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Heaney and the Classics

A Reading of Station Island

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INTRODUCTION:

The main aim of this dissertation is to focus on the figure of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, one of the most influential poets of the 20th century who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. In particular, this work presents a detailed analysis of his 1984 collection called *Station Island* and the relationship between Heaney and the Classics.

There are various reasons for the choice of this particular topic: this year we are celebrating the 700 years since Dante Alighieri's death so that topic, together with a more general link between Heaney and the Classics, has stimulated a larger research on more than one author. So, not only his link with Dante but also the one with Virgil and Greek literature in general need a deep investigation. Maybe, this fascination might come from the fact that during my High School years I attended a "Liceo Classico" where the three most important subjects were Italian, Latin and Ancient Greek literature. So in this dissertation, I have tried to link my two great passions: classic and English-language literature.

This thesis has been divided in three chapters:

Chapter One has been focussed on the life of Seamus Heaney and on some of the major events of his life. He was born (and raised) in Northern Ireland so he witnessed all the events that lead to the Irish fight for independence. Heaney has always struggled with the critics that accused him that he didn't take an active role in these fights. This was despite the fact that in most of his poems he talked about this situation, also paying a special attention and praising the victims. We also see how he was able to expand his literary knowledge by traveling to Europe and America and meet the greatest and most influential authors of the time. Heaney was a very religious man and he was also totally devoted to his wife and children.

In Chapter Two I have analysed Heaney's work *Station Island*, a collection of poems published in 1984 by Faber and Faber, a publishing house located in London. This book is divided in three parts: the first section consists of individual lyrics about everyone's ordinary life. Even the most high images and metaphors in that volume have been downgraded through the mirror of his special mundane world, as when, for example, he speaks about the death of a beautiful young girl he will later will her to a dog. The second part is named after the collection itself, *Station Island*. Here the poet undergoes into an imaginary pilgrimage to Station Island, also known as St Patrick's Purgatory, an isle in the middle of Lough Derg in the county of Donegal. This was a pilgrimage taken by Irish Catholics since medieval times. During this journey the poet encounters emblematic figures that give him advice or they also reprimand him. The figures that he meets are known by the poet; they happen to be important authors like James Joyce or simple men that the poet used to know when he was young. The third and final part is called "Sweeney Redivivus" and is linked with the figure of *Sweeney Astray*, an Irish medieval king that was cursed and transformed into a bird. In this section there are several poems about the figure of Sweeney. This character can also be seen as the alter ego of the poet and Heaney uses the figure of Sweeney to also talk about himself and his journey as a poet.

The final Chapter Three consists of an analysis of the relationship between Heaney and Classic literature. Here we illustrate the way in which Heaney was very much influenced by various Classic authors when writing his works. It will be shown how he took inspiration from Dante and Virgil but also from other Classic figures belonging to the ancient Greek literature. Heaney also made various biblical references in his works.

This work has allowed me to be acquainted with this incredible Irish poet who wrote about the struggle of his art and his profession with simple but effective words. Seamus Heaney is one of the most widely read and studied poets of our

time and his works have generated a large body of scholarly literature (articles, essays, undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations, monographs and volumes of essays). Through this work, I hope I have tried to manage and acknowledge as appropriately and comprehensively as possible all the references that I have accessed to and studied so as to make them useful tools of research and work.

CHAPTER 1: THE LIFE OF SEAMUS HEANEY



¹*Seamus Heaney (standing fourth from the left) in a school photograph at his old school outside Bellaghy in County Londonderry*

Photograph: PA.

1.1 Early Life

Seamus Heaney was born on 13th april 1939 to Patrick and Margaret Kathleen Heaney on a farm called Mossbawn, in the townland of Tamniarn, in the Derry county, Northern Ireland. He was the eldest of nine children, two girls and seven boys: Sheena, Anna, Hugh, Patrick, Charles, Colm Christopher and Daniel.² Anna died in 2002 and Christopher died in a terrible accident when he was only three years old. His father was both a farmer (he farmed the fifty acre Mossbawn) and a cattle-dealer. In Mossbawn the family had a horse and when Heaney was very young they had one big black carthorse with a white spot on his forehead, it was called Neddy. One of the poet's very first memories is to going out in the field with some corn stalks and handing them to Neddy's

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2013/aug/30/seamus-heaney-life-pictures-poetry>

² Corcoran Neil, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A critical study*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p.234.

nose, this might have irritated the horse because he lifted one of his hoofs and pushed him.³ Heaney doesn't remember what happened to Neddy, it was probably sold. Then they had a second horse but only briefly because it got sick and they had to kill her. Their third horse was a white pony called Ben, Heaney said that he used to ride frequently Ben but it always made him a little bit anxious. Nonetheless, for the poet being in charge of a horse held some certain ceremonial aspect, even, for example, catching one in the field was seen as a sort of investiture. From 1945 to 1951 Heaney attended the local Anahorish school, his first memories of learning to read were linked to the Anahorish school, as a child he did not show any particular sign of promise and vulnerability.⁴ On the first morning he went to school he cried, in front of a girl named Phil McNicholl who had the job of bringing him to school. He was also embarrassed about his schoolbag, it wasn't new and it wasn't what the other kids had, so it bothered him. It was a hand-made leather shoulder pouch and it belonged to his uncle Peter. Later on his favourite moments about those days were the ones where Phil had to take care of him. This brought him closer to her, as a matter of fact, she was his first love.⁵

From 1951 to 1957 he went as a boarder to St Columb's College in Derry city,⁶ about forty miles from his home and when he was fourteen, the family decided that it was time to move from the Mossbawn farm to another farm at the end of the parish called the Wood. The Wood was the farm where Heaney's father was brought up (so he inherited the farm from an uncle). The sudden move from Mossbawn was a decision probably made after the death of Heaney's brother Christopher.⁷ Christopher died in a road accident close to the house when he was three years old. He was at the bus stop with his brother

³ O'Driscoll Dennis, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, London, Faber and Faber, 2008, p. 9.

⁴ Corcoran Neil, *cit.*, p. 234.

⁵ O'Driscoll Dennis *cit.*, p. 19.

⁶ Corcoran Neil, *cit.*, p. 234.

⁷ Ivi, p. 235.

Hugh and he saw two of his other siblings across the street so he started to cross the road towards them. In that moment the bus was pulling away but a car was coming in the opposite direction. Christopher run straight into the side of the car and it was knocked down. He was taken to the Mid-Ulster Hospital but he passed away a couple of hours later. This terrible accident will be commemorated later in one of Heaney's earlier poems: "Mid-Term break"⁸.

The move to the Wood officially sealed off Heaney's childhood and this can also be seen on his poems. In his prose recollections, it is the name of Mossbawn, which stands guardian over the world to which he returned for the material of most of his earliest poems. Mossbawn is the title of two poems which he dedicate his fourth book *North* to his aunt Mary Heaney, who lived with the family. She had a big part in Heaney's early life. He considered Mary as the heart of the house; and she used to spoil him so the poet considers her like a second mother.⁹

Everything that Heaney has written about his childhood reinforces the sense of intimate domestic warmth and affection as its prevailing atmosphere, but this sense of community inside the walls of the home was not reflected in the world beyond those walls.¹⁰ The greater divisions of Heaney's childhood in Northern Ireland were about religion and culture. His first school, the Anahorish School, was attended by both Catholics and Protestants and even though the religious differences in the rural community were submerged by other interests, everything in the poet's life was influenced by the fact that he was born a Catholic in Northern Ireland. Heaney confirmed that Catholicism, during that time, was almost considered a racist word: a "label for a set of cultural suppositions."¹¹ Within the family it was a habit singing Irish patriotic songs so this created in Heaney a radical sense of being Irish in a state that

⁸ O'Driscoll Dennis, cit., p. 22.

⁹ Ivi, p. 5.

¹⁰ Corcoran Neil, cit., p. 235.

¹¹ O'Driscoll Dennis, cit., p. 20.

considered itself British. In the late 60s the cultural and religious division became too wide: one of the poet's brothers was beaten up because he attended a republican meeting.¹²

1.2 Heaney's Education

Heaney's secondary education was at Saint Columb's College, which was a Catholic boarding school that also served a diocesan seminary. So, this reinforced the religious and cultural context. During these years he began to approach to Hopkins's poetry. He found many similarities with the poet's life.¹³ The fact that Hopkins had been a priest was incidental because he embraced the doctrines and the theology that Heaney's and his generation embraced. For five years they had annual exams at St Columb's together with a Latin mass every morning. In Hopkins's journals, as Heaney said, we encounter "the claustrophobia and scrupulosity religious ordering of the mind, the cold-water shaves and the single iron beds, the soutanes and the self-denial" that were similar to the world that the poet's was living in when he first read his poems.

In attending St Columb's College Heaney's was one of the first beneficiaries of the 1947 Northern Ireland Education Act:¹⁴ this act made possible that the sons of the rural farming class and the urban working class of Northern Ireland had an opportunity at a proper second education. St Columb's not only produced the figure of Heaney but also many other leading figures in the public life of modern Ireland, such as the critic Seamus Deane, the dramatist Brian Friel and Eamonn McCann, who was one of the organizers of the Civil Rights March in Derry in 1968. Heaney confirmed that without the scholarship system, that was inaugurated at that time, he probably would have

¹² Corcoran Neil, cit., p.238.

¹³ Ivi, p239.

¹⁴ Ibid.

never gone to university¹⁵. Since the years at the primary school, the teachers told his parents that he was a clever boy. That made it possible for him to enter the qualifying exam and later, in secondary school, he had his first Latin lesson, something that will be mentioned in one of the section of his work *Station Island*.¹⁶ After his successful years at St Columb's he went to Queen's University in Belfast in 1957: there he studied English Language and Literature. In 1961 he graduated with a First Class honours degree. His awareness of the cultural differences took a new meaning during his days at the university,; yet, he did retain a loyalty to his original culture. During a lecture delivered at Queen's university in 1983¹⁷, he informed the audience that not only he attended the university sherry parties but, also, he joined the Bellaghy Pioneer Total Abstinence Association. There he read Shakespeare and Wilde. He even was a member of the Bellaghy Dramatic Society, there he discussed the loss of faith in the Victorian literature. During that time he also accompanied his mother to "Catholic evening devotions" and to the exposition of the Blessed Sacraments¹⁸. The gap between parish and academy was eventually bridged by the reading of Daniel Corkery's study of the Gaelic poetry *The Hidden Island* in which he lamented, in the Irish language, their own native culture. He also affirmed that a true Irish writer had to find the heart of the matter in the crowd attending a Munster hurling final¹⁹. Again this gap, for Heaney, was then bridged to a greater extent by the Irish Catholic affiliation and alienation in the writings of James Joyce. This will, also, appear at the end of the *Station Island* sequence.

Keats, Webster and Hopkins were a great English influence in Heaney's works, especially the latter.²⁰ He was a strong presence behind a stanza from a poem written at university. Later on, this was printed in the essay "Feeling

¹⁵ O'Driscoll Dennis, cit., p. 30

¹⁶ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 240

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 241.

into Words". This firstly appeared in a student magazine called "Gorgon" in later 1960 and in another magazine called "Q", he wrote under the pseudonym "Incertus", he didn't want to disguise his origin but the use of the pseudonym had to do with his lack of "writerly self-confidence".²¹ Those Incertus poems were written in a conscious homage to Hopkins but they were also the first attempt to write his own poetry. For example the poem "October Thought" was much an Hopkins imitation. During the Incertus poems period even Hemingway helped Heaney's poetry even though Hopkins remained the main influence²².

1.3 Life after his graduation

After leaving the Queen's College, Heaney studied for a postgraduate teacher's training diploma at St Joseph's College of Education in Andresontown in Belfast. This was a very ambitious course, during that year he wrote an extended essay on literary magazines in the North of Ireland since 1900²³. This was able to introduce Heaney to some of the most important literary and cultural holdings of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast and to some of the work of John Hewitt. He also bought Robin Skelton's *Six Irish Poets*, an anthology in which he encountered for the first time some contemporary Irish poets such as Thomas Kinsella, John Montague and Richard Murphy; he also began to read the poems of Ted Hughes.²⁴ In the preface to a limited edition of his work Heaney writes that these poets were more in tune with his first world than MacNeice and Eliot could ever be. But Heaney also said that even though in the book there was a promise of Ireland the real work that gave more of a charge to him was *The New Poetry* by A²⁵. Alvarez. Probably the poets that Skelton excluded were the ones who would have had a stronger impact on a

²¹ O'Driscoll Dennis, cit., p.37.

²² Ibid.

²³ Corcoran Neil, cit., p.242.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

young reader from the North. Nonetheless in Montague's boy with his bucket he recognized the home ground.

In 1962 he started teaching at St Thomas's Intermediate School in Ballymurphy in Belfast, this intermediate school was the Irish version of the English "secondary modern school".²⁶ In that school the headmaster was Micheal McLaverty, a short story writer and he introduces Heaney to the Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, he started reading *The Great Hunger* and *A Soul for Sale*, these works reflected a very close experience to Heaney's own so Kavanagh became one of the major literary inspiration for him.²⁷ He only met Kavanagh in 1967 during the summer where Heaney taught a summer course in Trinity College. He was introduced to him by Richard Ryan in front of a bar.

During his permanence at St Thomas he also registered, for a year, for a part-time post graduate degree in Queen's College. He wrote a thesis on Wordsworth's educational ideas in mind.²⁸ He also began to write in 1962, his first poem "Tractors" was published in the "Belfast Telegraph", now for him this poem was a "an anxious piece about tractors". Shortly after other Irish journals wanted to publish his poems, especially the "Kilkenny Magazine" that in 1963 published *Mid-Term Break*²⁹. He then met Alan Gabbey who introduced Heaney to Philip Hobsbaum, a lecturer who had joined the English department, he was also a poet who admired the works of Ted Hughes. Hobsbaum organized regular sessions among poets called "The Group" in London since 1950s, there the poems of the participants were read and discussed.³⁰ When Heaney met him he was organizing the same sessions in

²⁶ Ivi,p. 243.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ivi,p. 244.

Belfast in 1963, right when Heaney left his job as a teacher and returned at St Joseph-s as a lecturer in English.³¹

The meetings of The Belfast Group deepened, without any doubt, the sense of confirmation that was gained by Heaney since his earliest publications. In the article like “The Group”, written for “The honest Ulsterman” in 1978, Heaney depict Hobsbaum as one “one of the strongest agents of change” and also “he emanated energy, generosity, belief in the community, trust in the parochial, the inept, the unprinted.³²” When Heaney first met him he said that “he was very intense, very much a teacher, full of opinion. A seminar leader as much as a poet³³” He sensed that he was kind of conducting interviews with the people whom he thought would be adequate to be invited to come the The Group he was about to start.

The “Group” met regularly in Hobsbaum’s flat until his move to Glasgow in 1966. Later the sessions continued in Heaney’s apartment until 1970, these sessions were attended by younger poets such as Paul Muldoon and Frank Ormsby.³⁴

Hobsbaum was not only a lecturer but also an entrepreneur and he made sure that the work of the Belfast Group was brought to the attention of the public. The poets took part on the Belfast Festival and the journalist Mary Holland in the “Observer” wrote that she considered the Group as a cultural flowering in the city. The Festival produced different pamphlets which included, in November, Heaney’s first collection *Eleven Poems*.³⁵ However Heaney considered this sort of Belfast “reinassence” a media event. As a matter of fact when in July 1966 he had the opportunity to write about Belfast in the “Out of

³¹ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit., p. 63.

³² Corcoran Neil, cit., p. 244.

³³ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit., p. 73.

³⁴ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 245.

³⁵ Ibid.

London” column in the “New Statesman” he chose to analyse the deteriorating political situation and the emergence of Ian Paisley.³⁶

1.4 Affirmation in the literary world

By the time *Eleven Poems* was published, Heaney’s career was well in full swing. In December 1964 Karl Miller, of the “New Statesman” published together three of his poems in a pre-Christmas issue: “Digging”, “Storm of the Island” and “Scaffolding”.³⁷ This was possible thanks to Hobsbaum who had sent sheets of the discussion of the Group to Edward Lucie-Smith, who forwarded them to various magazines. No longer after Christmas, Charles Monteith of Fabers asked him to see a manuscript.

In the meantime, Heaney got married to Marie Devlin, whom he had met in October 1962. She came from Ardboe, Co. Tyrone, she was a teacher in the intermediate school when she got married. They had a son Micheal born in July 1966, then another Christopher, who was born in February 1968 and a daughter Catherine Anne, in April 1973.³⁸ Heaney wrote a poem about the birth of his daughter “A Pillowed Head” stating that it was a very different experience from the other two³⁹. When Catherine Anne was born they were already been parents for seven years and they were hoping for a girl so when they found out that it was a girl indeed, it was a special joy. The poems describes the moments that came before the labour. The country was quiet because it was just after dawn and for the first time the poet was able to go into the labour ward: he was there when the “little slapped palpable girl” came into the world.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 246.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 247.

⁴⁰ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. pp. 168-69.

In May 1966, when Heaney was 27, Fabers published his first full length collection *Death of a Naturalist* (dedicated to his wife Mary) and it received an extraordinary critical acclaim. In England, Christopher Ricks in the “New Statesman” acclaimed it was “outstanding”⁴¹. C.B. Cox in the “Spectator” affirmed that it was one of the best collection of poems he read in some time; Alan Ross in the “London Magazine” considered it a book with an great promise. In Ireland Michael Longley in the “Irish Times” wrote that “his childhood landscape has acquired the validity of myth⁴²”. Heaney received a Gregory Award for young writers and afterwards *Death of a Naturalist* received the Somerset Maugham Award and the Geoffrey Faber Prize. Those were only the first of the multiple awards that Heaney had collected but by far the most prestigious one was certainly the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.⁴³ Before that, in 1965, Heaney had begun to publish articles and reviews in various journals in England, he published in the Autumn of 1965 “The Use of English” a guide for teachers and he reviewed educational book for the “New Statesman” and “Listeners”⁴⁴. Later he became a well-known communicator on both cultural and political matters and was broadcasted for BBC radio and television.

1.5 Political affairs

In Heaney’s first years as a lecturer at Queen’s ,the Northern Ireland situation became more and more dangerous and tense. The Civil Rights movement among Catholics gathered more and more consensus; they were in a strong opposition from Protestant Loyalists⁴⁵. The first major violent crush occurred on Saturday 5 October 1968 in Derry City, one of the most economical

⁴¹ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 246.

⁴² Ivi, p. 247

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

depressed area in Northern Ireland. The real “Troubles” occurred when 2000 civil rights marchers, protesting against “gerrymandering” and discriminatory housing allocations, they went against a ban by the Home Affairs Minister William Craig. Eighty-eight were injured in police baton charges and the television coverage of the march that evening was not approved by the people and it created an international outrage.⁴⁶ This led to different riots in the Catholic Bogside area of Derry and a few days later Queen’s students organized a large protest march in Belfast city centre. Violence didn’t stop in the next few months in Northern Ireland, on August 12 1969 occurred the “Battle of Bogside”, it was a sectarian clashes in Derry.⁴⁷ This lead to the entrance of the British Army in the city on August 14. As a consequence of all this discontent in January 1970 the Provisional IRA was officially formed in Dublin.

Heaney considered himself partially involved in the Civil Rights movements, he said that he was not properly enrolled as member but for him the Civil Rights movement didn’t start in October 1968 ⁴⁸but even earlier, he was acquainted with several of the moving spirits. For example Dr Conn McCluskey and his wife, who were founder members, Austin Currie, who took part in the first big sit-in in Fintona had been at Queen’s with the poet. Heaney was in favour of the Civil Rights people but he had never been actually involved in politics. He didn’t appreciate the fervour and as a consequence of this even the most righteous cause worn him out. Even though he wasn’t appreciative of the politics he wanted to demonstrate his support to the Civil Rights movement by composing many poems about that.⁴⁹ On October 1968 he wrote a piece in the “Listener” called “Old Derry’s Walls” about the indignation and determination of the civil rights marchers.⁵⁰ The composer

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 248.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Sean O’Riada in 1968 contacted Heaney after the march in Derry and asked him for something to use in his radio programme on Radio Éireann. The poet, then, provided a satirical song called “Craig’s dragoons”. Heaney met O’Riada that same summer in Balydavid in Kerry, when he was on a vacation with his wife Marie, he described O’Riada as an histrionic man with a piercing intelligence and a “readiness to probe and provoke⁵¹”.

Heaney wrote only one direct political song when the Bloody Sunday occurred. On January 30 1972 thirteen civilians were killed by the British Army in Derry. The song was called “The Road to Derry”⁵² and it was written after he attended the funerals of the people who had been shot. Luke Kelley, the singer of the Dubliners folk group, asked Heaney to write something for him to perform. The poet came up with a traditional ballad, the first verses echoes one of his favourite songs in the Irish tradition “The Boys of Mullaghbawn” . According to Heaney the air of this song is beautifully slowed and he thought that it would suit the words and the mood of he was doing. Kelley didn’t seem to work for him so he decided to not sing that song. Heaney made some alteration when he rewrote the poem for the thirtieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday: he cut some lines that were, according to him, “a little bit ropey⁵³”. The statements and images remained the same as the old version.

The final lines of the poems reads:

⁵⁴“My heart besieged by anger, my mind a gap of danger, I walked among their old haunts, the home ground where they bled; And in the dirt lay justice like an acorn in the winter

Till its oak would sprout in Derry where the thirteen men lay dead.”

⁵¹ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. p .224.

⁵² Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 249

⁵³O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. p.213.

⁵⁴ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 249

These lines are very similar to the final lines of “Requiem of the Croppies”, a song in the “Door into the Dark” , composed in 1969. This is the continuity of Heaney’s Irish nationalist sympathies in that period. ⁵⁵

Door into the Dark is Heaney’s second volume and it was published in June 1969; This volume was written around Autumn of 1965, and the poets said that there was a new self-consciousness about this second volume, and he realized that the one simple requirement of lyric writing is self-forgetfulness, the first time he was able to attain it was when he started writing the first line of “The Forge”.

The reviewers appreciated the book but they also sensed something transitional about it. ⁵⁶

In 1969, after the publication, visited Madrid, he was on a tour of France and Spain with the money of the Somerset Maugham Award, won in 1968. He watched the events in the North on Spanish television feeling somehow guilty, this guilt can be found in his song “Summer 1969” in the “Singing School Sequence” of *North*. In “Feeling into Words” in *Preoccupations* he explained that these events must put pressure into his own work. ⁵⁷

“I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity”. ⁵⁸

By Reading *The Bog People* by P.V. Glob, he realized that it was like opening a gate because those symbols and images were a big discovery for the poet. This eventually led to produce a sequence of “bog poems”. However he also published in literary journals and reviews some poems that addressed the situation in the North in a more straightforward way. For example the poem

⁵⁵ Ivi,p. 250.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

“Intimidation” (appeared in the journal “The Malahat Review”) angrily bites out the threatening Loyalist bonfires of the twelfth of July.⁵⁹

Heaney’s next collection, called *Wintering Out* was badly reviewed by critics because the poems that he wrote about the situation in the North did not appear in the book. The poems collected in *Wintering Out* were a sort of response to the developing complexity of the violence occurred in the North, after the eruptions in the Northern affairs of the Provisional IRA in 1970.⁶⁰

1.6 The Berkley experience and the American days

Heaney spent the academic year of 1970-1971 in America, at the University of California at Berkeley. Tom Parkinson was a member of the English Department at Berkeley and he heard about Heaney from John Montague, it was through him that came an invitation: to spend a year in Berkeley as a visiting lecturer.⁶¹ Heaney felt himself ready for this experience, he was curious about the Beat scene and the fact that, at the time, the Bay Area was as hot politically as it was poetically.

Something about that experience changed the poet, it was the first time he lived for a long period outside Northern Ireland, it was also the first time that Heaney and his wife Marie lived in the sun⁶². The pay was enough for them not to obsess over money, at the end of the year he was freer than at the beginning. This happened also thanks to the intellectual distinction of the people that surrounded the poet, the nurture that came from new friendships. He met Mark Schorer who hosted several cocktails parties, there the poet drunk his first Martini. Although the most influential friendship was with Tom Flanagan, the

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 251.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 252.

⁶² O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. p. 284.

author of the book *The Irish Novelists 1800-1850*,⁶³ Flanagan concerned himself with Irish history and literature and this gave Heaney a conviction about the Irish theme as it were. The poem “Traditions” in *Wintering out* was dedicated to Flanagan; later when Flanagan published his novel *The Year of the French*, it has been said that the poet MacCarthy was partly based on Heaney.

The poet appreciated the freedom that California gave him saying that “you were able to work yet feel en fête”, he was able to do things with his family that around Queen’s were unimaginable. Also the students were different from Queen’s, they asked him if he wanted to be called “Seamus” or “Professor”, interacting with their freedom and ability to talk about drugs and sex led Heaney to feel a bit less uptight even though he couldn’t expel the Irish Catholic in him altogether.⁶⁴

During that time the University was extremely politicized, he often encountered a couple of Black Panthers preaching power to the people and there were also taboos of all kinds: Coors Beer banished because the workers were non-unionized on the books. Dealing with Bank of America or American Airlines were not permitted because they were part of the war effort in Vietnam.⁶⁵

Some of the work in the English Department was also different from Queen’s, he taught Freshman Composition, English 1A and he had a teaching assistant. The main difference, though, was the length of the courses because Berkeley operated on the quarter system⁶⁶. He taught two courses per quarter and he also got to devise his own syllabus for each of them. Over the year he gave lectures on contemporary poetry, conducted a reading-in-order-to-write workshop. Some of the classes had big enrolments, some small. They all had that “lovely Californian student chorus of “Hi-i-s” and “wow-w-w-s” and “he-

⁶³ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 252.

⁶⁴ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. p. 164.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

e-eyes!”.⁶⁷ Even though he was teaching a full load for him it felt like an holiday. Marie also had a great time during that period, she met interesting women and the kids enjoyed the home garden and the never-ending presence of the sun.

However Heaney’s mind never really left Ireland: in a piece published in the “Listener” he noted that “while Berkeley shouts, Belfast burns”, he also began to write a series of prose-poems which once again return to the world of his childhood in Derry. The poet did not complete the sequence in America and he was put off by doing so by the publication of *Mercian Hymns* a volume of prose-poems by Geoffrey Hill. He will later publish seven of these poems in his *Selected Poems 1966-1987* (1990).⁶⁸

1.7 The return to Northern Ireland and the move to the Republic

When Heaney returned to Northern Ireland in September 1971, the political situation had further deteriorated. Internment without trial had been introduced the previous month, he wrote a piece about that in *Preoccupations* as “Christmas 1971” an article full of anxiety, depression and tension⁶⁹. He said that “it hasn’t been named martial law, but that’s what it feels like⁷⁰.” By the time *Wintering Out* was published in 1972 he had left the North for the Republic. This move was supported by Ted Hughes but especially by Ann Saddlemyer, a Canadian academic, she rented Heaney her cottage in Glanmore, near Ashford, a beautiful area in the Wicklow county⁷¹. During Easter and he moved all of his family there.⁷² They loved the place so they decided to make Glenmore their permanent home.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 252.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p.253.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. pp. 197-98.

⁷² Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 253.

He offered many explanations for the move and it is pretty clear that there were artistic and political reasons for it. He said that he wanted to try to become a freelance or full-time writer, as to make poetry the centre of his life. The poet also realized that the move had an emblematic significance. Heaney's most revealing interpretation of the "emblem" of his move occurs in an interview with his friend Seamus Deane in "the New York Times Book Review" in 1979.

"I felt I was compromising some part of myself by staying in a situation where socially and, indeed, imaginatively there were pressures "against" regarding the moment as a critical. Going to the South was perhaps emblematic for me and certainly so for some of the people I knew. To the Unionist it looked like a betrayal of the Northern thing."⁷³

The move nevertheless occasioned anxieties especially about missing a major historical moment and being thought to have abandoned a responsibility. This fuelled one of Heaney's finest poems "Exposure", this poem concludes *North*. When he moved to Glanmore he started working on a version of the medieval Irish poem Buile Suibhne (The Madness of Sweeney)⁷⁴. What interested him in the Sweeney material were the short extracts that appeared in *A Celtic Miscellany* by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson⁷⁵, those extracts prompted him to get his hand on the Early Irish Texts edition of the work . He got the idea that he should translate them in its entirety. A first version of the text was completed quickly by April 1973 and this version, as Heaney said, was a "strong sense of bending the text to my purposes"⁷⁶. He later decided that this version was "too infected with the idiom of the moment" and he put it aside for almost seven years. After a semester in Harvard in 1979, he started working on it again, he was staying in a house in Long Island (lent to him by Tom

⁷³ Ivi, p. 254.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ O'Driscoll Dennis, cit. p. 321.

⁷⁶ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 255.

Flanagan).⁷⁷ In completing that version he knew he wanted to be “bare and fairly obedient and plain and strict in some way”. When he returned to Ireland he finished the work and in 1983 he published it as *Sweeney Astray*.

While working on *Sweeney* he was simultaneously working on the poems of *North*, that appeared in June 1975.⁷⁸

During this period Heaney deepened his study for three poets who have deeply affected his subsequent work: Dante, Yeats and the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam. *North* had a great critical acclaim and most reviewers were delighted that Northern Ireland had found an appropriate expression in poetry. Martin Dosworth wrote a review in the “Guardian” declaring that the book “unequaled in our contemporary poetry as a testimony to the patience, persistence and power of the imagination under duress”⁷⁹. Conor Cruise O’Brien in the “Listener” said that reading those poems he had a felt that he was listening to the thing himself: the tragedy of the Catholics of Northern Ireland.

The one place where *North* received a negative review was in Heaney’s native province, this probably happened because the Ulster people felt betrayed that the poet left for Glenmore. Ciaran Carson, a poet, wrote in “The Honest Ulsterman” that Heaney was “the laureate of violence, a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing” and Edna Longley thought that he had no need to prove his credentials because he wrote about his people in “oblique terms”.⁸⁰

However in the “Books of the Year” column in the “Observer” the American poet Robert Lowell described *North* as a new kind political poetry and said that Heaney was the “best Irish poet since W.B. Yeats”. Lowell also presented to him the following year the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize⁸¹, and many critics

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 256.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 257.

found in Heaney's *Field Work*, the book that was written *North*, an influence of Lowell, as a matter of fact, in this was included an elegy for the American critic who died in 1977. At his memorial service in London, Heaney also addressed their brief but important relationship.

He first met him in 1972 in London, Heaney was extremely shy of him because of his aura of a great classic but he also started reading his books and he did an episode on his radio about his books *History* and *Lizzie and Harriet* and *The Dolphin*.⁸² He got a copy of that and thanked him. Later Heaney wrote to him and asked if he would like to do a reading in Kilkenny (there was an art festival in 1975 and Heaney was very involved). Lowell stayed a week in Kilkenny and then he later went to see him in Wicklow. He enjoyed the visits of Lowell and because when he was with him he never felt the pressure of talking only about poetry.⁸³

The radio programme that Heaney was doing in that period was called "Imprint", he hosted it on Radio Eireann, he did it between 1973 and 1977. The poet confirmed that he was doing that to make money. In 1975 he decided, although, that he in order to buy a house in Dublin he had to return to his full time job so he joined the English department at Carysfort, a teachers' training college in Dublin. In November 1976 the family eventually moved to Dublin, to the Edwardian house in Sandymount. Heaney was appointed Head of the Department in Carysfort in 1976 and stayed there until 1981⁸⁴.

1.8 The Harvard Year and the subsequent publications

From the early 1970s Heaney's reputation had been growing in America and in 1979 (the year he published "Field Work") he spent a term in Harvard, as one of the temporary s

⁸² O'Driscoll Dennis, cit. p. 217.

⁸³ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 257.

⁸⁴ Ivi, pp. 258.

successors to Robert Lowell, who had taught a poetry workshop there. At the end of 1980 he was offered a five-year contract by Harvard: to teach there for one term a year. In 1981 he resigned from his job at Carysfort and started at Harvard in January 1982.⁸⁵ In 1984 he was elected to the Boylston Chair of Rhetoric and Oratory. Since he started teaching there he divided his time between America and Dublin. His wife Marie fully supported him and often went to America to visit him. There he never felt lonely because he knew a few people who he first met at the arts festivals in Ireland, for example Helen Vendler and Alfie Alcorn.⁸⁶

1980 was a very meaningful year for Heaney with the publication of *Selected Poems 1965-1975* and his collection of prose pieces *Preoccupations* in October. In 1982 he co-edited with Ted Hughes a children book called “The rattle bag”. In 1983 he published *Sweeney Astray* in Ireland. Simultaneously in England in 1984 another work was published: *Station Island*.⁸⁷

The decision to publish *Sweeney Astray* first in Ireland was because of Heaney’s directorship of Field Day. This was a theatre company formed in Derry in 1980 by Heaney’s friend Brian Friel and the actor Stephen Rea. They produced Friel play *Translations*. The play, set in 1833, set an important moment in the death of the Irish language. The examination of Irish history and the relationship between England and Ireland can be seen as an essential signature of Field Day. It is precisely in this context that Heaney saw the initial publication of *Sweeney Astray*.⁸⁸

“When we started Field Day I liked the idea of being published in Derry. [...] I hoped that gradually the Northern Unionist or Northern Protestants readership might, in some minuscule way feel free to identify with the Gaelic tradition.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 259.

⁸⁶ O’Driscoll Dennis, cit. p. 267.

⁸⁷ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 260.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 261.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

In 1983 Heaney also published a pamphlet poem *An Open Letter*. This received media attention because he dissociated himself from the term “British” under which he was classified by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion. They were the editors of the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. (1982).⁹⁰

1.9 Nobel Prize and his last years.



*Seamus Heaney, and his wife Marie Devlin, at their home in Dublin, in 2009. Photograph: Antonio Olmos, for the Observer.*⁹¹

From 1989 to 1994 he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford and he continued to divide his time between America and Ireland and also he still did some public readings. In 1995 he was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, when the news broke he was in Greece with his wife and for the two subsequent days no one, not even his children could contact him, he officially received the news when he reached the Dublin Airport. He always referred to the Prize as the “N thing”. He did not want to make a fuss about it.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2013/aug/30/seamus-heaney-life-pictures-poetry>

In 2000 he received an honorary doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania and in 2003 at the Queen's University was opened a "Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry".⁹²

In 2006 Heaney suffered a stroke but he later on recovered.

In 2010 Faber published his twelfth collection *Human Chain* and was awarded with the Forward Poetry Prize. In 2011 he was named by the "Observer" "Britain's top 300 intellectuals".⁹³

On August 30 2013 Seamus Heaney died, at the age of 74, in the Blackrock Clinic in Dublin. After a short fall outside a restaurant in Dublin he entered the hospital for a small procedure but he did not recovery and he died at 7:30 the following morning.⁹⁴

His son Michael revealed at the funeral that the poet's last words were "noli timere" (don't be afraid) to his wife Marie.

His funeral was broadcasted live on RTE television and radio and streamed internationally on RTE website.⁹⁵ Many were the tributes paid to Heaney: President Higgins, Bill Clinton, the former president of the United States and the European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso. Even Harvard University issued a statement.⁹⁶

Heaney was enormously popular, his books are still sold exceptionally well for a contemporary poet.

⁹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seamus_Heaney

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: STATION ISLAND

Introduction:

Station Island is the sixth poem collection written by Heaney. It was first published in UK and Ireland in 1984 by Faber & Faber and, then, published in America by Ferrar, Straus and Giroux in 1985.

This collection is divided in three parts: the first part is an opening section of individual lyrics inspired by memories of the ordinary life. The central section, named after the title itself, narrates and describes a series of encounters with the dead. The third and final part is called “Sweeney Redivivus”. It consists on a series of poems about the figure of “Sweeney Astray”, the seventh century king who was transformed in a bird in the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne*. This was translated by Heaney as *Sweeney Astray*.⁹⁷

Even though the poem is divided in three parts, the book has a formal unity, signalled by the presence in all of the sections of the Sweeney figure.⁹⁸ We encounter this character, for the first time, at the end of the Part One section in the last poem called “The King of Ditchbacks”. In the second part, right at the beginning of *Station Island*, we see Sweeney as the unregenerate Simon Sweeney, one of a family of tinkers remembered from Heaney’s childhood. Finally, in the last section, there is the full presence of Sweeney, being the “Sweeney Redivivus”.⁹⁹ In the “The King of Ditchbacks” the King calls Sweeney “dark morse” and this is tapped throughout the volume. It spells out a strict scrutiny by the poet on his own attachments and responsibilities. This self-scrutiny proceeds throughout the three parts in

⁹⁷ Corcoran Neil, *The poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, London, Faber and Faber, 1998, p. 110.

⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 110.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

different ways.¹⁰⁰ In part one it occurs in separate lyrics originating in autobiographical experience; in the second section the poet undergoes a penitential and confessional exercise on a mythologized pilgrimage. In the “Sweeney Redivivus” part Heaney’s voice is twinned with the character whose name rhymes with his own “Sweeney”.¹⁰¹ So the different modes of the volume are: the lyric, the narrative and dramatic. The shortest poem in *Station Island*, called “Widgeon” may be read as an allegory of the book’s different modes.

2.1 PART ONE

The individual lyrics of Part One introduce a new acerbity and astringency to the Heaney lyric. As a matter of fact, many of them offer a regretful self-scrutiny as objects and occasions from the ordinary world, insisting on their ethical claim. For example in “An Aisling in the Burren” there are sermons in stones:

“The day the clatter of stones
as we climbed was a sermon
on conscience and healing”¹⁰².

Poem after poems Heaney listens to similar sermons as the natural world offers instances of this model.¹⁰³ “Sloe Gin” is “bitter/ and dependable”; the Pacific in “Malibu” is an instruction in how this poet is, according to Corcoran, indissolubly wedded to the ascetic Atlantic; flying a kite is to know “the strumming, rooted, long-tailed pull of grief”. All of these moralities make Part One severe and self –admonitory; the tone is mostly reprimanded, restrained and even exhausted. Self-chastening is now accompanied by a sense of decline

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ivi p.111.

¹⁰² Heaney Seamus, “*Station Island*”, London, Faber and Faber, 1984. p. 47.

¹⁰³ Corcoran Neil cit. p. 113.

and the dangerous fragmentariness of memory.¹⁰⁴

What keeps soliciting at some level in a large number of these poems is the political reality of the North. For example in “Sandstone Keepsake”¹⁰⁵ a stone acts as the prompt to a meditation in which the poet is able to make a self- portrait of the artist as a political outsider. This is characteristic in its rejection of uneasy self-deprecation:

“It was ruddier, with an underwater
hint of contusion, when I lifted it,
wading a shingle beach on Inishowen.
Across the estuary light after light
Came on a silently round the perimeter
of the camp. A stone from Phlegeton,
bloodied on the bed of hell’s hot river?”¹⁰⁶

The poem reflects on the fact that this stone was “lifted” from the beach at Inishowen. Inishowen was at the opposite side of the Lough Foyle from the Magilligan internment camp. Heaney mythologized the stone in a Dantean analogy, imagining that the stone was from Phlegeton: “A stone from Phlegeton / bloodied on the bed of the hell’s hot river”.¹⁰⁷ He concludes the poem in a self-deflating contemplation on how he may appear to the Magilligan guards. It seems that “Sandstone Keepsake” may inherit the guilt and anxiety of “Exposure” (written in 1975 and included in the volume *North*). Nonetheless this seems more ironically assured of the poet’s inessential status:

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 114

¹⁰⁶ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 114.

the only thing that the poem can aspire to is the “veneration” of political victim.¹⁰⁸

2.2 PART TWO: STATION ISLAND

Station Island, also known as St Patrick’s Purgatory, is a small isle in the middle of Lough Derg in the county of Donegal. This isle has been a place of pilgrimage for Irish Catholics since medieval times. This pilgrimage usually lasts for three days and it consists in a self-punitive routine of prayer, fasting and barefoot walking around stones. This place has inspired popular legend and writing, especially medieval accounts of miracles and visions.¹⁰⁹ Since the nineteenth century Station Island has been the subject of literary treatments. For example poets like William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, Denis Devlin and Sean O’Faolain wrote about the isle and its religious meaning. The role model used in *Station Island* is Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, in particular the “Purgatorio” part where Dante meets various ghosts, who had an impact in his life. So the imaginary pilgrimage, taken by Heaney in *Station Island*, is a series of meetings with ghosts of the same type Dante meets in the “Purgatorio”: they are friendly, sad, exemplary and admonitory.¹¹⁰

The ghosts that Heaney meets in the poem have all been “inhabitants of the actual Irish world”¹¹¹, they either were friends and acquaintances or writers known for their work. The conversations are meant to enlighten the poet on the living of a genuine life or on the production of important art.

Helen Vendler comments that these ghosts can also be seen as a series of alter egos of the poets. They are men whose lives the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ivi, p. 117.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

poet might have found himself living¹¹².

Even though his encounters are mostly personal, he tries to make the, archetypal, his protagonists and antagonists have more of a general status when they are aligned with mythical figures of the past. For instance in I (a prelude to the pilgrimage itself) Heaney first encounter is with Simon Sweeney, who is referred to as a “Sabbath-breaker”, but he also reminds us of the Celtic hero of *Buile Suibhne*. Simon Sweeney was an actual figure who the poet used to meet on his way to school when he was a child. When in the poem he encounters Heaney he commands him to “Stay clear of all procession” but also fails to keep the poet away from the “quick bell-notes” of the church. As Hart observes, this frightens greatly the poet and sends him quickly on his way.¹¹³

“I was a fasted pilgrim,
Light headed, leaving home
to face into my stations.
“Stay clear of all processions!”¹¹⁴

For the poet, the figure of Sweeney is like the dark wood, an accuser who tries to threaten the pilgrim and wants to restrain him from redemption. The objectification as “dark wood” can also be found in the famous prologue of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* even though in Heaney’s tries to transpose Dante’s “dark wood” into his own backyard.

¹¹² Vendler Helen, *Seamus Heaney*, London, Fontana Press, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1998, p. 93.

¹¹³ Hart Henry, *Ghostly Colloquies Seamus Heaney’s “Station Island”*, *Irish University Review*, Autumn 1988, Vol.18, No. 2, pp.233-250, Edinburgh University Press, p.240.

¹¹⁴ Heaney Seamus, cit. p.63.

Dante's design of separation, initiation and return is also used by Heaney but firmly on the Irish ground.¹¹⁵

In the canto II Heaney encounters the ghost of William Carleton: he meets him on the road and not on the island itself because Carleton, who was an Irish writer of the nineteenth century, in his youth visited Station Island. After that he wrote the article "The Lough Derg Pilgrim", a denunciation of the barbarities and superstitions happened in the island. Carleton, due to what he experienced, decided to convert to Protestantism.¹¹⁶ This encounter is a challenging one for the poet because for him he betrayed their religion: yet he also presents him as his double: they both witnessed, as child, the victims of Protestants and Catholics feud and as adults they fell into religious and political doubts.

Carleton blames Heaney of not using his poetry as a political means but Heaney strongly disagrees with this point of view. He also explains his reasons.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless the poet leaves for the pilgrimage with an important lesson from Carleton:

"Remember everything and keep your head"¹¹⁸

Heaney has drawn a parallel between Carleton and Virgil because he was one of his forerunners who had been to Lough Derg before and had written about that experience. But Carleton is only a potential guide: he does not go with him in the pilgrim like Virgil does with Dante so he abandons him to his own destiny¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁵ Hart Henry cit. p. 243.

¹¹⁶ Corcoran Neil cit. p. 117.

¹¹⁷ Ryan, L. Womack, *Converting to Things Foreknown: Heaney's Marvellous Imagination in "Station Island"*, Estudios Irlandeses, Number 11, 2016, pp.220-231, Baylor University Texas, p. 226.

¹¹⁸ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 66.

¹¹⁹ Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, *"Station Island": Seamus Heaney's "Divina Commedia"*, Irish University Review, Spring-Summer, 1996, Vol.26, No. 1, pp.127-142, Edinburgh University Press, p. 129.

The ghost encountered in the Canto III is an inanimate “seaside trinket”, who is associated with the figure of Agnes Heaney, his father’s sister who died of TB in 1920. Agnes resembles Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice and for the poet it also recalls the Catholic rites performed on her behalf. He also points his focus on the young girl’s spirit who is preserved by her early death¹²⁰. The girl’s corpse is ironically compared to a:

“bad carcass and scraggs of hair of our dog that had disappeared weeks before”

In Section IV when the poet is about to declare “I renounce” at one of the stations, he meets a priest, Terry Keenan, whom he knew as a young man. He had died on the foreign missions briefly after his ordination. He tells the poet that he had:

“rotted like a pear among bare-breasted women and rat-ribbed men.”

Heaney realizes that the priest renounce in life was dangerous because it was forced by blind faith and not by a mature understanding. Now the priest, when he pronounces the words “I renounce” he turns them towards his faith, renouncing his spirit because he wants to return to earth. This can be seen as an ironic inversion of the fourth station of the cross where Peter denies the figure of Christ. As Maria Cristina Fumagalli¹²¹ has observed this priest can be seen as a another “Virgil manqué”: at the end of the poem Heaney mentions that between them there was a sort of master-disciple relationship; his comments about the meaning and the value of the poet’s journey strip Heaney of the support of religious belief.

Canto V consists of three different encounters with teachers and mentors of the poet himself. These encounters include the figure of Ben Murphy, who was Heaney’s Latin teacher at Anahorish school. The poet recalls the hard lessons learnt from Latin, then the poet hears the voice of another master, Patrick

¹²⁰ Hart Henry, cit. p.245.

¹²¹ Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, cit. p.129.

Kavanagh who reminds Heaney that he is doing religious and poetic exercises that he himself did fifty two years before. Kavanagh warns the poet that the pilgrimage is a lie and was created by an artist-god to trap trusting believers pretending to comfort them:¹²²

“Sure I might have known

Once I had made the pad, you’d be after me

sooner or later. Forty-two years on

and you’ve got no further! But after that again,

where else would you go? Iceland, maybe?

Maybe the Dordogne?¹²³”

Section VI evokes an early sexual experience and later a satisfying and fulfilling one. In the first part he recalls the childhood game “secrets” that he made with a young girl, comparing them to prehistoric and pagan adventures. Henry Hart affirmed that this girl who goes to visit him in his dream is Catholic meaning that she’s universal. In fact, she is compared to a vegetation goddess in modern dress (She is called by the poet a “Catkin-pixie”).¹²⁴ She also is juxtaposed to the legendary garrulous wife of king Midas and she also represents some of the characteristics of the Virgin Mary as well as the poet’s wife, whose name is Marie.¹²⁵ Later on, Heaney focuses on the good life of healthy sexuality. His new happiness is compared to Dante’s renewed inspiration after the visits of Lucy and Beatrice. His wife then is accustomed to Demeter. The section ends with the translation of a few line of the second

¹²² Hart Henry, cit. p. 246

¹²³ Heaney Seamus, cit. p.73.

¹²⁴ Hart Henry, cit. p.247.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Canto of the *Divina Commedia*, where Dante compares himself to flowers restored by Lucy's delight:¹²⁶

“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.”¹²⁷

Section VII includes the ghost of William Strathearn, a Catholic shopkeeper assassinated in an act of violence by two policemen in Northern Ireland, whom the poet used to play football with when he was young. This Canto is written in *terza rima* (the refrain used by Dante in the whole of the *Divina Commedia*). The poet actually does not name him because he wants to give his death a more symbolic meaning: he represents all the victim of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Canto VIII involves another ghost similar to the figure of Strathearn. He is an archaeologist named Tom Delaney, a friend of the poet who died at thirty two. Towards this figure he feels “I had somehow broken covenants, and failed an obligation”.¹²⁸ Then, appears the ghost of Colum McCarney, the poet's cousin to whom he dedicated the poem “The Strand at Lough Beg” in *Field Work*. He was murdered by Protestants and here he delivers the toughest attack to the poet. He condemns Heaney by saying that he and accordingly his poetry were not involved enough in the affairs of Northern Ireland, not actively discouraging those atrocities:¹²⁹

“The Protestants who shot me through the head

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 76.

¹²⁸ Corcoran Neil , cit. p. 116.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

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
Purgatorio
and saccharined my death with morning dew.¹³⁰

In section IX we can properly see that we are in the “Inferno” because the atmosphere is very gloomy and the souls are not able to accept their destiny and so they cannot be comforted. These souls are very different from the ones encountered by Dante in the *Purgatorio* section because they accept their fate with joy.¹³¹ This section is still about the Ulster situation. Heaney now meets the ghost of Francis Hughes, an IRA militant who died of hunger strike in 1981. The poet does not know him personally but he feels a connection with him because they both were born in the same district: Bellaghy. This soul is restless and this is transmitted to the poet himself. This violence transforms his native place into a proper hell and transforms his love for his land into hatred. Then the poet begins an invective against Ulster, in the same way Dante did against his native place Florence in the political cantos of the “Inferno,” *Purgatorio* “and “Paradiso.”¹³²

Canto X involves a ghost which is inanimate because it consists in a mug taken from the poet’s childhood home by actors that wanted to use it in a play. This is returned in the same way Ronan’s Psalter is miraculously returned from the lake by an otter at the opening of *Sweeney Astray*:

“Dipped and glamoured from this translation,

It was restored with all its cornflower haze

¹³⁰ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 83.

¹³¹ Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, cit. p.130

¹³² *Ibid.*

Still dozing, its parchment glazes fast –
as the otter surfaced once with Ronan’s psalter
miraculously unharmed, that had been lost
a day and a night under lough water.”¹³³

This cup represents Heaney’s own sense of fulfilment. Henry Hart declared that through this image the poet wanted to say that now that his dangerous journey is completed and that he receives the boon (the holy grail demystified) and the power to dispense words to his audience.¹³⁴

In section XI, the ghost of a monk, to whom once Heaney made his confession, speaks to him through another object: a kaleidoscope. For penalty he incites the poet to translate a poem by Juan de la Cruz. He chooses to translate “Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe”. That was a poem about the Spanish mystic’s celebration of the eternal fountain representing God as a source of life, whose love runs into the world through the figures of Christ and the Holy Ghost¹³⁵. This act of penance is similar to the one taken by Dante during his path through Purgatory: before entering, he has to take three steps, symbolising the three parts of penitence. According to the doctrine of Purgatory, this will lead him into the second kingdom of death. So in section XI we are indeed in the Purgatory and we can also notice the passage from Hell to Purgatory when Heaney uses the *terza rima*.¹³⁶

“As if the prisms of the kaleidoscope
I plunged once in a butt od muddied water
surfaced like a marvellous lightship

¹³³ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 87.

¹³⁴ Hart Henry, cit. p. 248.

¹³⁵ Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, cit. p. 131.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

and out of its crystals a monk's face.

[...]

What came to nothing could always be replenished.

“Read poems as prayers”, he said, “and for your penance

Translate me something by Juan de la Cruz”.¹³⁷

The final Canto, XII, the poet, once he has returned to the main land, now encounters James Joyce's ghost: he recommends to the poem a course opposed to that of the orthodox Catholic pilgrimage. Joyce is not named directly but the poet calls him a “prosecutor” and later on he mentions “Stephen's diary” referring to Joyce's poem “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man”.

“Old father, mother's son,

There is a moment in Stephen's Diary

For April the thirteenth [...].”

He claims that the only way the poet can do a proper work is through isolation. He remains rooted to the ground and tells Heaney to do the same¹³⁸. Some critics say that the figure of Joyce is similar to the figure of Virgil in the *Divina Commedia*. There is a substantial difference between the two of them: in Heaney's poem, at the end we do not know who is guiding whom because the poet wants to take Joyce's hands and guide him into a more sensible position towards religious and political commitments. On the other hand, Joyce wants to guide away the poet from senseless and archaic rituals like the one performed at Lough Derg.¹³⁹

“Your obligation

¹³⁷ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 89.

¹³⁸ Hart Henry, cit. p.235.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

is not discharged by any common rite.

What you must do must be done on your own

So get back in harness”¹⁴⁰

In her article called “Station Island: Seamus Heaney’s *Divina Commedia*”¹⁴¹ Maria Cristina Fumagalli says that Joyce can be seen as the reminiscent of Dante’s meeting with his ancestor Cacciaguida in “Paradiso” XV, XVI and XVII. Cacciaguida informs Dante that he will be exiled from his beloved Florence so that he encourages him to write his poem. Joyce does the same thing with Heaney, giving him the freedom to write his poem. He also refers to Heaney that he must not feel inferior towards tradition but he has to accept it and recognise it as an essential presence:

“Let go, let fly, forget.

You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note.”¹⁴²

2.3 PART THREE: SWEENEY REDIVIVUS.

The figure of Sweeney, as we already seen in the first part of the poem, is recurrent in Heaney’s works. First he translated “Sweeney Astray” in 1972 with the actual publication in 1983. In that poem Sweeney is the Ulster king who had offended Saint Ronan and because of that he is punished and cursed after the Battle of Moira in 673. He went mad and was transformed into a bird: he started flying (he was also exiled from his family and tribe) over Ireland

¹⁴⁰ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 92.

¹⁴¹ Fumagalli, Maria Cristina, cit. p. 134.

¹⁴² Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 93.

and Scotland.¹⁴³ The narrative of the poem is often interrupted by Sweeney's expressions of misery and also the celebration of the Ireland's landscape with a particular description of its trees. So we can see that Sweeney is also a lyrical poet. In the poem Heaney recognises a move from the pagan world to the Christian culture in Ireland. What is also important to notice is that Sweeney's voice is subdued to Heaney's own because he uses a lexicon familiar to the poet. In his book *The poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*¹⁴⁴, Neil Corcoran underlines that Sweeney is a constant presence in his work but we can also see that in "Sweeney Redivivus" the poet uses the definite voice of Joyce and the freedom of writing his poems. Sweeney is also the name of an antithetical figure resembling the name of Seamus Heaney. We can see that Sweeney is some sort of a Mask, a Yeatsian Mask, and we are perfectly aware that Yeats seems to be an important influence in the construction of the poem "The Master":

"Deliberately he would unclasp
His book of withholding
a page at a time and it was nothing
arcane, just the old rules
we all had inscribed on our slates."¹⁴⁵

This poem can be viewed as an allegory of what the critic Harold Bloom has called the "anxiety of influence": the master is the figure whom Heaney must go against in order to define and articulate his own art. Heaney is influenced

¹⁴³ Corcoran Neil, cit. p.125.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Heaney Seamus, cit. p.110.

by the mythology that Yeats uses in his poems so that the poet has to measure himself against him: ¹⁴⁶

“How flimsy I felt climbing down
The unrailed stairs on the wall,
Hearing the purpose and venture
In a wingflap above me.”

The poem “The First Flight” narrates the move of the poet from Belfast to Glenmore and is viewed as bird’s migration. The language used and the events depicted are similar to the ones that occurred in “Sweeney Astray”: Sweeney was transformed into a bird after the Battle of Moira and was always stalked by some individuals with stones: ¹⁴⁷

“Singly they came to the tree
With a stone in each pocket
To whistle and bill me back in
[...].” ¹⁴⁸

This can be compared to the criticism made by people who were jealous of Heaney or simply wanted to use him. Both Sweeney and Heaney were criticized for their past actions: Sweeney ignored the military protocol at Moira while Heaney did not speak up for the Catholics in the Troubles. They both

¹⁴⁶ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 126.

¹⁴⁷ <https://fawbie.info/station-island/the-master/>

¹⁴⁸ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 102

decided to escape this political situation, Sweeney went to Glen Bolcain while Heaney went to the Irish Republic:¹⁴⁹

“[...]”

So I mastered new rungs of the air

To survey out of reach

Their bonfires oh hills, their hosting,

and fasting, the levies from Scotland

[...]”¹⁵⁰

So this poem, as Corcoran said, celebrates with a Joycean disdain the adverse criticism.¹⁵¹

In “Drifting Off” the poet ascribes different human qualities to birds. This is a version of the medieval poem “Boast”. He starts mentioning some birds like the albatross that have epic qualities so they are out of reach for the poet.

“The guttersnipe and the albatross

Gliding for days without a single wingbeat

Were equally beyond me.”¹⁵²

Then he turns to birds that have qualities that the poet does not absolutely possess. There are also other birds which the poet feels at home with. He describes them as his similar. But he also tells the audience that he learned that there are some birds that cannot be trusted. The bright coloured birds remind

¹⁴⁹ <https://fawbie.info/station-island/the-master/>

¹⁵⁰ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 102.

¹⁵¹ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 126.

¹⁵² Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 104.

him of his poor public performance.¹⁵³

The poem ends with the image of Heaney as a hawk himself and not the Joycean “hawlike man”:

“But when goldfinch or kingfisher rent

The veil of the usual,

Pinions whispered and braced

as I stopped, unwieldy

and brimming,

my spurs at the ready.”¹⁵⁴

“The Scribes” is set in a millennium monastery where manuscript are copied and preserved by Scribes. This title may also refer to a group of people who made themselves judges, the precursor of the people who judged the poet for moving to Belfast in 1972. These scribes are described as negative by nature and Heaney/Sweeney throws this poem in their judgemental faces reminding them that the legends that were put into writing will be used in the future by Heaney to translate Sweeney incredible story:¹⁵⁵

“Now and again I started up

Miles away and saw in my absence

The sloped cursive of each back and felt them

Perfect themselves against me page by page.

¹⁵³ <https://fawbie.info/category/station-island/part-3-three-sweeney-redivivus/drifting-off/>

¹⁵⁴ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 104.

¹⁵⁵ <https://fawbie.info/station-island/the-scribes/>

Let them remember this not inconsiderable

contribution to their jealous art.”¹⁵⁶

The tone is much more softened in the poem “The Cleric”. It’s about Catholicism and it seems to acknowledge the fact that if you have place faith in it any future freedom will be defined by religion. The tones here are still pagan because Sweeney is reflecting on Saint Ronan.¹⁵⁷ The advent of Catholicism can be seen as an invasion of the Irish land and people so that Sweeney, at the beginning is infuriated by Saint Ronan because he started spreading his evangelism everywhere. Yet, at the end , Sweeney realises that Saint Ronan opened new horizons and freedom for him:

“Give him his due, in the end

He opened my path to a kingdom

Of such scope and neuter allegiance

My emptiness reigns with him.”¹⁵⁸

In “The Beech”, he suggests how selective his accounts of the world of his childhood were. He sets the young poet in a boundary tree between the old rural ways and modern military industrialism with a reference of the airforce bases in Northern Ireland during the Second World War.¹⁵⁹

“My hidebound boundary tree. My tree of knowledge.

¹⁵⁶ Heaney Seamus, cit. p 111.

¹⁵⁷ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 132.

¹⁵⁸ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 107.

¹⁵⁹ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 131.

My thick-tapped, soft fledged, airy listening post.”¹⁶⁰

“The first kingdom” is similar to “The Beech” but here Heaney takes a more bitter view of the inhabitants of his world, a view that perhaps was not expected from the author of Heaney’s first book:

“I blew hot and blew cold.

They were two faced and accommodating.

And seed, breed, and generation still

They are holding on, every bit

As pious and exacting and demanded.”¹⁶¹

The poem “Illo Tempore”, whose title is taken from the words introducing the reading of the Gospel in the Latin mass, is the more straightforward poem of the collection containing the religion theme¹⁶². He imagines Catholicism as a language that the poet has lost the ability to speak. The poem is not gracefully released but it is sadly resigned and it also has the same images of the other poem called “The Old Icons”. In both of them, there is a lot of regret and it creates a tone that can be seen both subdued and resolute: ¹⁶³

“Now I live by a famous strand

Where seabirds cry in the small hours

Like incredible souls

And even the range wall of promenade

¹⁶⁰ Heaney Seamus, cit. p.100.

¹⁶¹ Ivi,p.101.

¹⁶² Corcoran Neil, cit. p.132.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

That I press down on for conviction

Hardly tempts me to credit it.”¹⁶⁴

The poem that closes “Sweeney Redivivus” and the whole book is called “On the Road” and can be read as a summary of Heaney’s career to date. It also a statement of intentions for the future. This poem brings fulfilment to the volume’s journey, pilgrimage and migration. It opens with the figure of the poet while he is driving. The driver is behind the steering wheel of the car:¹⁶⁵

“In my hands

Like a wrested trophy,

The empty round

Of the steering wheel.”¹⁶⁶

In this place the reader can feel emptiness, only filled by the encounter with a rich young man who asks questions about salvation:

“Master, what must I

do to be saved?”¹⁶⁷

All of this is also accompanied by the ultimate vision of the last bird in “Station Island”. This provokes a response and the figure is not empty anymore; yet it is translated into the figure of Sweeney and he starts flying like a bird above the land.

In the last part of the poem we can see that there is a possibility of new

¹⁶⁴ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 117.

¹⁶⁵ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 132.

¹⁶⁶ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 119.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

renewal and there also can be a new form of inspiration, taken from desolation:¹⁶⁸

“For my book of changes
I would meditate
that stone-faced vigil
until the long dumbfounded
spirit broke cover
to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion.”¹⁶⁹

Station Island is one of the most famous long poems by Heaney and as we have seen throughout this brief analysis he often takes inspiration from the classics. In this collection, especially in the second part, we can see how influential Dante’s *Divina Commedia* was for Heaney and how he was able to quote Dante indirectly in many of his poems.

¹⁶⁸ Corcoran Neil, cit. p. 133

¹⁶⁹ Heaney Seamus, cit. p. 121.

CHAPTER 3: HEANEY AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CLASSICS.

1.1 Heaney and Dante:

As we have seen throughout chapter two, Dante was an important figure for Heaney and for his works. It is interesting to see what Heaney loved about Dante and how Dante affected Heaney's writing. During an interview with Karl Miller, Heaney observed:

¹⁷⁰“I was exhilarated to read Dante in translation in the Seventies, because I recognised some of the condition of Medieval Florence- the intensities, the factions, the personalities- as analogous to the Belfast situation. Farinata rising out of the tomb could be Paisley. The combination of personalities, political fury, psychological realism. All the voices speaking, and the accusation flying, the rage and the intimacy of *The Inferno*. I don't think, immediately I read the poem, “Aha! We can work with this.” The poem has the desiderata of high art, it is jubilantly at work in its medium, and at the same time has the interest of realist narrative. Eventually, however, it did present itself as an example, a way to be true to what was going on inside myself and outside myself.”

Station Island was not the only work that was inspired by the Italian Poet. For Heaney Dante was able to “place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to a scrutiny beyond history.”¹⁷¹

The poet, like Dante, wants to mark his own distinctive voice through his works and he also has this deep desire to understand himself on a profound level. By doing so, Heaney is following Dante's example and can achieve a new poetry free from social impositions. We can see all these influences in many works of Heaney: *Station Island*, *North*, and *Seeing things*. With these three major works Heaney was able to re-enact the three “Cantiche” that are present in the *Divina Commedia*. *North* is the

¹⁷⁰ Miller Karl, *Seamus Heaney in conversation with Karl Miller*, London, Between The Lines, 200, p.34.

¹⁷¹ Panzera Daniela, *Heaney's Journey into the Self: Towards a Dantean Light*, Nordic Irish Studies, 2016, vol.15, No.2, p 2.

counter part of the *Inferno* because it has an intense sense of suffering and the atmosphere is quite dark. In this collection the poet deals with the violence that was happening in Northern Ireland. Like Dante he has a conflicted relationship with his native land. Dante loved Florence but he was exiled for political reasons and for this reason he often said that Florence was lacking of pity and love.¹⁷² Heaney was not condemned into exile but, at a certain point of his life, he decided that he didn't want to live there anymore; so, he moved away. This is a clear case of "self- exile". Both Dante and Heaney witnessed the brutal aspects of their native lands and, in their works, there is always present this sense of injustice, felt for their country, because even though they love their native lands, they are stained by heart-breaking conflicts.

The prominent theme of *North* is the acts of violence that were occurring in Northern Ireland. In fact, in the second part of the poem, Heaney questions the role of his poetry in this hard time and how his poetry can help overcome this conflict. He also starts questioning if his decision to escape the North was the right one and he feels guilty for leaving his land in such a difficult time. Like Dante at the end of the collection Heaney wants to find that spark that will inspire the future generations¹⁷³.

Station Island can be considered a sort of *Purgatorio* because the poet here starts to talk with ghosts from his past and gives them a voice. These dialogues can make the poet answer some of his existential questions and to affirm his commitment. Maria Cristina Fumagalli stated that not only *Station Island* is like *Purgatorio* but it can be considered "a sort of miniature of the Divine Comedy". But Heaney's pilgrimage to Lough Dergh is shaped on the idea of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Following Dante's footsteps he starts a journey through the underworld and during this

¹⁷² Ivi, p.5

¹⁷³ Ivi, p.8

journey he is able to become an independent artist with his own personal vision. The poet in the paper “Envy and Identifications”, the poet confessed that he would not have written *Station Island* if he hadn’t become entranced with Dante’s *Divina Commedia*.¹⁷⁴

Seeing things is the equivalent of the *Paradiso*. Here Heaney creates a more transcendental poetry and the atmosphere here is luminous and it does not deal so much with the history of the “Troubles”. In this poem the poet takes another journey but this time to his past through memory. In this collection we also find the presence of another important classical figure for Heaney: Virgil and his work *Aeneid*. As a matter of fact, the collection is opened by the translation of an excerpt from *Aeneid IV*. Here Aeneas asks the Sybil of Cumae to descend into the reign of Dis and meet his dead father. Heaney wants to do the same thing: he wants to descend into his memory and meet his father. He also expresses his wish to enlarge his vision to the invisible aspects of life. The first poem of the collection also continues the journey theme, this time is through another poem about another poet, Philip Larkin, that Dante is mentioned:¹⁷⁵

“ [...] I alone was girding myself to face

The ordeal of my journey and my duty.”

Even though Larkin has made a journey for Heaney he will remain trapped into his meaningless experience without hope of liberation.

Heaney not only quoted Dante and his works but he also used the same numerical arrangement in his sonnets that Dante used in the structure of the *Divina Commedia*. Also the poetic form used by Heaney in these poems is a transformation of Dante’s *terza rima*.

¹⁷⁴ Ivi, p.9

¹⁷⁵ Ivi, p.12

Nowadays, when Irish poets want to quote and use Dante are faced with a feeling of anxiety because the figure of Heaney and of his use of Dante has assumed a prominent profile in Irish poetry. Heaney's influence creates more anxiety than Dante's because the temporal closeness offers more grounds of comparison. Heaney always sympathised with outcast figures like Sweeney, Dante and Grendel¹⁷⁶. He draws on medieval texts to deal with contemporary concerns. Using Dante and not Shakespeare also represents a way of escaping control from the British imperial tradition. By using Dante's political situation Heaney uses it as a way of talking about the Northern Irish conflict. In his work *Field Work* (1979) it appears his first Dante references, starting with the Ugolino episode. There is a reference to the fact that like Dante he was in his thirties and he found himself lost in the wood. In section VI of *Station Island* he directly translates the end of Canto II of the *Inferno* in order to communicate his reverence towards Dante:¹⁷⁷

<p>“As little flowers that were all bowed shut By the night chills rise on their stems open As soon as they have felt to touch of sunlight, So I revived in my own wilting powers And my heart flushed, like somebody set free.”</p>	<p>“Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo chinati e chiusi, poi che'l sol li 'imbianca, si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo, tal mi fec'io di mia virtude stanca, e tanto buono ardire al cor mi corse, ch'io cominciai come persona franca [...]”</p> <p>(Dante Alighieri, <i>Divina Commedia</i>,</p>
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¹⁷⁶ Maren Gisa Kratz, *O Poet guiding me. Dante and contemporary Irish Poetry*, Erlangung der Doktorwürde der Neuphilologischen Fakultät der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2011, p. 20.

¹⁷⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 26-27-42.

(Heaney 1984:76)

Inferno II, 1267-132)

Heaney's work *Seeing Things* is divided in two parts and the second one is called "Squarings". It consists on forty-eight twelve-lined poems, which are divided into four sets of twelve poems each. The sets are called: *Lightenings*, *Settings*, *Crossings* and *Squartings*.

The first poem in the *Crossings* section, is a projection of the Canto I of *Inferno*. At the end of the section the last poem, which is about a memory about returning from a civil rights march in Newry in the wake of Bloody Sunday, there is a threatening situation and is compared to Dante's crossing of Acheron. He remembers taking part in the protest with Michael Longley and when they were walking back they were surrounded by the police.¹⁷⁸

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)

Again, in 1986 Heaney translated the first three lines of the *Inferno* for Maristella Gallo's initiative *Poems on the Underground*. This brief translation exemplifies the relationship between the Underground and the *Inferno* in Heaney's poetry but also the image of life as a journey: the one who read the lines on the train are on a journey. The translation transported into the

¹⁷⁸ Ivi, pp. 54-55.

Underground also is a metaphor of how the language takes a journey in time and space with every new translation. “The Underground” is also the poem that opens all *Station Island*. In this poem there are many references to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and to Dido and Beatrice.¹⁷⁹

According to Helen Vendler, Heaney’s poem “Mud Vision” in *The Haw Lantern* he wants “to join the domain of mud with the domain of vision” and how to “reconcile the sullied flesh with the lucent soul¹⁸⁰”. All of this recalls the last four Cantos of the *Paradiso* where Dante has his final vision of God while entering the white rose.¹⁸¹

“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)	“Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna che si dilata e ingrada e redole odor di lode al sol che sempre verna” (Divina Commedia, Paradiso, XXX, 124-126)
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1.2 Heaney and Virgil

Virgil was another significant classical figure for Heaney and during the interview with Dennis O’Driscoll he stated that what drew him toward the Latin poet was the *Aeneid* and more precisely the journey that Aeneas takes in the underworld. There are many similarities between the two poets both in their private and poetic life. For example much of their early life is revolved

¹⁷⁹ Ivi, pp.74-75.

¹⁸⁰ Vendler Helen, *Seamus Heaney*, Fontana Press, 1998, pp. 144-145.

¹⁸¹ Maren Gisa Kratz, cit. p. 201.

around the pastoral and rural scene.¹⁸² Heaney's works are not only influenced by Irish history and culture but they show a ghostly presence of other cultures and texts. One of the more important ones is certainly Virgil and his works: *Aeneid*, *Georgic* and *Bucolic*. Like Heaney, Virgil lived in a period of civil unrest and violence spread non-stop through Italy. The main difference between them is that Virgil wrote an epic poem, the *Aeneid* celebrating the Augustus' Empire, whereas Heaney never supported any type of Empire. One of the main aims of his works is trying not to forget the past in order to create a society that might accept the Other¹⁸³.

So for Heaney the classics are a way of inserting himself into an European world and also trying to understand the different types of cultures.

The sixth book of the *Aeneid* is the part that Heaney interiorized the most. Heaney translated the sixth book and then wrote a poem *Route 110* that Rachel Falconer,¹⁸⁴ in her article, considered a "Virgilian autobiographical sequence". *Route 110* was written after he suffered a stroke and also after the fact that his first granddaughter was born. The descend into the underworld in Heaney's point of view is not of epic dimensions but in some kind of rural mode, using the language that Virgil used in the *Georgics IV* where he narrated the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and their journey into the underworld.

It is important to notice that during the last phase of Heaney's career he chose Virgil to accompany him towards the end and a clear evidence of that is the posthumous publication of his translation of *Aeneid* Book VI in 2016. Falconer stated that this was Heaney's way to speak from his

¹⁸² Hickey Ian, *Virgilian Hauntings in the Later Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland, 2018, p. 28.

¹⁸³ Ivi, p. 29.

¹⁸⁴ Falconer Rachel, *Seamus Heaney and the Classics*, Bann Valley Muses, edited by Stephen Harrison, Fiona Macintosh and Helen Eastman, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.181.

grave¹⁸⁵. There are three themes that resonate the most in his work: the bough, the barge and Aeneas' attempt to embrace Anchises. Another work that was influenced by the sixth book of the *Aeneid* is *District and Circle* where these themes are played with a greater political resonance, due to the 9/11 events and the London bombings in 2005. His last phase of life, not only as a poet but also as a human being in general, was always accompanied by the presence of Virgil and his underworld journey. That allowed him to explore this fragile phase of life.¹⁸⁶

Since his early poems, Heaney has always been linked with the meaning of katabasis, it's a Greek word that means "going down". The concept of katabasis is also linked to the journey into the underworld: the descend can be quite difficult and slow while the return is, often, very quick. The poem "Digging" is one of the first works that have been rooted in the theme of katabasis: Heaney here is trying to retrieve a memory of his father and grandfather when they were digging potato drills.¹⁸⁷ In a more general way the first volumes published by Heaney prove that his instinct was to look for the truth in the ground and in the mythical underworld. For example, all of his bog poems are about archaeological excavations. Heaney in all of his poems wanted to play the katabatic principle, as Falconer said, as to reach down for and holding fast memory¹⁸⁸.

At the begging of his work *Seeing Things* Heaney translates some lines of Virgil's book VI of *Aeneid*. Later he will translate the whole book from a new point of view:¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ivi, p.184.

¹⁸⁸ Ivi, p.185.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

“[...] latet arbore opaca	“[...] No one is ever allowed
Aureus et foliis et lento vimine	Down to earth’s hidden places
ramus,	unless he has first
[...] hunc tegit omnis	Plucked this sprout of fledged gold
Lucus et obscuris claudunt	from its tree
convabillius umbrae.	[...]
Sed non ante datur telluris operta	And when it is plucked, a second
subire,	one grows every time
auricomos quam quis decerpserit	In its place, golden again, emanating
arbore fetus.	That same sheen and shimmer [...]
[...] primo avulso non deficit alter	(Heaney translation of <i>Aeneid</i> VI
Aureus, et simili frondescit virga	187-98)
metallo.”	
(<i>Aeneid</i> VI, 138-44)	

This golden bough has become for Heaney a symbol of the beauty in his poetry, and the light that the bough emanates is like a premonition for the poetry Heaney wants to write throughout *Seeing Things* and onward. This, though, is still katabatic because the aim is going into memory¹⁹⁰. The bough theme is recurrent in Heaney’s works and like in Virgil’s works we are able to recognise it multiple times. In the *Aeneid* the bough is described twice: once by the Sybil of Cumae and then when Aeneas sees it for himself. In Heaney we find the bough theme at the beginning of *Seeing Things*, in the poem “Route 110” and in his translation of *Aeneid VI*¹⁹¹.

In the poem *Electric Light* we see a dialogue between Heaney and Virgil and the latter here lays down some commands for the poet. Heaney

¹⁹⁰ Ivi, p.186.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

provides us with a translation of these Virgilian commands that are considered part of the poetic process:¹⁹²

“[...] Poetry, order, the times, “Carmen, ordo, nascitur, saeculum,
The nation, wrong and renewal, then gens”
an infant birth [...]”
(Heaney, *Electric Light*, 11).

All of the *Electric Light* section is an homage to Virgil’s figure, presenting a lot of translation of Virgil’s works.

In his article “Vergil and Seamus Heaney¹⁹³” Michael Putnam has analysed the influence of Virgil in *Electric Light* and how Heaney translated the Latin words used by the Mantuan poet. The first book of *Electric Light* is an interpretation of the fourth eclogue; the second is a translation of the ninth eclogue; and the third book is a variation of the first eclogue. In his three poems Heaney’s focus is on the incursion of Rome in the pastoral world and the birth of a boy who will bring prosperity to the world¹⁹⁴.

Firstly, Putnam analyses the ninth Eclogue: this is a dialogue between two shepherds, and the central theme here is poetry and the impossibility of writing good poetry when the condition of the world is flawed¹⁹⁵. The two shepherds Lycidas and Moeris talk about another figure, which is absent, whereas there is also a third character who is Menalca, a singer-magician, who not present, might save the land. The translation that Heaney provides, according to Putnam¹⁹⁶, sometimes is not that literal and in some ways diverges from Virgil’s point of view. That happens

¹⁹² Hickey Ian, cit. p.31.

¹⁹³ Putnam C.J Michael, *Vergil and Seamus Heaney*, The Vergilian Society, Vergilius, 2010, Vol. 56, p.5.

¹⁹⁴ Ivi, p.5

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ivi, p.10.

especially in the lines 60-61 when Heaney turns the farmers' gesture into an artistic moment. In line 43 there is a subtle reference to Kipling:¹⁹⁷

“Insani feriant sine litora fluctus” (Virgil, <i>Eclogue 9</i>)	“let the mad white horses paw and pound the shore” (Heaney translation of Virgil's <i>Eclogue 9</i>)
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In here the literal translation would be “let the mad wave strike the shore” but Heaney also uses the words “mad horses” because he wanted to use the same symbol that Kipling used in his poem “White Horses”.

The fourth eclogue is about the birth of a boy who will bring serenity and prosperity to the world, after an era of uncertainty. In the poem *Bann Valley Eclogue* (a dialogue with all the past poetry) there is a reference to this fourth eclogue¹⁹⁸. Heaney quotes the first line of the eclogue as an epigraph. This serves to establish a level of special connection that Heaney had not only with Virgil but also with the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who wrote a variation of the *Eclogue IV* in 1977.

In this poem Heaney calls Virgil his “hedge school master”: this was the role of some literate people who taught to illiterate members of the population.¹⁹⁹ At the end of the poem, we note the word “asperging”.

This word comes from the Latin verb “aspergo” and it has do to with the Latin High Mass²⁰⁰. In the poem Heaney , again, evokes some of the crisis in our history and he turns Virgil's “puer” into a girl: that's probably a reference to his niece who was not born yet. The message that Heaney

¹⁹⁷ Ivi, p.11.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 12.

²⁰⁰ Ivi, p.13.

wants to convey is that there is still hope for Ireland and mankind in general²⁰¹.

Another Virgilian motif that is recurrent in Heaney's works is the steeping into Charon's boat and more precisely the poet describes the moment when Aeneas is stepping into Charon's boat to cross the River Styx. It is often used to assess a political situation. At the end of *Seeing Things* the poet gives us a translation of Dante's description of Charon's boat.²⁰² Here the poet is using Dante's version because he is influenced by Dante's vision of Hell and Purgatory. Later, although, in "Crossing xxxvi" Heaney is remembering an episode from his past (he was stopped by the police at a checkpoint in Northern Ireland) and he compares this to the river crossing on Charon's boat²⁰³. Heaney directly says that this was a scene he must have taken from Dante. On this particular point, Falconer²⁰⁴ stated that this cannot be a scene from Dante but that it's possibly coming from Virgil because in the *Inferno* Charon refuses to let the poets on to the boat. Both Virgil and Heaney narrated that when a living man steps into the boat the dead souls sink low into the water.

"Other souls ensconced on the long thwarts

He hurries off up gangways, then at once

Hands mighty Aeneas down into the vessel.

Under that weight the boat's plied timbers groan

And thick marsh water oozes through the leaks [...]"

²⁰¹ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁰² Falconer Rachel, cit. pp.188-89.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

(Heaney translation of *Aeneid VI*, 550-554).

In the poem *District and Circle*, that was published after the London bombings in 2005, he is torn between two groups: the London commuters with whom he is travelling and the rural community he has left behind in Northern Ireland²⁰⁵. The language used has to do with the memories of the Irish childhood that the poet left behind.

In the same poem there is also a glimpse of another Virgilian motif dear to the poet: the son who tries to embrace his dead father.

Aeneas finally meets his father in the Elysian Fields and here he tries to embrace Anchises three times without success.²⁰⁶

“ter conatus ibi collo dare bracchia circum,	“Three times he tried to reach arms round the neck.
ter frustra compressa manus effugit imago,	Three times the form , reached for in vain, escaped
per levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno.”	Like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings.”
(<i>Aeneid</i> , VI 700-702)	(Heaney translation of <i>Aeneid VI</i> , 942-944)

Here, according to Falconer²⁰⁷, there is the emotional climax of Heaney’s translation of *Aeneid VI*: the lines are conveyed with simplicity and directness. The audience is able to feel the emotional powers these lines contain because of their autobiographical resonance: throughout many of his poems Heaney tries to catch his father’s presence by simply going back into his memory and narrate episodes of his past.

²⁰⁵ Ivi, p.190-91.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ivi, p.192

Seeing Things was written shortly after his father's death and here Heaney imagines "his own father undrowned through poetry's embrace"²⁰⁸.

“[...] that afternoon
I saw him face to face, he came to me
With his damp footprints out of the river,
And there was nothing between us there
That might not still be happily ever after.”

(Heaney 1991:18)

Falconer has observed that Heaney identifies himself with Aeneas:²⁰⁹ Aeneas was a Trojan prince who was forced to leave his country in order to survive the war that was occurring in those times. Heaney left Northern Ireland and moved south during the Troubles era.

From *Seeing Things* onwards the theme of the underworld journey is also connected with the importance of memory and also the power of poetry to transform loss into a new form. Virgil remains a fundamental guide who helps Heaney transform the past into future by descending into memory²¹⁰.

When *Human Chain* was published in 2010 the audience could be aware that the theme of the underworld journey had changed and that, once again, the inspiration was from *Aeneid book VI*. Here the katabasis is the very centre of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ivi, p.193.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

the volume²¹¹. The central twelve poems are called “Route 110” and the episodes are taken from the poet’s earlier life in Northern Ireland and also from a few scenes from Virgil’s book VI of *Aeneid*. For example, we can see how in a poem a drowned neighbour is very similar to Palinurus: he was Aeneas’ drowned helmsman.²¹² Dido is personified with an abandoned girl friend and he says that “her hurt is still new”(similar to what Dido said to her sister Anna when she was talking about Aeneas “agnosco veteris vestigia flammae”). The victims that were bombed during the Troubles are identical to the figure of Deiphobus²¹³. Heaney and Anchises here can be seen as one the antithesis of the other. While Anchises makes a plea for lilies to lament the death of Augustus’ nephew Marcellus, Heaney on the other side has silvered oak stalks in one hand as a thanks offering for the birth of his grandchild. The Virgilian motifs can be found in the entire volume and not only in the “Route 110” section²¹⁴.

So we are presented here with another Virgilian motif: the riverbank scene. In the *Aeneid* Anchises tries to explain to Aeneas the concept of reincarnation of the souls of the dead to Aeneas. This episode takes place near the end of Aeneas’ journey into the underworld. While Anchises explains the concept to his son, he also points out to Aeneas all the future Roman figures who will have a glorious future, that is the heroes of Rome.²¹⁵ In “Route 110”, Heaney makes no reference to future heroes but he inserts a preface that translates Virgil’s riverbank scene. Even the souls return to a lighter corporeal existence in the “material” world. This preface also serves as the beginning of Heaney’s underworld journey: he takes the “katabasis” to discover the wisdom that lies beneath the underworld.²¹⁶

²¹¹ Ivi, p.194.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ivi, p.195.

“[...] To whom second bodies are owned by fate.

And to continued, as enjoined to often,

In my own words:

All these presences

Once they have rolled time's wheel a thousand years

Are summoned here to drink the river water

So that memories of this underworlds are shed

And soul is longing to dwell in flesh and blood

Under the dome of the sky”

(Heaney 2010)

The underworld journey for Heaney was not only about memory but also about catharsis and the shedding of old griefs.

1.3 Heaney and his relationship with the classical Greek literature.

Seamus Heaney visited Greece for many years. the first time he went there was in October 1995 when he was 56 years old. From that first visit in 1995, he visited Greece five times, until 2004. Here in Greece, in 1995, he also discovered that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

We can find allusions to the ancient Greek world even in his first works; in fact, he always felt a particular connection with the classical literature²¹⁷. He often took the mythical archetype and transformed it into a

²¹⁷ Taplin Oliver, *Seamus Heaney and the Classics*, Bann Valley Muses, edited by Stephen Harrison, Fiona Macintosh and Helen Eastman, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.14.

domestic and familiar reality. His father was frequently compared to the figure of the Greek god Hermes, and we can find this very allusion in the closing poem (“Personal Helicon” of his first book, *Death of Naturalist*, published in 1966²¹⁸. Another poem that is particularly tied to Greece is “Shelf Life”. This one belongs to the *Station Island* collection and it is about an object that he finds in his room. He says that it is a stone from Delphi and it is, also, not clear how this object came into his room. It was possibly a gift from someone who travelled there²¹⁹. Here he makes a direct pray to Apollo, the God of poetry and art in general. Heaney also felt a strong connection with Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey* and this related with the strong link he had with the writer Robert Fitzgerald, who was a professor at Harvard university²²⁰. When Heaney wrote his eulogy for Fitzgerald in his poem *The Haw Lantern* he used different images from the book 22 of the *Odyssey*, also there is a reference to *Odyssey* in the sequence *Glanmore Revisited*, contained in the volume *Seeing Things*, especially in the poem “Bedside Reading” where he says that he has swam with Homer²²¹. Another book dedicated to the memory of Fitzgerald is Heaney’s version of Sophocle’s *Philoctetes* that he titled *The Cure at Troy*. This was also a contribution to the enterprise of Field Day Theatre Company²²². The poet was often part and the protagonist in this festival, which took place every summer in Ireland, and he frequently choose Greek plays. Then, in 1994, he took Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and wrote a poem about it called *Mycenae Lookout*. The title of the last section of the volume “His Reverie Water” is a reference to a place in the Acropolis of Athens, where beneath it there was a secret water-supply²²³. Even though this poem has a Greek setting is not set in Greece.

At the end of *Mycenae Lookout* there is also a dedication to

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ivi, p.15.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ivi, p.16.

“Cynthia and Dimitri Hadzi”. Dimitri was one of Heaney’s friends who taught at Harvard with him. They travelled together in Greece.²²⁴

In order to honour his trips to Greece, Heaney wrote a sequence, *Sonnets from Hellas*, which is a collection of six poems²²⁵. In each poem there is a reference to a place the poet visited in Greece; for example, “The Augean Stable” starts from the museum at Olympia where there are the sculptures of the labours of Hercules, a figure dear to the poet. The fifth poem of the collection “Castalian Spring” is set at the rock basin below the site at Delphi²²⁶. This site was also a magnet for many poets since Byron.

The sixth poem is named “Desfina” and is set north of the Gulf of Corinth. Here the poet saw how from here he was able to see the bulk of Mount Parnassus. This poem ends with the word “Boustrophedon”, a particular reference to a method of writing that was found in some archaic Greek inscriptions.²²⁷

In her article about Heaney and Hesiod, Rowena Fowler²²⁸ stated that Heaney was the poetic son of Hesiod and the Irish poet inserted himself into a tradition that views poetry as equally cosmic and mundane. Hesiod calls upon himself the figure of the working farmer who is also a poet and this can mirror Heaney himself. Heaney came to acknowledge Hesiod through other poets like Patrick Kavanagh and Les Murray²²⁹. Murray enlists Hesiod as one of his main inspirations, he was the farmer poet who helped him clarify the confrontation between metropolitan and provincial.

Hesiod for Heaney does not stand for the archaic but for the present and even the future²³⁰. As a matter of fact, when the Muses speak to Hesiod they

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ivi, p.19.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ivi, pp.21-22.

²²⁸ Fowler Rowena, *Seamus Heaney and the Classics*, Bann Valley Muses, edited by Stephen Harrison, Fiona Macintosh and Helen Eastman, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.39.

²²⁹ Ivi, p.40.

²³⁰ Ivi, p.41.

exhort him not only to talk about what was before but also what will be. For Hesiod the Muses appear in a specific place and, in this case to Hesiod himself, they teach him how to write poetry, the bay staff that is also recurrent in Heaney 's poetry as bay tree²³¹. So, for both of them the Muses' gift is not only for the single person but, by extension, to their audience. For Heaney, it is also important how the Muses changed Hesiod's life when they gave him a new task. He is also in awe of the *Theogony*, the poem written by Hesiod after he was called by the Muses²³². The *Theogony* is a poem that comprises creation myths, tales of titans and heroes like Hercules (important mythical figure for Heaney). The *Theogony* also narrates the genealogy of the land, so there is a reprise of the rural world dear both to Hesiod and Heaney. Heaney pictures the Muses not only in Greece but also in Ireland. In Greece they call Hesiod while he's ploughing and in Ireland they call Patrick Kavanagh while he cures his land²³³. The experience of the farmer is well explained in Hesiod's poem *Works and Days*, both Heaney and Hesiod think that the art of poetry and farming have the same ethical purpose. For Hesiod the divine inspiration is rooted in the human experience and good sense. In *Works and Days*²³⁴ the Muses are asked for justice, and even Heaney tries to distinguish the concept of "pastoral" that is a beautified landscape and "rural". Both Hesiod and Heaney have a special connection with the art of ploughing because one must have enough strength, accuracy and patience. It is also considered an adult task and a rite of passage. As a matter of fact, Hesiod reserves more than a hundred lines to Ploughing in *Works and Days*, Heaney in "Follower" and in *Glanmore sonnets*²³⁵ Heaney says that the coordination of the eye and tongue while ploughing is important and he compared it to the work of poetry. Other poems by Heaney bring poetry and ploughing together, a good example might

²³¹ Ivi, p.42.

²³² Ivi, p.43.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ivi, p.44.

²³⁵ Ivi,p.45.

be in “In a Field²³⁶”. The act of ploughing here includes the process of time and memory that form a poem. Another parallel can be found in the poem “Chanson d’Adventure III” where ploughing is not only an emotional memory but also kinetic process²³⁷. Here we are presented with the figure of the bronze charioteer of Delphi whom the poet compares to himself. Heaney first saw the statue when he visited the Museum of Delphy in 1997.

When Heaney was at Harvard he formed different friendship with Greek-Americans.²³⁸

In her article Rosie Levan²³⁹ analysed the relationship between Heaney and Aeschylus, in particular what Heaney took for Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* specifically the *Agamemnon*. Heaney wrote a five-poem sequence called *Mycenae Lookout*. He began writing it in 1994 and it is the longest poem in the collection *The Spirit Level*. It is also situated at the heart of the volume. Here the poet reflects on the conflict in Northern Ireland. This poem came shortly after the ceasefire declared by IRA in 1994 and that left the poet angry and full of grief by the waste of life that the conflict caused²⁴⁰. Firstly he considered translating the *Oresteia* in its entirety but he later decided to write *Mycenae Lookout* and this poem resisted the story presented by Aeschylus. The perspectives are changed and, even if the consequences of the actions of the protagonists remain in the foreground, they all are subdued to the Watchman’s point of and words²⁴¹. In Heaney’s view this character is an emblematic figure who has witnessed and suffered the conflict occurred in the House of Atreus. Also, through the Watchman’s eyes, Heaney introduces the figure of Cassandra, who here is considered the silent object of the war, as Levan

²³⁶ Ivi, p.46.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ivi, p.47.

²³⁹ Levan Rosie, *Seamus Heaney and the Classics*, Bann Valley Muses, edited by Stephen Harrison, Fiona Macintosh and Helen Eastman, Oxford University Press, 2019, p.50.

²⁴⁰ Ivi, p.52.

²⁴¹ Ivi, p.51

said²⁴².

Helen Vendler stated that the figure of the Watchman is some kind of Heaney's surrogate and he helplessly watches the murder of Agamemnon and the prophecies of Cassandra.²⁴³

“Some people wept, and not for sorrow and joy

That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy,

But inside me like struck sound in a gong

That killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong

It brought to pass, still augured and endured.” (Heaney, 1990)

At the end of the poem he also foresees the rivalry between Romulus and Remus that will give the Roman empire a bloody history.

In the second part of the *Mycenae Lookout* the Watchman describes what happens to Cassandra. She was a prophetess who was condemned by Apollo to speak the truth but never to be believed.²⁴⁴ She was also raped many times by the soldiers in the camp.

Her femininity remains as a functional object in the poem because this quality brought her only abuse and violence. Her hairs are cut off and she bears on her head the marks of shame that rape caused her:²⁴⁵

“Her soiled vest,

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Vendler Helen, *Seamus Heaney*, Fontana Press, 1998, pp. 156-57.

²⁴⁴ Levan Rosie cit. p.62.

²⁴⁵ Ibid

Her little breasts,
Her clipped, devastated,
Scabbed,
Punk head,
The char-eyed
Famine gawk
She looked
Camp fucked
And simple.” (Heaney 1996)

When reading the Cassandra part we become aware the connection with another poem written by Heaney: “Punishment²⁴⁶”. This poem is included in the *North* volume, published in 1975. Critics like Corcoran and Murphy noticed that there is a connection between Cassandra and this poem and the Cassandra section of *Mycenae Lookout* can only be properly understood if we confront it with the issues raised in “Punishment”²⁴⁷.

In the third part the Watchmen predicts the fratricide from which Rome will prosper. In the last part of the poem the Watchmen goes beyond the story of Aeschylus and images from the poet’s childhood in Derry are portrayed in a very convincing way²⁴⁸.

“And then this ladder of our own that ran
Deep into a well-shaft being sunk
In a broad daylight, men puddling at the source
Through tawny mud, then coming back up
Deeper in themselves for having been there

²⁴⁶ Ibid,

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ivi,p.52.

Like discharged soldiers testing the safe ground [...]"

The language used by Heaney in this poem is violent and it is in contrast with both the characters of the Watchman and Cassandra who are considered non-violent figures.

The ideas that Heaney took for *Mycenae Lookout* can also be seen in other of his poems especially the idea of free will and home.²⁴⁹ While writing this poem also takes from Aeschylus the important role of the poet. Two poems that resonate with these ideas are *Seeing Things* and his speech for the Nobel Prize in 1995, called *Crediting Poetry* and addressed in Stockholm.²⁵⁰ In these works one of the central theme is knowledge. In *Seeing Things* the poet explores the marvellous and the immaterial creating new form and expression that come from memory. In *Crediting Poetry* Heaney tries to speak about the importance of art and poetry in general.²⁵¹

Mycenae Lookout is the mirror of the precarious condition of Northern Ireland. The poem precedes the peace and it also follows the conflict, it is made for an fragile, uncertain time²⁵². Heaney stated that in writing this poem he was allowing himself to express his anger and frustration after the conflict and violence caused by IRA. He expresses himself in the poem through the voice of the Watchman. For many critics his lines are the manifest of Heaney's thoughts. Heaney turned on purpose to Aeschylus after the IRA ceasefire because taking the figure of the Watchman had a catalytic effect on him²⁵³.

²⁴⁹ Ivi,p.54.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ivi, p. 66.

²⁵³ Ivi, p.68.

Conclusions

Seamus Heaney is one of the most important and influential poets of our time. In this dissertation I have highlighted the deep and fertile engagement Heaney had with literary works classical antiquity and the more recent past.

His passion for Dante and Virgil is particularly fascinating. Heaney studied Latin in school where he started a lifelong engagement with Virgil's *Aeneid*, a passion that culminated in the translation of *Aeneid* Book VI, published posthumously. In Dante, Heaney found a model of both poetry and morality.

In this dissertation I have tried to explain the reasons why Heaney often turned to literary works from the past in order to find creative and ethical points of reference for his own views and works.

Classical literature inspired the poet and he used it to talk about what was happening around him. In *Station Island*, for example, he uses Dante's medieval masterpiece to talk about the volatile situation in Northern Ireland. For Heaney the past was all-important because we can understand the future through its very lessons.

So, I have analysed the relationship between Heaney and Latin, Greek and Italian classics but it would also be interesting to analyse the relationship between Heaney and the “English” Classics or the North Mythology. But that is, probably, a different kind of work and research.

In fact, it would be fascinating to study how Heaney related to Shakespeare or, going even further back to the very beginning of the English Canon, to a famous and dense book like *Beowulf*, of which he published an award-winning translation.

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