

## Seamus Heaney and Dante: The Making of a Poet

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As my title suggests, the subject of this paper is the relation between poetry and making.<sup>1</sup> These terms in themselves sound familiar enough. And the import of the arguments I want to pursue could, in many respects, hardly be more fundamental. I do not propose here to offer any systematic investigation of Heaney's interest in Dante. This is a topic already broached not only by scholars and reviewers, but by Heaney himself who, as we shall see, in his most recent work quotes his own earlier translation of a passage from the *Inferno*. Though, of course, even if Heaney were any the less self-conscious in allocating to Dante so central a role in the history of his own imaginative life, the debt would anyway be apparent in allusions of style, image and thought.

If there are connections to be made here, they will emerge rather in an exploration of the different meanings which attach to the notion of 'making'. In the first instance, as it appears at the top of this paper, the word suggests the process of growth by which the poet attains the kind of maturity of voice which in Heaney's case has now earned him the recognition of the Nobel prize committee. However, the syntax by which the poet is defined as the object of the making process might refer not only to the attainment of professional standing, but also to a far less public realisation of the self. This is what Heaney identifies as poetry's capacity to 'strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life'.<sup>2</sup> The moral self is made whole. And in Heaney increasingly, and arguably also in Dante, this entails a reconciliation of past and present, a making sense of the self's relation to the course of time: the arc of a lifetime — the 'cammin di nostra vita' — upon whose disorienting mid-point Dante so resonantly began the redemptive pilgrimage of the *Commedia*.

There is, however, a further and more primal implication of *making* at issue here, one in which the artist becomes the subject of the creative activity. And at this point my argument turns to Elaine Scarry, whose book *The Body in Pain* has as its subtitle *The*

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the 48th Annual Conference of the Chubu English Literature Society. There has since been insufficient opportunity to make the revisions I would like to make. But the arguments introduced here will I hope form the basis of a more extended piece of writing in the future.

2 Seamus Heaney, 'The Government of the Tongue', in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 91-108 (107).

*Making and Unmaking of the World*.<sup>3</sup> In the marvellous density of its argument and the daunting energy of its moral clarity, Scarry's thesis is one to which the present essay cannot hope to do adequate justice. But as its major themes can I believe be shown to converge with the poetic aims of Heaney and Dante, it will be worthwhile to try here to rehearse briefly some of the principal arguments. Scarry begins by observing that while bodily pain is incommunicable, the attribute of being utterly undeniable which it possesses in the consciousness of the subject, can be appropriated and transposed to another object. This, Scarry asserts, is what occurs in both torture and war, where the 'compelling vibrancy or [...] incontestable reality'<sup>4</sup> of the injured body substantiates that which lacks a convincing reality of its own. In the case of torture, this is the illusory power of an unstable political regime, and in that of war, it is some aspect of the ideological ground of an entire culture or nation. For Scarry every facet of civilisation – all that issues from the imagination – is initially lacking the attribute of 'seeming real' that originates in the felt experience of the body. What distinguishes a nurturing civilisation from its opposite, from the unmaking of the world that takes place in torture and war, is that the former no longer requires the hurt body to confer reality upon its ideas, but has found instead benign forms of substantiation. The first step in this transformation is that from human to animal sacrifice. Scarry exemplifies this by pointing to the Homeric oath which was taken standing on a slaughtered horse.<sup>5</sup>

That torture is as abhorrent and unjust as it is unnecessary is generally beyond question. War, however, often provokes a more ambiguous moral response. But Scarry exposes the error in conventional perceptions of war, demonstrating that it consists, in its essential structure, of a *contest* in which each side strives to cause more damage to bodily tissue than the other. That which appears to prevent war from being substituted by a benign contest is the compelling power of the injured bodies to confer reality upon and memorialize the outcome of the conflict. Scarry imagines a dispute in which military action were replaced by some other contest 'of great duration and intricacy', after which the 'memorialization' of the outcome would be achieved by arranging for the respective populations to 'hold onto an animal organ or entrail in confirmation of the idea of winning and of the issue that was the winner and henceforth "real"'. She imagines that in reaction to this 'ghastly' ritual,<sup>6</sup>

there would no doubt be a universally shared species shame at picturing ourselves engaged in so atavistic, so primitive a ritual. But however primitive such a surrogate

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3 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

4 Ibid., p. 13.

5 Ibid., p. 127.

6 Ibid., pp. 138-39.

would be, seeming in that hour to carry us back thousands of years, it would be a very large step closer to the benign and familiar forms of substantiation in civilisation than is the fiction-generating process now relied on in war. That is, in almost all arenas of human creation, the work of substantiation originally accomplished by the interior of the human body has undergone a hundred stages of transformation, but the first stage, the first step was the substitution of the human body with an animal body. War is one of the few structures for the derealization and reconstitution of constructs in which this very first form of substitution has never occurred. Thus, the inner voice that protests that the imagined ritual would carry us back thousands of years must be reminded that war carries us back those thousands plus one.

Behind this attempt to effect a radical alteration in our perceptions of war, lies a corresponding need to positively embrace 'making'. So, Scarry prefaces her analysis by questioning our failure to ascribe to the creative act a value as high as the moral claims of destruction are low.

[...] is it not peculiar [...] that the action of creating is not, for example, held to be bound up with justice in the way those other events are bound up with injustice, that it (the mental, verbal, or material process of making the world) is not held to be centrally entailed in the elimination of pain as the unmaking of the world is held to be entailed in pain's infliction.

For Scarry, the fact that we perceive creating as 'empty of ethical content' is symptomatic of 'how faulty and fragmentary our understanding of creation is [...]'.<sup>7</sup>

Although her argument is rigorously documented with instances of historical fact, the imperative urgency of the analysis impresses through the way in which at all times it seeks to address the question of human civilisation in the universal terms suggested by the notion of 'making the world'. But in Heaney and Dante, however encompassing might be the truths at which they too aim, the concern with political violence is rooted in the specificity of time and place. What endures in the poetry, more than it does in the broader sweep of Scarry's discourse, is that the horror evinced is that of blood shed by known individuals and of lives extinguished in identifiable topographies.<sup>8</sup> This is, for instance, an especially poignant feature of the early cantos of the *Purgatorio*, and is perhaps most acute in the account which Buonconte da Montefeltro offers of his death in battle. His response to the pilgrim's desire to know the undiscovered resting place of his corpse

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7 Ibid., p. 22.

8 In his essay 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review*, 15 (1985), 5-19, Heaney writes: 'What I first loved about the *Commedia* was the local intensity, the vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades, the way personalities and values were emotionally soldered together, the strong strain of what has been called personal realism in the celebration of bonds of friendship and bonds of enmity. The way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history [...]' (p. 18).

begins with a verbal map.<sup>9</sup>

«Oh!», rispuos' elli, «a piè del Casentino  
traversa un'acqua c'ha nome l'Archiano,  
che sovra l'Ermo nasce in Apennino.

Là 've 'l vocabol suo diventa vano,  
arriva' io forato ne la gola,  
fuggendo a piede e sanguinando il piano.»

(*Purg.* V, 94-99)

(“Oh!”, he replied, ‘at the foot of the Casentino / there crosses a river named the Archiano, / which has its source above Ermo in the Apennines. / There where it changes its name, / I arrived wounded in the throat, / fleeing on foot and bloodying the plain.”)

This dissolution of the corporeal frame within a specific geography is as much a reflection of the certainty which attaches in Dante’s faith to God’s covenant to preserve the resurrected body in the Afterlife, as it is a condemnation of the atrocities of the battlefield.<sup>10</sup> That censure will be voiced in the *Inferno* through the presentation of the soldier-poet Bertran de Born.

Turning to Heaney, one recalls that his poetry has, more than Dante’s, explored the merging of bodies and landscapes, most notably in the ‘bog’ poems of *North*. And in the most recent collection, the portrayal of violence is no more acutely invested with a sense of local reality, than when the poet reconstructs the murder of a reservist soldier from the stains and scars that register the event in the fabric of the city.

Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood  
In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot  
Where his head had been, other stains subsumed  
In the parched wall he leant his back against  
That morning like any other morning,  
Part-time reservist, toting his lunch-box.  
A car came slow down Castle Street, made the halt,  
Crossed the Diamond, slowed again and stopped  
Level with him, although it was not his lift.

9 References to the *Commedia* follow the standard critical text: *La ‘Commedia’ secondo l’antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966-67). Translations are, on the whole, my own and aim to give a literal rendering in English while adhering as closely as possible to the original Italian syntax and phrasing. I have often relied upon *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Mark Musa, 3 vols (London: Penguin, 1984).

10 See Anna Chiavacci Leonardi, “‘Le bianche stole’: il tema della resurrezione nel *Paradiso*”, in *Dante e la Bibbia*, ed. by Giovanni Barblon (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 249-71 (258), who also notes, drawing attention to the precise geographical indications which accompany the burial theme in the *Purgatorio*, that in the case of Cato the phrase ‘in Utica’ (*Purg.* I, 74) ‘has great value because it underscores the historicity, the unequivocal and earthly definition of the body’ (‘ha grande valore perché sottolinea la storicità, la determinazione inequivocale e terrena di quel corpo’). The other references are: *Purg.* III, 25-27 (Virgil); 127-131 (Manfred); V, 124-127 (Buonconte).

And then he saw an ordinary face  
 For what it was and a gun in his own face.  
 His right leg was hooked back, his sole and heel  
 Against the wall, his right knee propped up steady,  
 So he never moved, just pushed with all his might  
 Against himself, then fell past the tarred strip,  
 Feeding the gutter with his copious blood.

These lines occur in the poem 'Keeping Going', in which an earlier section constitutes an affectionate memory of the amusements and simple comforts, more creaturely than bucolic, of a rural childhood, suffused with the smells of 'buttermilk and urine'. This typically sensuous evocation of the domestic is prefaced by Heaney's recollection of whitewashing the farmhouse walls, where, in the eyes of the child, the drying of the watery grey to white works 'like magic'. This vision, of course, is established – crudely perhaps – as a position from which the adult poet views the bloodied whitewash marking the place where the reservist died. One also sees though how Scarry would be sympathetic to this juxtaposition. The restoration, through the work of whitewashing, of the radiant 'kingdom' of childhood, is the constructive 'making' of civilisation unmade in the act of terrorism.

The last line of the section quoted above has struck one reviewer as a 'classically unruffled pentameter', epitomising Heaney's 'Homeric directness'.<sup>11</sup> And we will see that this reference to the epic mode is one to which Heaney himself has recourse. For the moment though, let it be noted that the rhythmical implications of the line, as we might expect in a poem structured upon a carefully wrought paralleling of images, are by no means tangential to Heaney's purposes. The intentionally comical pose struck by his brother, aping the piper with an upturned chair and 'a whitewash brush for a sporran' is, on one level, a mockery of military prowess and pomp. And one can read this along with the steady, almost photographic gaze fixed on the posture of the reservist. The absence of concentration, the apparent nonchalance with which he leans back, steadied by his crooked leg, are precisely not the taut muscularity one expects of the hero. In the 'Nobel Lecture' the phrase 'what happens' defines the sheer and unequivocal factualness of reality's atrocities: the Homeric sense of the real. And indeed, in noting the singularity of an individual's actions, such as the reservist's mighty push against death, the poetry confers its own reality upon the bodies of those who suffer 'what happens'. They are the bodies of those who toted a lunch-box or waved at friends from the revving tractor. The heroic, whether it erupts incomprehensibly and uselessly in the midst of the ordinary or else becomes a way of life that cannot be differentiated from normality, is in either case

11 Nicholas Jenkins, 'Walking on Air: Travel and Release in Seamus Heaney', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 1996, p. 10.

inadequate. As a poet in exile from the conflicts of his native country, Heaney has often seemed troubled by his non-combatant stance. But here, even the perseverance of his brother in managing to 'stay on where it happens' is called into question. For the poet recognizes that, however much his brother is valued for having debunked military posturing or simply succeeded in holding on to the rhythms of daily life, neither the comic nor the dogged attachment to place is enough. He 'cannot make the dead walk or right wrong'. Heaney refuses facile consolations.

The value which Heaney assigns in his meditation upon heroism to a certain contemplation of the quotidian can be grasped when one notes in the poem 'Damson' how the image of the lunch-box returns. Here, where the reader is in less danger of being transfixed by the gore, the weighing in the balance of creative and destructive impulses is more clearly focused. The poem commences by paralleling the blood which oozes from a bricklayer's cut hand with the stain from the damson jam seeping through his lunch-box. There is here once again the same sensual delight as in the whitewash sequence in witnessing the primal goodness and sheer benignancy of a raw material turned to creative effect.

Over and over, the slur, the scrape and mix  
As he trowelled and retrowelled and laid down  
Courses of glum mortar. Then the bricks  
Jiggled and settled, tocked and tapped in line.  
I loved especially the trowel's shine,  
Its edge and apex always coming clean  
And brightening itself by mucking in.

The same sense had emerged from 'To a Dutch Potter in Ireland', where the firing of the clay urns in the 'strongroom of vocabulary' becomes an image for a transformative miracle wrought upon the primal potency of language. The poet comes away 'like the guard who'd seen / The stone move in a diamond-blaze of air'. And one notes too that it is a soldier who has been transformed. In the 'Damson' poem, no less a religious awe seems to bind the poet's gaze to the Christ-like figure of the bricklayer 'shown bleeding to the world'. The sense of an art which is marvellous or arcane is suggested by the wrapping of the trowel 'like a cult blade that had to be kept hidden'. The significance of this is also, however, that we are reminded of Scarry's discussion of human sacrifice, and more generally of her analysis of the crucial passage in human civilisation from weapon to tool. The former is two-ended, both wielded by and acting upon the human body. Whereas the latter works its effect upon non-sentient matter.<sup>12</sup> But if the Christian allusion here is underplayed, the distance dividing the bricklayer from the figure of the antique hero is entirely explicit. In a further dissolving of weapon into tool, the similarity

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12 Scarry, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

of the 'trowel-wielder' to Odysseus in Hades, lashing out at ghosts with his sword, is only superficial.

But not like him —  
 Builder, not sacker, your shield the mortar board —  
 Drive them back to the wine-dark taste of home,  
 The smell of damsons simmering in a pot,  
 Jam ladled thick and steaming down the sunlight.

With the allusion to Odysseus cutting the throat of the sacrificial lamb, the poem seems to verge upon a crystallization of its inchoate Christian theme. Yet the wine-darkness becomes the attribute not of a crucified body but of a home. Mythical heroism yields before the domesticity of jam-making, and a piercing not of swords and blades but of sunlight. The tonal shift is latent in the poem's title. Standing self-sufficient and alone in the singular, the word 'Damson' possesses something of a heroic resonance. And if it were to suggest a name it would, with all the attendant ironies, be that of the Samson noted precisely for the violence of his demolition. But this is a fruit, and a humble and homegrown one at that. As has become habitual in Heaney's appraisal of the real, however, the bathos is anything but denigratory. In the sensuous luxury of the jam steaming in the sunlight, the poem invests the everyday work of the kitchen table with a sense of the marvellous. As sword and shield give way before the mortar board and ladle, the routine truths of domestic work are refocused into a radiance.

This canonizing of the makers of jam and homes over the dark shapes of the sackers of cities, links this poem to the sequence entitled 'Mycenae Lookout'. Here the decivilizing violence is traced back once more to the mythical in this vision of the Trojan war. The narration from the distanced viewpoint of the lookout, who has remained behind in Mycenae, might well allude to Heaney's much discussed consciousness of his own physical remove from the troubles in Northern Ireland. And certainly it would be uncharacteristic if the poet intended this perception of armed conflict as futile and unmitigated butchery to be evacuated of its contemporary political relevance. The Trojan campaign is recognised from the first as 'killing-fest, the life-warp and world-wrong', where bodies rain down like 'tattered meat' and the signalling of an outcome will be like a 'victory beacon in an abattoir'. The dread which attends the activity of the hero is all the greater for the war being on the whole unseen. And when in the poem's final section, the soldier 'comes surging in incomprehensibly' it is to disturb the quiet reverie of the water which absorbs the 'cries of the butchered'. But by this stage the healing process is under way, and the warrior's intrusion is a hiatus in the poem's pivotal movement to counterbalance the violence in the developing vision of the domestic, implicit already in the 'filled bath [...] behind housewalls'. The memory of the well at Athens suggests to the poet that the 'treadmill of assault / turned watermill', redeeming

the cycles of destruction in an image of productive work: a benign cooperation of human and natural energies. This prepares finally for a transition akin to that which transfigures the bricklayer in 'Damson'. For the poet recalls a well on his own land, sunk by workmen who seemed like 'discharged soldiers testing the safe ground'. The anti-heroic note is struck by the word 'puddling' with its suggestion of an aimless and desultory playing with water. Yet the well-sinkers are also ennobled as 'seers', not, as Cassandra was, of war, but of the fecundity implied in the 'bountiful round mouths of iron pumps / and gushing taps': the simple mechanical contrivances essential to the home.

Elsewhere in these new poems Heaney will turn to workmen and builders: the 'men in dungarees' who 'mixed concrete' as if driven by a mental image of the 'Pharoah's brickyards';<sup>13</sup> or the foundrymen who cast the bell miraculously shrunk to a thimble by St Adaman.<sup>14</sup> There are poems dedicated to a potter and an architect; to gravel as a building material; and to traditional tools like butter-prints and sharpening stones, objects which become talismanic while retaining all their texture and weight in the palm of the hand. In 'Two Stick Drawings' the sticks become emblems of the fundamental value of even the simplest implement to enable a projection of the self. So the poet recalls how Jim, who was 'simple', would try out various sticks 'until he found / The true extension of himself in one / That made him jubilant'. This is precisely how Scarry understands the creative function of the tool.<sup>15</sup> And that tools and the activity of building are indeed so central to Heaney's new work should come as no surprise, given that the 'spirit level' of the title is primarily an instrument of vital importance in the early stages of realising any architectural project: a tool which is indispensable to the human imagination's extension of itself outwards into the protective spaces of rooms and dwellings; and also unlikely ever to be transformed into a weapon. Nor in Heaney is this interest in manual work anything new, as the early poem 'Digging' attests in its evocation of his father's physical toil. There Heaney had ended with the famous declaration that he would dig with his pen; and there is much in the recent writing to suggest a return to this station. For in the company of the builders and makers that inhabit the new poems, one also senses the figure of the poet himself.

In the *Nobel lecture* Heaney portrays himself resisting the imaginative impulse to conjure the marvellous, subdued by the sense of duty which bound him to strive for an unrelent-

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13 *The Spirit Level*, p. 39.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

15 This is in fact an attribute which Scarry ascribes equally to tools and weapons: ' [...] the object, whether weapon or tool, is a lever across which a comparatively small change in the body at one end is amplified into a very large change in the object, animate or inanimate, at the other end' (op. cit., p. 175).



ingly objective vision of a reality which, for a survivor of Northern Ireland, not infrequently appeared 'murderous'. The poet cites a poem of twenty years ago which reveals something of his frustration with such an artistic procedure.

If I could come on meteorite!  
Instead, I walk through damp leaves,  
Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

Imagining a hero  
On some muddy compound,  
His gift like a slingstone  
Whirled for the desperate.

And Heaney continues in the lecture to justify his suspicion of aesthetic consolation in the face of 'the actualities of Ulster and Israel and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth'. This reluctance to 'credit anything too positive in the work of art' gave rise to a creative practice whose rigours he likens to that of a monk 'bowed over his prie-dieu', and straining in his contemplation to 'bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue'.

Now this kind of consideration of artistic purpose also enables one, I would suggest, to trace a path back to Dante. In the central sequence of the *Paradiso*, Dante encounters the soul of his ancestor Cacciaguida who reveals his future exile and encourages him to be steadfast in seeing through his poetic mission. The Dante-character confesses that 'if he is a timid friend to truth' ('s'io al vero son timido amico'), it is because of his fear of forfeiting his fame in posterity.<sup>16</sup> Flaring into a brilliance like a mirror of gold in the sun, Cacciaguida acknowledges that Dante's 'blunt speech' ('la tua parola brusca') will unsettle guilty consciences, but famously exhorts him nonetheless to keep going.

«Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,  
tutta tua vis'ion fa manifesta;  
e lascia pur grattar dov' è la rogna.

Ché se la voce tua sarà molesta  
nel primo gusto, vital nodrimento  
lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta.

Questo tuo grido farà come vento,  
che le più alte cime più percuote;  
e ciò non fa d'onor poco argomento.»

(*Par.XVII*, 127-135)

('But nevertheless, avoiding all falsehood, / (let your words) reveal your vision in its entirety; / and just let them scratch where it itches. / For if your voice tastes bitter / at first, it will then give vital nourishment / once it has been digested. / Your cry will

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16 *Paradiso* XVII, 118-20.

be like the wind, / that strikes the highest peaks; / and that is no small cause for honour.’)

That this requirement to remain true to reality will entail a supreme effort is hinted at already in Cacciaguida’s prophecy of Dante’s exile: of how other people’s bread will taste of salt, and of how hard it will be to climb another’s stairs (lines 58-60). The motif will be taken up again in Canto XXIII, 64-66, in the image of the poet’s shoulder trembling beneath the weight of his subject.<sup>17</sup> And again in *Paradiso* XXV, where, at line 3, the poet observes how the hardship of writing left him ‘thin for many years’ (‘per molti anni macro’). We will perhaps never be sufficiently apprised of the actual circumstances of Dante’s life to know whether or not his emaciation was a literal and bodily consequence of his versifying. As a means of distinguishing the lyrical sensibilities of his early love poetry from the uncompromising political engagement underpinning the *Commedia*, the metaphor is strikingly effective. Yet it would be mistaken to adopt the view that this demonstrates a simple linear progression. It no more represents the full story than does the modern poet’s image of the bowed monk. For Heaney’s appeal to a Franciscan asceticism marks a phase of obeisance to a kind of truth-telling, which he now claims no longer prevents him from attending to the ‘absolutely imagined’, as he has learned to trust the ‘marvellous’.

Heaney explores this maturation through the figure of another monk, one who shows himself capable of the heroic virtue which the poet’s earlier version of himself had doubted. The monk is St Kevin of Glendalough who, while piously stretched out in the form of the cross, finds that a blackbird has constructed a nest in the palm of the hand thrusting out of the window of his cell. Filled with compassion, Kevin remains immobile for weeks until the fledglings have flown the nest. In the poem which this tale inspires there is a telling emphasis on the imagination. In a kind of mock dismissiveness the poet remarks that the whole episode is ‘anyhow’ imagined. But this cleaving to reality over fiction serves to draw the reader into the creative process of imagining Kevin’s predicament. Moreover, within the poem’s narrative we are also surely intended to feel the force of Kevin’s own imaginative engagement with reality.

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17 Although here it is not the difficulty of confronting atrocity which tests the poet, but the miraculous presence of Beatrice. Angelo Jacomuzzi, ‘Il ‘topos’ dell’ineffabile nel *Paradiso* dantesco’, in *Da Dante al novecento: studi critici offerti dagli scolari a Giovanni Getto nel suo ventesimo anno di insegnamento universitario* (Milan: Mursia, 1970), p. 41, points out the origin of this motif of the ‘ponderoso tema’ and the ‘omera mortal’ in Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 38-40. Dante continues with a metaphor of a boat cutting through water, and of the helmsman who spares himself no effort to keep his craft on a steady course. Lino Pertile, ‘Stile e immagini in *Paradiso* XXIII’, *The Italianist*, 4 (1984), 7-34 (20-21), notes how effectively the verb which renders this image of the boat ploughing its course – the ‘fendendo’ of line 68 – evokes ‘the effort of cutting through a resistant material’ (‘la fatica di chi taglia una materia che resiste’).

Scarry, speaking of the torturer's deconstruction of the human imagination's making of the world, observes that the room, that threatening enclosure which features in so many Amnesty reports, represents in its benign manifestations the most basic instance of the self's extension into the world.<sup>18</sup> The monk too has his cell. But Kevin's body, in the imaginative devotion of his *imitatio Christi*, extends beyond the habitual space of his life, as he translates himself from being simply the inhabitant of a room to being 'linked into the network of eternal life'. The heroism of his spirit lies in being able to conceive from within the straight lines and right angles of cross, cell and window frame, the roundness of nest and eggs and the endless cycle of natural generation. As the Christian imagines life out of the death of the sacrificial lamb, so Kevin reconstructs his own bodily shape as a part of Nature's making. That this might indeed be where Heaney sees a new vision of the heroic stature of the imagination is suggested by his reference in the Nobel lecture to Yeats' 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'. Heaney relates how Yeats, living in a Norman tower which had played a role in an earlier episode of Irish military conflict, reflected upon the divide between the violence that besets civilisation and the work of those who are its builders. The constructive virtue is evoked through the image of the mother bird feeding its young and the honey bee which, as Heaney points out, is traditionally 'suggestive of the ideal of an industrious, harmonious, nurturing commonwealth'. And this explains perhaps why Heaney's new collection features on its cover a medieval image of bees entering the hive.<sup>19</sup>

Heaney links the combination he finds in the Yeats poem of hard truth-telling and compassion with Homer's account of Odysseus weeping at Demodocus's song of the fall of Troy. Heaney is drawn to Homer's simile of a woman weeping over her dying husband, as she feels on her back the spear that signals her captivity. The significance of this would seem to be that it represents the value of a certain spiritual pliancy in the artist: a capacity to admit of an intersection between the knowable and the transcendent. And it is, coincidentally, the tragedy which arises when a creative mind closes itself to such possibilities, when more simply the pursuit of truth is divorced from compassion, that Dante explores through his reconstruction of the Odyssean persona. The poet of the *Inferno* is famously at pains to differentiate himself from the character whose narrative journey he perpetuates in the twenty-sixth canto. Dante's 'Ulisse', for all his oratorical guile, is not a poet, and lacks the poet's intuition that there is more to truth than

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18 Op. cit., p. 38-41.

19 Though it is interesting to speculate that another association here may be with Heaney's fondness for Mandelstam's use of the image of bees building a hive as an analogy for Dante's construction of the 'thirteen-thousand-faceted form' of the *Commedia*. See 'Government of the Tongue', pp. 94-95. Mandelstam's meditation on Dante can be found in an English translation in *The Complete Prose and Letters of Osip Mandelstam* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), pp. 397-451.

knowledge. And the *Commedia*, of course, in Christian terms offers a sustained examination of this theme.

Returning to Heaney's lecture one finds that, no less efficacious than the documentary truthfulness of the callously prodding spear shaft, is the way in which the lyric poem rings true simply by the aesthetic virtue of its music. In support of this notion that language might possess an instinctive rightness upon entering the ear, the poet appeals, as he has often had occasion to do in the past, to Osip Mandelstam, and in this case to his sense of 'the steadfastness of speech articulation'. We are entering upon the question of the nature of the poet's work in recognising the natural voice and a commitment to the effort which Heaney, conscious of the paradox, locates in a *striving* to '*repose* in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds'.

On the sixth terrace of mount Purgatory, Dante will be asked by the spirit of the poet Bonagiunta to confirm if he is indeed the poet he believes him to be.

«Ma dī s'ī' veggio qui colui che fore  
trasse le nove rime, cominciando  
'*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*'.»

E io a lui: «I' mi son un che, quando  
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo  
ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando.»

(*Purg.* XXIV, 49-54)

('But tell me if I see before me he who / brought forth the new verses, beginning / "Ladies who have intelligence of love".' / And I to him: 'I am one who, when / Love breathes in me, take note, and according / to the manner in which Love speaks within I go making my meaning'.)

The protagonist's answer is as crystalline a definition of his creative procedure as one could wish for. It harks back to the ancient conception of divine inspiration in which the poet is a conduit through whom the higher power speaks.<sup>20</sup> And there is something of this in the first poem of *The Spirit Level* which suggests firstly, in its description of the 'rain stick' repeatedly upended to produce a wondrous, unheard of music, a metaphor for the poet's striving to hear the music latent in language.

Upended the rain stick and what happens next  
Is a music that you never would have known  
To listen for. In a cactus stalk  
Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash  
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe  
Being played by water...

We are reminded of the healing, nutritive function which the flow of water will possess

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20 Heaney notes the ancient origin of this attitude in 'The Government of the Tongue' essay, p. 93.

in 'Mycenae Lookout'. And, as an unexpected wealth of sound is captured mysteriously in the artifact of the poem, it may also be that it is the poet himself who is the pipe being played by the world.

The 'vo significando' of Dante's lines also gestures towards truthtelling in the notion of remaining true to the inner dictates of emotion. It implies not only the process by which the spontaneously arising inspiration from within is liberated through the studied procedures of a technical practice, but also the forthrightness of a voice which strives to make its meanings count. One imagines in the parenthetical 'noto' a Wordsworthian recording of experience awaiting a subsequent translation into a crafted form. And it is interesting that in the poem in *The Spirit Level* where Heaney is most focused upon his own career as a poet, he ends, rather like a television documentary capturing an artist at work, by depicting himself scribbling in a notebook during a climb.<sup>21</sup> Within the lapidary formulation of creative practice which Dante delivers himself of during his 'via crucis' on the mountain, however, there also resides a crucial moral alignment of the poet who writes these lines with the more youthful version of himself that in Florence wrote poetry in praise of Beatrice. And it is in part this sense of forging a continuity that underpins the remarkable aura of self-sufficiency which emerges from the 'I mi son un che' ('I am one who' - the added force of the reflexive in Italian is untranslatable). By reintegrating into the present the melodic and moral inclinations of his youth Dante makes himself whole, and rediscovers what was all along his natural voice. The meaning which he 'goes spelling out' is also that of his own selfhood. And the notion that there might be a valuable resilience and independence to be derived from this artistic self-possession is implicit in the affirmation which Cacciaguida offers of Dante's political identity, when he declares 'it will be well for you to have made a party of yourself' ('a te fia bello / averti fatta parte per te stesso').<sup>22</sup> The vivid dramatisation of this motif in Heaney's poem 'The Flight Path' indicates that it remains central also to his sense of his own political role.<sup>23</sup> He narrates how, during a train ride to Belfast, he was accosted by an old schoolfriend, now a member of the IRA.

So he enters and sits down  
Opposite and goes for me head on.  
'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write  
Something for us?' 'If I do write something,  
Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.'

But this 'writing for oneself' is not the withdrawal it might at first seem. In the stanza

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<sup>21</sup> *The Spirit Level*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Paradiso* XVII, 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> See Michael Cavanagh, 'Seamus Heaney's Dante: Making a Party of Oneself', *Lectura Dantis*, 12 (Spring 1993), 7-15.

that follows, Heaney quotes his own translation of lines from Dante's *Inferno*.

*When he had said this, his eyes rolled  
And his teeth, like a dog's teeth clamping round a bone,  
Bit into the skull and again took hold.*

This is how the damned soul of the Pisan Count Ugolino expresses his vengeful hatred for the man responsible for his political downfall and atrocious death by starvation. He gnaws for eternity on the skull of the Archbishop Ruggieri, whose body is frozen beside him in the ice-fields of deepest Hell. Dante's uncompromising image of canine savagery undoes the rhetorical effect which Ugolino, much like the terrorist on the train, had sought, however crudely, in seeking to draw the poet to his side. Plainly then the allusion to Ugolino, condemned for political betrayal, is there to demonstrate the necessity for the poet of resisting being drawn into partisan sympathies. There is much more that could be said of the play here in Heaney between the gaols of Northern Ireland, Ugolino's imprisonment in the tower, and the repeated 'safe as houses' with all the ironies which such a phrase must have in the mouths of those who make bombs. Dante as much as Yeats, recognises how the image of the tower might stand as well for what is creative and valuable in human societies, as much as it might embody all that is arrogant and belligerent. Ugolino, moreover, becomes for Dante the epitome of the ferocious instinct to tear civilisation apart. And the lines Heaney cites are those which most clearly demonstrate Dante's resolve to make the reader contemplate the morally intolerable.<sup>24</sup>

Heaney, like Elaine Scarry, is testing the value of 'making' against the grim realities of war. His writing, in exposing that 'ore of self' at the root of his own existence, is that benign form of substantiation to which the philosopher appeals. Throughout *The Spirit Level* Heaney invokes his childhood, describing, for example, how a sofa once became transformed into a steam train, and how, every time his father folded a paper boat, 'a dove rose in my breast'. These are reminiscences which celebrate the magical quality which children perceive in what Scarry calls 'making up' and 'making real'; and they suggest that at the most fundamental level her affirmation of the ethical value of the benign power of the imagination is something which any child would know. So Heaney

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24 The difficulty which centuries of readers have experienced in the face of such a demand is clear from those who have sought to romanticize Ugolino as a tragic hero, and more generally from the widespread reluctance to acknowledge the possibility that Dante intends us, in the infamous last line of his speech in Canto XXXIII - 'Then hunger did more than grief could do' ('Poscia, più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno' (line 75)), to understand that the Count ate his own children. There could hardly be a more harrowing vision of 'unmaking'. And one also notes, with Scarry in mind, the bitter irony of Ugolino's attempts to compare himself with the God who both created, and incarnated himself in, the human body. See Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, 'L'orazione del conte Ugolino', *Lettere italiane*, 23 (1971), 3-28.

asks us to 'imagine being Kevin', imagine the heroic effort of his imagining; and, taking hold of the 'rain stick' as he prepares to shake music from the wounded world, says quietly 'Listen again now'. For history has taught the poet the urgency of his theme. The imperative has always to be renewed. The time to listen is always now.

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