaks with the assurance of a teacher, although of course not in Joyce's but in Heaney's words, imitating Joyce and accommodating Heaney's conception of Eliot and Mandelstam:¹⁸²

Let go, let fly, forget.
You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.'

[...] The English language
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,

a waste of time for somebody your age.
That subject people stuff is a cod's game,
Infantile, like your peasant pilgrimage.

¹⁸⁰ Meyer finds in Heaney's Carleton and Joyce an echo of Mandelstam's Dante, a view of writing as a natural process of self-maintenance. Also influenced by Eliot, whose Dante differs greatly from Mandelstam's, "Heaney [...] somehow manages to maintain a middle ground between extremes of interpretation." (Meyer 1995: 214) As Conor McCarthy concludes in his chapter on 'Station Island', "Rather than creating simple equivalences between the contemporary and the medieval, Heaney creates multiple, complex evocations of resonances between figures from the past and those of the present." (McCarthy 2008: 85)

¹⁸¹ Cf. Thomas Brückner's essay on the differentiation of "to guide" and "to be guided" in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Commedia* (Brückner 1997).

¹⁸² As Sabina Müller points out, the poet who meets his deceased literary precursors on his poetic journey into the otherworld has the advantage of portraying and adjusting them as he wishes and therefore deals more easily with his anxiety of influence (Müller 2007: 258). She suggests that Joyce's ghost, speaking in a very Heaneyesque manner, a strategy by which Heaney implies temporal priority over Joyce, can be interpreted as *apophrades* in Bloom's sense (ibid. 148).

[...] it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.' (Heaney 1984: 93f)

One of the original signatures with which Joyce tells Heaney to fill the element of water here is the elver, a kind of eel, which of course is Heaney territory. Joyce for Heaney, like Virgil for Dante, at this moment appears to be a father figure and teacher giving personal advice well appreciated, but with his parting the teaching process is supposed to be complete and the poet is left alone to take responsibility for his own endeavour. Fumagalli has repeatedly argued that 'Station Island' is "a sort of miniature of the *Divina Commedia*", which makes the realm of XII the *Paradiso* and consequently Joyce a kind of Cacciaguیدا figure (Fumagalli 1996: 127; 134; cf. Fumagalli 2001).¹⁸³ Pillonca writes that apart from "appearing far-fetched", this interpretation might distract from the more profound function the *Commedia* and the *Purgatorio* in particular possess, as Le Goff has elaborated on, and from the pervasive importance of the concept and tradition of purgatory to the Irish Catholic poet (Pillonca 2006: 346f). "In *Station Island*, it is definitely Dante's second *Cantica* that is Heaney's point of reference, not only as a structural and poetic model but as one of its generative principles." (ibid. 349)

Heaney adapts the Dantesque meeting and parting of two poets beyond the restrictions of time, with one being the master and one being the apprentice whose training concludes with their parting (cf. Brückner 1997: 135), in order to free himself symbolically of poetical and political burdens and mark his emancipation. Reeves stresses the "Joycean-Dantesque overtones" of the flight-metaphor ("take off", "let fly") Heaney uses in Joyce's speech, and supports this by quoting Manganiello, who suggested that Joyce "reinterpreted Ulysses'

¹⁸³ Her idea is that sections VI to IX constitute the infernal realm, sections X and especially XI are Purgatory, and in section XII "we *are* in *Paradiso*" (Fumagalli 1996: 130f; 135). As Pillonca notes, Carla De Petris has also made the Joyce/Cacciaguیدا connection (cf. De Petris 1995: 170; De Petris 1998: 79). She suggests that Heaney uses Dante "to counterbalance Joyce's invitation to open up to the modern world beyond Dublin Bay", to "reaffirm his intention to resist Joyce's 'fetish of exile'" (ibid. 82; 87). I would argue, however, that even if Heaney does not call himself an exile but an inner emigré, it is the shared feeling (and geographical reality) of distance from their politically troubled homes that constitutes a major part of Heaney's attraction to Dante (cf. Manganiello 2000: 101). What is more, Joyce, even if he lived abroad, made Dublin his setting and most lasting subject matter. For these reasons, in addition to Dante's profound influence on Joyce, it remains doubtful whether Dante and Joyce were used in 'Station Island' "one to exorcise the other", as De Petris argues (ibid. 79).

headstrong and fatal flight in *Inferno* 26 ‘by having his Ulyssean Dedalus fly over the nets of nationality, language, and religion and reach the true country of his art through exile’” (Reeves 1993: 268).¹⁸⁴ Joyce’s ghost dismisses the pilgrimage as “infantile”, which according to O’Donoghue relates “to the political question of involvement with the ‘infantile’ demands of nationalist and community politics” (O’Donoghue 1998: 246), which suits Joyce, who excluded himself from the nationalist involvement of his contemporaries. The word “infantile”, however, as O’Donoghue points out, is ambivalent: “the demands of infants may lack *gravitas*, but they have great force” (ibid.). The transcendence of expectations and simple definitions reflects Heaney’s “longing beyond belonging”, as Michael Parker puts it in his assessment of Heaney’s early work and the difficulty of reading it on the premise of nationalist tradition (Parker 2006: 30).

Reeves correctly notes the thoroughness of the *terza rima* in XII, much stricter than in the other sections with *terza rima*, and favourably comments: “The more ‘Dantean’ in formal technique, the more forceful and direct the utterance.” (Reeves 1993: 268) This corresponds to the important last lines of Colum’s speech in VIII, which are in *terza rima* even though the rest of the section is not. Fumagalli, talking about the presence of other poets in ‘Station Island’ either as ghosts or in quotations, suggests that Dante’s absence as a character, even though the *Commedia* plays for Heaney as fundamental a part as the *Aeneid* does for Dante, “is substituted by the recurrent, and [...] highly strategic, presence of *terza rima*.” (Fumagalli 1996: 135) Stan Smith argues that Heaney finds with *Station Island* an imaginary release from the “Northern Irish deadlock” through language:

Heaney’s poetry has pursued language as political metaphor and metonymy through to its source, to a recognition of language as both place of necessary exile and site of a perpetual return home. [...] Displacement is seen [in *Station Island*] not as exile but as freedom, whether in the wide-blue-yonder of America or the poetically licensed otherworlds of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.” (Smith 1997: 234)

Thus exile, representing a form of freedom if chosen voluntarily (and if not, there is at least the freedom of being able to say and write what one desires), possesses for Heaney a geographical as well as a poetical meaning, if one takes the use of Dante as imaginary exile or escape from the Northern Irish situation, as Smith suggests here. Given that Dante in ‘Station

¹⁸⁴ The quotation is from Dominic Manganiello’s *T. S. Eliot and Dante* (1989), page 158. Of course, as Muldoon mentions in his “Go Fish” lecture, Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait* actually says that he will “fly by” the nets, which is ambiguous, as it can both imply “fly past them” and “fly by means of them”.

Island' is placed in a specific Northern Irish context, however, the use of Dante, in addition to granting the poet a necessary freedom, at the same time "restores centrality to a marginalized culture: that of Northern Catholics", as O'Brien argues (O'Brien 2006: 211).

On a structural level, 'Station Island' as Dantesque poem sequence offers imitation, transformation and quotation in translation. The *Inferno* is directly quoted from, the *Purgatorio* is explicitly alluded to and lends the framework for the transformation process, and the *terza rima* is imitated more or less faithfully at various instances. Furthermore, on a psychological level, the anxiety about predecessors and masters is consciously dealt with poetically in a way inspired by Dante's encounters with figures such as Virgil, Statius, Daniel, and Latini. Dante gives Heaney the courage to approach other writers. As Fumagalli puts it, "Dante [...] represents the melody to which all the other voices adjust in order to allow Heaney to sing." (Fumagalli 1996: 141) Gatto regards 'Station Island' as "a daring act of creative misreading of the *Divina Commedia*", which later enables Heaney to produce a pure translation in 'The Crossing' (as opposed to his impure one in 'Ugolino'), having "overcome his need of appropriation" (Gatto 2000: 71). Thus the poet pilgrim's purgatorial voyage on Station Island, the flight of Sweeney, and "the reworking of the Dantesque journey" together necessarily constitute "allegories of the poet's quest" (ibid. 76), his search for a poetic identity and better self-understanding (cf. Bassnett 2007: 140). As is the case with Kavanagh's, Heaney's Lough Derg poem might not be his best work or it might not reflect homogeneity or refinement, but it is a necessary step forward in the poet's evolution towards an independent spirit.

3.5 Immrama: The Voyage of Muldoon

Immrama are Christian tales in Old and Middle Irish about sea voyages into imaginary otherworlds, probably inspired by the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*.¹⁸⁵ As Elizabeth Boyle writes, the purpose of the metaphorical sea voyages was to expiate sins, a Christian undertaking towards redemption (Boyle 2010: 106). The *immram* relevant for this study is *Immram curaig Maíle Dúin* (The Voyage of Máel Dúin's Boat), probably dating from the ninth century (cf.

¹⁸⁵ H.P.A. Oskamp discusses the *immrama* of Bran and Máel Dúin in his chapter on secular voyage literature, as opposed to the voyage of St. Brendan, but concedes that *Immram curaig Máile Dúin* "draw[s] on both secular and ecclesiastical tradition." (Oskamp 1970: 39) "Pre-Christian and Christian motifs are used indiscriminately by the author, and the result is a 'work of art' composed of motifs of divergent backgrounds." (ibid. 43)

Oskamp 1970: 48). As Paul Muldoon points out, “the best known [Immrana] are *Imram Brain*, ‘The Voyage of Bran’ and one that has a particular resonance for myself, for all too obvious reasons.” (Muldoon 2000: 86) MacNeice took his inspiration for his radio play *The Mad Islands* (1962) from Máel Dúin’s story (ibid. 89).¹⁸⁶ In the Irish tale more than a thousand years old, Máel Dúin takes to sea with a number of men to avenge his father Ailill’s murder. On the way, they come across thirty islands to the west of Ireland, each inhabited by strange creatures, only to return eventually to the first island, which had been their initial destination but had been unattainable due to a storm, causing the detour.

Muldoon’s collection *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) according to Clair Wills “explores the meaning behind the cliché of life as a journey, or (perhaps more aptly) a pilgrimage” (Wills 1998: 66). Positioned about halfway through the collection, a sonnet called ‘Immrana’ foreshadows his long poem ‘Imram’ at the end of the collection. The sonnet’s first line clearly refers to Máel Dúin’s voyage: “I, too, have trailed my father’s spirit” (Muldoon 2001: 85). The poem, trailing the spirit of the father, does not offer an answer or clear solution like Máel Dúin’s voyage does. Nothing is certain: the father “disappeared / And took passage, almost, for Argentina”, but only almost, and he is “drinking rum / with a man who might be a Nazi”, but might not be. The speaker might be making all of this up. As Richard Kirkland notes, “‘Immrana’ carries a cultural awareness of the Irish literary tradition of exile and emigration, perhaps most fully developed previously by Joyce, and reduces it to a state of near cliché.” (Kirkland 1992: 38)

‘Imram’, then, consists of thirty rhymed ten-line stanzas, alluding to the thirty islands in the original tale (cf. Wills 1998: 80), and follows the speaker on a search for his father. He visits various places, only to return to the pool hall where he started his journey. As Justin Quinn writes, the poem “mixes a hard-boiled narrative mode reminiscent of Raymond Chandler with material from Native American and Celtic mythology”, and it is “prophetic of the importance which American material would come to play in his subsequent poetry.” (Quinn 2008: 178) In his essay on ‘Imram’ and ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’, Steven Putzel remarks that “in a marvellous example of intertextuality” within the collection of *Why*

¹⁸⁶ That the *immrama* still influence Irish writers is evidenced by Celia de Fréine’s *imram / odyssey* (2010), a bilingual collection in which every poem is rendered in both Irish and English. Liam Carson observes that it references Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s boat metaphor from her poem ‘Ceist na Teangan’ (‘The Language Issue’, translated by Muldoon in the bilingual edition *Pharao’s Daughter* from 1990) in its opening line (Carson 2010: 108). Like most sea voyage narratives, de Fréine’s “journey is both exterior and interior”, and it “is concerned with exploring notions of borders and limits”, not least the Irish border (ibid. 109).

Brownlee Left, the speaker of 'Making the Move' "could be preparing to write 'Immram'" when he passes his bookshelf and names the contents, among them Raymond Chandler and Howard Hughes (Putzel 1996: 2).

The speaker of 'Immram' claims his account of the journey to be accurate, as Dante does in the *Commedia*: "I am telling this exactly as it happened."¹⁸⁷ (Muldoon 2001: 94) This is of course not the case (for both authors, it is fair to assume). He says "I wanted to know more about my father. / So I drove west to Paradise" (ibid. 95). Similarly, the islands to which Máel Dúin sails are to the west of Ireland. Clair Wills notes that to "go west" in popular speech also means to die,

crossing the border between one world and another. In terms of literary tradition the westward voyage forms an important strand of pre-Christian and Christian legend in Ireland, including the voyages of Oisín, Bran, Mael Duin, and the most famous, Brendan. (Wills 1998: 75)

What Muldoon's protagonist finds in paradise, "In that land of milk and honey", is his mother, residing in an asylum. He receives a little information from her about his father: "his empire / Ran a little more than half-way to hell / But began on the top floor of the Park Hotel." (Muldoon 2001: 96) When he arrives at the hotel, he notices a couple calling themselves "Mr and Mrs Alfred Tennyson". As William A. Wilson remarks, Tennyson published his 'Voyage of Maeldune' in 1880 (Wilson 1993: 120). Later on in the Atlantic Club, a person resembling a pirate "ferried me past an outer office", and he "did a breast stroke through the carpet" (Muldoon 2001: 98).¹⁸⁸ He is accidentally injected by a hypodermic syringe, and in his drug vision he "entered a world equally rich and strange". He has a sexual vision of a stabbed woman, in which the dead woman, not the voyeuristic speaker, experiences ecstatic pleasure. Putzel comments on this scene: "As a hell-like wasteland image this beats the images created by Aed the Fair (purported author of Immram Curaiq Maele Duin), or, for that matter, by Homer, Virgil, Dante or T. S. Eliot." (Putzel 1996: 5) If this is true, it is quite an accomplishment on Muldoon's part, this "stabbing" and surpassing of the most prominent of literary predecessors who have ventured into a poetic other- or underworld.

¹⁸⁷ Kirkland points out how this humorous statement undermines any integrity of the poet or speaker towards the reader. A reliable poet/reader relationship becomes irrelevant (Kirkland 1992: 40).

¹⁸⁸ In her brilliant essay on 'Immram' as a journey of discovery, Allison Muri notes these and more allusions to water and sea voyages, which according to her Muldoon uses "to present a pointed and deliberate critique of colonial power", the "violence inherent in sexual conquests of the female characters bear[ing] resemblance to the violence inherent making the move overseas to conquer America's frontier" (Muri 1995: 45).

After his drug-influenced vision, the speaker of 'Immram' regains consciousness

Behind that old Deep Water Baptist mission
Near the corner of Sixteenth and Ocean—
A blue-eyed boy, the Word made flesh
Amid no hosannahs nor hallelujahs
But the strains of Blind Lemon Jefferson
That leaked from the church (Muldoon 2001: 98)

He watches Blind Lemon snort some cocaine, “angel dust, dust from an angel’s wing / Where it glanced off the land of cocaine” (ibid. 99). The “land of cocaine” points back to the land of milk and honey, as it not only refers to drugs but to the land of Cockaigne or Cockayne, the medieval land of plenty, as described in the satirical poem ‘The Land of Cockayne’, one of the Kildare Poems from the 14th century: “There are rivers great and fine / Of oil and milk, honey and wine”.¹⁸⁹ Furthermore, as Allison Muri points out, the “lactose and dextrose” with which the drug is cut a few lines later refers to milk and honey, lactose being milk sugar and dextrose being the sugar that is in honey (Muri 1995: 49). “The materialistic quest for wealth and power, whether through past exploration and colonization, or through present exploitation of natural and human resources, is related to the concept of a paradise”, “a false paradise associated with prosperity” (ibid. 46; 49). Naked, “thirty-odd of those brown eyed girls” are chanting “*The Lord is my surf-board. I shall not want*”, led by a life-guard, calling this new religion that came to him in a vision “*The Way of the One Wave*”. For the practice of his kind of sect, he rents the old Baptist mission. As Putzel observes, the girls parallel the seventeen girls given to Máel Dúin and his comrades by the queen of one of the islands (Putzel 1996: 4): “So the seventeen men and the seventeen grown-up girls slept together, and Máel Dúin slept with the queen.” (Stokes 1889) Muldoon’s protagonist now realises that his father was a drug smuggler, trafficking throughout South America.

The speaker’s final stop before returning to the pool hall is a penthouse suite back at the Park Hotel. In a dark room, he encounters a skinny old man, a kind of hermit or savant figure with long hair and beard and bedsores inspired by Howard Hughes, who absolves the traveller: “I forgive you”. As Putzel notes, this meeting with the old man ironically echoes the hermit episode of Máel Dúin’s voyage (Putzel 1996: 5). According to Whitley Stokes’s translation, there are a few islands on which men resemble a hairy hermit. In section XIX of the Irish

¹⁸⁹ The translation from Middle English is based on J. A. Bennett and G. V. Smithers.
Cf. <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/trans/cockaygn/cockaygn.htm>

tale,¹⁹⁰ “they saw in the island a man whose clothing was his hair” (Stokes 1889); in XX,¹⁹¹ a man’s “raiment” is “the hair of his own body” (ibid.); in section XXX,¹⁹² “an ancient grey cleric was in the church, and his hair clothed him altogether” (ibid.); in XXXIII, a man is “clothed only with the white hair of his body” (ibid.). The last of the hairy pilgrims, the Hermit of Tory (cf. Oskamp 1970: 47), tells Máel Dúin not to kill the man who murdered his father “but forgive him because God hath saved you from manifold great perils, and ye too are men deserving of death” (Stokes 1889).¹⁹³ Kirkland takes the words of the hermit in ‘Immram’, intertextually linked to those of the man in the old *immram*, onto a political level:

Qualified though this certainly is, the act of redemption in the forgiveness is a step towards an escape from historical forces and with the recognition that in the revival of the original legend the hero refuses to kill his father’s murderer, Muldoon is reviving an Irish history not based on the vindictive brutality informed by an impaired historical consciousness. (Kirkland 1992: 41)

With the encounter in the penthouse, not much is solved. Muldoon’s protagonist has not found his father, but has become a bit wiser and gained some insight. Again following “Mr and Mrs Alfred Tennyson”, (as indeed Muldoon follows Tennyson in using the Irish *immram* as a framework for his poem), the pilgrim leaves the hotel:

There was a steady stream of people
That flowed in one direction,
Faster and deeper,
That I would go along with, happily,
As I made my way back, like any other pilgrim,
To Main Street, to Foster’s pool-room. (Muldoon 2001: 102)

The man on the quest is content, in the end, to return to Main Street or to the mainstream, for that matter. The pool-room is where the pilgrim belongs, but the pilgrimage was necessary for him to realise it. Like Máel Dúin, he drifts from one place to the next only to arrive at the starting point, where Máel Dúin finds the man upon whom he intended to take revenge but whom he then forgives, and where Muldoon lets his hero end his trip “happily”, perhaps

¹⁹⁰ The island of the lonely pilgrim (cf. Oskamp 1970: 46).

¹⁹¹ The island of the wondrous fountain (ibid.).

¹⁹² The island of the monk of St Brendan of Birr (ibid. 47).

¹⁹³ As Oskamp points out, this last episode before the return to the first island is crucial in its “Christian engagement”, putting “the text on a different level”. The hermit is a true penitent, having given up his old fraudulent habits and being gradually rewarded for it with an increase in the quality of the food given to him on the island. The food finally becomes angelic (Oskamp 1970: 57), as does the cocaine in ‘Immram’.

similarly reformed. The remaining ambiguity of the poem and the mostly unresolved mystery of its quest is of course a Muldoonian prerequisite. With the “absence of an authoritative perspective”, the search for definite answers and defined matters or personas becomes a moot undertaking: “In Muldoon’s grotesque world, it seems that the concept of *identity* itself has been changed into a one-word oxymoron.” (Wilson 1993: 122f)

Wills describes ‘Immram’ as “an extended meditation on the possibility of alternative origins, including possible literary foster fathers: the anonymous scribes of Irish legend, Chandler, MacNeice, Frost, Tennyson.” (Wills 1998: 70) Thus ‘Immram’ functions for Muldoon in a similar way to that in which ‘Station Island’ functions for Heaney: while on the quest for his own identity (or style), and a mature, acceptable relationship with his literary forefathers, the pilgrim poet encounters various kinds of father figure in the form of actual (imagined) meetings, but also in the digested form of quotations, allusions, imitations, and transformations, thus appropriating these forebears in an original creation of art that eventually liberates the poet. In a very different manner, both poets also try to come to terms with their positions and poetic responsibilities concerning the Northern Irish predicament. In its satirical and irreverent way, the approach Muldoon takes towards religion also differs greatly from Heaney’s, not least because he does not choose a geographic space as profoundly drenched in Catholic tradition as Lough Derg for the setting of his journey. It can be said that Muldoon’s quest, in order to distinguish itself, at least on a superficial level, from Heaney’s, must exclude any too obvious use of Dante.

3.6 *Secular Eden*: Clifton’s Earthly Paradise

Drink up Eden, see the Pacific and die.¹⁹⁴ (Clifton 2007: 149)

In order to appreciate fully Clifton’s appropriation of Dante’s *Paradiso* in chapter 4.2, it is important to contrast and balance it with his portrayal of a secular, earthly paradise to be found in many poems from *Secular Eden* (2007), especially those set in France. The poem that gave the collection its title, ‘Secular Eden’, was written between 1997 and 1999, when Clifton lived in France. It consists of five stanzas with five lines each, every third and fifth line forming a rhyme. It is Sunday evening:

¹⁹⁴ The quotation is from the poem ‘Sydney Awnings’ in *Secular Eden*.

Six o'clock in secular Eden –
No-one will ever fall from grace
Where the bells are electric, and the chimes
Of a French municipal hall
Preserve us in time. (Clifton 2007: 96)

The church is locked up, and instead of religious symbols the French flag is illuminated “at the end of the Seventh Day”, written in capital letters. The “flight-paths / Write their celestial Word”, again capitalised, “On the sky above us”. There is “no guilt now”, while the artificial lights of the cash-dispensers turn on “as if by a hidden hand” (ibid.). The apple mentioned in the last stanza promises restoration, not the loss of innocence:

And the *apokatastasis*
Of the healthfood shop, to be entered into,
With the pure, organic apple
There in its window. (ibid.)

Thus the poem ends with an ironic reversal of the forbidden fruit. Organic food, the poem suggests, is a means of salvation or relief of conscience, perhaps even a substitute for religious faith, for it is something that can be believed in, something undoubtedly good and meaningful. The world that is being described is defined as secular, yet the poem is interspersed with religious symbols and idioms (note also the capitalisations mentioned above), thus underlining the clash of two philosophies of life. The outsider from a Catholic country finds himself in a country seemingly free from religious constraints, from moral and sectarian pressure, where people do not have to be ashamed of “crossing race and bloodline”. The poem is highly ambivalent regarding the two worlds it reflects. On some level, it seems to praise the freedom of the secular world, but at the same time it seems to mock it, to accuse it of an emptiness and an unromantic artificiality, with electric bells and artificial light, as opposed to real bell, book and candle.

Preceding ‘Secular Eden’ in the volume, the poem ‘God in France’ imagines God being on a break in Paris, celebrating life in the flesh, celebrating the simple joys. He says, “Let Judgement take care of itself” (ibid. 54), and sips his coffee. Again, the tone is highly ironic. Fintan O’Toole writes in his review of *Secular Eden*:

A major writer is one who has escaped the anxiety of influence. Few achieve this by being completely original, and poets in particular are in a constant dialogue with the past. But Clifton achieves it in a paradoxically original way, by capturing with masterful fluency the sense of a world in which everything has happened before and been written before. His is a universe of aftermaths, hauntings and returns, in which even God (in the delightful poem *God in France*) dreams of becoming flesh again, as he did once before. (O'Toole 2008: B6)

The same applies to Clifton's approach to Dante. Other poets might have done it before him, but his appropriations are original.

In the "dank underworlds" in 'To the Fourteenth District', you can "clear your head / In a secular air"; in "post-religious shock", "everydayness [is] raised to a holy rite / At café tables." (ibid. 104) In her favourable review of *Secular Eden*, Alissa Valles comments on the void or incompleteness inherent in the secular world portrayed by Clifton:

Clifton reserves especially withering epithets for forms of secularism that regard themselves as absolute – the oracular pronouncements of Parisian TV philosophers, the "apokostases" [sic] of store windows, the notion of scientists and engineers as "masters of the globe." For Clifton, secularism, properly understood, is a divestiture, a pilgrimage toward what he describes in "The Whaling Station" as "the pole of pure unknowing." (Valles 2010)

As Valles observes, *Secular Eden* offers an "overarching meditation on 'gardens and the Garden,'" (ibid.). For example, 'The Garden' represents a poetic space for escapism, "As if nothing else mattered / But the garden," and is reminiscent of the earthly paradise, "At its centre / A tree, a plum tree" (Clifton 2007: 18). Fittingly, the collection is replete with apple imagery, the apple being the fruit most often associated with the forbidden fruit, although the kind of fruit is not specified in the Bible. There is the organic apple in 'Secular Eden', the Apple Mac in 'The Writers Building', the "cloven halves of the apple" in 'The Country of Still Waters' (where the father is in his "otherworld of quiet") (ibid. 34), the "tasteless fruit of universality" in 'Cloudberry', which is also called bakeapple (ibid. 38), and "perfect knowledge" in 'Newton's apple': "Here they are eating it though, not watching it fall." (ibid. 83)

Similarly, in Ciaran Carson's *For All We Know* the imagery of the apple, Eve, and the tree of knowledge recurs throughout. In 'Proposal', for example, "You were the first to go for an Apple, when they / first came out", "the Tree of Knowledge looming" from the inside of the

computer (Carson 2008: 29). In the other poem called 'Proposal', the woman passes the speaker an eating apple called "Discovery" "for the second bite" (ibid. 78). Again, in 'To Get to the Dark' from *On the Night Watch* (2009, dedicated to Seamus Heaney), one gets to the "knowledge / of the apple" by eating through to

[...] the core

the code
of tree

encapsulated
in each pip (Carson 2009: 26)

This poem is linked in turn to a poem called 'The Pips Were On', playing on the other meaning of "pip", emitted from "the phone" or "the radio" or "the wireless", and here "the operator" taps out "a code" (ibid. 78). Progress and technology are associated with the temptation from the Garden of Eden, and thus with the Fall. Lisa Miller writes: "Abundance, perfection, innocence, a time before strife and disappointment – Eden is all of this" (Miller 2010: 18). A secular Eden might not quite fall within these parameters.

In Canto XXII of the *Purgatorio*, Dante, Virgil, and Statius come across a tree full of sweet-smelling fruit, "un alber [...] con pomi a odorar soavi e buoni" (*Purg.* XXII, 131-132). In order to learn moderation, the purging sinners of the sixth circle, the gluttonous, are not to eat from it nor to drink from the water that flows around it. This punishment is obviously inspired by the torments of Tantalus (cf. ibid. 659n). Canto XXIV describes another tantalising fruit tree. In Eden finally, in Canto XXXII, Beatrice leads Dante to the tree of knowledge. Mazzotta suggests that the wood in Dante's Eden is the dark wood from the beginning of the *Inferno*, "the same dark wood", perhaps, as in Clifton's 'The Angel of Meudon' (Clifton 2007: 189), now seen from a different perspective, signifying a new departure (Mazzotta 2008).¹⁹⁵ In 'The Angel of Meudon' near the end of *Secular Eden*, "vapour trails / Disintegrate, like the written word in space", reminiscent of the "celestial Word" in 'Secular Eden'. The "long-lost thread / Of time, tradition and the living dead" (Clifton 2007: 190) is clearly visible and has formed a web of intertextual links. Through contemporary poems the reader receives, as in Heaney's 'Hermit Songs' from *Human Chain*, messages from "the sibyls of the chimney

¹⁹⁵ See Mazzotta's lecture on *Purgatorio* XXX, XXXI, and XXXIII: <http://www.academicearth.org/lectures/purgatory-6>

corner”, and letters with “stamps from Eden” (Heaney 2010: 75) as a reminder and continuously modified preservation and fusion of pagan and Christian culture and tradition.

4. Paradise in Exile

*but of Paradise, I cannot speak properly,
for I have not been; and that I regret.*¹⁹⁶ (Laird 2007: 12)

The word “paradise” derives from the Iranian words *pairi-daeza*, Avestan for a fencing or wall, and *paridaida*, Old Persian for a royal or wild park (Kluge 1999: 612). As Scott recounts, “it passed into Hebrew with the meaning of ‘garden’ and was used to signify the Garden of Eden or Earthly Paradise” (Scott 2004: 221). Later on, he explains, it referred to both that and a celestial paradise, or heaven. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, paradise was associated more with a celestial city, “the holy City of Jerusalem”, and less with a garden. In the apocryphal New Testament book *Apocalypse of Paul*, these two elements are combined, “since the Garden and its four rivers are found within the walls of its heavenly City” (ibid.).

In the thirteenth century, mainly because theologians found this concept of paradise too terrestrial, a theory inspired by Aristotle and Ptolemy was gradually accepted. In this theory, the earth is a fixed sphere at the centre of the universe, overarched by the seven spheres of the moving celestial bodies (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), and by the Fixed Stars in the eighth sphere. A sphere of fire marks an absolute divide in the cosmos. In the spheres above the moon’s orbit, motion is believed to be of a perfect, circular kind. According to the theory, this motion derives from the ninth sphere, the Primum Mobile, which in turn is moved by its love for God and passes on this motion to the rest of the universe. Above the Primum Mobile lies the true heaven, the Empyrean, which was believed to be immaterial and to exist “outside of both space and time.” Here reside God and the blessed (ibid. 221-4). This is the concept of paradise underlying Dante’s *Paradiso*. Also, as Lisa Miller puts it, “Dante’s heaven is a place of light, sweet smells, and music. [...] The light grows brighter and brighter”, until it becomes the capitalised “‘Light’ of God.” (Miller 2010: 168f). At the end of the *Purgatorio*, Dante is “puro e disposto a salire a le stelle” (*Purg.* XXXIII, 145), and this is what is told in the *Paradiso*: with Beatrice’s guidance, Dante gradually rises from one sphere of heaven to the next until he arrives in the Empyrean.

¹⁹⁶ This is from Northern Irish poet Nick Laird’s poem ‘Mandeville’s Kingdom’ from his collection *On Purpose* (2007). All seven sestets of the poem are printed in italics; this might be because it translates lines from chapter XXXIII of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a book in Anglo-Norman French from the 14th century. Cf. for example http://www.planetnana.co.il/mandeville/Travels_of_Sir_John_Mandeville-CHAPTER-XXXIII.htm

Like hell, paradise or heaven triggers the imagination of many poets, as in Thomas Kinsella's 'Tear', where the dying grandmother can expect a "commotion at Heaven's gate", or his long poem 'From the Land of the Dead', beginning with Eden imagery and speaking of four rivers, one of them "milkwhite". This poem's paradise has "no serpents", "only the she-wolf" (Kinsella 2001: 107; 109-112). In 'Flying', the twenty-second and last poem from the sequence 'Light Music', Derek Mahon describes the way

A wand of sunlight
touches the rush-hour
like the finger of heaven.

A land of cumulus
seen from above
is the life to come. (Mahon 1999: 74)

In Harry Clifton's 'Plague and Hospice', the "black out-patients" are "dreaming of admittance / To the dripfeed / Of an understaffed heaven", whereas in 'Mango Season', the ripe mangos are "Paradise, superabundance / Clustered up there" (Clifton 1979: 46; 44). In the short poem 'Paradise', Seán Haldane humorously illustrates how things are appreciated most when left behind or lost, and how the starting point of the journey might be its destination, as in the *immram*:

We climbed and sweated, gasped for breath,
Heading for paradise, until we stopped
In a cold and naked place – black rocks, and snow.

Shivering, we viewed the glowing fields
We'd left behind.

Paradise, spread out below. (Haldane 2009: 27)

The examples are copious, and Dante might lie at the back of some of them, but this is not always possible to determine. Therefore, the following chapters will strive to focus on an explicitly Dantesque use of paradise or heaven, and on what links the *Paradiso* with the reality and cliché of exile.

4.1 Like Dante's Heaven

Clifton's 'The Crystalline Heaven', as has been noted in chapter 2.4.5, begins with a quotation from *Inferno* XVI, alluding to the destructive effect quick money has on people. The speaker of Clifton's poem, performing his day job in Dáil Éireann, condescendingly looks down on the rows of sinners below him, while he sits near the glass dome of the building. The title of 'The Crystalline Heaven' not only refers to the glass dome, of course, but also to Dante's heaven, the ninth heaven or Primum Mobile, which is situated between the Fixed Stars in eighth heaven and the Empyrean in tenth heaven. In the Primum Mobile, Dante sees the angelic hierarchies, but he does not encounter any souls. In Canto XXVII of the *Paradiso*, after they have ascended to the Primum Mobile, Beatrice explains its workings as follows:

«La natura del mondo, che quieta
il mezzo e tutto l'altro intorno move,
quinci comincia come da sua meta;
e questo cielo non ha altro dove
che la mente divina, in che s'accende
l'amor che 'l volge e la virtù ch'ei piove.
Luce e amor d'un cerchio lui comprende,
sì come questo li altri; e quel precinto
colui che 'l cinge solamente intende.¹⁹⁷ (*Par.* XXVII, 106-114)

As Barbara Reynolds clarifies, the Primum Mobile directs

with its movement the daily revolutions of the other eight heavens round the earth. From its invisible motion, communicated throughout the cosmos, time is measured. Beyond it, there is no space, or time. Allegorically, the perfect ordering of the movements of the spheres represents the operating of the divine power which, through the angelic orders, influences the lives of men. (Dante 1962: 295)

The light and love encircling the Primum Mobile comes from, or is, the Empyrean, the immaterial, true heaven and the abode of God, which has the greatest amount of light in the *Paradiso*. As John A. Scott writes, "Light, physical and metaphysical, is therefore a

¹⁹⁷ The nature of the world, which around a calm / centre moves everything else, / starts from here taking aim; / and this heaven does not have another place / than the divine mind, which sparks off the love / that moves it, from which its power rains. / Light and love encircle it, / as it encircles the other circles; and such enclosing / is understood only by him who intended the embrace. (my translation)

manifestation of goodness, joy, and beatitude; light is both an expression of divine beauty and its reflection in the universe.” (Scott 2004: 225) Appropriately enough as regards Clifton’s poem, however, Rachel Jacoff notes that the *Primum Mobile* “sequence has recently been a particular favorite of physicists and poets, for some of whom it seems to take precedence over the final vision as the poem’s quintessential epiphanic moment.” (Jacoff 2007: 117)

As mentioned before, Clifton’s speaker’s parallel with Dante is qualified in the last stanza: the speaker is aware of his own hubris, of not being quite like Dante (yet), and that it might eventually be altogether impossible to become a comparable poet, functioning as a model for so many poets after him. As regards the intertextuality with Dante in ‘The Crystalline Heaven’, Clifton treats the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* in different ways. Hell presents itself with a quotation in translation and a transformation: Dublin is Florence and the deputies are the Florentine sinners. Paradise is in the equivocal title (the paratext), and in various similes: “high as Dante”, “a Dantean vision”, “a shadow of Dante”, “crystallising to heaven / High and light as the dome above Dail Eireann”. Therefore, heaven and hell are not only divided by the glass dome but also by language. Hell is more tangible, easier to visualise, whereas heaven has to stay ambiguous and blurry, which is exactly how Dante writes the *Commedia*. The failure to describe heaven with words is not only mentioned by Dante but expressed through “a gradual effacement of the human form” (Jacoff 2007: 108; 112), a different use of language, less episodic narrative, and a constant increase of light.¹⁹⁸ The change in poetic style (especially through the repetition of words) and the increase of light are exemplified by lines 38-42 of Canto XXX (cf. *ibid.* 117; 120):

[...] Noi siamo usciti fore
del maggior corpo al ciel ch’è pura luce:
luce intellettüal, piena d’amore;
amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
letizia che trascende ogni dolzore. (*Par.* XXX, 38-42)

These are “the forces that govern the universe, / Light, reason and love, a Dantean vision” (Clifton 2007a: 7).

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Jacoff 2007: 123: “The *Paradiso* oscillates between statements of its daring originality and confessions of its impossibility, of the ineffability of its vision and of the inadequacies of language to render it.” As Christof Weiland points out, Canto XXIII of the *Paradiso* neatly ties together the aspects of ineffability: the dazzling of the protagonist, his loss of memory and speech, and his overcoming thereof (Weiland 2008: 138).

In 'The Crystalline Heaven', Clifton makes the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* converge to convey an inner tension, a state of being torn between different worlds. This friction seems to be gone in the poems written in secular exile. France is peaceful: one can sit in a café and write poetry there. Exile represents a form of poetic freedom. Happiness, however, sounds different. There is a palpable tension between an internalised religious upbringing and a longing for the greener grass on the other side, a common feature of much contemporary Irish poetry. The clash of Clifton's Catholic background and the modern world, in which everything is global and migration is fashionable or even obligatory, reverberates in Clifton's poems. Choosing Dante as literary model in some way opposes him to the secular world Clifton discovers in France and portrays in his poems set in France. Dante might on some level be unorthodox, as with his criticism of the papacy, but the *Divine Comedy* is a deeply religious work. Clifton's fascination with Dante lies in a sense for beauty, tradition, and hope, a hopeful searching for the true path and the arrival in heaven.

In a slight return to Muldoon's 'The Bangle (Slight Return)', the poem's paradisiacal aspect should be added. For instance, the "godlike" waiter "drew himself up in his full-length white empyrean" (Muldoon 2001: 462). As Wills writes, the waiter

is given quasi-divine status. Like God, he has command of the total range of possibilities which are listed and distinguished on the menu. He can survey them all, without doing himself damage by gross indulgence, by trying to consume them all without making a choice.

(Wills 1998: 211)

The speaker sits below the waiter, looking up at him. Contrary to the protagonist, the waiter is not prone to a debasing sin like gluttony. Being "godlike", he resides where God resides, in the Empyrean. The irony of this exaggeration might imply that a waiter is still a kind of servant, and he would probably simply not be able to afford indulging himself. As a waiter, he has to wait. He has the power of turning this around, however; the waiter can make people wait, and he can withhold information.

In 'Peace' from *For All We Know* (2008) Carson refers to the Empyrean in adjectival form:

And afterwards we drifted away between linen sheets
scented with lavender, rehearsing the momentous day

of our marriage, whenever that might be, empyreal
tomorrow blossoming the more we found each other there. (Carson 2008: 106)

The “day of our marriage” is as uncertain and distant as the afterlife, but as hopeful and promising as the outermost sphere of heaven, the abode of God and the blessed. “Tomorrow” is “blossoming” like the snow-white rose in Dante’s tenth heaven, like the “flowers of desire” in which the couple makes their bed in ‘Desire in Belfast’. The sheets are presumably as white as the waiter’s clothes, and they recall the oceanic billows of the marriage bed in ‘The Canto of Ulysses’, as the lovers are drifting away in a lavender-scented ocean. The next Dantesque poem, Michael Donaghy’s ‘Machines’, explicitly alludes to Dante’s heaven as a model for the machinery of love.

As fellow poet Sean O’Brien writes in his obituary for Michael Donaghy in *The Guardian*, the poet and Irish traditional musician, who died in 2004 at the age of 50, was “a New Yorker who had made his home in London”, and he “was born into an Irish family and grew up in the Bronx.” (O’Brien 2004) Michael Dirda remarks: “It’s sometimes even a bit unclear whether he should be regarded as an American, an English, or even an Irish writer.” (Dirda 2010) Donaghy himself addresses the question of Irishness in his poem ‘Fraction’:

The fourteenth time my mother told the story
Of her cousins dismembered by a British bomb,
I turned on her, her Irish son. ‘I’m American.
I was born here.’ She went to pieces.
[...]
I was thirteen. I didn’t know who I was. She knew.
As I held her wrists, reassuring,
Repeating, that I was her Irish son,
I was the man who’d clicked the toggle switch

Bracing himself between two branches,
Between the flash and the report. (Donaghy 2009: 110)

As David Wheatley puts it, “the true Donaghy position is in-betweenness, neither one thing nor the other, as the poem’s ending demonstrates” (Wheatley 2009). While there might be room for discussion, I suggest that there is sufficient Irishness in Donaghy for this present study to include ‘Machines’ from his collection *Shibboleth* (1988).

'Machines' consists of one tercet, one sestet, two tercets, and a final couplet. The rhyme scheme is aba/bcdcdde/fgf/hfg/hg, leaving only one line unrhymed. The poem starts by comparing a "harpsichord pavane by Purcell" to a "racer's twelve-speed bike", stating that "The machinery of grace is always simple." (Donaghy 2009: 5) The cyclist controls the cycle and the harpsichord player controls Purcell's chords, and not the other way around, the poem suggests. "And in the playing, Purcell's chords are played away" is the only unrhymed line. It is phrased in the passive, not mentioning the player but his playing. "Played away" insinuates that the player transforms Purcell's music so much that it becomes something else. The poem is a love letter, addressing a "Dearest" and striving to work, to function, to win or comfort the heart of the beloved:

So this talk, or touch if I were there,
Should work its effortless gadgetry of love,
Like Dante's heaven, and melt into the air.

If it doesn't, of course, I've fallen. So much is chance,
So much agility, desire, and feverish care,
As bicyclists and harpsichordists prove

Who only by moving can balance,
Only by balancing move. (ibid.)

Strongly reminiscent of the Metaphysical poets,¹⁹⁹ the poem succeeds in imitating the machineries it describes. In O'Brien's words, it shows "the startling wit and ingenuity with which [Donaghy] explored a metaphysical poet's taste for paradox as an instrument of seduction" (O'Brien 2004: 1). The cyclist moves forward, the harpsichordist moves his fingers on the keyboard and perhaps also moves his listeners, as the poem moves, or is supposed to move, its reader. Dante's system of heavenly spheres is a machine driven by love, never stopping its movement. If it stopped, or did not work properly, the souls would fall from heaven. The "machinery of grace" is simple, the "gadgetry of love" is effortless; or so the poem claims. That things are not that easy is hinted at in the second half of the poem, which replaces confidence with doubt: the working of the machinery is dependent on proper maintenance but also subject to chance. The balancing act of levelling the scales is visualised in the chiasmic figure of the final couplet, and in the unrhymed line, which creates a pivotal

¹⁹⁹ In 'A Valediction: forbidding Mourning', for example, John Donne compares the souls of the lovers to a compass. The addressed beloved is the part that is fixed on the paper, the speaker is the moving part: "Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun." (Donne 1990: 121)

point exactly in the middle of the poem, against which the eight lines on each side of it balance themselves. After this turning point, the comparison between the cycle and the harpsichord music ends and the poem becomes self-referential. The third analogy for the function or effect of the poem, after cycle and harpsichord, is “Dante’s heaven”. The simile is not further elaborated upon, but the analogy reverberates throughout the poem. “Ptolemy dreamt of” the trapezoid (Donaghy 2009: 5), perhaps, but his ideas also lie at the basis of Dante’s concept of heaven. Words to be found in Donaghy’s poem - “wheel”, “concentric”, “cycle”, “love”, “desire”, “move”, “balance” - also play a major role in Dante’s poem.

In congruence with the presuppositions of the present study, O’Brien suggests an influence of Catholicism on Donaghy’s poetics: “A beguiling playfulness serves to emphasise the depths of anxiety and melancholia over which Donaghy’s superb ear leads us - feelings perhaps rooted in Catholicism. He retains the Catholic sense of scale and labyrinthine ingenuity” (O’Brien 2004: 1). Therein may originate the main connection with Dante.

In ‘Exile’ from Dublin poet Alan Jude Moore’s collection *Strasbourg* (2010), “heaven is far away” (Moore 2010: 12). Perhaps not surprisingly, Moore, who is part Italian, brought a copy of the *Inferno* with him to Florence during a stay by which ‘Exile’ was inspired. The poem’s seven formally diverse sections paint a modern picture of Florence, at times formally emulating the objects it describes:

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neon crosses
s
u
s
p
e
n
d
e
d (ibid.)

Are the “three ladies” who “disappear / in the hallway of a church” Dante’s three blessed ladies? It is possible, given the infernal atmosphere:

how does a person pass the ovens
walk down the streets of Dante the exile
without feeling the lick of flames
the memory of smoke and bone? (ibid. 13)

Hubbard suggests that the poem “offers Dante’s exile from that city as a counterpoint to its gatherings of motley visitors” (Hubbard 2010: 98), but I would suggest that the allusion to Dante also serves to underline the bleak atmosphere of the city, with the fascists’ slogans and billboards that “line the way like headstones; / the empty mouths of soldiers’ ghosts”, “as if for the first time god deserted”. Like Dante in the dark wood, people seem to have lost their way, and the religious symbols are empty remnants. Their “body mechanic”, their “machinery”, is “somehow / driven by internal electricity” (Moore 2010: 14f). Perhaps they will not get a second chance like Dante the pilgrim, because here, “in the dark they walk”, the three ladies. Everyone is an exile in a world of “broken fairy lights”.

4.2 Canti XV-XVII: Clifton’s Cacciaguida

the episode of Cacciaguida – a pardonable exhibition of family and personal pride, because it provides splendid poetry (Eliot 1951: 264)

Near the end of Clifton’s *Secular Eden*, in the 2003-2004 section, there is a poem called ‘Cacciaguida’. Cacciaguida is Dante’s great-great-grandfather, whom he meets in the fifth heaven, the Heaven of Mars, in Canto XV of the *Paradiso*. Cacciaguida had died in battle in the Second Crusade around 1147, and the surname of Alighieri derives from his wife (Dante 1962: 190; 364). After talking about the state of Florence at length, Cacciaguida’s shade predicts Dante’s exile, because he can see the past and the future, and he advises him to tell the whole truth about his journey among the dead. Thereby, Dante justifies and absolves himself for writing the *Commedia*; he “endows the poem as well as the journey with sacral authority” (Jacoff 2007: 114).²⁰⁰

Clifton’s ‘Cacciaguida’ poem merges Dante’s ancestor with his own ancestor, whose steps he is trying to retrace in Italy. He calls him “our common ancestor”, addresses him as Cacciaguida, and makes him appear “between his lines / and mine”, that is, between Dante’s

²⁰⁰ Ulrich Prill mentions the Cacciaguida episode as an example of Dante’s reworkings of Virgil; Dante meeting Cacciaguida is inspired by Aeneas meeting Anchises in *Aeneid* VI, 679-702 (Prill 1999: 166).

and Clifton's verses. The poem consists of eight quatrains, with a direct quotation from Dante in stanza four:

I balance on my knee
The sacred book. *E venni*
Dal martiro a questa pace –
Dante . . . Buses pass,

And Florence, city of cities
Rushes on, into declension – (Clifton 2007: 191)

The quoted line is the last line of Canto XV. It means “I came from martyrdom to this peace”, for in Dante's time, the crusaders' death in the service of faith was considered martyrdom. Dante is hoping for a similar fate after his death (cf. Dante 1994a: 438n). There is something presumptuous, or irreverent, about the way the Italian quotation is incorporated in the text: “my knee” rhymes with “*venni*”, which suggests that “*pace*” and “pass” are supposed to rhyme, too. They do, but more obviously so when “*pace*” is pronounced incorrectly, like the English word “pace”, for example, so that it becomes a one-syllable word. It can probably be assumed that this is not due to insufficient mastery of the Italian pronunciation on Clifton's part, but rather comes across as wilful, tongue-in-cheek assimilation.

Clifton's ancestor talks about the Great War like Cacciaguida talks about the crusade: “the map of Europe” is “Split and sutured” (Clifton 2007: 191) like Florence in Dante's time, which Dante's Cacciaguida criticises in his speech. Unlike Dante though, Clifton does not make his ancestor address him directly, and the poem skips from the imagined ghostly encounter or haunting back to the speaker's reality:

Now I live in a foreign city,
Lighting candles
To his name, in empty churches,
Studying public records.

Bread and salt are my portion
On the wooden stairs.
Everything has come true
As the book foretold. (ibid. 192)

The book, i.e. *La Divina Commedia*, divined Dante's exile, and Clifton's, or so the poem suggests. The book, of course, also refers to the book of divine foreknowledge mentioned by Cacciaguida in line 50 of Canto XV, for the souls residing in the realms of the afterlife can foresee the future (cf. Dante 1962: 191n). Through this comparison with Dante's fate, the speaker in Clifton's poem takes himself quite seriously, and equates, perhaps too easily, political and self-chosen exile, which is not to say that Clifton himself does so, of course. The poem might suggest that exiling oneself for art's sake, for artistic freedom, is a sacrifice, or even martyrdom, necessary for being at peace with oneself and with life.

The traditional welcome gift, bread and salt, is also the salty bread from a stranger in a foreign city from line 58 in Canto XVII, when Cacciaguida foretells to Dante the strains of the coming exile: "Tu proverai sì come sa di sale / lo pane altrui" (*Par.* XVII, 58-59). The "wooden stairs" allude to "come è duro calle / lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale" (59-60). These lines are quoted, or rather paraphrased, in Bernard O'Donoghue's 'Amicitia', published in *The Reader* in 2011. The poem imagines the relationship between Dante and Gemma Donati, even though "the story goes" that he was inconsolable "When Dante's life-and-death love Beatrice, / his grace-conferring lady, died" (O'Donoghue 2011: 28). In spite of "forbidding her to visit him in exile", Dante might still have written to Gemma,

saying how wearisome it is to climb
unfriendly stairs, and how salt-bitter the taste

of food prepared by other hands. [...] (ibid.)

So the poem suggests. It is fair to assume that both Clifton and O'Donoghue have at some point read Yeats's 'Ego Dominus Tuus', written in 1915.²⁰¹ The poem, a dialogue between "Hic" and "Ille", makes assumptions about Dante as a historical figure, alluding to the same passage:

Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life,
Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by a man. (Yeats 1992: 211)

²⁰¹ See Ellis 1981: 1-3 about Yeats's approach to Dante in the poem.

Appropriately enough, the same poem includes the lines “A style is found by sedentary toil / And by the imitation of great masters.” (ibid.)

In 2006, Clifton published his own version of *Paradiso* XVII, lines 13-142, where Dante asks Cacciaguida to tell him about his future, he then hears about his banishment but also who will be his benefactors, and finally receives the advice to write down everything he experienced - not least to ensure his afterlife as a poet. Lines 110-111, rendered by Clifton as “And even the loss of my native place / Will leave me somewhere to live – inside a poem” (Clifton 2006: 45), could serve as a motto for Clifton’s own life abroad. The fact that Clifton chose this passage from *Paradiso* for translation suggests his own need for justification or appreciation. After all, in a globalised world of consuming and outselling, writing poetry constantly has to be defended against sales figures and more lucrative ways of making a living.

It is noteworthy that Clifton titles his translation ‘The Poet in Exile’, deliberately stressing what he has in common with Dante, even though his exile is self-chosen. Apart from some kind of struggle and life-long relationship with Catholicism, it is the major point of identification. Although, or rather because, exile is a recurring theme in Irish literature, the difference between political exile and self-chosen emigration always has to be remembered, of course. The twenty-sixth of the thirty-one untitled poems from Muldoon’s *The Prince of the Quotidian* (1994) addresses the term, perhaps all too often misused or turned into a cliché:

Snow on the ground. The narcissi
nipped in the bud. In the latest issue
of the *TLS* 'the other Seamus', Seamus Deane,

has me 'in exile' in Princeton:
this term serves mostly to belittle
the likes of Brodsky or Padilla

and is not appropriate of me: certainly not
of anyone who, with 'Louisa May' Walcott,
is free to buy a ticket to his emerald isle

of choice. To Deane I say, 'I'm not "in exile",
although I can't deny
that I've been twice in Fintona.' (Muldoon 1994: 36)

Every Irish poet is free to return to his “emerald isle”. As I pointed out in the introduction, Clifton somewhat critically remarked on the tendency to call the Irish “exiles” but others “emigrés”. A special appeal, however, inheres in the fact that Dante wrote his great poem in exile, exile being particularly dear to the Irish psyche, as Clifton pointed out.

Compared to the *Inferno*, the *Paradiso* has been neglected in the Irish Dante reception of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As regards translations in particular, the *Inferno* has been far more popular and accessible. The repeated use of the third canticle distinguishes Clifton from the majority of “Dante users”. Even the majority of Heaney’s Dante-inspired poems reference the *Inferno* or *Purgatorio*. After Bloom, this could be the *clinamen* or swerve, “the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism.” (Bloom 1997: 42) Clifton discovers Dante, appropriates him as Heaney did, but then swerves shortly before hell and purgatory and ends up in paradise. Furthermore, he escapes the influence of the intimidating contemporary by choosing another influence more remote in time and alien in language, as Eliot suggested good poets do. But is this escape really possible or even intended, if both poets choose the same remote source of inspiration? The common source, I argue, makes the saving division between the contemporary Irish poets all the more obvious: Clifton’s approach to Dante is his very own, conveying a distancing and self-questioning, reverently irreverent fascination sprinkled with moments of transcendence.

4.3 Canti XXX-XXXIII: Heaney’s Paradise

Dirt is made magical by ‘Wheels within Wheels’ [...] With the terminal snapping of the chain here, and the disappearance of the ‘nimbus’, Heaney bids farewell to his most ambitious wish – to join the domain of mud with the domain of vision. Earlier, in *The Haw Lantern*, the parable-poem ‘The Mud Vision’ had projected such a conjunction (Vendler 1998: 144)

Heaney’s ‘The Mud Vision’, in Helen Vendler’s words trying “to reconcile the sullied flesh with the lucent soul” (ibid. 145), recalls Dante’s final vision of God when he enters the heavenly white rose in the last four canti of the *Paradiso*.²⁰² In Canto XXX, Beatrice leads Dante

²⁰² Also from *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Heaney read ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ and two sonnets from the sequence ‘Clearances’ at the international Dante seminar in 2003. ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, he says, is

Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,
che si dilata ed ingrada e redole
odor di lode al sol che sempre verna (*Par. XXX, 124-126*)

In Canto XXXI, Beatrice returns to her throne within the rose, and Dante is from here on guided by St Bernard. In the brightest part of the rose, Dante sees the Virgin Mary. It compares to the sullied version of the mud vision:

And then in the foggy midlands it appeared,
Our mud vision, as if a rose window of mud
Had invented itself out of the glittery damp,
A gossamer wheel, concentric with its own hub
Of nebulous dirt, sullied yet lucent. (Heaney 1987: 48)

Heaney tells O'Driscoll that 'The Mud Vision' is "set in the Irish midlands, but the actual memory behind it was of thronged roads and gardens around a housing estate in County Tyrone in the late 1950s, when the Virgin Mary was supposed to have appeared to a woman in Ardboe." (O'Driscoll 2008: 286) According to Heaney, the poem is about the loss of religious faith; the people in the poem "find themselves in a universe that is global, desacralized, consumerist and devoid of any real sense of place or pastness. [...] And in all this, that fictional population is like myself." (ibid. 288f)

With scenes such as the mud vision, Heaney himself creates the "into-focus-out-of-focus effect" he discovered through Eliot's 'Little Gidding' and deeply admires in Dante. This "simultaneous emergence and disappearance", he explains, "catches the whole moving phantasmagoria, the hallucination and evanescence of Dante's Cantos" (Heaney 2003: 345). Eliot alludes to the heavenly rose in Dante's Empyrean in section IV of 'The Hollow Men' (1925):

written "in the stanza form that John Ciardi used for his translation of the *Commedia*" (Heaney 2003: 352), while the sonnets in memory of his mother "try to conjure a sense of the other world", imagining her spirit to return to her parents' home and to settle in a spot where there used to be a tree when Heaney was born (ibid. 353). Both examples, chosen by Heaney for the context of a seminar focusing on Dante, testify to the pervasiveness of Dante's influence even regarding the less obviously influenced poems, and to the fact that Heaney is fully aware of this influence.

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom (Eliot 1969: 85)

As in 'The Mud Vision', Dante's bright, perfect, and beautiful image is used here in a damaged, deprived context. This metaphorical clash underlines the tensions between religion and the modern age, which are dealt with in both poems.

In her chapter on *The Haw Lantern*, Fumagalli illustrates the common ground between Dante and Heaney, the search for a language of identity as well as the rootedness in Catholic tradition and faith, by discussing the collection's first poem 'Alphabets':

This implicit tension between (to employ Yeats's distinction) Heaney's "national language" (Irish) and his "mother tongue" (English) exposes a 'subterranean' correlation between these "thickets" in "Alphabets" and the image of the *silva* of Italian dialects in which Dante tries to find his own *loquela* [cf. *De vulgari eloquentia*]. The solution to Dante's linguistic dilemma is the *Commedia* itself [...] as with Dante, it is precisely in and through his poetry that Heaney finds the answer to his own linguistic quandary [...]

In "Alphabets" the letters which are "trees," the capitals which are "new orchards in full bloom," "the lines of script like briars coiled in ditches," might well be the "rough-spoken," "rural" lines of the *Commedia* [cf. "Envy and Identifications"], whose "new calligraphy" feels "like home" because of the "psychological imprint of the common Catholic faith" he shares with Dante. As Heaney has declared, "what is a central experience in [Catholic] cultures [Italian, Polish, Spanish] is just subculture in the Anglophone world" [...]
(Fumagalli 2001: 161f)

She compares the plasterer in the last stanza of 'Alphabets' to the just rulers in Canto XVIII of the *Paradiso*, who through their dancing form the words "*DILIGITE IUSTITIAM [...] QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM*" from the Book of Wisdom (*Par. XVIII, 91-93; Dante 1994a: 512n*):

[...] As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum –

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter. (Heaney 1987: 3)

I would add to this echo the Dantesque nature of the “head-clearing” simile of the astronaut, whose view comes very close to Dante’s stellar and planetary vision in heaven, where he is looking down at the planet from which he departed. Fumagalli gives further examples of Heaney’s use of the *Paradiso* in her chapter “A Poetry of Paradise”, focusing on *Seeing Things*, *The Spirit Level*, and Walcott’s *The Bounty*. About *Seeing Things* she argues:

[...] what characterizes this book is a pervasive radiance, a sense of serenity and bliss that much more strongly recalls the peace and luminosity of *Paradise* than the gloom and doom of the *Inferno*. In creating this ‘paradisiacal’ atmosphere, Heaney resorts to the more sophisticated and rarefied device of allusion rather than to the quotation or translation more typically supporting his ‘infernal’ or ‘purgatorial’ themes. (Fumagalli 2001: 226)

Interestingly, this corresponds to the observations made earlier in this study about Clifton’s use of the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso* in ‘The Crystalline Heaven’: the two canticles are treated differently when reworked intertextually. The “sophisticated and rarefied” strategies make echoes of the *Paradiso* much more difficult to detect. This reflects the treatment of hell and paradise in the *Commedia*, but also in art and traditional cultural imagination in general: hell’s concrete images of evil versus the eschatological, speculative nature of heaven; horned demons versus spheres of light. Also, the tangibility of hellish imagery is probably one of the reasons for the *Inferno*’s heightened reception relative to the two other canticles. ‘Seeing Things’, Fumagalli suggests, was influenced by Dante’s ocular baptism in the river of light in Canto XXX, whereas ‘The Skylight’ is reminiscent “of Dante’s prayer to Beatrice in *Paradiso* XXXI, where he celebrates her for the same reason Heaney celebrates his wife” (ibid. 227f; 237).

In Canto XXXII, Bernard names the souls who are seated each in their particular row of petals, and there is singing, and Bernard prepares Dante for his vision of God, which is described in the final canto. Canto XXXIII, “an explosion of metaphors” (Boitani 1978: 104), starts with Bernard’s address of 39 lines to the Virgin Mary.²⁰³ Mary has to grant Dante his vision of

²⁰³ Piero Boitani explains that the “tie between history and eternity is the theme of Bernard's prayer. Its first part (vv. 1-21), which constitutes a traditionally formal *elogium*, or praise of the Virgin, is a) an illustration of the

God, just as she had to grant his entrance into the realms of the afterlife at the beginning of his journey; she “is the medium of God’s grace to Dante” (cf. *ibid.* 86). Gradually, Dante’s sight becomes purer, so that he is now able to look at the eternal light of God, which in the remainder of the canto he describes while constantly pointing out how indescribable it is, and how memory fails to recall it properly:

Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio
che’l parlar mostra, ch’a tal vista cede,
e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio. (*Par. XXXIII, 55-57*)

Three *terzine* later, the Cumaean Sibyl is referred to in a simile when Dante tries to describe the way the memory of his vision of God is fading and cannot be grasped and expressed in words. It is as intangible as the snow that melts in sunlight and the oracles of the sibyl, written on leaves and blown away by the wind:²⁰⁴ “così al vento ne le foglie levi / si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.” (*Par. XXXIII, 65-66*) Dante alludes here to a scene described in *Aeneid* III, 448-51 (Dante 1994a: 916n). As Jacoff writes, this is “the last, and in some ways the most potent, of the poem’s many Virgilian allusions” (Jacoff 2007: 119).

The sibyl is a recurrent figure in Heaney’s work. In *Field Work*, in the second part of ‘Triptych’ titled ‘Sibyl’, the speaker asks the prophetess for some insight. Also, in the title poem of *Electric Light* the old woman is described in sibylline terms: her “smashed thumbnail” is “a littered Cumae”, and she talks “sibilant[ly]” in an “eddy of sybilline English”²⁰⁵ (Heaney 2001: 80). As was mentioned before, in ‘Hermit Songs’ from *Human Chain* the figure returns in the plural. The poem, consisting of nine sections with three quatrains each, is dedicated to Helen Vendler, and is concerned with the world of medieval scribes, books, writing, and reading. The art of book binding recalls another one of Dante’s famous final images: everything that seems scattered in the universe is in the Empyrean “legato con amore in un volume” (*Par. XXXIII, 86*).

history of man's salvation (vv. 1-9), and b) a praise of Mary as intermediary between man and God, of her role for men on earth and for the blessed in Heaven (vv. 10-21). The second section of Bernard's speech (vv. 22-39) is his prayer on behalf of Dante and it recounts the story of Dante's own salvation from time to eternity.” (Boitani 1978: 84)

²⁰⁴ Derek Mahon might have been inspired by this image in ‘Leaves’: “Somewhere there is an afterlife / Of dead leaves”, “Somewhere in the heaven / Of lost futures / The lives we might have led / Have found their own fulfilment.” (Mahon 1999: 60)

²⁰⁵ Heaney’s spelling of “sibylline” might be a misprint.

When Dante sees the holy Trinity in the form of three circles in different colours, in one of them the human image, he encounters the difficulty of describing the mystery of the Incarnation. He compares his predicament with the geometer trying to square the circle, “an insoluble problem [...] which the Middle Ages associated with the mystery of the Incarnation” (Boitani 1978: 110):

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige,
tal era io a quella vista nova:
veder voleva come si convenne
l' imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova (*Par.* XXXIII, 133-138)

Fumagalli suggests that the title of the second part of Heaney's *Seeing Things*, 'Squarings', might have been inspired by this simile from near the end of Canto XXXIII (Fumagalli 2001: 241). Furthermore, she argues that in spite of stressing the insoluble nature of what he saw and tries to write down, “Dante actually seems to manage to ‘square the circle’ when his mind, pervaded by a flash of lightning, perceives for but an instant [...] how the divine and the human are joined in God” in the lines that follow the geometer simile. He also manages it, she writes, “by convincing us of the truth and of the value of his incarnational intuition” (ibid. 241f). Finally, in his last simile, Dante compares himself to a wheel, moved by the love that moves the sun and the other stars:

ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,²⁰⁶
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle. (*Par.* XXXIII, 143-145)

Like the first two, the third canticle of the *Commedia* closes with “stelle”, a triple feature reflecting the intricate structure of the tripartite poem.

Also tripartite is Heaney's poem 'Wheels within Wheels' from the first part of *Seeing Things*. As Fumagalli points out, the poem “is both a mature reflection on the significance of three specific experiences in Heaney's childhood and a meditation on Dante's *Paradiso* XXXIII.” (Fumagalli 2001: 242) As she observes, the last lines of section I are especially reminiscent of Dante's last lines of the *Paradiso*:

²⁰⁶ The italics are in the edition.

Something about the way those pedal treads
 Worked very palpably at first against you
 And then began to sweep your hand ahead
 Into a new momentum – that all entered me
 Like an access of free power, as if belief
 Caught up and spun the objects of belief
 In an orbit coterminous with longing. (Heaney 1991: 46)

First Dante sees the circles, then he himself becomes a circle, a wheel moving in harmony with the universe. Similarly, Heaney's speaker is seized by the momentum of the wheels.²⁰⁷ The line endings "belief", stressed through its repetition, and "longing" recall Dante's "disio e 'l velle", often translated as "desire and will" (cf. Dante 1962: 347), which are moved around by "l'amor". Thus Dante's lines are transformed into a personal memory to which Heaney ascribes a comparably profound significance as he remembers and records everything in writing.

In section II, the speaker remembers placing his bicycle upside down in a muddy water hole and spinning the back wheel around, so that the dirt splashes about and "showered me in my own regenerate clays. / For weeks I made a nimbus of old glit." (Heaney 1991: 47) Fumagalli interprets that "Heaney encodes here a prolepsis of himself as a poet who regenerates and recreates himself."²⁰⁸ (Fumagalli 2001: 243) The last section, she suggests, is inspired by Dante looking at the heavenly rose in Canto XXXI (ibid. 244):

Nothing rose to the occasion after that
 Until, in a circus ring, drumrolled and spotlit,
 Cowgirls wheeled in, each one immaculate
 At the still centre of a lariat.
Perpetuum mobile. Sheer pirouette.
 Tumblers. Jongleurs. Ring-a-rosies. *Stet!* (Heaney 1991: 47)

The speaker watches immaculate cowgirls circling around in a "Ring-a-rosies" just as Dante looks at the immaculate blessed in the circular rose, wherefrom perpetual movement originates. As quoted above, for Helen Vendler the poem signifies a farewell to the desire of joining mud and vision, of "reconcil[ing] the sullied flesh with the lucent soul", for eventually

²⁰⁷ The image of the wheels derives from the prophet Ezekiel's apocalyptic vision in the Old Testament: "The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel." (Ezekiel 1:16)

²⁰⁸ See Fumagalli 2001: 243f for an interpretation of "nimbus", "glit", and "Stet!".

“the chain snapped” and the “nimbus of old glit” was gone. Heaney’s concern by the time of *Seeing Things*, she suggests, is how “to reconcile the water of the diaphanous virtual with the rock of the massive material” (Vendler 1998: 145).

The last poem considered in this study, and the most significant concerning Heaney’s reception of the *Paradiso*, is ‘A Dream of Solstice’, first published in *The Irish Times* on December 21, 1999 to mark the turn of the millennium, and then republished in a revised and perhaps final version in *The Kenyon Review* in 2001. The poem is replete with paratext, especially in its version in *The Kenyon Review*. To begin with, the title, each letter capitalised, foreshadows the passage of Dante about to be quoted and then translated, and establishes the time of year the poem is set in. In the word “solstice”, “sun standstill”, can be found the Italian word for sun, which is also part of the Dante passage about to follow. Below the title is an explanation in italics of what recurs at the winter solstice at the neolithic Newgrange: “*The sun’s rays enter Newgrange – 5000-year-old passage grave north of Dublin – on December 21 every year. A slot in the stone entrance, 70 feet away from the burial chamber at the core of the tumulus, admits the light.*”²⁰⁹ (Heaney 2001a: 1) After this follows the epigraph, a quotation in the Italian original of *Paradiso* XXXIII, line 58 to the caesura in line 61, not in italics. Instead of the original comma Heaney ends the quotation with aposiopesis:

Qual è colui che sognando vede,
che dopo ‘l sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l’altro a la mente no riede,

cotal son io ... (ibid.)

He indicates where these lines come from: “Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto xxxiii”. Then starts his original poem, or so one might think. The first eight lines of the 34 lines of the poem are printed in italics and turn out to be a translation of what was quoted above, adding the next few lines from *Paradiso* XXXIII up to line 65, the exact line before Dante refers to the sibyl, who is excluded.²¹⁰ Untypically for Heaney, the entire poem is written in perfect *terza rima*,

²⁰⁹ In *The Irish Times*, and in a later publication of ‘A dream of solstice’ (the title is not capitalised at all here), in *Echi danteschi* from 2003, this explanation is missing (cf. Heaney 2003a: 137).

²¹⁰ Boitani links the image of the dreamer to Thomas Aquinas’ theory of the *divinatio per somnium* and concludes from evidence in the *Convivio* and the *Commedia* that Dante was influenced by this “divinatory value of dreams for all things divine”. He points out that “these *terzine* are not merely a very effective, poetical illustration of Dante’s trouble with his memory and his language, but also an allusion to a particular way of seeing God (the dream-vision of the prophet) and of describing Him (like the Sibyl on her leaves). This double effect is achieved by [...] combining the philosophical dimension with the enchanted contemplation of nature

including the additional closing line with which Dante ends his canti. From the translated lines in italics, Heaney segues directly into the rest of the poem, but the change in style is clearly perceptible:

*It is the same with snow the sun releases,
The same as when in wind, the hurried leaves
Swirl round your ankles and the shaking hedges*

That had flopped their catkin cuff-lace and green sleeves
Are sleet-whipped bare. Dawn light began stealing
Through the cold universe to County Meath (ibid.)

The sounds and the vocabulary become unmistakably Heaneyesque: one might note the typical percussive plosives in “flopped”, “catkin cuff-lace”, “sleet-whipped bare”, for example. Heaney progresses from Dante’s imagery, which is about the transitory nature of things, to winter imagery, with naked hedges and coldness, setting the scene for the winter solstice. The description of quiet atmosphere and “Millennia deep”, ancient landscape is interrupted by a contemporary noise:

Flight 104 from New York audible
As it descends on schedule into Dublin,
Boyne Valley Centre Car Park already full (ibid. 2)

The speaker, standing in a crowd of people, waits with the others for the sun to rise, enter the passage grave, and “hold[...] its candle // To the world inside the astronomic cave.” This is the climax and end of the poem. People are watching the rays of light in amazement at the ancient construction, just as Dante in amazement drinks with his eyes from the river of light. The way the tomb functions as an astronomic indicator of time is similar in its wondrous nature to Dante’s vision in heaven, the poem implies. The image of the candle is also used by Dante in Canto XXX, when Beatrice explains the sudden shock of light:

«Sempre l’amor che queta questo cielo
accoglie in sé con sì fatta salute,
per far disposto a sua fiamma il candelò». (*Par. XXX, 52-54*)

and the absorption of classical poetry.” (Boitani 1978: 108) Given that Boitani interprets the three images, the dreamer, the melting snow, and the leaves of the sibyl, as a tripartite entity, it is even more noteworthy that Heaney omits the sibyl here. He might have done so to avoid giving the impression of writing a prophetic poem.

The candle, i.e. the soul entering heaven, is prepared by this light for the flame of God's love.

The last sentence of 'A Dream of Solstice' spans twelve lines and is, of course, a "head-clearing" simile:

And as *in illo tempore* people marked
The king's gold dagger when he plunged it in

To the hilt in unsown ground, to start the work
Of the world again, to speed the plough
And plant the riddled grain, we watch through murk

An overboiling cloud for the milted glow
Of sunrise, for an eastern dazzle
To send first light like share-shine in a furrow

Steadily deeper, farther available (ibid.)

As the gold dagger disappears steadily deeper into the unsown ground, so the ray of sunlight disappears into the slot above the entrance of the passage grave and slides as far as the centre of the cave. The beautiful simile, in imitation of Dante, masterfully concludes an overtly Dantesque poem featuring quotation in Italian, quotation in translation, imitation of the *terza rima* and a transformation of Dante's final vision. The intertextual methods used in the poem of course qualify Fumagalli's observations about Heaney's use of paradise. As with 'The Strand at Lough Beg', the poem would probably have profited from fewer obvious and repetitive references. Heaney seems to want to make sure that the Dante passages he includes in his poems are properly understood by his readers, the majority of whom might not have read Dante, and that his borrowings are clearly identifiable. The reader who does not know Italian or has not read Dante only recognises the Italian quotation as borrowed; thus to him or her the possible overload of consciously applied intertextuality is not perceivable. The open use and reworking of Dante might also imply that there is little anxiety of influence on Heaney's part; he has made Dante his own, as in Bloom's final phase of the poet, *apophrades*.

Furthermore, the poem is an example of Vendler's reconciliation of "the water of the diaphanous virtual with the rock of the massive material": the dawn light steals "Over weirs where the Boyne water, fulgent, darkling / Turns its thick axle, over rick-sized stones", and its

destination is, of course, also built of massive stone. The wonder of the light's passage, passing water on its way, is balanced against the solid structure of the grave. The after-effect of the experience is, as in the passage quoted from Dante, that of a dream. What was seen is becoming more and more unreal and impalpable for the memory. Peggy O'Brien states that Heaney's "attraction to Dante comes from the built-in incompleteness of vision guaranteed by the central conceit, that Dante is still mortal", and that his use of *Paradiso* XXXIII in 'A Dream of Solstice' therefore reflects Heaney's "unique state of betweenness" concerning his own faith, which locates him in a state resembling purgatory (O'Brien 2006: 207). Stressing the human and corporeal aspect in Dante's text, she places particular importance on Heaney's poem's final image. She refers to the poem's first version published in *The Irish Times*, which ends with Dante's breast-sucking infant simile, which Heaney has removed from the later versions;²¹¹ after "holding its candle", the older version added two more tercets, which make the intertextuality with Dante even more explicit:

Inside the cosmic hill. Who dares say "love"
At this cold coming? Who would not dare say it?
Is this the moved wheel that the poet spoke of,

The star pivot? Life's perseid in the ashpit
Of the dead? Like his, my speech cannot
Tell what the mind needs told: *an infant tongue*

Milky with breast milk would be more articulate. (Heaney 1999: 1)

This adds three direct references to Dante to those already mentioned: "the moved wheel that the poet spoke of", "Like his, my speech cannot / Tell", and the final quotation in translation; it was probably wise to cut an ending so articulate.

²¹¹ Dante announces that his account will be shorter, or even less exact, than that of „un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella" (*Par.* XXXIII, 107-108), for an infant cannot properly express him- or herself with words. Nick Havely suggests that Heaney's use of this image may represent "a mediation of Dante through Mandelstam", as it evokes a "pre-verbal state", and the poem intimates "possible new beginnings" (Havely 2007: 263).

5. Conclusion

Poets borrow from Dante for various reasons, but there are a few particularly relevant to Irish poets. As Seamus Heaney has pointed out, in the Anglophone world, Catholicism is a subculture, and the use of Dante serves as cultural ratification for poets born within this subculture. Furthermore, Dante as a political exile speaks to the exiled state of mind associated with the Irish, whether it be as a result of the diaspora, in the form of self-chosen exile, or as literary cliché associated especially with Joyce. This rootlessness or struggle for identity, caused by political strife, includes an attitude of defiance against the English imperial tradition, manifesting itself not only through a re-appreciation of old Irish texts and Celtic tradition, but also through a continuing appropriation of Dante, whose example can serve as a means of reinterpreting the English language as something that is their own as much as it is universal. As Heaney has Joyce say in 'Station Island', "The English language / belongs to us." (Heaney 1984: 93) As a native speaker of Irish, Ciaran Carson has addressed the issue of first and second languages in Ireland in his poetry, and his translation of Dante's *Inferno* can be read as one possible answer to the predicament, testing and blurring the boundaries of English as solely the language of the colonisers. As Neal Alexander writes, "By producing a translation of Dante that reads like a translation, Carson's *Inferno* also serves the purpose of estranging or pluralising the linguistic and cultural norms of the English language in which he writes." (Alexander 2010: 201)

This study is based on the presumption that it is impossible to examine the reception of Dante in contemporary Irish poetry without taking into account Heaney's approach. Dante's influence on his poetry is profound and exceeds, at least on the level of obvious intertextual references, that on the poetry of his Irish contemporaries. Heaney's approach to Dante is self-confident, apparent, and pervasive: Dante in Heaney's poems is not treated as a separate text within the text but appears as stories, characters, episodes, images taken from the *Commedia*, or as a historical figure. Heaney's self-referential, at times perhaps even arrogant, use of Dante is visible in the repeated quotations within poems from his own translation of Dante. His Dantesque elegies centre upon his own anxieties rather than focusing on the deceased person. The daisy-chain of poets in 'An Afterwards', an image of poets picking one another's brains or feeding on one another, reflects his awareness of the anxiety of influence, but the humorous tone implies that he does not worry about it that much, since he is "famous Seamus" after all. Various father figures appear; but more haunting than, for example, Master

Murphy or Joyce is the ghost of his own father, whose ash plant symbolically reappears even in Joyce's hands.

In particular, Dante helps Heaney to come to terms with the Northern Irish situation: from *Field Work* on, the predicament of finding his proper role in the context of the Troubles is part of his appropriation of Dante. He achieves what he admires in Dante, namely the combination of the political, the collective, the local, and the personal in his poetry. The authority inherent in his use of Dante is exemplified in poems such as 'Crossings xxxvi', where he merges two different scenes from Dante into one to accommodate his poetical needs, or 'The Little Canticles of Asturias', a miniature *Commedia* which implies that the poet pilgrim is a (miniature) Dante. In the case of 'Station Island', Dante's example helps Heaney to overcome an anxiety of influence that any writer approaching the topic of Lough Derg might experience. From *The Haw Lantern* on, Heaney's poetry includes aspects of the paradisiacal, as Fumagalli has shown. Therefore, what Geert Lernout wrote in 1989 now appears quite prophetic: "If the James Joyce in *Station Island* is pointing to a post-purgatorial phase in Irish writing, only Heaney will be able to write a *Paradiso*." (Lernout 1989: 264) Even if one takes this statement as applying specifically to borrowings from the *Paradiso* as opposed to a general "poetry of paradise", however, Harry Clifton has proven him wrong.

Among Irish poets, Heaney is now perhaps as influential (with the positive as well as the negative connotations of that word) as Yeats or Joyce. I suggest that given the lack of temporal distance, the ways poets deal with Heaney's looming presence - in Bloom's words, their revisionary ratios - are more significant than their approaches to Dante as a predecessor. Since Dante, in addition to the eel, has become Heaney territory, the nature or absence of their use of Dante reflects the poets' handling of the omnipresent Nobel Prize winner. These strategies may of course be unconscious. It might not be a coincidence that Heaney's Northern Irish poet friends Michael Longley and Derek Mahon appropriate in their work a considerable amount of Greek mythology, for example, but not of Dante. Also, Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson, both having had Heaney as a kind of mentor, do not openly borrow from Dante, even after Carson translated the *Inferno*, which was a commission, not his own choice. Becoming acquainted with the *Commedia*, Carson finds in music an original way to approach Dante, as he is an accomplished and passionate musician:

I love the way he shifts his registers, from vituperative vernacular to high philosophy, just as he moves through a gamut of feelings, from anger to pity to tenderness to awe. It's a very attractive and vigorous music, and one of the challenges of the translation was to try to get that music, which I felt was missing in a great many of the English translations I read.

(Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 21f)

Yet Conor McCarthy, who points out a general lack of consonance between Heaney's Dante and Carson's translation, stresses two important similarities: the "parallels between the world of Dante and that of contemporary Northern Ireland", and a "commitment to vernacularity" (McCarthy 2008: 167).

Muldoon too does not borrow from Dante in an obvious manner, but he is certainly well aware of him. As he notes in a live chat with the New Yorker Book Club in 2009, "we've come to recognize, indeed, how much literature in translation – the Old and New Testaments, Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Joyce – has meant to us all along."²¹² While he does engage with Heaney poetically, as 'The Briefcase' demonstrates, a more explicit use of Dante would probably invade Heaney's territory more than an eelskin briefcase. His more oblique use of Dante and the classical template, as in 'The Bangle (Slight Return)', is a deliberate authoritative gesture that can perhaps be described as Bloom's *daemonization*, implying that he has the authority to use Dante and Virgil and Homer, as Heaney and Joyce do, but that he does so in a very different, original way. As 'Immram' shows, encounters with predecessors, Irish tradition, and intertextuality in general serve Muldoon as a kind of liberation, just as 'Station Island' does for Heaney, but the setting is American.

Similarly, Eavan Boland, whom Heaney met through Mahon and the Longleys (cf. O'Driscoll 2008: 209), is perhaps too closely associated with Heaney to rely heavily on Dante as hypotext and predecessor. In addition, her concern is primarily with the absence of female predecessors, as Sabina Müller has shown; in 'The Journey', the female poet-speaker is guided into an underworld by the female poet Sappho, and in this underworld the focus is on women and children, contrary to Virgil or Dante. She thus appropriates the male tradition of the *katabasis* to accommodate female interests, with the *Aeneid* as a more obvious influence than the *Commedia*, as poems such as 'The Latin Lesson' show.

²¹² <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/bookclub/2009/10/a-live-chat-with-paul-muldoon.html>

Poets whose Dantesque intertextuality is much more explicit include Bernard O'Donoghue and Harry Clifton, who both spent a major part of their career outside of Ireland, detaching themselves from what was going on in Ireland politically and poetically. In 'The Potter's Field', O'Donoghue addresses the issue of his emigration and the ensuing question of identity. Owing to their geographical distance, it is thus perhaps less threatening for them to use Dante in spite of Heaney, and part of their open appropriation might even be a gesture of claiming Dante for themselves. It is telling that O'Donoghue's translation from Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno* begins at the line after Heaney's 'Ugolino' ends, and that his 'Amicitia', like Clifton's 'Cacciaguida' and 'The Poet in Exile', appropriates a scene from Dante that was not used by Heaney, but by Yeats, whom Bloom in 1986 identified as a "dangerous influence" on and "precursor proper" of Heaney (Bloom 1986: vii; 2). The connection with Yeats makes Dante less particularly Heaney's and more generally Irish; in a way, it "daemonizes" Heaney's Dante by generalising away its uniqueness.

Clifton's 'The Crystalline Heaven' reflects the longing for escape from a hellish Dublin, possibly influenced by Kinsella, with Dante's heaven in mind; the glass dome, as well as offering a glimpse of heaven, however, also evokes a glass ceiling holding the poet back and reminding him of his own shortcomings, which also lie at the core of O'Donoghue's 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin'. A central concern of Clifton's poetry is the clash of secular and religious worlds, and his use of Dante reflects his own affinity for Catholicism and sets him apart from the secular world he portrays in *Secular Eden*, in spite of his need for distance from his Irish Catholic background.

Thomas Kinsella's Dante differs from other Irish poets' Dante inasmuch as his poetry differs from theirs, his position within the Irish poetry scene being one of relative isolation. Through extensive continuous revisions, he seems to try to evade classification and to further ambiguity. As evidenced by his essay on Dante and modern poets, Heaney knows that Dante played an important role in Kinsella's poetry before he himself approached the *Commedia*. Heaney was very aware of the older poet's publications and their political aspirations, as with 'Butcher's Dozen', in view of which he found himself "elated by the attack on the hypocrisy of the Widgery report and uneasy about the caricature of the Protestants." (O'Driscoll 2008: 164) He met Kinsella around 1963 at a reading where Kinsella read from 'Downstream' (ibid. 163). 'Downstream' accesses Dante through Pound and resembles, like 'Songs of the Psyche', a descent into the unconscious, C. G. Jung being another important influence on Kinsella.

Among the more recent publications featuring Dante, Gerry Murphy's *My Flirtation with International Socialism* is notable for its conspicuously hidden use of the *Commedia*; in spite of the collection's many explicit versions and adaptations, his two versions of Dante appear at first to be original poems. Given that Dante's Capaneus stands for the blasphemous human arrogance of rebelling against God, this might imply that Murphy is one of the sinners, his sin perhaps being plagiarism. Seán Haldane and Fergus Allen, with their poems alluding to the canto of Paolo and Francesca, notably appropriate a famous Dante scene absent from Heaney's oeuvre.

Conclusively, it can be said that the Irish Dante confirms the *Inferno*'s reputation as the main source of reference for contemporary poets: of the poems mentioned in the present study, 69 poems borrow from the *Inferno*, 20 from the *Purgatorio*, 13 from the *Paradiso*. A similar ratio applies if one only looks at Heaney's poems, which constitute more than a third of the whole examined corpus: 28, 8, 7. The preferred canti are I, III, and XXXIII-XXXIV of the *Inferno*, the most frequent methods allusion and transformation, according to the definitions established in the introduction. If particular canti or scenes from Dante are appropriated, the ones that Heaney has used are generally avoided. While it is impossible to tell whether these tendencies are conscious decisions on the part of the authors, they are still significant in the context of poetic influence. Within contemporary Dante reception, there is an Irish Dante, who in turn is shaped and influenced to a great extent by Heaney's Dante.

The scope of this study only allowed for a marginal mention of the non-Irish Dante in English language poetry. It would of course be valuable to compare and contrast the Irish reception with the English, Scottish, and American receptions in particular, since there is no end of Dantesque intertextuality in sight. Furthermore, extensively comparing Dante's influence with that of Homer and Virgil might offer further insights about the contemporary re-appreciation of classical material. In the twenty-first century, T. S. Eliot's famous statement still holds true: "A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest." (Eliot 1951: 206) Writing in a remote time and an alien language, Dante proves an attractive catalyst for contemporary poets to deal with all kinds of anxieties, especially about their immediate predecessors or contemporaries, as well as about the political situation in which they find themselves, and to which they might be expected to react.

List of Contemporary Poems

Allen, Fergus.

‘Southern Ocean’

‘Counshingaun’

Boland, Eavan.

‘Lights’

‘Outside History’

‘The Bottle Garden’

‘The Journey’

‘The Latin Lesson’

Carson, Ciaran.

‘E’

‘Exile’

‘Intelligence’

‘Loaf’

‘Peace’

‘Proposal’

‘Second Language’

‘Siege’

‘Slate Street School’

The Inferno of Dante Alighieri

‘The War Correspondent’

‘To Get to the Dark’

Clifton, Harry.

‘Benjamin Fondane departs for the East’

‘Cacciaguida’

‘Cloudberry’

‘Early Christians’

‘God in France’

‘Hereafter’

‘Hermit Songs’
‘Lacrimae Christi’
‘Newton’s apple’
‘Red Fox Country’
‘Secular Eden’
‘The Angel of Meudon’
‘The Canto of Ulysses’
‘The Country of Still Waters’
‘The Crystalline Heaven’
‘The Garden’
‘The Other Shore’
‘The Poet in Exile’
‘To the Fourteenth District’

Donaghy, Michael.

‘Machines’

Flynn, Leontia.

‘The Human Fish’

Haldane, Seán.

‘Desire in Belfast’

‘Paradise’

Heaney, Seamus.

‘I.1.87’

‘A Dream of Solstice’

‘A Retrospect’

‘Alphabets’

‘An Afterwards’

‘Anything Can Happen’

‘Audenesque’

‘Bann Valley Eclogue’

‘Canopy’

‘District and Circle’
‘Electric Light’
‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’
‘Keeping Going’
‘Known World’
‘Leavings’
‘Limbo’
‘Loughanure’
‘Out of This World’
‘Route 110’
‘Sandstone Keepsake’
‘Seeing Things’
‘September Song’
‘Squarings’
‘Station Island’
‘The Ash Plant’
‘The Biretta’
‘The Crossing’
‘The Early Purges’
‘The Flight Path’
‘The Gaeltacht’
‘The Journey Back’
‘The Little Canticles of Asturias’
‘The Loaning’
‘The Mud Vision’
‘The Riverbank Field’
‘The Schoolbag’
‘The Strand’
‘The Strand at Lough Beg’
‘The Underground’
‘The Walk’
‘Triptych’
‘Ugolino’
‘Wheels within Wheels’

Kinsella, Thomas.

‘A Proposal’

‘Argument’

‘Butcher’s Dozen’

‘Downstream’

‘Open Court’

‘Songs of the Psyche’

‘The Back Lane’

Matthews, Tom.

‘Peter of Morrone’

Moore, Alan Jude.

‘Exile’

Muldoon, Paul.

‘Gathering Mushrooms’

‘Immram’

‘Immrama’

‘Paris’

‘See if I care’

‘The Bangle (Slight Return)’

‘The Briefcase’

Murphy, Gerry.

‘Capaneus’

‘Farewell to a Pagan’

‘New Arrivals Eighth Circle’

O’Donoghue, Bernard.

‘Alzheimer Fruit’

‘Amicitia’

‘Fra Alberigo’s Bad Fruit’

‘Nel Mezzo del Cammin’

'The day I outlived my father'

'The Potter's Field'

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