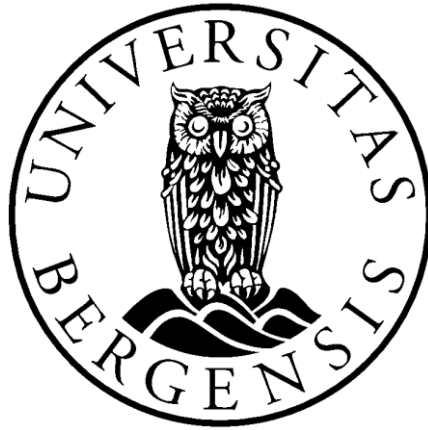


The Katabasis Motif in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney



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Thank you

It has been a wonderful experience to counterbalance my work as a radiologist and become a student again, at the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies here in Bergen. To be given the opportunity to immerse myself in a new field has been a privilege. I started work on this thesis while spending 6 months in Marblehead just north of Boston, Massachusetts. Since everything I read was in English, my chosen poet wrote in English, and I also otherwise was surrounded by the language, it felt natural to write this thesis in English.

The first time I read a poem by Seamus Heaney I had a feeling that his voice was familiar. He felt like someone I had known for some time. I felt that his poetry had something to do with me. I liked both his writing style and his choice of subjects: attachment to people and places, tradition, vocation, chosen values...and so I decided to write my master's thesis about poetry, a choice I didn't see coming. I have thoroughly enjoyed having Seamus Heaney and his poetry in my life these last few years.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor associate professor Anders Kristian Strand. You have been a great teacher and encouraging mentor. Your knowledge of all things literary is truly inspiring. Your feedback and guidance have strengthened this thesis ever since its rather modest beginnings. Thank you!

My children Taran, Kjartan and Njaal – thank you for being so supportive of me throughout this lengthy project. No work or study is ever more important than you are! Still love you to the moon and back!

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Introduction

Ever since he wrote “Digging”¹, the first poem in his first published collection *Death of a Naturalist*² the Irish poet Seamus Heaney has gazed downwards, to the ground and under the ground. From the first pastoral poems to the poetic commentary on the Troubles, from “District and Circle”³ to translations of Book VI of the *Aeneid* Seamus Heaney had this earthy connection. His home ground, his childhood realm, his home country, mythical burial places as well as real ones – they all continuously weave their way into his poetry. As in mythology, many of Heaney’s descents into the underground were quests for better understanding – a better understanding of his own role as a poet, a better understanding of the Irish conflict, a better understanding of grief. Also in poems dedicated to family and friends, or portraying family bonds and friendships, references to the mythic quests can be found.

In Greek mythology and in literature generally, descents into the Underworld, the world of the dead, are referred to as katabasis. The same expression is used for lyric descents and even for the narrative of health decline. The word is Greek in origin and translates as “going down”. The objective of a katabasis is to gain knowledge and understanding. The word descent sends one’s thoughts not only to the act of moving down a slope or ladder to a lower level, but also to the genealogical meaning of the word. One’s descent are one’s ancestors – and ancestors are often part of the descent narrative, both in Heaney’s works and in the katabatic myths. Descent in its double meaning plays an important role in Seamus Heaney’s poetry.

The myth of Aeneas, who carried his father from the burning Troy and had to make sacrifices to become the founder of Rome, intrigued Seamus Heaney throughout his career. As a student, he translated segments of this work as part of his Latin studies, and also later in life he enjoyed translating. Some of these translated texts found their way into his poems – as whole verses, fragments or motifs. Sometimes the words were left behind and only the form or rhythm of a poem was transmitted, an even more subtle form of translation. Heaney also translated classic plays and epic poetry as a whole, and his translation of *Beowulf*⁴ is one of the most sold translations of this poem. From the *Aeneid* especially Book VI about Aeneas’ descent to the Underworld held a fascination, and Heaney translated a part of it for his poetry collection *Seeing Things*, published in 1991.⁵ Motifs from the *Aeneid* would play an important

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 13.

² Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

³ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 17.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999)

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991)

role again 19 years later in the collection *Human Chain*.⁶ Here especially the poems “The Riverbank Field” and “Route 110”⁷ take inspiration from the *Aeneid*.

After Heaney’s death in 2013 his publisher Faber and Faber announced the posthumous publication of Heaney’s translation of the whole Book VI of the *Aeneid*. He had been working on this translation over several years, and its publication came as a wonderful surprise to his readers. The choice of subject was no surprise though, as Heaney had mentioned his continued fascination with this work in several interviews.

In my thesis, I will take a closer look at the use of the katabasis motif in Seamus Heaney’s poems. Two of the poems are the two translations of the part of Book VI where Aeneas meets the Sybil and receives the instructions for his descent. The poems I will examine are published in the collections *Death of a Naturalist*, *Wintering Out*⁸, *Seeing Things*, *District and Circle*⁹ and *Human Chain*. The first translation of part of Book VI is published in *Seeing Things*, the second translation of Book VI is published as a book, titled *Aeneid Book VI*¹⁰. One of the poems has translation as its subject, which also fits in well with the subject matter of this thesis.

Heaney – Writer and Translator

*Two buckets were easier carried than one.
I grew up in between.*¹¹

It appears that any work written in connection with or about a great poet should include an introduction of the artist himself. And there is no way to go about this without repeating everything that has been said before, but still – it has to be done since one can’t assume that one’s chosen subject of attention is as well known to everyone as one thinks he or she should be. Just typing the name Seamus Heaney into the search field of Google or any other search engine seems to come up with first lines of newspaper articles and encyclopedia entries that are permutations of the following: Seamus Heaney, County Derry, nine children, Northern

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)

⁷ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 46-59.

⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972)

⁹ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Aeneid Book VI* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016)

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), 4.

Ireland, Nobel Prize, cattle dealer, “Digging”, Harvard, Dublin... And it is widely held that no other poet has had as many books written about him in his lifetime as Heaney.

Seamus Heaney described himself as having grown up “in between”¹² and the American critic and Harvard professor Helen Vendler describes some of the opposites that characterized Northern Ireland at the time:

[...] differences of religious affiliation (Catholic versus Protestant), of political affiliation (Nationalist versus Unionist), of class (the deprived versus the economically dominant), of region (the agricultural versus the industrial), and of tribe (Celts versus Anglo-Saxons).¹³

I will use some of these and some additional “in betweens” to introduce Seamus Heaney.

Heaney was born in Mossbawn, County Derry, Northern Ireland, into a farming family with his father providing for the family by both working the land and dealing with cattle, and his mother taking care of – in time – nine children and the household. On his father’s side, the family were farmers, on his mother’s side there were mill workers and women working as domestic servants. Heaney thus grew up between the rural agricultural tradition and the result of the industrial revolution with its more modern work places. Also as placed in the County Derry landscape he has described his childhood as in between. The railway-tracks a field away from his childhood home Mossbawn and the sounds of passing trains symbolized the advances of modern life, whereas the sounds of the animals in the barn and on the pastures were part of an everyday that Seamus Heaney described as archaic¹⁴.

The home Heaney depicts growing up in seems to have provided a wonderfully loving family. On the one side two women – his mother and an aunt – concentrating on the housework and the children, on the other hand the father, taking care of the cattle and working the fields. In between these two worlds – the masculine and the feminine as defined by tasks and obligations of a rural society – the children grew up between speech and silence. Heaney’s mother enjoyed both the spoken and the written word, whereas his father was a man of few words, possibly except when at work. Heaney’s wife Marie describes the family as being

¹² Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 1995). Accessed 13.11.20 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>

¹³ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

¹⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 1995). Accessed 13.11.20

[...] utterly together, like an egg contained within the shell, without any quality of otherness, without the sense of loss that this otherness brings. They had confidence in the way they lived, a lovely impeccable confidence in their own style.¹⁵

Another source of language were the spoken rituals of the family's Catholic faith, and – also filling the room on regular basis – the Shipping forecast on BBC radio, listing poetic sounding names of regions off the British and Irish coast.

Also on the radio were reports about the Second World War, words like “the enemy” and “the allies” could be heard in the news. Being born in 1939 Seamus Heaney was a preschooler during the last years of the war. Nevertheless, he recounts the remoteness of the events portrayed – it was mere sound to him. There was no fear related to hearing these reports, the content was not part of his immediate world, strange as that may seem given the severity of the events taking place in central Europe. Heaney credited this fact as being important for the utter security he felt as a child.¹⁶

Growing up Catholic in Northern Ireland in the forties and fifties of the 20th century would in many ways have been in between: between two religions, and in extension of this between two sides of a long-standing political conflict. Even in remembering, Seamus Heaney seems in between – in this case between two different views of his childhood. In *Stepping Stones*, a book of interviews with him done by Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney describes a neighborly life without big divisions, marked as it was by the practicalities of rural life where neighbors supported each other in their work. In Neil Corcoran's book *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* Heaney is cited as being very conscious of borders between townlands and parishes even as a youngster.¹⁷ Beside these geographic divides, faith-based divides must have woven their way into people's consciousness. There were athletic divides – only the Catholic minority played Gaelic football (which Heaney enjoyed). There were divides of possession: historically advantaged families, i.e. protestant families with English or Scottish (Anglican or Presbyterian) roots, usually owned the larger farms and estates. And like brooks joining to become a river all these smaller divides eventually lead to the time of turmoil and unrest that brought forth what is called – somewhat euphemistically – the Troubles. The division between Unionists and Nationalists was the result of a long history of parallel cultures where the Protestant population mainly formed the privileged group (also economically), and the Catholic part of the population was deprived and disadvantaged. Both of Heaney's memories

¹⁵ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 235.

¹⁶ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones, Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 3-58.

¹⁷ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 236.

may be right and not necessarily contradictory since there also will have been an element of childhood innocence having to make room for a broadened and more realistic view of his first world.

In 1947 the Northern Irish Education Act was passed and Seamus Heaney was one of the first generation of students getting to enjoy the benefits of this law. It enabled him to receive a higher education, for which he had to attend a Catholic boarding school in Derry. His leaving home at twelve years old marked the beginning of a separation from his family, not of affection, but of education. In the poem *The Conway Stewart*¹⁸ this separation is represented by the fountain pen given to him by his parents when he moved away to boarding school. A symbol for learnedness, the fountain pen will enable Heaney to move into a different realm (“the heaven of education”¹⁹), thus widening the already appearing distance between him and his parents. At the same time though the fountain pen will help him bridge that gap through letters written in his “longhand/’Dear’/To them, next day.”.

Seamus Heaney later describes his feeling of being between two worlds poignantly in a sonnet dedicated to his mother:

Fear of affectation made her affect
Inadequacy whenever it came to
Pronouncing words 'beyond her'. *Bertold Brek*.
She'd manage something hampered and askew
Every time, as if she might betray
The hampered and inadequate by too
Well-adjusted a vocabulary.
With more challenge than pride, she'd tell me, 'You
Know all them things.' So I governed my tongue
In front of her, a genuinely well-
Adjusted adequate betrayal
Of what I knew better. I'd *naw* and *aye*
And decently relapse into the wrong
Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.
(From *Clearances*)²⁰

During his student years at St. Columb’s College and Queen’s University Heaney was very much part of Catholic tradition. At boarding school, the day started with Latin mass, going to

¹⁸ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 9.

¹⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 1995). Accessed 13.11.20
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>

²⁰ Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 28.

confession and communion was a natural part of the boys' schedule, the feast days were milestones throughout the liturgical year. School was a continuation of life in the Catholic faith at home. Heaney describes the school as a place with a common culture, where "Catholic farmers' sons were being taught by (Catholic) farmers' sons".²¹ The only separation in the student body was that those who wanted to become priests would choose Greek as a subject whereas the rest would choose French. All the students studied Latin, and especially Virgil held a fascination for Heaney. In this he seems to have been encouraged by his teacher Father Michael McGlinchey, who loved Virgil and especially Book VI of the *Aeneid*. The school had ambition on behalf of its students, and Heaney describes it as "very academically pitched". Passing the exams was paramount to getting a university or professional education, and the Catholic students succeeding in this system were the first generation of a broader Catholic middle class in the North. The Northern Ireland Education Act can thus be seen as forerunner to what Neil Corcoran calls "the release of cultural and political energy [...] in the 1960s"²². Heaney depicts the years at Queen's University from 1957 onwards as somewhat separated, but with more civility than what was happening outside university life. There were religious student societies explicitly for Protestant or Catholic students, and there were societies that students would gravitate more or less to according to religion. However, there were also the open groups like the debating society and the Saturday night dances.

Still, there was a feeling of separation, caused by the gap between the formation of his childhood and the newly received cultural and educational input²³. Even though Heaney balanced this by taking part in activities from both worlds, this feeling of inbetweenness and the consequences of his rural background still made their mark on his decisions, or rather on what he considered possible choices for his life after University. Even though he finished with a First in English and the chairman of the English department suggested further studies in Oxford, Heaney chose a teacher training college, St. Joseph's College of Education. He ascribed this choice to a lack of confidence at that time, but maybe even more a lack of precedent for further education in his family. There was also the sensed expectation that he should start earning money, which he did when he started teaching in 1962.

²¹ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 239.

²² Ibid.

²³ Among schoolchildren (John Malone Memorial Committee, 1983), cited in Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 240.

During his years at University Heaney had published a few poems in student magazines under the name *Incertus* – uncertain –, but during his time at St. Thomas’s Intermediate school he began to write more regularly and with greater passion and seriousness. The headmaster and writer Michael McLaverty supported him, and introduced him to other Irish poets. Upon returning to St. Joseph’s as a teacher in 1963 Heaney was invited to join a group of young poets, the “Group”. This group was an important influence for the next decade and many personal friendships sprang from it. By 1964 quite a few poems by Heaney had been published in Irish and English magazines, and he had attracted the attention of Faber and Faber, who then in 1966 published his first collection *Death of a Naturalist*.

After having published two more volumes of poetry focusing on and taking inspiration from childhood, family, and rural life – *Door into the Dark*²⁴ in 1966 and *Wintering Out* in 1972 –, Heaney chooses a change of pace.

The beginning of the Troubles in Ireland is usually placed in the late 60’s, and by 1975 violence had escalated. The Nationalists (who identified as being Irish/Gaelic and were mostly Catholic) wanted Northern Ireland to become a part of the Republic of Ireland; the Unionists (who identified as being British and were mostly Protestants) wanted it to remain part of the United Kingdom. Even though a political and not a religious conflict, the Troubles had a prominent element of religious divide as well.

The presence of British troops, the camps with interned prisoners (mainly nationalists) and the events of Jan. 30th, 1972 – Bloody Sunday – made the ongoing conflict a constant shadow over everyday life in Northern Ireland.

Seamus Heaney was by this time a well-known poet. He had experimented with shorter lines and the use of Irish in the Ulster dialect, and had thus already taken a slight turn in direction in *Wintering Out* (1972). Having spent a year at Berkeley where there was a general spirit of protest and solidarity, and having become aware of the fact that his pastoral poems could be seen as “some kind of endorsement of the Northern status quo”²⁵ he felt ready to write more political. It was in this mood that the poem *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* was published in *The Listener* in 1971, and later in *North*²⁶, published in 1975. Heaney felt drawn between the desire to be an artist and a citizen, to wholly commit to the artistic endeavor, but also to express himself as a citizen. In 1969 he had given himself a Christmas present that would be a

²⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

²⁵ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 128.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

turning point for this dilemma. It was a book about preserved bodies found in bogs in Denmark. Some of the people had been victims for ritual murders, and the images of the peat-colored leathery bodies made a lasting impression on Heaney. These would be the images he would use to talk about the violence in Northern Ireland; these were the symbols that would help him to put feelings into words: “The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.”²⁷ Now that he found these emblems – he is citing Yeats here – he could address the violence in Northern Ireland from a safe distance, or, as he put it in one of the interviews with Dennis O’Driscoll, he had the possibility of ‘being alert to the situation’. This double-distance to difficult subjects (addressing them obliquely and calling them something else) was part of “proceeding carefully and cautiously, minding my mouth, but minding it, I hope, for the right reasons”²⁸, part of not wanting to take sides, wanting to stay in between.

Heaney and Katabasis

Katabatic elements have been a part of storytelling from the oldest myths we know and to this day. In the *Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest stories known, Gilgamesh’s faithful friend Enkidu descends to an underworld to retrieve some of Gilgamesh’s possessions. Enkidu does not follow the strict laws of the Underworld and is therefore required to stay there forever, but Gilgamesh can still communicate with Enkidu’s shade. In these Sumerian poems dated to the second millennium BC many elements of other epic journeys are present: the quest for something lost, the rules to be followed, a plant to be taken along, a ferryman.

In Greek mythology, there are many descents to Hades. One the most famous is Orpheus’ descent to rescue Eurydice, retold in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, one of several accounts of katabasis in this collection of poems, as well as in Virgil’s *Georgics 4*. Odysseus is often mentioned in the context of katabasis. Since he is not descending to the Underworld, but instead summoning Tiresias through a sacrifice, this meeting is actually the result of a nekylia, not a katabasis. In a nekylia the hero stays above ground, and summons up the dead from the Underworld through a sacrifice. Once the dead appear the person performing the rite can question them about the future.

²⁷Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words”, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 24.

²⁸O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 159-60.

In Christian theology, Jesus' descent into Hell is the time between his crucifixion and the resurrection from the dead. In the Bible, not much is said about this time in the Underworld, but it is described in 1 Peter 4:6²⁹ and Ephesians 4:9³⁰. In addition, Hades as a representation of the Underworld is mentioned in the Bible.

Closer to home the Norse mythology has Hermod riding into the underworld on eight-legged Sleipnir to bring back his brother Balder. The Kalewala is the national epic of Finland and Karelia. It consists of fifty ancient poems that were pieced together in the period of Romantic nationalism in the 19th century. One of the main characters is Lemminkäinen, who falls into the river of death during one of his quests. His mother then descends to the underworld to recover him from the river.

In Virgil's *Aeneid* we meet a more modern hero with collective ideals, serving civilization with his mission. Though Aeneas is dedicated to his cause, the founding of Rome, he is also torn between duty and passion, not without desire to leave the path he is on for love. Even though duty is victorious in his internal battle, there is an inner division there. This "modernized", more two-dimensional version of the epic hero is easier to relate to than for example the more one-dimensional Odysseus. This could be part of an explanation for the continued interest Seamus Heaney had in Virgil and the *Aeneid*, since it echoes his own feeling of being in between.

Another well-known – if not the most well-known – katabatic journey is Dante's descent to the underworld. From being lost in mid-life and darkness he casts himself as the hero of his journey to the *inferno*. Being in need of companions he writes himself into a fellowship with other great poets. One of them is Virgil, whom he chooses to be his guide. This choice of a pre-Christian writer can be explained by what is interpreted as Virgil's "pietas", which matches well with Christian values. Also, Virgil's prediction of the birth of a boy child which will grow up to become a savior in the 4th Eclogue was often interpreted as a sign that he was a pre-Christian prophet. There are many other connections between Dante and Virgil, the most prominent being that they both have undertaken a katabatic journey.

The typical elements in a katabatic narrative are a downwards movement and a quest for knowledge, for an object or for a person – or combinations of these three. One could think of

²⁹ ⁶ For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to human standards in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. New International Version. Biblica, 2011. Bible Gateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/#copy>. Accessed 22.09.20

³⁰ ⁹ What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? Ibid.

katabatic narratives as a sub-genre, since they often contain certain fixed elements: one hero, maybe with a guide by his side, a place where one is in danger to get lost (woods, sea), something to be discovered to be granted access to the underground (the golden bough, an entrance), a ferryman, a boat, a river, a crossing... In addition, the hero is often put to more tests while on his Underworld journey. The return from this Underworld – the anabasis – is supposedly difficult, but it is often not recounted as detailed as the journey. In fact, the return is often so briefly described that it seems to be just the necessary step that has to be taken in order for the story to be told – which it of course is, implied as it is just by the fact that there is a story to tell, and we are reading or hearing it.³¹

The hero is transformed in some way by his/her travels, usually to the better or even to a different self, a self altered by the trials that he has met. In Book VI of the *Aeneid* the hero, Aeneas, arrives at the Campanian coast as a migrant, a Trojan refugee, and leaves as the founder of Rome. He has found the Golden Bough, made his way to the underworld, seen the shade of his father and has tried three times to embrace him. These empty embraces represent the shift to look away from the past and to the future, from Troy to Rome, from love to duty.

Some modern authors (especially after 1945) have used the katabasis theme in a non-reconciliatory way, where the opening context is Hell, or where the hero after the descent has to live with these two worlds co-existing in one reality.³²

As mentioned in the introduction, one can easily argue that there have been katabatic elements in Heaney's poetry from the very start. "Digging" in *Death of a Naturalist* definitely has that movement of going into the earth and back in time, and at the same time Heaney is reflecting with *pietas* on his position in the family, especially the paternal line. Later, the well-preserved bodies found in peat bogs in Denmark inspire the bog poems published in *North*. The unearthed victims for ritual killings were the inspiration for poetry that addressed the atrocities happening in Ireland at the time, for the first time not only indirectly and allegorically, but in a more analogous way. Heaney had found what he in *Feeling into Words* called "images and symbols adequate to our predicament"³³: just like the earth in Denmark bore witness of former tribal cruelties the ground in Ireland was imbued with sectarian conflict. In *Seeing Things* and in *Human Chain* though, Heaney uses the katabasis theme in a

³¹ Rachel Falconer. "Katabatic narratives". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. First published 17 October 2011. <https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=17641>

³² Ibid.

³³ Heaney, "Feeling into Words", *Finders Keepers*, 23.

different way. Familial love and the wish for communion with the dead are very much in the foreground in these poems, as well as filial devotion and a form for piety.

In *Stepping Stones* Seamus Heaney talks about the use of classical references, which he considers part of his natural repertoire. By learning Latin he learned about myths, including the Underworld, which then became a part of his literary frame of reference. Some of it also fitted in well with the Catholic faith of his upbringing. O'Driscoll asked Heaney about why he considers himself as “Jungian in religion”. In his answer, Heaney makes a connection between his Catholic upbringing and the myths of the classical world: “When I was young I dwelt entirely in the womb of religion. My consciousness was dominated by Catholic conceptions [...], prayers and practices.” The Catholic faith followed him into adulthood, and to the question “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic?” he answers:

I suppose so, because Catholicism provided a totally structured reading of the mortal condition which I've never quite deconstructed. I might have talked differently, certainly more diffidently, if you'd asked me about these matters thirty years ago, since I eventually did my best to change from catechized youth into secular adult. [...] But, in maturity, the myths of the classical world [...] provided a cosmology that corresponded well enough to the original: you learned that, from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region – not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life.

Getting older has therefore been a matter of dwelling with and imagining in terms of these archetypal patterns [...] For years I've been writing poems where I meet ghosts and shades, they are among the ones I like and value most [...].

I think this rather long quotation is important in order to understand Heaney's natural and twofold connection with the katabatic genre – through religion and literature.

Memory defines the katabatic quest in many ways. One way is intertextuality – an intertextuality of form in this case. Since there are fixed elements in the sub-genre of katabasis that make it very recognizable, readers of a katabatic text will always interpret it in relation to other similarly constructed works. The collective memories a readership might have of other writers who have written in the same sub-genre are revived in the reading process. During the descent and in the underworld, understories are woven into the main story, stories that by being part of this journey are also given a new lease of life and moved to the front in the readership's consciousness, where they become a refreshed memory. And the hero himself takes memories with him both to and from the Underworld. Memories of people are often a reason for the quest. And on return the hero retains not only the information or the

secret he was after, but also memories of new encounters with people of his past, some enriching, some tragic. This possibility of weaving a multilayered tapestry using memory and tradition makes the katabatic journey a form that can accommodate literary, political, historical, ethical and personal topics in an all-in-one package. It is up to the writer to choose his or her angle. Maybe the focus is on the descent, the empty embraces or the waiting spirits – or – though less likely – the imperial propaganda like the one barely hidden in the catalogue of Roman heroes in the *Aeneid*. Heaney himself has had different impulses – the death of his father, the arrival of a granddaughter and the wish to honor his Latin teacher -and has therefore chosen different foci while working with Book VI throughout the years.³⁴ Heaney’s faithfulness to Book VI of the *Aeneid* all through his adult life has also given him the opportunity of emphasizing the generational aspect of this katabatic myth. As readers we can enjoy a translation that has its roots in a boy admiring his teacher, poems written by a man “midway in the journey of his life” mourning his father and by a grandfather welcoming his granddaughter.

Theory and Method

I have not used a specific theoretical approach to my reading of Seamus Heaney’s poems in this thesis on his use of the katabasis motif. One reason is that Heaney’s poetry does not seem to lend itself to a very theory-heavy approach, another that that kind of approach does not come natural for me. I came the study of literature with a love for philology (and a background in science), and I have tried to do something like a philological close reading. As a person and as a reader I am quite factual and tend to shy away from overinterpretation. Heaney’s prose tried to steer clear of what he described as a “gap between the professional idiom and the personal recognition”³⁵, something that seems to justify my approach. That being said, I have tried to build up theoretical knowledge around my subject.

Heaney himself asked once: “What attracts you to a poet? A sense that you’re in safe hands, artistically speaking, and that the work embodies knowledge of life.”³⁶ He was speaking about Czeslaw Milosz, but he embodies what he is looking for in others. Not only does Heaney’s poetry not lend itself to be read in light of a certain discourse, Heaney does not lend himself to

³⁴ He admits that not having a choice of focus when translating the whole book required a certain kind of stamina: “By the time the story reaches its climax in Anchises’ vision of a glorious Rome (...) the translator is likely to have moved from inspiration to grim determination.” Translator’s note, Heaney, *Aeneid Book VI*, p. IX

³⁵ Seamus Heaney, “Professing Poetry”, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 71.

³⁶ Andrew Garavel, “An Animated Conversation”, *America – The Jesuit Review*, 14.9.2009. Accessed 11.10.20

theory either. In *The Redress of Poetry*³⁷ he does take up some contemporary theoretical views, but really only to dismiss them. So my approach to Heaney is not shaped by theory, but by admiration for his craft and his stance towards life.

For this thesis I have read some papers where the author seems to want to press Heaney into a mould that is shaped by the author's individual theoretical interests. I find that this in some cases leads to overinterpretation. I have several times heard or read the description "Leavisite" in connection with Heaney. Thinking of Leavis' text "Reality and Sincerity" that does ring true. In the text "Reality and Sincerity"³⁸ in *The Living Principle* Leavis presents what he deems to be criteria for quality in literature. He uses Thomas Hardy's poem "After a Journey" as an example. He likes the introversion presented in the scene of the poetic "I" talking to someone he has lost, but really talking to himself. In this poem "reality" and "sincerity" is created, according to Leavis. This is achieved through words that describe a realistic situation and mood and have the complexity and precision that give verbal power to a poem. The language is instrumental in making the poem truly existential. Leavis also unabashedly looks for a connection between the writer and his work, something I often do too and have done in this thesis.

On the Poetry Selection

In the following, I will look at some of Seamus Heaney's poems that have in common that they have some element of katabasis in them. I have chosen poems from different phases of Heaney's career. They either have some form of katabatic narrative, follow a katabatic event or have katabasis as subject matter. One of the poems is a meta-translational poem, and there are two translations of the part of Book VI of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas receives his instructions on how to begin his katabatic journey.

"Digging" is one of the most well-known poems by Seamus Heaney and also one of his first published poems. It is a statement of his intention to become poet, to go underground with the help of his pen, and to continue a family tradition of closeness to the home ground, though not as a farmer. It is a poem from his naturalistic phase and was published in *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966.

³⁷ Seamus Heaney, "The Redress of Poetry", in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 - 2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 257.

³⁸ Frank Leavis, "Reality and Sincerity", *A Selection from Scrutiny* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), 248.

The “Tollund Man”³⁹ is one of the first political poems. Heaney uses the bog as a receiving ground for Irish history and myth. By absorbing these remote events into his poetry Heaney lets the ritual murders of the Iron Age become a means to portray violence and injustice in Ireland during the Troubles. The “Tollund Man” was published in *Wintering Out* in 1972.

“District and Circle” is a poem of five sonnets, describing a journey on the London Underground. Heaney describes the journey in steps reminiscent of mythic underground journeys. “District and Circle” was published in *District and Circle* in 2006.

“Chanson d’Aventure” is a moving poem written during an episode of illness. It starts at the lowest point of the event and describes the journey back to health. It was published in *Human Chain* in 2010.

“Canopy”/“The Riverbank Field”/“Route 110” are the three poems published in the middle of the collection *Human Chain*. We move with Heaney from the magical forests in Harvard Square to the riverbank in preparation for the mythical journey on “Route 110”, with Book VI of the *Aeneid* in our luggage.

Heaney has translated the “Golden Bough” part of Book VI of the *Aeneid* twice, and as the last two “poems” I will compare these two translations which were published 25 years apart.

³⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966—1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 64.

Digging

Digging is an example of Heaney's early poetry, a statement of intent.

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

“Digging”⁴⁰ is the first poem in Heaney’s first published collection. And right there, from the very beginning, he evokes the image of ancestry as connected to the earth, and digging as a means to find truth. For Heaney truth was defined as a “life-force at the very heart of culture and of the creative project. It resides in and animates personal memory and [...] exists as the value that the artist has to continue to strive to embrace”.⁴¹ According to Heaney himself, poetry should be “true to the impact of external reality and ... sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being.”⁴² One has to go underground to find roots and connections, whether it be those of exterior or interior nature. He starts with a very non-pastoral or even anti-pastoral comparison of the pen in his hand with a gun. But then the pastoral world reigns him in – pastoral here in a sense of that there is a portrayal of country life in an idealized form. “Stooping in rhythm (...) nestled (...) levered (...) By God, the old man could handle a spade” are all positive descriptions of hard agrarian activities. Heaney could have described these activities with words like “his calloused hands ... chafing ...struggling... his tired back”. Just like Virgil uses the tools of animal husbandry – the shepherds –, Heaney uses an agricultural tool as a vehicle for poetic self-expression and lets the sounds and tactility of working the earth take over. Both his father and his grandfather⁴³ were farmers, working the land they lived on. His father bends low to dig up potatoes, his grandfather digs up turf, “going down and down for the good turf”. Seemingly different tasks, both the act of potato digging and turf cutting provide for the family – the former food, the latter warmth. Heaney evokes the physicality of these actions and their results: the “clean rasping sound/When the spade sinks into gravelly ground”, the feeling of “potatoes that we picked,/Loving their cool hardness in our hands” and the sound of “the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat”⁴⁴. The “r”s in the “rasping” of the spade in the “gravelly ground” let us hear the stamina and determination that is put into the work, whereas the “potatoes we picked” are described in easy, rounded alliterations. The many “s”-sounds in “squelch and slap/Of soggy peat” let us hear the squishy wetness of the bog. There is a sensuality in this poem that is typical for Heaney’s poetry in general, but especially for this first collection. According to Neil Corcoran in *The Poetry of*

⁴⁰ Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, 13.

⁴¹ Michael Parker, "Now, and ever / After": Familial and Literary Legacies in Seamus Heaney's "Human Chain", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 21 No. 2, 2015: 341-359

⁴² Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 1995). Accessed 13.11.20 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>

⁴³ It is actually one of Seamus Heaney’s granduncles who is portrayed here. Patrick Heaney, his father, lost his parents early, and was raised by his uncles.

⁴⁴ All underscores in this thesis are *my emphasis*.

Seamus Heaney, these alliterations and stresses lean on Anglo-Saxon poetry⁴⁵. He sees this as a choice that came naturally to Heaney since he had an interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In addition, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, with its sprung rhythm and prosody closer to everyday speech, may have had an influence on this poem.

“Digging” is a poem about being on the verge of an adulthood that is very different from the adulthood his father and grandfather experienced. On one hand digging as part of the daily work on the farm – for turf, for drainage, for planting or harvesting – is a very important part of farm work and as such worthy of description. On the other hand there is the fact that the reflection around digging shows the distance about to be established – the continuity Heaney reflects upon is discontinued by these reflections, as expressed in the deracinating lines “the curt cuts of an edge/Through living roots awaken in my head.”⁴⁶. Digging is done to prepare the ground for planting or to unearth an artifact, but it can also be used to create trenches and walls. Heaney chooses the pen as a tool well knowing that this can create a distance between him and this origin,⁴⁷ or be used to preserve memories of his “omphalos”, his origin and keep rural traditions alive.

Going back to the triptych image of a pen, a gun and a spade it seems the beginning of the poem is metonymically quite crowded. The gun represents the call to arms felt by many nationalists, as well as the always-lingering background of violence. The spade is an essential tool of a farmer, whereas the pen represents the commitment to poetry. This poem and its beginning has been a subject for discussion in many books and articles on Heaney. Of course, having the pride of place in the first collection will get it a lot of scrutiny. Neil Corcoran detects a strain of “over-determination” in these opening lines together with the closing lines:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
[...]
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

⁴⁵ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 2.

⁴⁶ Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, 14.

⁴⁷ It is interesting that in a later poem the fountain pen his parents gave him when he left for St. Columb’s College at the age of twelve also is seen in a double significance: a tool representing his entrance into a learned world and a tool to keep him close to his parents.

In the closing lines, the pen becomes “squat” and heavy sounding, looking back on the opening lines where it was not only compared to a spade but also the gun. However, that still doesn’t explain the gun, which “seems at least one analogy too many for a short poem”.⁴⁸

Helen Vendler in “Seamus Heaney” sees the gun as an expression for the choices an Irish Catholic child would have had: to choose either the farm and follow the agricultural family tradition, or to take up arms and help the Republican cause in that way. This describes a situation where writing and war are “politics by other means”.⁴⁹ According to Vendler Heaney rejects aggression in choosing the spade analog over the gun in the final lines.

There are two things that make it difficult to accept her interpretation. Heaney himself has said that he grew up sheltered from conflict, and that life at university was “on the whole more civil than life outside university”.⁵⁰ The fifties and early sixties were a relatively calm time in Ireland, and there were few violent incidents. This changed first in the late sixties, when Catholics in Northern Ireland began to protest their conditions and fight for their rights. Since “Digging” was written in 1964, it does not seem plausible that the violence should play such an important part in the poem. Could it be that the gun is more a general nod to the difficult Irish situation, also as part of the pastoral writing tradition? “Pastoral is always a genre which is being tested from the outside ... from anything that encroaches on this ... ideal world of creativity.”⁵¹ Maybe the gun comes in to give an edge to the piousness and melancholy tenderness of the poem and at the same time move this pastoral poem closer to other pastorals like Virgil’s eclogues?

Or maybe the gun was just a sign of youthful exuberance that should not be overinterpreted? In “Feeling into Words” Heaney himself has explained the poem as an illustration of the proverb “The pen is lighter than the spade.”⁵², a saying he often heard when questioned about his day and his progress at school, something that was “laid down” in him as a child. He did not want to overload the poem with significance, calling it “a big coarse-grained navy of a poem, butinteresting as an example of what we call ‘finding a voice’ ”. He does not mention the gun at all in “Feeling into Words”, other than saying that this was the first poem he wrote where his feelings had “got into words”, and that “the rhythm and noises still please

⁴⁸ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 9.

⁴⁹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 29.

⁵⁰ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 43.

⁵¹ Michael Putnam, “Virgil and Seamus Heaney”, *Vergilius* 56 (2010): 4.

⁵² Heaney, “Feeling into Words”, *Finders Keepers*, 15.

[...] although there are a few lines in it that have more of the theatricality of the gunslinger than the self-absorption of the digger”.⁵³

Neil Corcoran detects influences of other poets in “Digging”. He mentions specifically Ted Hughes’ poem “The Thought Fox”⁵⁴, another poem about becoming a poet, but finds the influences subtle and complex, seemingly liberating and not anxiety-inducing. “Digging” is not as much occupied with its own making as it is with finding one’s feet in choosing a career as a poet, and the emancipation from family tradition that goes with it. In its look to the ground it also offers an analogy for truth finding and the creative process that would follow Heaney throughout his career, from the rustic retrieval of his first world to longing journeys to the Underworld.

Tollund Man

In his third volume of poetry, *Wintering Out*, Heaney leaves the rural world of his childhood with its life marked by religious customs and agrarian activities. A year spent at Berkeley had enlarged his view both for the social problems of the time and other ways of writing poetry. In the fall of 1970, Heaney moved to California with his family, invited to be a guest lecturer at the University of California. Here he met another environment where supremacy was a challenge, in this case white supremacy and the suppression of Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans. He also encountered a movement of fellow poets, teachers and students wanting to right this wrong, and minorities asserting their rights. This stay spurred the development towards a more politicized way of writing, and *Wintering Out* is the result of this development. The bog poems in this collection have two major sources of inspiration.

The first is evident already in the poem initiating the bog poems, “Bogland”, published in *Door into the Dark* in 1969. Here the Irish landscape is compared to the prairies in the United States as a place of myth. “At that time I was teaching modern literature in Queen’s University, Belfast, and had been reading about a frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up – or rather, laid down – the bog as an answering Irish myth.”⁵⁵ Heaney wanted to establish a connection between his personal memories of the bog landscape of his childhood and the bog as a keeper of national memories in the form of

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁴ Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 14.

⁵⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 54-55.

archeological artefacts. Thinking of the bog as an archive of the national past gave him an image that he could expand to let the bog represent Irish national myth and consciousness.

The other source of inspiration is a book Heaney discovered in 1969. It was a book on Iron Age Jutland, *The Bog People* by P.V.Glob⁵⁶. In his book *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet* Michael Parker describes the importance of Heaney's discovery like this:

The book embraced the majority of his deepest concerns – landscape, religion, sexuality, violence, history, myth [...] It provided an historical perspective enabling Heaney to 'cope with' and confront the contemporary 'Troubles', and created a sense of continuity, kinship and affirmation at a time of social and political disintegration.⁵⁷

With the new belief that poetry could be “a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance”⁵⁸ the collection *Wintering Out* sets a new tone. Heaney uses real and imagined individual fates as a means of portraying systemic injustice. There are poems honoring laborers, servant boys and mummies. There are portrayals of married struggle and child abuse. One poem is about a young mother who drowns her baby, seeing this as the only solution as an unwed mother – in 1972 an unusual and for a male poet quite progressive subject. It seems that Heaney was building a foundation of “human diminishment: isolation, repression, disenchantment, exploitation or betrayal”⁵⁹ from which he then cautiously and obliquely could approach the violence happening in Ireland. He did this through poems about the bog people, published in several of the collections, but first in *Wintering Out* and in greatest number four years later in *North*. By going back in time to the Iron Age and down into the ground of sectarian violence Heaney sets out on a challenging katabatic journey. The quest for the poet is twofold: to face the unavoidable utter discomfort of finally not sparing himself any longer and saying something about the Troubles, and to bring back words, images, or collective memories that stir the mind and can serve as adequate symbols for this task.

After having been foreshadowed on the last pages of *Door into the Dark* the “Tollund Man” makes his entrance in *Wintering Out*:

⁵⁶ Peter Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969)

⁵⁷ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 91.

⁵⁸ James Randall. “From the Archives: An Interview with Seamus Heaney”. *Ploughshares* 114, Spring (2011), <https://www.pshares.org/issues/spring-2011/archive-interview-seamus-heaney-james-randall>

⁵⁹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 21.

Tollund Man

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

II

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses
Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

III

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard
Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

I could have written “Tollund Man” out in two columns so it would not leave so much empty space on the page. One has to see this long narrow poem printed in one long column though, “going down and down” on the page, like an archeological dig goes down into the earth.

“Tollund Man” is a poem in free verse, composed of short-lined quatrains. The shorter lines of this poem could be a result of Heaney’s meeting – on the page or in real life – American poets with a more experimental style. The build of “Tollund Man” resembles the long narrow poems of William Carlos Williams – some lines are only four syllables wide.

The poem starts with a statement of intent: “Some day I will go to Aarhus”, and from here on everything is imagined. The Tollund Man is described in detail – both how he looks now and how he was found. The first part of the poem is almost like an ekphrasis, a vivid description of the Tollund Man, whom Heaney visualized with the help of a black and white photo. He sees the body in peat-brown, an Anglo Saxon-sounding compound word. The description of his nakedness and of the noose around his neck gives an indication of how he died, but there is no direct mention of violence in the first poem. The narrator knows that he will need time to take it all in, to reflect about what might have happened. The Tollund Man was probably sacrificed to the goddess Nerthus, a “bridegroom to the goddess”, and by letting her “dark juices” work “him to a saint’s kept body” Heaney exposes the sexual aspect of this kind of ritual. These sacrifices were made in the hope that they would insure new life in spring. In an interview in *The Paris Review* Heaney explains:

In the understanding of his Iron Age contemporaries, the sacrificed body of Tollund Man germinated into spring, so the poem wants a similar flowering to come from the violence in the present. Of course it recognizes that this probably won't happen, but the middle section of the poem is still a prayer that it should.⁶⁰

This hope is expressed in the religious wording of the second poem – consecrate, holy, pray. The speaker feels a call to prayer at the sight of the Tollund Man, but dismisses it as possible blasphemy. But still, there is a thought that something good might come out of the violence: what if the body parts of the four Catholic brothers brutally killed by Protestants in the early 1920s could germinate, could bring this lost generation back to life in a new spring? The atrocities committed by one group are described right next to rituals of religious practice of the other group in the conflict, which gives a jarring effect. It is also a contrast to the first poem, where violence and beliefs are intertwined.

The last poem in this sequence imagines the sadness that connects the speaker with the Tollund Man across two millennia. Helen Vendler interprets the “sad freedom” as the certain knowledge of death, accentuated by a new awareness of the repetitiveness of history.⁶¹ However, there is also a speechlessness, a loss of connection – the speaker would not know the tongue of the people living around Aarhus now and even less be able to communicate with the Tollund Man. Even though there is this sense of bewilderment, there is also something common, letting the speaker “feel lost,/Unhappy and at home.”

With “Bogland” and “Tollund Man” Heaney initiates a series of poems that use the Irish bog landscape as a place of receiving, of preservation and of myth. Even though he turns away from the artisan and agrarian first world that dominated his early collections, he does not turn away from the home ground. While Heaney as a younger poet had to define himself against his familial background in a broad sense, he now widens his field of view and becomes more aware of the other spaces surrounding him – history, politics, geography. He exchanges the vertical depth with a more horizontal width and explores the Irish past and culture in the layers of preservation the bog offers. M. Reza Ghorbanian writes in his article “Subjectivity as Alterity in Seamus Heaney’s Poetry”⁶² that Heaney’s identification with the bog, and its victims, “facilitates the depiction of a descent into the underlying origins of the unconscious where he can examine the deepest layers of the collective memory and deconstruct the

⁶⁰ Henri Cole, “Seamus Heaney The Art of Poetry No. 75”, *The Paris Review* 144 (1997) Accessed 15.11.20 <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1217/the-art-of-poetry-no-75-seamus-heaney>

⁶¹ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 43

⁶² M. Reza Ghorbinian. "Subjectivity as Alterity in Seamus Heaney's Poetry." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 49, no. 2 (2016): 119. Accessed 13.11.20 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44030587>.

foundations of tribal beliefs and images that inform [...] collective behavior”. Heaney starts to use his poetry to dig into the dark recesses of the tribal history and conflicts of his home country; he bows his head “in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world”⁶³.

Digging into the layers of centuries of sedimented strife was not something that came naturally to Heaney, given his reticence to take sides and his defense of the poet’s right to be apolitical. In his Nobel Lecture in 1995 Heaney said:

While the Christian moralist in oneself was impelled to deplore the atrocious nature of the IRA’s campaign of bombings and killings, and the “mere Irish” in oneself was appalled by the ruthlessness of the British Army on occasions like Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972, the minority citizen in oneself, the one who had grown up conscious that his group was distrusted and discriminated against in all kinds of official and unofficial ways, this citizen’s perception was at one with the poetic truth of the situation in recognizing that if life in Northern Ireland were ever really to flourish, change had to take place.⁶⁴

So Heaney went through a process of recognizing that he could not go on living in a lyric parallel world, but had to come with some kind of response, a response that “would not allow itself to be predetermined by the social and political situation but which, at the same time, would not completely evade that level of reality either”⁶⁵. In his essay “Feeling into Words” Heaney puts it this way (I cite in expansion of a shorter citation above):

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. [...] I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry [...] it would be possible to encompass the perspective of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.⁶⁶

From this point onwards, the poet’s digging is no longer only a way of exploring his own roots. Searching for “symbols adequate to [the] predicament” is an archeological activity in the field of expression. Finding that the field of archeology itself offers these symbols then doubles the downwards trajectory. The archeological digging in a bog can potentially uncover the dark history of a people and as such can be challenging to do and to relate to over time.

⁶³ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation, 1995). Accessed 13.11.20 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1995/heaney/lecture/>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Eugene O’Brien, “Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing” (2002), 157. Accessed 11.11.20 https://www.academia.edu/212510/Seamus_Heaney_and_the_Place_of_Writing

⁶⁶ Heaney, “Feeling into Words”, *Finders Keepers*, 23.

Heaney had eased himself into the field through the poem “Bogland”, in which the findings are merely interesting, not brutal. Helen Vendler points out that the findings actually represent “domestic ordinariness (butter) or evolutionary astonishment (the giant elk)”.⁶⁷ All this changes when Heaney reads about the bog people in Jutland. Now the bogs hide murdered bodies, symbols for humankind’s propensity for faith based sacrifice and tribal behavior. Going back in time and down into the psyche of one’s nation required some courage, but with the bogs and their history Heaney had found the historical frame in which he could at least try to decipher the Troubles, enabling him to take this step into a more political phase of his work.

District and Circle

Already the title of this poem takes us to the underground, more specifically to the Edgware station in London, to which the District and the Circle line of the London Underground run parallel. The poem has also given its name to the whole poetry collection in which it appears, and whose jaunty green and yellow lettering in typical Faber layout also point underground, namely to the color code used on London Underground maps and signs. The poem is a sequence of five sonnets. The lines do not rhyme, though some lines have endings that are slant rhymes or even identical rhymes. The loose rhymes seem to fit the uncertainty portrayed in the poem.

I will include the sequence of poems here, and have a closer look at the first, third and fifth poem. The other two I will just paraphrase, to enable the reader to follow along in the journey.

District and Circle

Tunes from a tin whistle underground
Curled up a corridor I’d be walking down
To where I knew I was always going to find
My watcher on the tiles, cap by his side,
His fingers perked, his two eyes eyeing me
In an unaccusing look I’d not avoid,
Or not just yet, since both were out to see
For ourselves.

As the music larked and capered
I’d trigger and untrigger a hot coin
Held at the ready, but now my gaze was lowered
For was our traffic not in recognition?

⁶⁷ Vendler, Heaney, 39.

Accorded passage, I would re-pocket and nod,
And he, still eyeing me, would also nod.

Posted, eyes front, along the dreamy ramparts
Of escalators ascending and descending
To a monotonous slight rocking in the works,
We were moved along, upstanding,
Elsewhere, underneath, an engine powered,
Rumbled, quickened, evened, quieted.
The white tiles gleamed. In passages that flowed
With draughts from cooler tunnels, I missed the light
Of all-overing, long since mysterious day,
Parks at lunchtime where the sunners lay
On body-heated mown grass regardless,
A resurrection scene minutes before
The resurrection, habitués
Of their garden of delights, of staggered summer.

Another level down, the platform thronged,
I re-entered the safety of numbers,
A crowd half straggle-ravelled and half strung
Like a human chain, the pushy newcomers
Jostling and purling underneath the vault,
On their marks to be first through the doors,
Street-loud, then succumbing to herd-quiet...
Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?
Always new to me, always familiar,
This unrepentant, now repentant turn
As I stood waiting, glad of a first tremor,
Then caught up in the now-or-never whelm
Of one and all the full length of the train.

Stepping onto it across the gap,
On to the carriage metal, I reached to grab
The stubby black roof-wort and take my stand
From planted ball of heel to heel of hand
As sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me.
I was on my way, well girded, yet on edge,
Spot-rooted, buoyed, aloof,
Listening to the dwindling noises off,
My back to the unclosed door, the platform empty;
And wished it could have lasted,
That long between-times pause before the budge
And glaze-over, when any forwardness

Was unwelcome and bodies readjusted,
Blindsided to themselves and other bodies.

So deeper into it, crowd-swept, strap-hanging,
My lofted arm a-svivel like a flail,
My father's glazed face in my own waning
And craning...

 Again the growl
Of shutting doors, the jolt and one-off treble
Of iron on iron, then a long centrifugal
Haulage of speed through every dragging socket.

And so by night and day to be transported
Through galleried earth with them, the only relict
Of all that I belonged to, hurtled forward,
Reflecting in a window mirror-backed
By blasted weeping rock-walls.

Flicker-lit.

The first sonnet of “District and Circle” describes the entry to a modern day Underworld. As is customary when entering the Underworld, the guest has to make some kind of payment or solve a task. In this case, the task is to pass the musician and to get through the awkwardness of deciding whether to pay him or not. Alliterations describe the sound of the station – “tunes from a tin whistle underground/Curled up a corridor” – one can imagine the tiled aisles and passages of a subway station, where echoing music announces the presence of a busker. The poem is held together by some slant rhymes; assonant like in “underground – down” and “find – side”, and consonant like in “capered – lowered”. There is also an identical rhyme in the last two lines. Here lowered gaze meets open look, the coin is held at ready, but a mutual understanding between artists leads to nods, not money exchanged. The identical “nod” in both lines confirms the shared circumstance of being two artists “out to see for ourselves”, a reciprocated gesture.

The second sonnet begins with a description of a stare willed straight ahead (“eyes front”), as part of being able to passively descend further into a technical underworld (“We were moved along”). One can almost feel the movement of the escalator, the cold whiteness of the walls, the rumbling sounds and the cold draft that are contrasted with the summer day and the cityscape the traveler just left.

In the third sonnet, the crowd waiting on the platform engulfs the traveler, there is movement, but also connection (“A crowd half straggle-ravelled and half strung like a human chain”). The word choice of “human chain” describes a connectedness between these individuals, and of course after the publication of Seamus Heaney’s last collection with the same name this description will have gained a new depth. The crowd is waiting to board – not a barge but a train in this case. The lyrical “I” wonders whether he has betrayed himself or someone else – who is this someone else? Is it the busker he just met? Or is it his father he is thinking about, almost like a premonition of a meeting about to happen?

Or is it – as Rachel Falconer wonders in *Heaney, Virgil and Contemporary Katabasis*⁶⁸ – the Tollund Man, resurrected from the earth first by archeologists and later by Heaney in the poem “The Tollund Man in Springtime”?⁶⁹ The first and last of these five sonnets were originally written as part of a new Tollund Man poem, “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, an “environmentalist [...] lament”⁷⁰, where the Tollund man one spring morning awakens and walks out of the museum to discover our world – a world that has changed since he was killed and now is in far worse shape. The journey in the subway was originally written as his discovery of something that is an everyday occurrence for Londoners. It was not meant to be a mythical journey, according to Heaney.⁷¹ But since Heaney had an autobiographical connection to this experience of daily taking the tube to exactly this station he decided to take these two sonnets out of the original poem and publish them as a separate unit, abandoning the Tollund Man idea. The bombings of the London Underground in July 2005, whereof one happened at Edgware Station, prompted Heaney to expand the poem:

The figure who speaks in the five sonnets [...] is at a remove from the people among whom he finds himself. This is partly because I am remembering the other, younger person I was when I first journeyed on a London tube train, somebody who was much less at home [...] than I would become later on. But the feeling of unease is also there because the figure in question is haunted by all kinds of new awarenesses: awareness of the potential danger of a journey nowadays on a London tube train and awareness of the mythical dimensions of all such journeys underground, into the earth, into the dark.⁷²

⁶⁸ Rachel Falconer, “Heaney, Virgil and Contemporary Katabasis”, *A Companion to Poetic Genre* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), (1-22), 11 (Pagination in author’s copy.)

⁶⁹ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems 1988 – 2013* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 166.

⁷⁰ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 411.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁷² *Ibid.*

This expansion of the poem gave something that is an everyday and recognizable occurrence – the musician in the subway station – a mythical significance, a typical example of Heaney’s capacity to make the ordinary extraordinary.

The fourth sonnet – the last of the three that were interposed – has the traveler stepping not on a barge but on a means of transport nonetheless – the train carriage. There is a weightiness over this description, “taking stand”, “sweet traction” and “heavy down-slump”. The noise disappears into the background, the journey begins. To counterbalance the movement of the train and the weight of readjusting bodies, “spot-rooted” the traveler holds on to the “black roof-wort”. The Anglo-Saxon style compound words weigh down and anchor this sonnet in another “word hoard”⁷³, just as the traveler is still anchored in his Irish rural landscape.

In the fifth sonnet, the traveler is pressed deeper into the carriage by the wave of fellow-passengers, reminiscent of souls gathering on the banks of the river Styx. He holds on to the strap, but there is a lot of movement, so the traveler’s arm is “a-svivel like a flail”. A svivel is a little piece of metal on a fishing line, allowing the hook to turn without entangling the line. A flail is an old-fashioned farmer’s tool used for threshing, for separating the grain from the husk. Heaney uses these two words describing independent movement and separation right before he describes a sort of vision of his father appearing in the train window. This does not seem like an anticipated meeting, more like a surprising and short happening, the result of a stream of consciousness. The face of the father appears in the traveler’s double-contoured reflection in the train window, superimposed on his mirrored face – “My lofted arm a-svivel like a flail/My father’s glazed face in my own waning/And craning...”. The repetition of the /ei/ diphthong holds the lines together just like the two outlines in the window are tracing each other, a Virgilian embrace of sorts with the shade of his father. And this meeting pulls the traveler out of the present and back towards his first world (which Heaney often described as archaic), prompting him to describe himself as a relict, someone connected to another time. The separation from his father alluded to through tools from his childhood in the first lines of this sonnet is reversed into relative closeness since the traveler does not feel at home in the modern world, here represented by the London underground, either. The traveler is “neither here nor there”⁷⁴ in this fleeting moment of inbetweenness.

⁷³ Heaney uses this word in “North”; Heaney, *North*, 10.

⁷⁴ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, 111.

Heaney does not mention the London bombings of 2005 in this poem. Its setting of course predates the bombings by forty years, and the poem was also written before the bombings. There is an uncanny prescience in the last verse though in that the passenger is “hurtled forward” and the reflected images in the carriage windows are described as “mirror-backed/By blasted weeping rock-walls./Flicker-lit.”, as commented on by Rachel Falconer.⁷⁵ Thus the poems can function as a contemplation on a journey between two worlds – the rural Irish world and the English urban world -, and at the same time accommodate the memory of the catastrophic bombings.

Chanson d’Aventure

As a genre, the *chanson d’aventure* is the poetic equivalent to the chivalric romances, the *romans d’aventure*, which arose in France in the mid-fourteenth century. *Chansons d’aventure* were also written in the insular French called Anglo-Norman and in Middle English.⁷⁶ They have two distinguishing features: a frame that often is a rather conventional setting like a walk in the woods, and a usually amorous action that the poet is either the hero of or an interested witness to. The poem “Chanson d’Aventure”⁷⁷ in *Human Chain* is the description of a katabatic-anabatic episode in Seamus Heaney’s life, with Heaney himself as both the hero and the witness. As mentioned above the anabasis is the often briefly narrated episode of the hero’s resurfacing after a more lengthy narrated journey into and through the Underworld. This poem reverses the balance, making the anabasis the main element of the account.

In 2006 Heaney was visiting friends for a birthday celebration together with his wife Marie. Waking up in the morning Heaney tried to get out of bed, but could not move his left side. He had suffered a stroke during the night. Another guest, a physiotherapist, was summoned and an ambulance called. Heaney had to be carried down the stairs of the guesthouse in which he and his wife were staying. The ambulance arrived, and the patient was taken to a hospital. The ride in the ambulance, the feeling of having a hemiparalysis and his stay in a rehabilitation hospital are described in the three parts of “Chanson d’Aventure”.

These poems are beautiful manifestations of love and gratitude, but they are not only that. Illness narratives are a genre where patients tell their story of descent into some form of

⁷⁵ Falconer, *Heaney, Virgil and Contemporary Katabasis*, (1-22), 13 (Pagination in author’s copy.)

⁷⁶ Philip Bennett, “Chansons de geste and Chansons d’aventures: Recent Perspectives on the Evolution of a Genre”, *French Studies* 66, 4 (2012), 525.

⁷⁷ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 14.

physical or psychological imbalance. As such they can be considered katabatic narratives. Following this thought, the parallel telling of an ascent out of illness is an anabatic narrative. The katabatic and anabatic trajectories of an illness narrative can vary and can be very imbalanced. In cases where there is no recovery, there is no ascent, and in cases of sudden illness with recovery the descent is short and immediate, often so immediate that it cannot be retold, leaving only the possibility for an anabatic narrative. The retelling of a stroke is an example of this kind of narrative. As the name implies the event of illness is momentary, the katabasis is a free fall.

According to Francisco Saavedra⁷⁸ recovery narratives share typical characteristics, and we find several of them in Heaney's poem or even in the fact that he wrote a poem. For a poet turned patient agency can have been an important factor. Heaney was (or is) a beloved poet in his home country and is well known also outside of Ireland. By writing about his experience he takes control over what has happened. This agency is important for all patients, but maybe even more so if you are a public figure. Another important factor is a form for directedness – trying to make sense or give sense to what happened. In the first part of the poem Heaney describes the (renewed) love he and his wife have for each other. In an interview in *The Guardian* he said:

The trip in the ambulance I always remember because Marie was in the back with me. [...] To me that was one of the actual beauties of the stroke, that renewal of love in the ambulance. One of the strongest, sweetest memories I have. We went through Glendorn on a very beautiful, long, bumpy ride to Letterkenny hospital.⁷⁹

Other characteristics of an anabatic (recovery) narrative are the upward trajectory that comes naturally with improving health and the emotional narrative style.

“Chanson d’Aventure” starts with a short epigraph where two lines from John Donne’s poem “The Ecstasy” are cited. This poem describes love as a union of souls that is completed through the physical union. It establishes what this poem is about – soul and body, love and comfortable closeness, union and disruption.

⁷⁸ Javier Saavedra, “Recovery stories of people diagnosed with severe mental illness: Katabatic and Anabatic narratives”, in *Identity Construction and Illness Narratives in Persons with Disabilities*, ed. Ch. Glinborg & M. de la Mata (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2020) 69.

⁷⁹ Henry McDonald, “Heaney tells of his stroke ordeal”, *The Guardian*, 18.7.2009. Accessed 11.10.20 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/19/seamusheaney-ireland>

Chanson d'Aventure

*Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.*

I

Strapped on, wheeled out, forklifted, locked
In position for the drive,
Bone-shaken, bumped at speed,

The nurse a passenger in front, you ensconced
In her vacated seat, me flat on my back –
Our postures all the journey still the same,

Everything and nothing spoken,
Our eyebeams threaded laser-fast, no transport
Ever like it until then, in the sunlit cold

Of a Sunday morning ambulance
When we might, O my love, have quoted Donne
On love on hold, body and soul apart.

II

Apart: the very word is like a bell
That the sexton Malachy Boyle outrolled
In illo tempore in Bellaghy

Or the one I tolled in Derry in my turn
As college bellman, the haul of it there still
In the heel of my once capable

Warm hand, hand that I could not feel you lift
And lag in yours throughout that journey
When it lay flop-heavy as a bellpull

And we careered at speed through Dungloe,
Glendoan, our gaze ecstatic and bisected
By a hooked-up drip-feed to the cannula.

III

The charioteer at Delphi holds his own,
His six horses and chariot gone,
His left hand lopped

From a wrist protruding like an open spout,
Bronze reins astream in his right, his gaze ahead

Empty as the space where the team should be,
 His eyes-front, straight-backed posture like my own
 Doing physio in the corridor, holding up
 As if once more I'd found myself in step
 Between two shafts, another's hand on mine,
 Each slither of the share, each stone it hit,
 Registered like a pulse in the timbered grips.

The first part of the poem describes the ambulance ride to the hospital. The first words take us to the very lowest point in Heaney's katabasis – total passivity as he is “strapped on, wheeled out, fork-lifted, locked in position”, a witness to his own incapacitated state. Then the anabatic ascend begins with the alliterative “bone-shaken, bumped at speed” ride, that – as becomes clear in the next stanza – includes a nurse and a “you”. The “you” is Heaney's wife of over 40 years sitting next to him in the ambulance. They do not speak with words, but communicate with their eyes. The line “our eyebeams threaded laserfast” also points to *The Ecstasy* where the lovers' looks at each other are described in a very similar way: “Our eyebeams twisted, and did thread/Our eyes upon a double string”.⁸⁰ Their souls communicate even though right now, in this sudden moment of illness, Heaney's body cannot: “[...]When we might, O my love; have quoted Donne/On love on hold, body and soul apart.” There are ten rounded “o”-sounds in these beautiful assonant lines, until the last word cuts in: “apart”.

“Apart” is then the first word in the second poem, and the whole line “Apart: the very word is like a bell” is a beginning that resounds with Keats' first line from “An Ode to a Nightingale” that reads: “Forlorn: the very word is like a bell”⁸¹. In Keats poem, this line describes the feeling of being torn away from his reveries and back into his stricken reality. For Heaney and his wife the fear of being “apart” is dominant, both because of the sudden illness, indicating the possibility of a parting through death, and because at the time there was no sensory connection since Heaney could not feel his hand. The plosive sound of “apart” links it to memories of bells tolling, both at church and in school, and of people and places. Malachy Boyle, the bell ringer in Bellaghy is mentioned, in an enjambment with an almost playful internal rhyme – “Malachy [...] Bellaghy” – and a quote often used in the reading of the

⁸⁰ John Donne, “The Ecstasy”, *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed 11.10.20
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44099/the-ecstasy>

⁸¹ John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”, *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed 11.10.20
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale>

Gospel in the Latin mass, “*in illo tempore*” (“at that time”). Bellaghy is the name of the village where Heaney’s family home was since his teenage years. The Heaney family grave is in the church cemetery there. Since the epigraph has moved the metaphysical poet Donne to the forefront, the bells again push one’s thoughts towards John Donne, this time to his sermon “For whom the bell tolls”⁸², in which the tolling bell indicates death. All these memories of childhood, family and church illustrate the seriousness of the situation, whether it was clear for Heaney at the moment or first later, looking back at this episode. Katabatic writing is memorious in its nature, a recovery of memories. But also the literary associations and the intertextuality that are created can be seen as katabatic – texts are retrieved from the underground of memory and released into a renewed existence. In writing this poem Heaney both recovers the memory of the stroke episode and his katabatic, memory-retrieving associations at the time.

The image in the last stanzas of his “once capable warm hand” is possibly a reference to lines in an untitled Keats fragment “This living hand, now warm and capable/Of earnest grasping”⁸³. Keats wrote these lines when he was already aware of his own imminent death from tuberculosis. A hand incapable of writing also hampers the spontaneity of the writing process and thus for a poet might be synonymous with a less agile mind. But in Heaney’s case it is more about the physical, sensory coupling. Not only is Heaney’s hand not capable of holding a bell pull right now, it feels “flop-heavy” and lifeless, not even able to transmit the sensation of being held. The visual connection between husband and wife now replaces the physical one. The “drip-feed to the cannula” comes between their “ecstatic gaze”, and with its mid-thickened shape sends one back to the bell pulls of the first stanzas. By invoking Donne and Keats Heaney not only writes himself into a literary community, he also seeks out his predecessors – citing and rewriting as a form for communion with the dead. Heaney goes to a literary past and to the dead poets that inhabit this past –this is also a catabatic journey. The use of citations and variations in his poetry of course presupposes a well-educated readership with a good memory, enabling it to achieve a form of passive membership in this elusive circle.

During his convalescence, Seamus Heaney had to learn how to walk again. In the third poem he compares himself to the Charioteer of Delphi, a Greek statue from the Classical period.

⁸² John Donne, “Meditation XVII”, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1623). Accessed 14.11.20 https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Meditation_XVII

⁸³ John Keats, “This living hand, now warm and capable”, *Poetry Foundation*. Accessed 11.10.20 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50375/this-living-hand-now-warm-and-capable>

The statue is incomplete, not only missing the horses and the chariot, but also his left arm – “his left arm lopped” – and the line where the missing arm is mentioned is the only one in the poem that is missing its second half, is “lopped”. The Charioteer is an upright standing statue and does not have the fluidity of captured movement that statues from later in the Classical period have. But, just like Heaney, who had lost control over the left side of his body, he uses his right hand and looks forward, “eyes-front, straight-backed”. The hands supporting Heaney between the shafts of the parallel bars used for physiotherapy remind Heaney of his father’s hands, supporting him while he walks between the handles of a plough. He could feel the plough cut through the earth, its vibrations “like a pulse”, as if the ground was alive. And here in this last scene the ground, the shade of the father, the guides, the danger and the renewed love for his wife all blend to place this poem in the katabatic-anabatic tradition.

What was the quest in this journey? On one level the poem tells a story of illness, recovery and renewed love. But, as mentioned above, there is another level, as in all recovery narratives: to write about the illness and the way out of it is to claim ownership of one’s story. It is no longer just a dry-worded account in a hospital file, maybe given by others; it is “my” story. Especially with serious illness writing can be a way of coping, as much for a Nobel laureate as for any other patient. Even though Heaney conjures up lovely and positive images of renewed love, his stroke must have felt like a threatening brush with death. He did not die, but he could have. He did not lose his speech, but he could have – like his fellow Nobel laureate Tomas Tranströmer, whom he had met personally after the former had his debilitating stroke. So the quest may have been to find a way to cope with the loss of trust, the form of trust that Tranströmer writes about in “Schubertiana”:

Så mycket vi måste lita på för att kunna leva vår dagliga dag utan att sjunka genom jorden!
Lite på snömassorna som klamrar sig fast vid bergsslutningen ovanför byn.
Lita på tysthetslöftena och samförståndsleendet, lita på att olyckstelegrammen inte gäller oss och att det plötsligt yxhugget inifrån inte kommer.⁸⁴

So much we have to trust, simply to live through our daily day without sinking through the earth!
Trust the piled snow clinging to the mountain slope above the village.

⁸⁴ Tomas Tranströmer, Nobel Lecture (Program), 16. Accessed 11.10.20
<https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/transtromer-lecture.pdf>

Trust the promises of silence and the smile of understanding, trust that the accident telegram isn't for us and that the sudden axe-blow from within won't come.⁸⁵

Heaney had received this “axe-blow from within”. And because he came up from the Underworld of illness he could – like every other hero returning – tell his story.

Canopy/The Riverbank Field/Route 110

In the middle of the collection *Human Chain* is a group of poems that is ordered following a natural development: From the enchanted woods and golden boughs of “Canopy” onwards to reflections around translation on the “Riverbank Field” and to travels in the Underworld of memories on “Route 110”.

Canopy

In the first of this group of poems, “Canopy”⁸⁶, Seamus Heaney remembers a Harvard happening, an art installation in Harvard Yard. Harvard Yard is a parklike area on the University campus consisting mainly of greens, tall trees and crisscrossing paved walkways.

In this setting, the artist David Ward set up an installation of light and sound in May 1994. Thirty sound sources were hung from the freshly leafed trees, and recordings of different voices speaking in different languages were played every evening from dusk to dark. The stories were all about place. There were memories, folk tales, poems – all recorded in different languages. And there were passages from Italo Calvino's *Invisible cities*⁸⁷, a work that explores imagined places in miniature prose poems, and through these places human nature.⁸⁸ The sound of the different languages would be heard from the trees, and horizontal lighting laid a green roof over the yard, a canopy. In the poem Heaney remembers the fascination this installation held for him.

“Canopy” is written in nine quatrains with short lines, most of which are six syllables long. It is written in free verse with no end rhymes, but some alliteration and assonance. The poem starts with Heaney giving the time (“the month of May”, “trees were turning”) and place, Harvard Yard. Then the installation is described visually, the “Voice-boxes in the branches/Speakers wrapped in sacking”, before the acoustic elements are introduced. The

⁸⁵ Tomas Tranströmer, “Schubertiana”, *The Great Enigma: New collected poems* (New York: New Directions Books, 2006), 148. Transl. by Robin Fulton

⁸⁶ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 44.

⁸⁷ Italo Calvino, *Invisible cities* (London: Vintage Books, 1972)

⁸⁸ <https://brooklynrail.org/2014/02/criticspage/art-theory-poetry-and-an-airplane-above-some-trees>, 20.10.20

voice boxes become “Shadow Adam’s apples”. The sounds washing over the listeners have a whispering or mumbling quality, varying in volume. This effect is onomatopoeically conveyed through the many s-sounds interspersed some rounded o-sounds: “sibilant ebb and flow,/Speech-gutterings, desultory/Hush and backwash and echo.” The sound seems to Heaney like “antiphonal responses/In the congregation of leaves”, liturgical song in a church room, were the leaves are the responding congregation. Or maybe the trees are talking in their sleep, quite the opposite of the talking trees in Dante’s canto XIII. The “reeds on the riverbank/Going over and over their secret” send the reader’s thoughts to another riverbank, another “going over”. The people enjoying this installation “were cocking their ears,/Gathering, quietening,/Stepping on to the grass,/Stopping and holding hands” – the verb forms point to a continuity in these activities, a prolonged enjoyment.

[...]
Earth was replaying its tapes,

Words being given new airs:
Dante’s whispering wood –
The wood of the suicides –
Had been magicked over to lover’s lane.

“Words being given new airs” surely refers to Sappho’s “Mere air, these words, but delicious to hear”, thus connecting the installation with archaic Greece.⁸⁹ And Dante is mentioned, but these trees and these words are as different as they could be from those in the forest in the seventh circle of hell. No gnarled branches, no black leaves, instead the colors of May in an illuminated canopy. A romantic place – a “lover’s lane”.

Therefore a branch being broken off in this setting would have

[...] curled itself like a finger
Around the fingers that broke it/
And then refused to let go.

There would not be blood and words sputtering from the broken end of the branch like in Dante’s *Wood of Suicides*, but there would be a longing for connection, a holding on. All the texts replaying from the trees are symbols of connection – connection to a home place whose

⁸⁹ A plane pulling a banner with the words “WORDS OF AIR OPEN TO THE EAR” flew over Harvard Yard on opening night. <https://brooklynrail.org/2014/02/criticspage/art-theory-poetry-and-an-airplane-above-some-trees>

vernacular the persons speak, but also connection to each other. Language as belonging and connection, but also – since most of the languages filling the air would not have been understandable to those walking in the forest – rhythm, song and atmosphere.

And the mythic world would be turned upside down, the Golden Bough not holding on to the branch it grows on, but to the hand that plucks it:

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

This installation is not only in a landscape but also about landscape – the inner landscape of our first worlds, connected to language and memory, peopled with persons lost and persons alive. The shining “boughs” in the last line give the readers a first glimpse of the next landscape to come: the entrance to and then later the underworld itself. It is not easy to go there, neither in myth nor in poetry, but – “so I thought” – it is nice to imagine an easier entrance to this hidden world.

In this poem Heaney shares a Harvard memory that made him feel connected with a mythic world, with ancient Greece, with Virgil and Dante and their Underworlds – and he is at home in *this* landscape too, in his poetic second world.

The Riverbank Field

I have included «The Riverbank Field»⁹⁰ in my selection of poems because it is a meditation on the act of translation, and because I think it can give us an impression of an accomplished writer and translator’s thoughts on this part of his vocation. The poem also establishes a twofold connection to the katabasis motif since it ends in a translation of lines from Book VI of the *Aeneid*:

The Riverbank Field

Ask me to translate what Loeb gives as
‘In a retired vale... a sequestered grove’
And I’ll confound the Lethe in Moyola

⁹⁰ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 46.

By coming through Back Park down from Grove Hill
 Across Long Rigs on to the riverbank –
 Which way, by happy chance, will take me past

 The domos placidas, those ‘peaceful homes’
 Of Upper Broagh. Moths then on evening water
 It would have to be, not bees in sunlight,

 Midge veils instead of lily beds; but stet
 To all the rest: the willow leaves
 Elysian-silvered, the grass so fully fledged

 And unimprinted it can’t not conjure thoughts
 Of passing spirit-troops, animae, quibus, altera fato
 Corpora debentur, ‘spirits’, that is,

 ‘To whom second bodies are owned by fate.’
 And now to continue, 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 underworld are shed
 And soul is longing to dwell in flesh and blood
 Under the dome of the sky.’

Translation as a subject and discipline in its own right has gained recognition during the last decades of the 20th century. Translation of an old text is not only looked upon as a way of bringing forward an old text, but also as a chance for transmission to new readers in a new form. In the book *The Translator as Writer* Clive Scott writes that

“[...] translation is not an act of preservation (of a definitive text), nor an act of recall (of a text that inevitably belongs to the past), but an act of transmission (of handing on a text in what is deemed an appropriate form) and of reimagination.⁹¹

From being placed quite low on the literary ladder (“it’s only language”) translation has climbed and claimed its place next to other well established subjects like comparative literature, linguistics and cultural studies. Susan Bassnett describes this development in her contribution to the book *World Literature in Theory*, the chapter “From Cultural Turn to

⁹¹ Clive Scott, “Translating the literary: Genetic criticism, text theory and poetry”, in *The Translator as Writer*, ed. Susan Bassnett, Peter Bush (London: Continuum, 2006), 108.

Translational Turn”⁹². During the last decades, this “translational turn” has moved from translation as a vocation with the translator in the background to letting the translator be visible – by letting the translated text be visibly translated. This development then led to an inward turn where the translator’s creativity, cognition and consciousness are considered important factors in the translation process.

“The Riverbank Field” is written in tercets, a form that immediately sends ones thoughts to another poet in another time, Dante, whom Heaney greatly admired. He has incorporated translations of Dante in earlier works, among others the translated lines from Canto III in *Inferno*, that conclude the collection *Seeing Things*.⁹³ The tercet will always be closely connected to Dante’s katabatic journey, so by choosing this form Heaney establishes an immediate closeness between it and his own lyric journey into memorious ground in *Human Chain*. The poem is written in blank verse, not in terza rima, thus being placed in a position between two traditions, the medieval Italian and the English.

The poem is a reflection on the process of translation as both a medium of transfer and a source of deformation. In the first stanza Heaney comments on the subject by using three different words for the act of translation: to “translate”, to “give as” and to “confound”. These three expressions go right to the center of the discussion around translation. Should the translator *translate* word for word in the background, *give* an approximation or let his experience and imagination *confound* the text, something that would maybe produce a “version”?

Whereas “preservation” and “recall” in the citation above have something static about them there is movement in the words “transmission” and “reimagination”. Heaney conjures this movement, this image of flow and change with the word “confound”. Even though the word as used today means “to bring disorder” into something, the Latin origin “fundere” means “to pour”. In the re-working of a text a writer or translator always pours in some of his or her own imagination. It seems that Heaney accepts this fact as unavoidable: “I will confound [...]”. Using a river as imagery in a poem about translation strengthens this image of movement. Readers of Heaney’s poetry will recognize this river, the Moyala, from other poems, especially as a place linked to memories of his father.

⁹² Susan Bassnett, “From Cultural Turn to Translational Turn: A Transnational Journey”, in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014)

⁹³ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 105.

The first part of “The Riverbank Field” describes how imagination will always color a translation. Heaney replaces a landscape he has no possibility of imagining “correctly” since it is mythical through something known, the landscape of his childhood. And having started to replace one thing in the translation, other things will necessarily follow, while others again will remain faithful to the original: “Moths then on evening water/It would have to be, not bees in sunlight [...] but *stet*/To all the rest [...].”

The translation in Heaney’s “own words” in the second half of the poem is carefully chosen. It is about “spirits [...] /To whom second bodies are owed by fate”, which is of course what happens to a text when it is translated – it receives a second body. Translation itself can be seen as *katabasis*, as the “digging up” of a text and giving it a new life. Heaney’s age and declining health may also have been a factor in his choice as he was nearing the age his father was when he died. By letting this meditation take its subject matter from Aeneas’ *katabasis* Heaney prepared the reader for the next poem in the collection, “Route 110”, a very loosely translated version of that journey.

Route 110

The poem “Route 110”⁹⁴ is central in the collection *Human Chain* and is placed centrally in the volume, right after “The Riverbank Field”. Both poems are offspring of Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Whereas “The Riverbank Field” was an illustration of how memories weave their way into translation and shape it, “Route 110” illustrates a different form for translation. Here a work by a predecessor is used to mirror the poet-translator’s chosen subject. In this case Heaney uses the Book VI to mirror episodes in his own life. He takes us on a sweeping journey through early adulthood and on to older age, moving from being one of the young ones in a generational setting to being a member of the oldest generation.

“Route 110” is a poem in twelve parts. Each poem is twelve lines long, four stanzas with three lines each. All twelve poems are written in free verse. Heaney also used this form in *Squarings*,⁹⁵ the 4 x 12 poems sequence that is part of the collection *Seeing Things*. In *Stepping Stones* he talks about this form: “It felt given, strange and unexpected; I didn’t quite know where it came from, but I knew immediately it was there to stay.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 48.

⁹⁵ Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 55.

⁹⁶ O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 320.

Heaney employs the “mythic method” in this poem. T.S. Eliot coined this phrase in an essay⁹⁷ describing James Joyce’s then newly published novel *Ulysses*. In his paper “Virgil and Heaney: “Route 110””, Michael Putnam writes that according to Eliot this is a way of “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity.” Putnam explains this method “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance”⁹⁸ like this:

(...) by having imaginative recourse to his literary inheritance, a poet can also bring structure and meaning to his own work of the present. Such a project enables an author, by careful reference to a parallel, earlier text, to offer his readers, through the very patterning and meaning of words from the past that put forward a standard against which the present moment of creativity can be measured, a time for contemplative pleasure that puts them, in Frost’s words, “beyond confusion”.

Michael Parker also writes about this creative method in “‘His Nibs’: Self-Reflexivity and the Significance of Translation in Seamus Heaney’s *Human Chain*”⁹⁹. He talks about how the new interpretation and the use of other authors’ work are signs of appreciation:

In improvising on the *Aeneid*’s themes, images and motifs, Heaney is engaging in what Roger Garfitt has referred to as ‘the appreciative plunder’ to which poets often resort. Such readings – or ‘misreadings’ as Harold Bloom has it – spark an imaginative ignition, a release of new energy in an independent creation.

Heaney himself talks about two methods of translation in a conversation with the American Poet Laureate Robert Hass that took place at Berkeley, California in February 1999¹⁰⁰. He uses a Viking analogy in describing the two approaches, thinking of the two historical manners in which the Vikings had contact with Ireland and the British Isles: a period known as the Raids and a period known as the Settlements. The Raid is when the translator sees something he likes in another language and takes what he or she needs, and lets the imagination focus on it. This will give an “imitation”. The Settlement is staying with a work and settling in it, colonizing it, so to speak. The settler is shaping the translation, but is also shaped by it.

⁹⁷ T.S.Eliot, “*Ulysses, Order and Myth*”, *Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975) 175-78.

⁹⁸ T.S.Eliot, “*Ulysses, Order and Myth*”, 175-78.

⁹⁹ Michael Parker, “‘His Nibs’: Self-Reflexivity and the Significance of Translation in Seamus Heaney’s “*Human Chain*”.” *Irish University Review* 42, no. 2 (2012): 327-50. Accessed November 14, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24576167>.

¹⁰⁰ Christina M. Gillis, ed., *Sounding Lines: The Art of Translating Poetry A Conversation between Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass*, (Berkeley: Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2000),1.

In this case of “Route 110” Heaney has taken the genre of katabatic epic poetry and the form, the twelve part structure, because he needed both for ordering and shaping and last not least signifying this memorious journey through his past. However, his connection with the Book VI of the *Aeneid* goes such a long way back that there must be “settlement” as well. Heaney is shaping the *Aeneid* again and again in his works, but it has also formed him, from the time his teacher at St. Columb’s College sighed and said he wished Book VI had been chosen as subject for an exam.

I will now have a closer look at three of the twelve poems in “Route 110”. The poems take us through Aeneas’ journey through the Underworld, but the parallel content from Heaney’s life is not necessarily chronological. I have chosen the first, ninth and eleventh poem.

Poem I

In the first poem we meet the young poet-in-the-making Heaney – he is in these poems a version of himself – in a used bookstore, about to pay for a book, “a used copy of *Aeneid VI*”:

In a stained front-buttoned shopcoat –
Sere brown piped with crimson-
Out of the Classics bay into an aisle

Smelling of dry rot and disinfectant
She emerges, absorbed in her coin-count,
Eyes front, right hand at work

In the slack marsupial vent
Of her change-pocket, thinking what to charge
For a used copy of *Aeneid VI*.

Dustbreath bestirred in the cubicle mouth
I inhaled as she slid my purchase
Into a deckle-edged brown paper bag.

The poem starts with many sibilants in succession (stained, shopcoat, sere, crimson, Classics, smelling, she) as well as some alliteration (some of the sibilants, but also crimson and Classic, dry rot and disinfectant). There are also compound words, one in every stanza. This together with the enjambments in the first three stanzas (that are in fact one sentence), gives a nice flow through this transaction of buying the book. All the sibilants seem to whisper “Sybil, Sybil”, giving the poem a mystical atmosphere. They point to the shopkeeper who has the function of the Sybil. She introduces Heaney to the Virgilian underworld just as the Sybil in Book VI of the *Aeneid* makes it possible for Aeneas to gain access to the mythical Underworld. Whereas Aeneas has to wait for the Sybil’s fit to pass, Heaney has to wait for a

financial decision, the price of the book. From the context, one understands that Heaney has not stumbled over the book accidentally, but has asked for it, just as Aeneas asks the Sybil for advice. Whether the “dustbreath” inhaled from the “cubicle mouth” reminiscent of the Sybil’s cave is a poetic inspirational breath or an expression of unhealthy surroundings may be dependent on whether the reader likes the musty smell of bookstores or not. Packed in a brown paper bag the “*Aeneid VI*” is now both protected and easily accessible, ready to enter into a new cycle of its existence.

The book that comes into Heaney’s hands represents a forwarding of the past to give it new life. It is a starting point for the many journeys underground that Heaney would embark on throughout his career. Book VI will turn out to be essential in shaping a pattern of perception in Heaney that will modulate his thought and poetry throughout his career.

Poem IX

Poem IX looks at sectarian murders that happened during the time of the Troubles. This difficult time for Ireland has put its indelible mark on the country’s history and on everyone who has lived through it. Heaney comes to this poem from poem 6 and 7, describing the death of a friend and a wake, a parallel to Palinurus’ death in the *Aeneid*, and poem 8, describing a break-up initiated by Heaney, paralleling the sighting of Dido whom Aeneas left in Carthage. It is interesting that he does not focus on suicide, and those “simply driven/By life to a fierce rejection of the light”¹⁰¹ who appear for Aeneas, dwelling instead on the communal aspect of a wake and his own inglorious moment of being the one who leaves a girlfriend. From this careful weighing of priorities, Heaney moves to the raw realities of murder:

And what in the end was there left to bury
Of Mr Lavery, blown up in his own pub
As he bore the primed device and bears it still

Mid-morning towards the sun-admitting door
Of Ashley house? Or of Louis O’Neill
In the wrong place the Wednesday they buried

Thirteen who’d been shot in Derry? Or of bodies
Unglorified, accounted for and bagged
Behind the grief cordons: not to be laid

In war graves with full honours, nor in a separate plot
Fired over on anniversaries

¹⁰¹ Heaney, *Aeneid Book VI*, 24.

By units drilled and spruce and unreconciled.

This poem parallels the meeting with Deiphobus in the *Aeneid*. Deiphobus was a prince of Troy and Helens third husband. During the last day of fighting he fell victim to her cunning, was killed by her first husband Menelaus and terribly mutilated. Aeneas could hardly recognize him. The victims of the bombings in Ireland were also often unrecognizably maimed, and it is these murders Heaney remembers. The first named person is Jack Lavery, a pub owner, who died on December 21, 1971, when a bomb that was planted in his bar blew up in his face while he tried to carry it outside.¹⁰² The other named person is Louis O'Neill, who died in a bombing while drinking in a pub "the Wednesday they buried/Thirteen who'd been shot in Derry".¹⁰³ Heaney here looks back to another predecessor, W.B. Yeats, who wrote a poem about the Easter rising of 1916. In it, he declares in the last stanza that while one can't know when the violence ends, it is his "part/To murmur name upon name/As a mother names her child". Of course in 2010 one cannot name all the thousands of dead in the Northern Irish conflict, but Heaney chooses two, one from each side, and names them, thus lifting sectarian killings out of anonymity.

The first lines of this poem contain many plosive sounds, mostly "b"s, but also "p"s and "d"s. There is also some alliteration and internal rhyming ("blown up in his own pub"). The plosive sounds together with the "o"s are somewhat echomimetic of the explosions they describe. Heaney describes the horror of these killings by rhetorically asking about what of the victims was left to bury, implying the answer would be "very little". He talks about the other bodies that are "bagged" like pheasants on a good shooting day, or laid in a body bag like victims of any other war. The burial though is without tributes, there is no military cemetery, even though these honors are bestowed on other victims, namely the paramilitary volunteers and soldiers on either side. The final triplet of adjectives: "drilled and spruce and unreconciled" is a typical Heaney ending, where the suddenness of the change in value of the last word makes the readers mind stumble. It is a moment of strangeness reminiscent of other such triplets like in the final lines of *The Tollund Man* where Heaney projects that "in Jutland/In the old man-killing parishes" he will "feel lost,/Unhappy and at home."¹⁰⁴ What are the soldiers "unreconciled" with? Michael Parker thinks there are several possible readings here – among

¹⁰² <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/22/archives/bomb-and-soldiers-kill-two-in-belfast.html>. Accessed 29.10.20

¹⁰³ <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/alpha/O.html>. Accessed 29.10.20

¹⁰⁴ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 63.

them the loss of comrades, the armed conflict, the partition of Ireland – but concludes that it is an open ending to the poem.¹⁰⁵

This poem about atrocities that happened in the 20th century inferno of the Troubles represents the lowest point of this poetic katabatic journey. The memories about this phase in Heaney's life are probably also emotionally one of the lowest points. Heaney is a poet of place and of people, and tried to make “the voice of reality and justice”¹⁰⁶ heard through his poetry throughout his career, but especially from the midseventies and into the eighties of the last century. After several years of trying to find a mode of expression, he finally found a voice to say something about the territorial ideology and resulting violence reigning in his home country. The poems of *North* deal with this conflict. After writing *North* Heaney wanted to come up to the light again, as Rachel Falconer notes in “The Music of Heaney's *Aeneid VI*”¹⁰⁷. In an Interview with James Randall in the *Ploughshares* in the late seventies Heaney remembers

(...) writing a letter (...) saying I no longer wanted a door into the dark – I wanted a door into the light. And I suppose as a natural corollary or antithesis to the surrender, to surrendering one's imagination to something as embracing as myth or landscape, I really wanted to come back to be able to use the first person singular to mean *me* and my lifetime.¹⁰⁸

So from *North* on the poetry seems generally lighter, starting to “credit marvels”¹⁰⁹, and also the three poems following in this sequence have a lighter, almost playful touch. But there is a certain irony in the fact that the myths never really left Heaney and now, looking back on his life in this sequence of poems, Heaney again turns to both the ground and the mythic journey.

Poem XI

After having passed the Elysian fields in poem X Heaney now takes us to the riverbank, remembering the evenings spent fishing there with his father. This is the riverbank he has prepared us for in “The Riverbank Field”, thus giving this poem a prominent position in this lyrical sequence. It is almost like a “this is what we came here for” moment – the moment in the *Aeneid* where Aeneas meets the shade of his father and – in this parallel journey – the moment where Heaney meets his father. There is only a “we” in this poem, appearing twice,

¹⁰⁵ Parker, “His Nibs”, 339.

¹⁰⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991) 2.

¹⁰⁷ Rachel Falconer, *The Music of Heaney's Aeneid*, *Comparative Literature* (2017) 69 (4): 430–448.

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.pshares.org/issues/spring-2011/archive-interview-seamus-heaney-james-randall>. Accessed 30.10.20

¹⁰⁹ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 52.

once in the beginning where it places both of them on the river, once towards the end, placing both on a riverbank “as if [...] comingled among shades”. But how do we know that the “we” is father and son since it is never mentioned explicitly? There is of course the positioning of this poem, as mentioned, but the riverbank has also in other poems figured as a meeting place for father and son. There is the “bright river evening” of “Man and Boy I”, there is the “undrowned father” of “Seeing Things III”, and, in the *Human Chain* collection, the almost-embrace of “Album IV”. The eleventh section of “Route 110” reads like this:

Those evenings when we'd just wait and watch
And fish. Then the evening the otter's head
Appeared in the flow, or was it only

A surface-ruck and gleam we took for
An otters head? No doubting, all the same,
The gleam, a turnover warp in the black

Quick water. Or doubting the solid ground
Of the riverbank field, twilit and a-hover
With midge-drifts, as if we had comingled

Among shades and shadows stirring on the brink
And stood there waiting, watching,
Needy and ever needier for translation.

Another twelve-line poem in free verse, intermittently bound together by alliteration and repetition. There is the triplet “wait and watch/And fish” in the first stanza, there are “shades and shadows”, and there is “waiting, watching” once again in the last stanza. The otters head is mentioned twice, in one sentence, like the otter coming up in the flow and disappearing at once. There is some insecurity introduced as to whether there really was an otter, maybe it was just a “ruck”. Heaney uses a word for wrinkle with an Old Norse origin here. There is, though, no insecurity as to the gleam. Besides adding to the inner eye beauty of the setting of the flowing river with light reflections, ‘gleam’ also directs my thoughts to another poem where Heaney employed this word. This is the last stanza of the poem “Sunlight” – dedicated to his aunt Mary Heaney – in the collection *North*:

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

Here the “gleam” refers to the love Mary Heaney showed her family, a love that could be hidden in the daily acts of kindness, like the bread baking described in this poem. John

Banville wrote about Seamus Heaney in the *Guardian*, that he is someone who “insists on affirming the enduring decencies, what Wordsworth called “the little, nameless, unremembered acts/Of kindness and love”¹¹⁰”. The “No doubting, all the same,/The gleam” could again be an affirmation of an unspoken love, in this case between father and son. The imprint of something no longer visible, like the relationship to our parents, gives us our foundation, our “solid ground”.

Comparison of the two Translations of Book VI by Heaney

Introduction

I will now look at two translations of a passage in Book VI of the *Aeneid* by Seamus Heaney and compare them to each other. Sometimes I will also consult the Loeb translation by H. R. Fairclough, which has the Latin text and the English translation published on opposing pages. Heaney has mentioned this translation, most famously in his meta-translational poem “The Riverbank Field”. One reason for including this Golden Bough passage here is the important part the Golden Bough has in Book VI of the *Aeneid* as a means of entering the underground and for protection. The other is my interest in translation. I was curious to see whether there are clearly discernable differences between the two translations over the course of a quarter century.

Translating prose and poetry will hone a translator’s skill with words. Because there is a given text the writer is trying to reproduce, or rather reconstitute – all the while being faithful to its message (or intention) – he or she has to work within a given context, maybe even a given verse structure. Trying to reproduce or create some form of equivalent to for example an alliterating four beat line in a translation from Anglo-Saxon, or to conform to the “shape” and rhyme pattern of an Elizabethan sonnet is a challenge as well as an exercise. T.S. Eliot wrote: “The serious writer of verse must be prepared to cross himself with the best verse of other languages and the best prose of all languages.”¹¹¹ He saw these “crossings” as formative for his poetic voice. Also Seamus Heaney has reflected on the special and in many ways refining exercise that translation is:

¹¹⁰ John Banville. “Playing the common world’s melody”. *The Guardian*. First published 17 March 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/17/poetry.johnbanville>

¹¹¹ Ronald Schuchard, ed., *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 679.

That kind of waiting for the right word to fill the space is something I associate more with translation. If you're writing your own poem, you're after something just at the edge of your knowledge, so you're in a much more improvisatory frame of mind. But when you're translating, you tend to know the effect you're after, the space is there at the centre like an empty space in a jigsaw, and what you need most is the one piece of language that fits exactly.¹¹²

The twice translated part of Book VI is *Aeneid* 6.98-148 (Talibus ex adyto dictis Cumaea Sybilla [...] nec duro poteris convellere ferro). It was first published in 1991 in *Seeing Things* as part of a classical frame around this collection of poems, which contains among others the above mentioned poem "Riverbank Field". The passage from the *Aeneid* was placed at the head of the collection while a translated passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy*¹¹³ concluded it. In this passage, Aeneas finds the Sybil and appeals to her for instructions on how to get to the Underworld. The passage is not about the actual katabatic journey, but about the prerequisites. Aeneas needed the Golden Bough to enter the Underworld, and Heaney placed the poem about it at the very beginning of the collection. This makes this translation in itself a Golden Bough, something we need to enter the collection, to be able to fully understand the poetry. Talking about another of his translations, *The Burial at Thebes*, Heaney talks about having had a "title deed" to do this translation. He felt that the political and cultural resonances the Greek classical play *Antigone* by Sophocles possessed for the Irish people gave him the right to do a version of it. What were the resonances Book VI had for him, what was his "title deed" here? Maybe it was the fact that he had lost several people that were important in his life in the years preceding the first translation of the Golden Bough – his parents, close friends and a Harvard mentor. These losses would have added a new resonance to this text. Aeneas longing for "One face-to-face meeting with [his] dear father" must have taken on a completely new meaning.

In the book of interviews that Dennis O'Driscoll did with Seamus Heaney the poet talks about the importance that Book VI of the *Aeneid* holds for him:

[...] there is one Virgilian journey that has indeed been a constant presence and that is [...] Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs of Book VI have been in my head for years – the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father.¹¹⁴

¹¹² O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 449.

¹¹³ Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 105 – 107.

¹¹⁴ O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 389.

In a later passage he talks about his love for Book VI and his inclination to one day translate it as a separate unit¹¹⁵. This separate translation, worked on over several decades, was then published posthumously in 2016. It honors Father Michael McGlinchey, Heaney’s Latin teacher, and continues the celebration of the arrival of a granddaughter that had started with the Virgilian poem “Route 110” (published in *Human Chain* (2010)).

Comparison

I have chosen to divide the text into 6 parts for convenience while working with the two versions, but also to enable readers to easily follow along. The six parts are as follows:

Part	Line number Loeb		Line number Heaney 2016
1	6.98-101	“The fit”	140-145
2	6.102-109	“The wish”	146-153
3	6.110-116	“Anchises”	154-161
4	6.117-123	“The petition”	162-170
5	6.124-136/1	“A dangerous task”	171-186
6	6.136/2-148	“The golden bough”	187-203

In the translation with the title “The Golden Bough” published in *Seeing Things* there are no line numbers.

Part 1: “The fit”

In this part, the Sybil’s raging and Apollo’s attempts to rein her in are described.

The first words represent the first difference between the texts: whereas the Heaney 2016 translation (H2016) begins with “Thus from her innermost shrine [...]”, the Heaney 1991 translation (H1991) begins with “So from the back of her shrine [...]”. Two thoughts come to mind: in 1991 the translation was a “stand alone”, published with no preceding text. Heaney thus needed a way into the text. “So” is a common way to start a sentence that also is a hint of something having preceded these first words. But “so” is also a way of describing something – “so” in the sense of “in this manner”. The latin “talibus” is closer to this latter use of “so”. Even though there is no comma behind this sentence-initial “so”, it does give the impression of also being a discourse marker, a connection to something that has been said before, not only descriptive as the latin “talibus” is. Here Heaney has found an elegant way of translation

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 440.

that is true to the original, but also reminiscent of another, more everyday use of the word “so”. Heaney has used this word as a way into text since: in his translation of *Beowulf*, the Old English epic poem, the “hwæt!” that is usually considered a call for attention was translated with “So.”.

The words “in the back of her shrine” in H1991 have become “innermost shrine” in H2016. “Innermost” is a slightly old-fashioned word that indicates something much more private and hidden than “the back”. While the latter is more technically descriptive, the former is more mysterious and elegant.

In line 142 Heaney uses the words “menacing riddles” in H2016 instead of the earlier “fearful equivocal words”. The new word combination seems much more concise – not because the translation of “horrendus” is really more correct, but because it is less ambiguous. Both translations are a mix of Latin-French and Germanic words, so no real difference there, but fearful can be understood in two ways, both “being in fear” and “causing fear”. Menacing is stronger as a purely causative word. The word “equivocal” is very Latinate, so the Germanic “riddle” seems a good replacement for the “equivocal words” from 1991. The Latin original has “ambages” meaning lie, mystery or riddle, and Fairclough in the Loeb translation settles for “enigma”, which has entered the English language from Greek via Latin, originally from “ainos”, meaning tale or proverb. Heaney uses the word “enigma” in the next line, in the translation of “obscurus vera involvens” as “truth and enigmas were twined inextricably”. Obscurus means “dark”, and Fairclough translates this part beautifully as “wrapping truth in darkness”. Heaney’s translation here seems unnecessarily complicated in its word choice.

Part 2: “The wish”

In this part, Aeneas voices his willingness to submit to any test to be able to meet his father.

“As soon as her fit passed away and the mad mouthings stopped” is replaced by “Then as her fit passed away and her raving went quiet”, a sentence where sounds seem to be mirrored around a center line – the short “it” in fit and quiet, the “a” in away and raving -, giving the sentence a better flow. Aeneas, who has kept his epithet “Heroic” in both versions, addresses the Sybil as “Sybil” in H2016, whereas she is addressed as “Priestess” in H1991. Heaney probably felt he had to replace the mode of address, having used the same word just a few lines before (line 56). The alliteration “foreseen and foresuffered” is kept, but it is spread over two lines, part of a sequence of seven consecutive mid-segmented lines ending with the tender

– and over 22 years unchanged – appeal for “one face-to-face meeting with my dear father”. Maybe these enjambments were chosen to project a certain urgency into Aeneas’ plea, or they could be imitating some of the half-lines in the original. They could also be influenced by having translated *Beowulf*.

The Acheron, one of the five rivers of the Underworld, “comes flooding through” in H1991, but “floods to the surface” in H2016, establishing more of a connection between the gate to the Underworld, the river Acheron and Lake Avernus.

“...I pray for one look, one face-to-face meeting with my dear father” becomes “...vouchsafe me one look, / One face-to-face meeting with my dear father”. “Pray”, a word with latin-french roots, is substituted by “vouchsafe”, also with latin-french roots. Vouchsafe was first used in the 14th century, and later Shakespeare used it many times in his works.¹¹⁶ It is rarely used today and has an almost archaic sound to it – understandable, but formal and from a different time. It implies more than “pray” does that the person granting the wish is of higher standing than the one wishing, and is bestowing his or her grace on the supplicant.

Finally, “Teach me the way and open the holy doors wide” becomes “Point out the road, open the holy doors wide”, with the medial caesura and the assonant “o”s of road, open and holy giving an Old English flavor to the line.

Part 3: “Anchises”

In this part, Aeneas describes his journey with his father whom he had saved from the burning Troy

“I carried him on these shoulders through flames / And thousands of enemy spears” in H1991 becomes “On these shoulders I bore him through flames / And a thousand enemy spears.” in H2016. The newer version is more solemn owing to the rearrangement of the words and the choice of “bore” instead of “carried”. Whereas to carry mainly describes a physical activity, to bear adds the dimension of support (bearing walls) and endurance (bearing the pain) and thus conjures a more multifaceted image. The “a thousand spears” in H2016 has a

¹¹⁶The Merriam Webster webpage gives this example: "Vouchsafe me yet your picture for my love," beseeches Proteus of Silvia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vouchsafe>

Shakespearean ring to it: *The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to!...*¹¹⁷

The battle and the sea-journey of latin-french origin become the fighting and the sea-crossing of Germanic and Latin (crux)/Old Irish (cros)/Old Norse (kross) origin.

Part 3 is 6 lines long in H1991, 7 lines in H2016, caused by an enjambement and a new half-line, the alliterative “battling tempests and tides”. The original does not have an alliteration here, so this could be another effort to elevate the translation of this epic poem through an archaic form.

Part 4: “The petition”

In this part, Aeneas beseeches the Sybil to let him descend to the Underworld

Having argued for his need to see again his father in the Underworld by telling the story of their flight from the burning Troy, Aeneas now addresses the Sybil with flattery and comparison. The “So therefore, Vestal, I beseech you take pity” of H1991 becomes “Wherefore have pity, O most gracious one” in H2016. The newer version has a shorter appeal and a longer vocative, thus producing a clear caesura in the middle of the line. The word Vestal was used earlier in the H2016 translation (this is no longer only the translation of an excerpt), so this choice also avoids repetition.

The Sybil in H1991 is the “keeper” of Avernus and “nothing is out of (her] power”, the even stronger Sybil in H2016 is “mistress” and “alone has the power”. Also the following lines show a few changes in translation: “faith in the loudly plucked strings of his Thracian lyre” becomes the alliterative “trusting and tuning the strings of his Thracian lyre” whereas “redeem a brother by going in turns” becomes “win back a brother by taking the road”. “Faith” has a latin origin, as has “redeem” and “turns”, whereas in the new translation “trust” comes from Old Norse, “win back” has a Germanic/Old English origin and “road” also is Germanic. So there are not only the added alliterations, but there is also a turn towards an Old English and Germanic based vocabulary.

¹¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Accessed 11.11.20 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1524/1524-h/1524-h.htm>

Part 5: “A dangerous task”

In this part, the Sybil explains to Aeneas how difficult it is to return from Avernus.

After Aeneas has presented himself and his wish to the Sybil she explains to him in H1991 that “The way down to Avernus is easy. Day and night black Pluto’s door stands open”. In Heaney 2016 this becomes the more rhythmic “It is easy to descend into Avernus. Death’s dark door stands open day and night.” Maybe the change in the first sentence was mainly made to accommodate the strong alliteration “Death’s dark door” in the beginning of the second sentence. Otherwise there would have been two in construction very similar lines right after each other: (“The way is easy – the door is open”). The wonderful “d”-alliteration makes this passage so much stronger and at the same time more easily understandable. Whereas Heaney chose to replace the Roman god of the Underworld Dis from the original text with the somewhat better known Pluto in H1991, he went even further in H2016. The metonymic Dis is replaced by what he stands for – death. And thus one does not have to know about Dis or Pluto’s role in the underworld to understand the threat of these words.

“This is the real task and the real undertaking” becomes “That is the task, that is the undertaking”. Alliteration (t) and assonance (a) as well as a caesura and four beats make for a strong line with an Anglo-Saxon touch. The original words are “hoc opus, hic labor est” – where hoc and hic would be translated as “this”, referring to something close to the speaker. “That” is more emphatic though, has more urgency, and is often used to really drive home a point (“That is what we are talking about here!”). “That” also fits the context of the Sybil conveying important facts and giving Aeneas a reality-check.

Those who are “[...] sons of gods/ Favoured by Jupiter the Just, or exalted to heaven/ In a blaze of heroic glory” (H1991) can make it back from the Underworld. In Fairclough’s translation (and in the original) there are two groups that are mentioned: the favored ones (“whom kindly Jupiter has loved”), and those who are exalted (“shining worth uplifted to heaven”). In Heaney’s first translation these groups seem to merge into a single one. In H2016 they are again separated, and interestingly there is a new distinction: “sons of gods/ Whom Jupiter favoured, or heroes exalted to glory/*By their own worth*” (my italics). I find that interesting since it gives the hero agency – it is his or her virtue that leads to their exaltation.

The Sybil then goes on to describe to Aeneas the landscape that would meet him, if he continues with his quest. The wooded center is described like this in H1991: “Forests spread midway down,/And Cocytus winds through the dark, licking its banks.”. In H2016 the

translation becomes more literal in the first part with “tenant media omnia silvae” now translated as “At the centre it is all forest”. The second part is translated more freely with “And a ring of dark waters, the river Cocytus, furls and flows round it.”, but all the elements of the original “Cocytusque sinu labens circumvenit atro” seem to be there. The alliteration “furls/And flows” both looks back to forest and through the “o” in flows ahead to the assonance of “love so torments” in the second part of the line. The Sybil continues:

“(And flows around it.) Still, if love so torments you,
If your need to be ferried twice across the Styx
And twice to explore that deep dark abyss
Is so overwhelming, if you will and must go
That far, understand what else you must do.”

Here is an example that this translation makes the text easier to understand without really changing the content. Heaney has used the expression “to sail the Stygian lake twice and twice to inspect/The murk of Tartarus” in H1991. In H2016 he decided on “to be ferried twice across the Styx/And twice to explore that deep dark abyss”. There are two main differences between these versions, and they concern the use of place names and the use of an image that is well-known to many potential readers, not only those well-versed in Greek mythology:

The name Styx is much easier to understand than the adjective Stygian, since the river Styx has become part of popular culture, among other things through the 70s band and numerous video games. Stygian is one step removed and therefore less accessible. In a similar manner the name of the deepest point of the Underworld, the Tartarus, no longer features in this translation and is replaced by the alliterative “deep dark abyss”. Instead of using the place name that many readers might not have a concise understanding of, the place itself is described.

The well-known image is that of someone – in this case Aeneas – being ferried across the river. Most readers will not think swimming (as in Fairclough) or sailing (as in H1991) would be the method to get over the Styx, whereas the ferry and the ferryman are better-known modes of transport into the Underworld.

In H2016 Heaney lets the Sybil describe Aeneas urge to descend to the Underworld as an *overwhelming* need, as so strong that he will and *must* go (my italics) – a much more forceful pull towards the descent than in H1991.

Part 6: “The Golden Bough”

In this part, the Sybil explains to Aeneas what he must do to be allowed into the Underworld.

After explaining the dangers of going to the Underworld the Sybil now explains to Aeneas that he has to get hold of the golden bough before he can be granted access to it. “Hidden in the thick of a tree is a bough made of gold,/ and its leaves and pliable twigs are made of it too. It is sacred to underworld Juno, who is its patron, [...]” is the way she begins her explanation in H1991. The first sentence, especially the second half, sounds stiff and seems without fluidity compared to the H2016 version which goes as follows: “Hid in the thick of a tree is a golden bough,/ Gold to the tips of its leaves and the base of its stems. Sacred (tradition declares) to the queen of that place.” Gone are the pliable twigs and the “too” that seems like an afterthought, replaced by two flowing five beat lines containing two adjectival phrases describing the golden bough. And Juno, the patron, becomes the queen – without a name, but with her function described through the mention of her title, easier to understand.

The “golden-fledged growth” is now “a sprout of fledged gold”, waiting to be plucked, whereupon a new bough will grow, having not only the “same metal sheen”, but the “same sheen and shimmer”, another alliteration. The Sybil explains that the bough should come away easily if Aeneas indeed is called by fate to descend into the Underworld. If it does not no power or tools will be of any help. The predictably unsuccessful attempt to “quell” and “cut” the Golden Bough of H1991 becomes “break” and “lop [...] off” in H2016, the latter in origin a rural expression for cutting trees.

Statistics

After having compared the two translations in their wording I will now have a short look at the “statistics”:

H1991 has 59 lines and, interestingly, H2016 has just as many. One does immediately notice though just by looking at the printed pages, that the 1991 version takes up more space on the page – the lines are longer and quite a few have their text expand over two line spaces. This clearly is a consequence of the page width, not an intended enjambment or visual effect. With its 606 words, H1991 is 50 words longer than H2016. About 24 lines have a midcaesura of some sort, either a punctum, comma, “:” or “...” in H1991. Five of these lines have a punctum. In H2016 there are 29 midcaesuras, 7 of these are punctums. This confirms the visual impression of a more compressed translation with more half-lines.

Interpretation

The long lines in H1991 I mentioned above were mostly written in hexameter, whereas the new translation in long parts is written in an approximation of iambic pentameter. This is a classic divide in Virgil translations to English – whether to hold on to the classic hexameter or translate to the verse form that is most common in English poetry, blank verse – unrhymed lines with the regularity of the iambic pentameter. The iambic pentameter had been a difficult subject for Heaney in his younger years. Since it is the most common form in English poetry, Heaney saw it as the form of the oppressor, a form he either was skeptical to work in or wanted to subvert. In this translation though he seems at ease with it and shifts confidently between lines in hexameter and lines resembling iambic blank verse. Rachel Falconer comments on this in “The Music of Heaney’s *Aeneid*”:

At this point Heaney is not interested only in the wreckage of old, colonialist systems; he also wants to forge a poetic line that voices a commonality of experience. Because it is offset by hexameter lines, however, Heaney’s iambic pentameter does not quite convey this sense of belonging. I would describe it more as a sense of longing to belong [...]. Heaney’s early pen name for himself was *Incertus*, and in this case the irregularity of the iambic insists on that uncertainty.¹¹⁸

While I agree with the intention stated on Heaney’s behalf in the first part of the quote, I disagree with the interpretation in the second part. While he did use the name “*Incertus*” due to a lack of writerly confidence in his very first publications fifty years prior to his translation of the *Aeneid*, I strongly believe that Heaney was over that kind of uncertainty at this point of his career. This translation has a flow and a varied rhythm that indicates confidence and freedom from stricter form restraints. Heaney seems at home in both traditions, sure of himself, sure of his technique.

There is another difference between the two translations though, and it too is related to form. I will try to illustrate it here. This is from Heaney 1991:

[...] No ordeal, O Priestess,
That you can imagine would ever surprise me, 12
For already I have foreseen and foresuffered all. 13
But one thing I pray for especially: since they say it is here 16
That the King of the Underworld’s gateway is to be found, 14
Among these shadowy marshes where Acheron comes flooding through, 16

¹¹⁸ Falconer, *The Music of Heaney’s Aeneid*, 439.

I pray for one look, one face to face meeting with my dear father. 16

In the 2016 translation this passage looks like this:

[...] No ordeal, O Sibyl, no new
Test can dismay me, for I have foreseen 10
And foresuffered all. But one thing I pray for 11
Especially: since here the gate opens, they say, 12
To the King of the Underworld's realms, and here 11
In these shadowy marshes the Acheron floods 12
To the surface, vouchsafe me one look, 09
One face-to-face meeting with my dear father. 11

These much shorter lines have an Anglo-Saxon sound to them, with two stressed syllables in each half-line. The half-lines are not prominent here, and there are enjambments that do not belong into the Anglo-Saxon style, but the stressed syllables give a rhythm that reminds one of the rhythm in Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*. There is some alliteration, even though it is not the linking alliteration of an Anglo-Saxon poem.

The word choices in the later translation of *The Golden Bough* are more oriented towards a Germanic, Norse and Old English word family. Heaney lies down in a different "word-hoard"¹¹⁹. In the foreword to his translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* Heaney writes that he had to persuade himself about being born into the Anglo-Saxon language – and Anglo-Saxon being born into him. He explains that having grown up Catholic with a Nationalist background in Northern Ireland he had thought of Irish and English as opposed and irreconcilable:

I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and, and this was an attitude that for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with the whole vexed question – the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland.¹²⁰

During his studies, Heaney attended lectures on the history of the English language. While learning about the many connections and parallels between the historical languages in

¹¹⁹ Heaney, *North*, 10.

¹²⁰ Heaney, *Beowulf*, XXIV.

Scotland, England and Ireland this duality disappeared. He likens the common origin of the languages with a river issuing from a Celto-British land of plenty, “prepolitical, prelapsarian, urphilological” and describes the effect this knowledge had on him:

The Irish/English duality, the Celtic/Saxon antithesis were momentarily collapsed and in the resulting etymological eddy a gleam of recognition flashed through the synapses and I glimpsed an elsewhere of potential that seemed at the same time to be a somewhere remembered.¹²¹

What he found Heaney describes as a “linguistic loophole [...] into some unpartitioned linguistic country, [...] an entry into further language”.¹²²

It is interesting to note that Heaney uses a river metaphor to describe this awakening – as mentioned above he also turned to the image of something flowing in his metatranslational poem “The Riverbank Field”. The “gleam” is also interesting in light of both earlier and later uses. It strengthens the interpretation of a gleam (in the river in poem XI of “Route 110”¹²³, in the meal bin in the dedicatory poem “Sunlight”¹²⁴) as something positive and linked with flashes of recognition and feelings of connection.

The main difference between these translations seems to me the passage of time – one was written before the translation of *Beowulf*, the other after. After the dualities of Heaney’s internal language walls had completely collapsed, he could move freely in this in-between space he had created for himself. Instead of there being a loss of identity he could thrive in several languages and shape his own style. There was the English language that had formed him and was his medium of communication, the Irish that he felt should have been in a more prominent position, the Latin that opened a different world and forever changed his mode of perception, and the underlying root-languages that constantly gave new understanding and awareness. Recognizing that there was no unsurmountable juxtaposition here, but a possibility to occupy the space between these languages, gave Heaney a new springboard for the imagination.

Conclusion

Heaney has all his life been a poet of attachments – attachment to family and friends, his childhood’s home ground, his academic milieu, and his country. This attachment has had

¹²¹ Heaney, *Beowulf*, XXV.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Heaney, *Human Chain*, 58.

¹²⁴ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 93.

varying consequences throughout his career. During the first years of his poetic career, he both maintained a connection to his first world and severed some roots. The connection is kept through poems describing aspects of rural life, wonders of nature seen through the eyes of a child, and his upbringing on the family farm. However, there are also strands in his poetry that emphasize his need for independence. “Digging” is one of the poems that highlight this duality. The presentation of his chosen vocation as a poet as a form for digging happens in the same poem where roots are cut. The soil of his home ground is the place where these relations are shaped, undone and re-shaped. This first poem might not have been part of a “poetics of the ground” yet, but it does illustrate the “earthiness” of his early style.

After this early phase of finding a voice and positioning himself, the home ground is not enough anymore. Heaney felt that the political situation in Ireland called for him to lift his eyes, widen his horizon and reflect on the sectarian violence. He found a way of saying something about the Irish problem in the image of the bogs of Northern Europe. Bogs are layers and layers of information, a receptacle for natural and created artefacts and thus a depot of history. The bogs were also the burial place for victims of tribal practices, sacrificed to an earth goddess. Digging deep into this dark history Heaney weaves the Irish Troubles and the findings from the historic Underground into a bigger picture of the human condition. He is digging for history, for comparison, for being able to say something about eternal conflicts in the context that was the Irish Troubles. Whereas his earlier poetry had been a digging for feelings of a private nature, he now dug for history and entry points for reflection around public matters. And this was a katabatic journey, difficult for the writer and, as he found out, not sustainable in the long run. After having written poems about the Troubles both obliquely and directly, composed elegies about victims and translated classic plays into a new framework he resented his role as a public poet more and more.

In his later poems, Heaney writes himself into the company of his predecessors. The freedom to create unconstrained from others’ expectations opened again for the possibility to celebrate poetry. He translates longer texts and short citations, alludes and borrows form. He digs into a diverse word-ward full of confidence. He merges real and imagined landscapes. Personal impressions are recovered from the past, memories reimagined. This time – as is natural in the course of time – recollections of travels with friends, of colleagues and of teaching abroad are added to the memories of his wife, children and grandchildren, parents and siblings.

The Aeneid and the katabatic journey of Book VI are a strong presence in these later collections, and especially *Human Chain* is shaped by it. It is as if Heaney travels to the world

of his lost loved ones just as Aeneas travelled to the Underworld, thus giving his memories – and the shades he encounters on his journey – a new life. And in this renewal is a promise of a future strengthened by the past.

I have looked at the katabasis motif in the many different shapes it assumes in Heaney's poetry. There is the filial connection to the home ground as shown in "Digging" and the sacrificed "Tollund Man" in the peat-heavy soil of the bog in Jutland. I have examined a modern katabasis as described in "District and Circle" and an anabasis from the deep valley of an illness in "Chanson d'Aventure". Translation as katabasis, and katabasis ending in the need for translation – "The Riverbank Field" and "Route 110" blend poetics and memories. In my comparison of the two versions of a part of Book VI of the *Aeneid* I find a poet reconciled with the different languages that are his inheritance, moving freely in the space in between.

The Virgilian journey that has been a constant presence in Seamus Heaney's life has enriched his poetry in so many ways. Robert Tracy said about Heaney's last collection *Human Chain* that "the poems are a dazzling display of referential virtuosity".¹²⁵ Heaney has always wondered how a poet should "properly live and write"¹²⁶, has resisted being drawn to one side in the Irish conflict, has felt in between. He reluctantly chose to go down a more political path during the Troubles, stepping carefully on his way to this difficult poetical Underground. He managed his difficult task with conciliatory acuity, but wanted to come up into the light again, think his own thoughts. Aeneas bore with him the memories of Troy, and also Heaney carries memories forward. The katabasis motif stayed with him and gained importance as he translated, honoured, remembered and looked to the future. The later Heaney seemed so at ease moving across borders of time and space, the private and the public, myth and faith that "in between" no longer seems to describe a somewhat uncomfortable position, but rather a confidently occupied middle ground.

¹²⁵ Robert Tracy. "Book Review: Human Chain", *Irish University Review* 41, no. 2 (2011): 266-71. Accessed November 18, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24576110>.

¹²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 13.

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