

Dante's Influence on Seamus Heaney's Poetry on the Troubles in Northern Ireland: "The Strand at Lough Beg," "An Afterwards" and "Ugolino"

La influencia de Dante en la poesía de Seamus Heaney sobre el conflicto norirlandés: "The Strand at Lough Beg," "An Afterwards" y "Ugolino"

JUAN JOSÉ COGOLLUDO DÍAZ

Institution address: Escuela Oficial de Idiomas de Tudela. Departamento de Inglés. Magallón 10. 31500 Tudela. Navarra. Spain.

E-mail: jcogollu@educacion.navarra.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-6473-0833

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Abstract: Dante's *Divine Comedy* had an enormous influence on Seamus Heaney's *oeuvre*, especially from *Field Work* (1979) onwards. Heaney exploits the great Dantean epic poem to create a framework that allows him to contextualise some of the most painful political and social episodes in Irish history, namely the Great Hunger and the secular clashes between Protestants and Catholics. Heaney pays special attention to the problems originating from the outburst of the atavistic and sectarian violence—euphemistically known as "the Troubles"—between the unionist and nationalist communities in Northern Ireland as from 1969, causing great suffering and wreaking havoc on the Northern Irish population for decades.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney; Dante; Troubles; Northern Ireland; hunger.

Summary: Introduction. "The Strand at Lough Beg": Sectarian Murders. "An Afterwards": A Dantean Setting. "Ugolino": A Reflection of Northern Ireland. Conclusion.

Resumen: La *Divina Comedia* de Dante ha ejercido una enorme influencia en la obra de Seamus Heaney, especialmente desde la colección de *Field Work* (1979) en adelante. Heaney se vale del gran poema épico dantesco para crear un marco que le permita contextualizar algunos de los episodios políticos y sociales más dolorosos de la historia de Irlanda: la Gran Hambruna y los enfrentamientos seculares entre protestantes y católicos. Heaney presta una especial atención a los problemas derivados del estallido de la violencia atávica y sectaria entre las comunidades unionista y nacionalista en Irlanda del Norte a partir de 1969. Estos hechos—conocidos

eufemísticamente con el nombre de los *Troubles*—causarán enormes estragos y un gran sufrimiento a la población norirlandesa durante varias décadas.

Palabras clave: Seamus Heaney; Dante; *Troubles*; Irlanda del Norte; hambre.

Sumario: Introducción. “The Strand at Lough Beg”: asesinatos sectarios. “An Afterwards”: un emplazamiento dantesco. “Ugolino”: un reflejo de Irlanda del Norte. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyse the presence of Dante in Heaney’s poems and to illustrate how the Irish poet has used this influence¹ to portray and depict some of the worst plights in recent Irish history, fundamentally the sectarian murders in contemporary Northern Ireland, and the famine which razed the whole island between 1845 and 1849. Heaney creates his own poetic voice by translating, imitating and adapting the great Dantean poem.

The Florentine poet, Dante Alighieri, and his celebrated epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1309–1320), which describes his spiritual journey from Hell through Purgatory to Paradise, exercised a considerable influence on Seamus Heaney. Susan Poursanati says that the “travelling of stories through time and space” has long been discussed by different critics, and, in relation to “Ugolino,” she claims that “Heaney is justifiably the master of Dante’s text and by translating it, he can turn it into the narrative of his own nation and its two conflicting groups” (141).

Using Dante’s inspiration and techniques, the Irish poet has written some of his verses on the political and social conflict in Northern Ireland, euphemistically known as “the Troubles,” which have been the source of so much suffering and violence. This “divine” inspiration manifests itself in three important poems in the collection of *Field Work*: “The Strand at Lough Beg,” an emotive and powerful elegy dedicated to Colum McCartney, his cousin and a victim of a sectarian murder;² “An Afterwards,” a poem in which Heaney’s “wife” recriminates him for his excessive dedication to poetry in detriment to the little time he spends

¹ Harold Bloom defines the word “influence” as “a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological—all of them ultimately defensive in their nature” (xxiii), all of which can be found in Heaney’s Dantean poems.

² Heaney has also written two other compelling elegies about two murdered friends: Seán Armstrong, “A Postcard from North Antrim,” and Louis O’Neill, “Casualty,” both from *Field Work* as well.

with his family; and "Ugolino," an acclaimed poem about Ugolino, the Count of Donaratico, which closes *Field Work*. "Ugolino" is an extensive translation by Heaney based on cantos XXXII and XXXIII of the *Inferno*. Heaney's translation of this poem allows him "a possible re-imagination of an old story to transfer the violence in the streets of Northern Ireland to the realms of the literary tradition and the poetic narratives" (Poursanati 143).

Heaney created the poems covered in this article through the inspiration he derived from Dante's works. The comparative literary analysis is achieved by using the traditional French School approach.³ "Ugolino" is the result of translating the Dantean poem into English. Heaney's free yet cleverly meaningful translation transposes the Dantean setting to that of the Northern Irish Troubles, the cultural and historic context of the Irish audience guaranteeing a fitting reception and understanding. The quality of Heaney's work lies not so much in the accuracy of the translation but in the ingenuity of the successful adaptation. The process of imitation and interpretation also applies to the "The Strand at Lough Beg" and "An Afterwards," where the main focus is on the receptor rather than the emitter.

From these works onwards, Heaney starts using other fragments from Dante as a scaffold to create a number of poetic pieces, which he adapts according to his interests and needs. While Heaney's interest in translation becomes more obvious after "Ugolino," Dante's influence progressively increases in his oeuvre. The importance of Dante is highlighted in an interview in which Heaney states that "[t]he experience of reading him [Dante] in the 1970s was mighty, and translating the Ugolino episode was like doing press-ups, getting ready for something bigger" (O'Driscoll 234). Heaney was obviously building up to the long sequence of poems of "Station Island," from the collection of the same name, *Station Island* (1984). It is divided into twelve sections which clearly reflect the Dantean influence both in its structure as well as the technique of employing ghostly characters for the different encounters that Heaney experiences during his pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory. Situated on the small rocky island of Station Island in Lough Derg,

³ The emphasis of this approach is placed on seeking for possible imaginary links and similarities between different texts to establish a plausible framework which derives from the influences and comparisons between the original work and the desired text to create the basis of a new literary entity.

County Donegal, St Patrick's Purgatory is a place Irish Catholics have visited for centuries.

Heaney defines the sequence as “a *purgatorio* in itself, the site of a three-day pilgrimage involving a dark night and a bright morning, a departure from the world and a return to it”; and he explains the reasons for having chosen Station Island as the stage for his long poem:

I would not have dared to go to Lough Derg for the poem's setting had I not become entranced a few years ago with *The Divine Comedy* in translation, to the extent that I was emboldened to make my own version of the Ugolino episode from the *Inferno* and to translate (though not to publish) the first four cantos. (“Envious” 18)

Heaney elaborates on his fascination with Dante in an interview in 1989 in Rome:

It is the Joycean example, a way into free space, to dodge instead of allowing the English tradition—imperial politically—imposing culturally—to marginalize the Irish poet. The strategy that Joyce viewed was to marginalize that Anglo-Saxon Protestant tradition by going to the Mediterranean, by going into Greece... but for me it is not just a tactic. It has to do with the psychic imprint of the Catholic faith. In Ireland we grew up as rural Catholics with little shrines at the crossroads, but deep down we realised that the whole official culture had no place for them. Then I read Dante and I found in a great work of world literature that that little shrine in a corner had this cosmic amplification. (De Petris 161)

Dante's influence reappears with vigour in “The Crossing,” the poem Heaney dedicates to the memory of his father and which closes the collection of *Seeing Things* (1991). We can also find references to Dante's work in the poem of “Sandstone Keepsake,” the first part of *Station Island* (1984), and in “The Flight Path,” from *The Spirit Level* (1996).

It is worth highlighting the internal struggle that Heaney endured for a considerable length of time during his career: on the one hand, his role as a professional poet, and on the other hand, his ethical commitment to society. This duality, which he termed as “Art and Life” (on which, see later), permeates throughout the three poems analysed in this article.

The time and place Heaney lived through made him an exceptional witness of what transpired in his country. Throughout his poetry, plays

and prose, he condemns the injustices and grievances endured by his community. This condemnation, while refraining from supporting either faction, stems from the authority furnished by his own experience, for the simple reason that he writes for himself. By rejecting the use of poetry as a propaganda tool, he speaks on behalf of no one but his own conscience.

Nonetheless, the political pressure and increasing violence derived from the Troubles, which decisively impacted Heaney's artistic undertaking, are reflected in his subtle use of language and rhetorical figures; striking and well-chosen metaphors and ingenious historical analogies are unmistakably discernible in the way he establishes the correlation of social issues with contemporary events. He uses Ireland's turbulent history as an allegory to depict its political and social unrest fuelled by the intense brutality and sectarian murders synonymous with the conflict in Northern Ireland.

1. "THE STRAND AT LOUGH BEG": SECTARIAN MURDERS

In this poem Heaney describes the murder of his cousin, Colum McCartney, by loyalist Protestant paramilitary groups.⁴ McCartney was twenty-two when he and his friend, Seán Farmer, were shot dead by the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) in the back of the head when returning home from a rugby match between Derry and Dublin in Croke Park, Dublin. The terrorists set up a bogus road checkpoint pretending to be members of the Ulster Defence Regiment.⁵

The title of the poem alludes to the place where McCartney grew up, on the shores of Lough Beg, an area where Heaney's father used to take his cattle to graze. The poet obviously chose this benign landscape to set the narration of the elegy. Dante's presence is clear from the very beginning as the poem opens with a quotation as an epigraph which refers to the first canto of the *Purgatorio*:

⁴ Colum McCartney appears again in *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*.

⁵ "Three weeks after the Miami massacre another bogus road block claimed the lives of two Catholics, Sean Farmer and Colum McCartney. The roadblock remained in place on the main Newtownhamilton-Castleblaney road outside Armagh for over an hour. A plain-clothes police patrol passed through it after presenting RUC identity passes. Farmer and McCartney were stopped and shot dead. The area where the shooting took place was within the responsibility of UDR" (Dillon 200–01).

IN MEMORY OF COLUM McCARTNEY

All round this little island, on the strand
 Far down below there, where the breakers strive,
 Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand.

Dante, *Purgatorio*, I, 100–103.⁶ (Heaney, *Field Work* 17)

These lines allude to the act where Virgil purifies Dante at the end of his long journey through the *Inferno*. Cato, the pagan guardian of Purgatory who receives the new arrivals, orders Virgil to clean his pupil's (Dante) tarnished face so that he can present himself clean before the angel. In the poem Heaney compares Ireland, "this little island," with Purgatory.

Heaney explains how the idea of including this reference to Dante came about: "When I read the passage at the start of Dante's *Purgatorio*, describing that little lake and rushy shore where Virgil and Dante find themselves once they emerge from the murk of hell, I couldn't not connect it with my own strand, so that last bit of the poem was the first bit to be written" (O'Driscoll 221). Heaney senses the immediate connection to Dante's scene from the *Purgatorio* and transposes it to the lake in Northern Ireland. As a result of this influence, the Irish poet assumes Virgil's role and consequently McCartney becomes Dante. Harold Bloom says that there was a time when influence was generous: "At the heart of this matrix of generous influence is Dante and his relation to his precursor Virgil, who moved his ephebe only to love and emulation and not to anxiety" (122). I believe the same analogy exists in Heaney's relation to Dante.

As with the other murdered victims who appear in *Field Work*, Colum McCartney is an individualist. The first verses of the poem link the setting where the killing took place, "Along that road, a high, bare pilgrim's track," with the road, "Where Sweeney fled before the bloodied heads"⁷ and describe the scenery of isolation and utter helplessness in

⁶ The lines translated by Heaney belong to *Purgatorio* I, 100–102.

⁷ The reference to the medieval Irish tale of *Buile Suibhne*—which narrates the story of a legendary king trapped between atrocity and madness—shows the importance Heaney grants to the Gaelic tradition of resorting to the past and to the land: "Sweeney, the seventh-century Ulster king who was transformed into a bird-man and exiled to the trees by the curse of St Ronan" (Heaney, *Station Island* 123); "My fundamental relation with Sweeney . . . is topographical. His kingdom lay in what is now south County Antrim and north County Down, and for over thirty years I lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney's places and in earshot of others . . ." (Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* vii).

which Colum McCartney and Seán Farmer find themselves at the time they meet death. Heaney describes his cousin's trip home: "Leaving the white glow of filling stations / And a few lonely streetlamps among fields" (17). The following lines put the emphasis on the solitude of the way, which leads to three questions which speculate on the circumstances of his murder:

What blazed ahead of you? A faked road block?
The red lamp swung, the sudden brakes and stalling
Engine, voices, heads hooded and the cold-nosed gun?
Or in your driving mirror, tailing headlights
That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down. (17)

McCartney is murdered in an ambush when he becomes separated from his community. He dies in darkness and among thickets. However, the poet brings his cousin back to the world by mourning his death and making his pain and affliction public: "Where you weren't known and far from what you knew: / The lowland clays and water of Lough Beg, / Church Island's spire, its soft treeline of yew" (17).

Heaney recalls the time he shared with his cousin and takes pleasure in some scenes from the everyday life they spent together near the lake:

There you used hear guns fired behind the house
Long before rising time, when duck shooters
Haunted the marigolds and bulrushes,
But still were scared to find spent cartridges,
Acrid, brassy, genital, ejected,
On your way across the strand to fetch the cows. (17)

Heaney acknowledges despairingly that his family was not always capable of dealing with certain situations they had to endure as a result of sectarian violence. Instead of defending themselves, they adopted the attitude Heaney denounces in "Whatever You Say Say Nothing," included in *North*, and the poet condemns this stance of appeasement; in the last line he regrets the lack of determination to put an end to the terrible situation: "For you and yours and yours and mine fought shy, / Spoke an old language of conspirators / And could not crack the whip or seize the day" (*Field Work* 17).

In "The Ministry of Fear," also included in *North*, Heaney recognises that the Britishness of the political reality of Northern Ireland

is dependent on the United Kingdom, but the poet refuses to subordinate socially and culturally to such dominance: “Ulster was British, but with no rights on / The English lyric: all around us, though / We hadn’t named it, the ministry of fear” (*North* 65).

Heaney continues with his memories by describing some bucolic images of the countryside:

Across that strand of yours the cattle graze
Up to their bellies in an early mist
And now they turn their unbewildered gaze
To where we work our way through squeaking sedge
Drowning in dew. Like a dull blade with its edge
Honed bright, Lough Beg half shines under the haze. (*Field Work* 18)

All of a sudden, as if he had just woken up from a dream, Heaney realizes his cousin is not walking beside him, but bloodstained and on his knees on the ground: “I turn because the sweeping of your feet / Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees” (18); the poet kneels down and, as with Virgil and Dante in Purgatory, he wipes the blood and mud off his cousin’s face with “handfuls of the dew” (18), and Colum is blessed. In the following lines, Heaney invokes and creates a heart-breaking scene in the image and likeness to that of Dante, by envisaging Colum the following way:

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

I fully agree with Wallace’s assessment that the last two lines “effect a remarkable fusion of ancient Ireland, Dantean Purgatory, and modern Ulster” (299). The green scapulars have different connotations: the political or patriotic meanings, and the religious implications of piety and forgiveness (some members of certain religious orders wear scapulars).

For Heaney, green is both an important and symbolic colour in this poem; not in the traditional nationalist sense but for its biblical significance of love and compassion for one's neighbour:

Heaney colors as green not Irish nationalism but political forgiveness and reconciliation. Taken in this context, Colum McCartney's death, then, while terrible, is marked not only by the Catholic scapulars of green but also by a springlike hope that such an atrocity will lead to forgiveness, not more vengeance. (Russell, *Poetry and Peace* 247)

The rushes Heaney refers to in "Grow the tall rushes from the oozy sand" (*Field Work* 17), are long and flexible yet hard—symbolizing humbleness—and it is the same material used in Dante's symbolic belt around his waist when he is about to go through Purgatory. When the rushes are cut, they are immediately replaced with new ones:⁸ "No other plant could keep itself alive: / None that bears leaf, or hardens in its prime / And will not bend when wind and water drive" (Sayers 76).⁹

In "The Strand at Lough Beg," Heaney performs the role of a good-natured Virgil who looks after his cousin. Heaney washes Colum's face and plaits the rushes over his shroud just as Virgil wipes Dante's face and girds his belt at the end of the first canto of *Purgatorio*. Dante's words describing the healing ritual are important for Heaney; they offer a certain degree of hope for "this little island" (*Field Work* 17), since Ireland is also a Purgatory for the poet.

I believe the epigraph at the beginning of Heaney's poem is appropriate since it summarises, by means of introduction, the main image the poet wants to convey: the cycle of life and death, and how, in a way, Colum's lost "life" becomes "restored." As Tony Curtis states: "What the quotation does is set Heaney the task of rising through the pain of the experience embodied in the poem and establishing a longer perspective, one that contains hope, transcendence even" (110–11).

Colum's shadow returns in *Station Island* (1984); this time it is to reprimand Heaney for the "artistic" way in which he treated his murder.¹⁰

⁸ These rushes represent the cycle of life, and according to Benvenuto da Imola, "ex uno actu humilitatis nascitur alius" (one act of humility gives way to another; my translation) (qtd. in Echeverría 216).

⁹ The lines translated by Sayers belong to *Purgatorio* I, 103–105.

¹⁰ In Section VIII of "Station Island," Colum McCartney comes back to denounce and reprove Heaney, specifically his poetry: "for the way you whitewashed ugliness and

For Corcoran, Colum appears “to complain bitterly that this exquisite Dantean close to ‘The Strand at Lough Beg’ is a continuance in literature of family incapacity” (94).

2. “AN AFTERWARDS”: A DANTEAN SETTING

Dante’s work is also relevant in “An Afterwards,” a very special poem through which Heaney gives voice to his wife, Marie. She reproaches the poet for not thinking enough about his family, and for his almost exclusive dedication to the world of poetry. “An Afterwards” opens with a clear reference to the *Divine Comedy*, precisely to the Ninth Circle of the *Inferno*, where traitors are confined for committing treachery. The first two lines refer to the scene in which Count Ugolino is biting the skull of his executor, archbishop Ruggieri. Heaney’s wife deems all poets to be scandalmongering slanderers and sends them all to the Ninth Circle; her husband does not get off scot-free from that torment either since, having preferred poetry to his wife and children, he has “betrayed” family life in the name of art:

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain;
For backbiting in life she’d make their hell
A rabid egotistical daisy-chain. (*Field Work* 44)

These sinning poets have defamed other people in life and therefore must perpetually pay for their crimes. I believe that establishing a parallelism with the aggressive behaviour of the unionist and nationalist communities to each other is plausible, insomuch that they need to put hatred behind them in order to redeem themselves and move forward. The words the poet uses to describe the scenes of cannibalism are terrifying and allude to the poem “Ugolino,” with which Heaney concludes his collection of *Field Work*.

When Marie—instigated by, and with the help of her companion, Virgil’s wife—has finished going through and inspecting the Circle of Ice where traitors are kept for their sins, Heaney asks her the following

drew / the lovely blinds of the *Purgatorio* / and saccharined my death with morning dew” (*Station Island* 83).

questions: "My sweet, who wears the bays / In our green land above, whose is the life // Most dedicated and exemplary?" (44).

In the last stanza, Marie acknowledges some redeeming traits which, I believe, partially "absolve" her husband: his noble and unbiased attitude towards his work. However, this could turn against him, since she accuses him of avoiding political commitment; reluctantly, she finally admits: "You weren't the worst. You aspired to a kind, / Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact. / You left us first, and then those books, behind" (44).

Michael Parker thinks that these lines also imply a partial "acquittal" from his wife: "At least in his poetry he had striven to be even-handed in his approach to the Troubles and, though he had been unfair to his family, something of value—'those books', *Wintering Out* and *North?*—did emerge out of his 'responsible *tristia*'" (172).¹¹ Leontia Flynn wisely pointed out that "[t]hese are the last lines of the poem, thrown out as a criticism by the poet's wife, prematurely widowed through neglect before being widowed for real—but Heaney knew they'd have a different closing impact" (41). Unfortunately for Heaney's family, they could not foresee at the time of writing this poem the premature and unexpected loss of their loved one, and the force these lines would have.¹² Flynn adds that "[w]hatever the personal cost of writing, at least his books *have* been left behind. There's more than a little awareness here of the poet's own supremacy in life (he 'left behind' his contemporaries too), but this comically posthumous statement is also poignant now" (41–42).

Notwithstanding the dark and gloomy atmosphere in "An Afterwards," Heaney also uses this poem to render a note of humour. As Conor McCarthy remarks, "[n]ot all references to Dante in *Field Work* are so grim. 'An Afterwards' uses Dante, unusually, for humour" (55). McCarthy states that there is a comic effect when Marie "condemns all poets to the ninth circle of hell, where they attempt to gnaw each other's brains out" (55). He concludes that "'An Afterwards' blends humour with serious questions about public and domestic responsibility" (55).

¹¹ Parker quotes two words from the poem "Exposure," which closes the collection of *North* (72–73), and they refer to a reflection by Heaney about his responsibilities and sadness; his *tristia* evokes the title of the poems Ovid wrote when he was in exile.

¹² Seamus Heaney passed away on Friday 30 August 2013 in Blackrock Clinic, Dublin, where he had been admitted to have a medical procedure after a fall on the previous day. His last words (in a text message he wrote in Latin) to his wife were: "*Noli timere*"—"don't be afraid" (Russell, *Seamus Heaney* 4).

Heaney, himself, also noted, “The humour, I’d have thought, is central to ‘An Afterwards’. Virgil’s wife—an entirely imaginary one—and the poet’s wife, there on the infernal ledges, looking down at the spouses in the ice of the ninth circle . . .” (qtd. in O’Driscoll 206).

3. “UGOLINO”: A REFLECTION OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Heaney returns to the Ninth Circle, the Second Ring of Hell in “Ugolino.” Dante’s influence could not be more evident since Heaney’s poem is a long translation from the *Inferno*.¹³ It deals with the death and permanent condemnation of Count Ugolino to Hell and the unjust death of his four sons in a Pisan prison, whose story appears entirely translated in Heaney’s version. We learn of Ugolino’s terrible dream, the agony and distress of his sons, and their death from starvation. Neglected and blind, Ugolino, whose hunger overrides his biological feelings towards his children, outlives them.

From the late 1960s, right after the outburst of violence in Northern Ireland, and until the publication of *Station Island* in 1984 (his sixth collection of poems), Heaney had to endure an internal struggle which tormented him and caused him great moral anguish for a very long time during his career. He debated between his artistic responsibility as a poet and embracing the tribal political commitment of his community.

Any decision he would take in either direction had negative implications, as Carla De Petris claims: “Both choices implied a different type of treason” (168). The story of Count Ugolino is of relevance to Heaney for it represents the breach of loyalty and symbolizes the very act of betrayal of trust: “In the *Commedia* and especially in the story of Count Ugolino he [Heaney] found a perfect emblem of betrayal and of the inadequacy of human justice” (168).

In this context of inner conflict, Heaney explains the purpose for writing his translation: “The creative act is witnessed by history, and the writer writes to be read. In that sense, I translated ‘Ugolino’ in order for it to be read in the context of the ‘dirty protests’ in the Maze prison” (O’Driscoll 425). Such “dirty protests” began at the end of 1976 “when republican prisoners [like Ciaran Nugent] refused to put on prison clothes, and were punished by being kept in their cells wrapped only in a blanket” (McKittrick and McVea 161). The first seven republican

¹³ The translation belongs to lines 124–39 (XXXII) and 1–90 (XXXIII).

prisoners went on hunger strike towards the end of October 1980. A second wave of hunger strikes followed on 1 March 1981, when ten republican prisoners died over the period of nearly six months.¹⁴ In his book, *Blanketmen* (2005), former H-block prisoner Richard O'Rawe explains that a deal to end the hunger strikes, which might have saved six lives, was rejected by IRA leadership in favour of boosting Sinn Féin's political strength (qtd. in Hanley 193).

Heaney regards pleasure as yet another powerful motive for translating Dante's text: "But the contemporary parallel is not at all necessary; the sine qua non is personal rapport and writerly excitement" (O'Driscoll 425).¹⁵ Both reasons fit perfectly well with what Heaney describes as "Art and Life" and "Song and Suffering" (*The Government of the Tongue* xii), that is, poetry and politics.

Ugolino betrays the State just as some innocent people are similarly betrayed by certain political powers which operate within that State. That explains why Dante's curse affected both Ugolino and his homeland: "[Dante] calls down a purifying flood upon Pisa for including within its atrocity the deaths not only of the traitorous Ugolino but also of innocent children" (Hildebidle 42). The sin, that is, the treason committed by Ugolino, places him in Hell, specifically in the Ninth Circle, very close to Satan. I agree with John Hildebidle's opinion that Heaney uses the poem, in part, to criticize Ireland, and not just Northern Ireland, "which has shed so much blood to no apparent effect" (42), since there are quite a few references and examples to very dark periods in the history of Ireland: the Great Hunger, the atavistic violence of the island, and more contemporarily to that of Northern Ireland, as well as the continued personal and family betrayals of the respective "tribes."

The poem opens with a scene in Hell in which Ugolino is nibbling persistently at his executor and great enemy's skull, archbishop Ruggieri. Count Ugolino was imprisoned by the archbishop in a tower in Pisa

¹⁴ Bobby Sands, the legendary prisoner for the republican cause, was the first inmate to die (5 May, after 66 days on hunger strike); Francis Hughes, the son of one of Heaney's neighbours, was the second (12 May)—the "ghost" of Francis Hughes appears in section IX of "Station Island"; Michael Devine was the last one to perish (20 August).

¹⁵ For some time, Heaney, in his own words, was "so exhilarated by the whole marvel of Dante" that he was "tempted to have a go at doing the complete *Inferno*—simply for its own imaginative splendor," an idea he had to abandon because he did not know the language (O'Driscoll 425).

called *della fame*. As already mentioned, they are both trapped in the Ninth Circle, the frozen lake of Cocytus that houses traitors:

We had already left him. I walked the ice
 And saw two soldered in a frozen hole
 On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,
 Gnawing at him where the neck and head
 Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,
 Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread. (*Field Work* 61)

Parker draws a parallelism between these two characters and two paramilitary members, a republican and a loyalist Unionist respectively: "The two figures of the second and third line, locked into an all-consuming hatred, might easily be a Republican and a Loyalist paramilitary, an I.R.A. man and a Brit" (176). Ugolino's children, who were also confined in the tower, starved to death after a few days, and the count himself became blind from hunger.

Heaney portrays the Great Hunger that Ireland underwent in the middle of the nineteenth century, one of the most appalling periods in the history of Ireland, while skilfully transposing the Dantean episode of the lugubrious atmosphere of Hell to the Irish context. The narrator (Dante himself), incapable of understanding what type of grievance or terrible affront would drive a man to "devour" another man's skull, questions Ugolino about it, in case such behaviour be justified, thereby "freeing" him of such a colossal atrocity before the world:

'You,' I shouted, 'you on top, what hate
 Makes you so ravenous and insatiable?
 What keeps you so monstrously at rut?
 Is there any story I can tell
 For you, in the world above, against him?
 If my tongue by then's not withered in my throat
 I will report the truth and clear your name.' (*Field Work* 61)

Ugolino stops biting his "leftovers," and is willing to talk, but not before saying how painful it will be for him to remember and retell the story of the heinousness committed against him and his family, to the point that the mere thought of what happened "makes [his] heart sick":

That sinner eased his mouth up off his meal
 To answer me, and wiped it with the hair
 Left growing on his victim's ravaged skull,
 Then said, 'Even before I speak
 The thought of having to relive all that
 Desperate time makes my heart sick;
 Yet while I weep to say them, I would sow
 My words like curses—that they might increase
 And multiply upon this head I gnaw.' (61)

He does not know his interlocutor's name—although he identifies him by his Florentine accent—nor how he managed to descend to where Ugolino is confined:

I know you come from Florence by your accent
 But I have no idea who you are
 Nor how you ever managed your descent.
 Still, you should know my name, for I was Count
 Ugolino, this was Archbishop Roger,
 And why I act the jockey to his mount
 Is surely common knowledge; how my good faith
 Was easy prey to his malignancy. (61)

He identifies Ruggieri as the person responsible for his suffering, a fate worse than death; the count justifies his act of vengeance against the archbishop for the cruelty inflicted on him by the latter:

How I was taken, held, and put to death.
 But you must hear something you cannot know
 If you're to judge him—the cruelty
 Of my death at his hands. So listen now. (62)

Ugolino goes on to mention the jail tower he is being held in, and the word "Hunger" appears in capital letters because it has become a proper noun designating his place of captivity. This word, *Famme*, together with the sentence in the future tense, "Others will pine" (languish, be consumed), may be interpreted as a prediction of what is to come. In other words, Heaney may be insinuating that something similar might take place in Northern Ireland, such as the death of ten republican

prisoners in 1981 while on hunger strike in the notorious Maze prison,¹⁶ as mentioned earlier. They were protesting against their status as common criminals rather than political prisoners:

Others will pine as I pined in that jail
 Which is called Hunger after me, and watch
 As I watched through a narrow hole
 Moon after moon, bright and somnambulant,
 Pass overhead, until that night I dreamt
 The bad dream and my future's veil was rent. (*Field Work* 62)

He then narrates the terrible nightmare he had, in which a wolf and its cubs are annihilated, “And my hallucination / Was all sharp teeth and bleeding flanks ripped open” (62), in a hunt organized by Ruggieri. When he wakes up, he finds himself facing a yet crueller and more terrible reality:

When I awoke before the dawn, my head
 Swam with cries of my sons who slept in tears
 Beside me there, crying out for bread.
 (If your sympathy has not already started
 At all that my heart was foresuffering
 And if you are not crying, you are hardhearted). (62)

The details of Count Ugolino's death are not entirely clear and are open to interpretation. Dante insinuates that Ugolino might have sacrificed his own sons, although it is very probable that the Florentine poet may have wanted to maintain that ambiguity for the purpose of speculation. In this respect, Jay Ruud claims that “[m]any have interpreted this to mean that Ugolino ate his own children's flesh to prolong his life, though it may only mean that he finally succumbed to starvation” (89).

Ugolino stared in silence at his four children, who were crying:

¹⁶ Seven prisoners were members of the Irish Republican Army and the other three belonged to the Irish National Liberation Army; this group was the military wing of a Trotskyist group, the Irish Republican Socialist Party, a splinter group of the Official IRA.

I bit on my two hands in desperation
 And they, since they thought hunger drove me to it,
 Rose up suddenly in agitation
 Saying, 'Father, it will greatly ease our pain
 If you eat us instead, and you who dressed us
 In this sad flesh undress us here again.'
 So then I calmed myself to keep them calm.
 We hushed. That day and the next stole past us
 And earth seemed hardened against me and them. (*Field Work* 63)

For four days there was nothing but silence between father and sons:

Then, throwing himself flat in front of me,
 Gaddo said, 'Why don't you help me, father?'
 He died like that, and surely as you see
 Me here, one by one I saw my three
 Drop dead during the fifth day and the sixth day
 Until I saw no more. Searching, blinded,
 For two days I groped over them and called them.
 Then hunger killed where grief had only wounded. (63)

Heaney's translation brings to the foreground not only the anguish of Ugolino (the "paramilitary" in Parker's words [176]), but the real pain and suffering of his family and their eventual death, matching that of the innocent victims of Northern Ireland at large.

Finally, Ugolino is perpetually punished through the practice of anthropophagy. The count, after telling his story, returns to the initial stage in the poem, which is to hold and gnaw at the archbishop's skull as if he were a dog of prey: "When he had said all this, his eyes rolled / And his teeth, like a dog's teeth clamping round a bone, / Bit into the skull and again took hold" (*Field Work* 63).

Along the lines of Heaney's analogy, "For the sins / Of Ugolino, who betrayed your forts,¹⁷ / Should never have been visited on his sons" (63), Parker establishes the following:

Ulster becomes the 'nightmare tower,' its innocent and guilty inhabitants plagued by moral famine, spiritual dearth. There, the 'future's veil' is 'rent,' and children and young men can still be regarded as 'legitimate

¹⁷ According to Peter Armour, Ugolino ceded some castles to Florence and Lucca in order to avoid war, "an act for which he was later accused of treason" (619).

targets,' despite the fact that the sins of fathers '[s]hould never have been visited on his sons.' (177)

Unfortunately, it has become the norm in Northern Ireland that the consequences of acts committed by wrongdoers inexorably end up affecting the lives of innocent people. Similarly, Curtis writes: "That is all too often the case in Ulster: you are born fatefully into one tribe or the other. The apocalyptic vision at the end of 'Ugolino' is a terrible prophecy of Ireland's fate if a solution is not found to the 'monstrous rut' of the present strife" (124).

In relation to the "sins" committed by Ugolino, and the punishment he deserved, De Petris points to what the author of the poem would do himself: "Dante, himself a victim of political unrest, maintains that only God can find an equilibrium between betrayal and its punishment" (169).

The lines which close the poem and the collection of *Field Work* create a grim atmosphere of deadly and disturbing silence rather than keeping a thread of hope alive: "Your atrocity was Theban. They were young / And innocent: Hugh and Brigata / And the other two whose names are in my song" (*Field Work* 64).

This tragic poem, besides recalling a long and terrible episode of Irish history—the Great Hunger in the middle of the nineteenth century—reflects the absurd and unnecessary deaths of thousands of innocent people.

It is also emblematic of the situation in Northern Ireland. For decades, people lived in two separate communities manifesting their ancestral hatred for each other. The sectarian and complicit policies implemented by the official political institutions of the State supported one side to the detriment of "the other side."¹⁸ In other words, the Unionist government in Stormont legislated in favour of the Protestant unionist community against the Catholic nationalist community. It is no exaggeration to say that the Catholic community, like the black people in South Africa, suffered their own system of *apartheid*.¹⁹ As a token of

¹⁸ "The Other Side" is the title of a poem in *Wintering Out* (24–26); the expression is used both by Catholics and Protestants to identify and refer to the people who do not belong to their group; they, besides being seen as different, can also pose a threat.

¹⁹ Especially since the establishment of the colonies, the so-called infamous plantations from the early seventeenth century, which destroyed the social and cultural system in Ireland. This sectarian political framework has continued in Northern Ireland during the twentieth century, and triggered off the violence of the Troubles in 1969.

this, David McKittrick and David McVea provide us with one example of such discrimination:

Orange marches became part of the fabric of Unionist government while at the same time nationalist parades were subject to severe restriction. The Twelfth of July celebrations, the climax of the Orange marching season, effectively became a ritual of the state. (16)

Arthur E. McGuinness draws special attention to the hostile confrontation of the two communities in Northern Ireland, portrayed by the two main characters in "Ugolino": "Ugolino's eternal gnawing upon Archbishop Roger suggests the seemingly perpetual struggles of Catholic and Protestant extremists in Ulster" (57). Likewise, Rand Brandes adds that "The image of Ugolino's cannibalism reflects the state of affairs in Northern Ireland" (25). Although brief, his statement explicitly illustrates and summarizes the Dantean setting of this period in Northern Ireland, and is further epitomized by David Wallace's opinion: "The savage sectarian violence running through *Field Work* (now itself a retreating memory) finds perfect summation in Heaney's 'Ugolino'" (301).

CONCLUSIONS

Heaney resorts to the *Commedia* as a scaffolding to convey his view on some of the bleakest periods in Irish history, such as the so-called "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. The elegy, "The Strand at Lough Beg," includes a direct quote from the *Purgatorio*; "An Afterwards" is, to a great extent, set in the Ninth Circle of the *Inferno*; and the long translation of "Ugolino" (one hundred and six lines) is Heaney's version from two cantos near the end of the *Inferno*.

I firmly believe the Swedish Academy's premise for awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to Seamus Heaney, for "works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past" ("Nobel Prize") accurately synthesizes the poems analysed in this article: "lyrical beauty" and "ethical depth" concur with the poet's notions of "Art and Life." They also reflect Heaney's willingness and determination to condemn violence, which is exemplified by the celebrated metaphor from his poem "Digging": "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (*Death of a Naturalist* 2).

Dante's importance to Heaney is validated by the poet's portrayal of some of the most tragic events in Irish history, especially the parallelisms he establishes between the events in the *Commedia* with Ugolino's suffering and the plight of the whole population of Northern Ireland during the Troubles; as Neil Corcoran highlights, "Dante is of crucial value to Heaney as the greatest of all poetic communers with the dead" (85). The sectarian violence of Northern Ireland has been articulated through the intertextuality with the various kinds of relationship that exist between Dante's texts and the translation and adaptation of the poems as perceived by Heaney. As Poursanati claims, "[h]is translation of 'Ugolino' is an adaptation as he has attempted to match the main idea which the poem presents about Dante's native land with the contemporary struggles over possessing Ireland" (142).

In *Field Work*, Heaney, as a seasoned poet, no longer relies on his traditional sources of inspiration for writing, such as the family farm, archaeology, mythology, history and language, but turns to the translation and adaptation of the works of others as a means of transmitting his reality. This he does with the "Ugolino" episode of Dante's work; in fact, I believe that this very poem lends itself to being interpreted as the elegy that globally encompasses the humanitarian disaster of the Great Hunger in Ireland, including Britain's responsibility in this huge catastrophe, and more specifically of the conflict derived from the Troubles in contemporary Northern Ireland.

The savage sectarian violence which percolates throughout some of the poems in *Field Work*—especially the elegy of "The Strand at Lough Beg"—is aptly summarized in "Ugolino." As Blake Morrison states: "The presence of Dante's circles reflects a new emphasis on moral responsibility, an emphasis quite antithetical to the determinism of *North*" (81). Despite this bleak scenario, the acceptance of this "moral responsibility" from both communities is essential to securing a plausible solution to the quandary stemming from the Troubles; should this premise be fulfilled, hope is, therefore, a reasonable corollary.

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