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Translation as *Katabasis* and *Nekyia* in Seamus Heaney's "The Riverbank Field"

Gerrit van Dyk

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Translation as *Katabasis* and *Nekyia* in Seamus Heaney's "The Riverbank Field"

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Throughout his career, Seamus Heaney has found an expressive outlet through translation—particularly translation of Greek and Roman literature. In his poem, "The Riverbank Field," from his latest collection, *Human Chain*, Heaney engages in metatranslation, "Ask me to translate what Loeb gives as / 'In a retired vale...a sequestered grove' / And I'll confound the Lethe in Moyola." Curiously, with a broad spectrum of classical works at his disposal, the poet chooses a particular moment in Virgil's *Aeneid* as an image for translation. What is it about this conversation between Aeneas and his dead father, Anchises, at the banks of the Lethe which makes it uniquely fitting for Heaney to explore translation?

In order to fully understand Heaney's decision to translate this scene from *Aeneid* 6, it must be clear how Heaney perceives the classical tropes of *katabasis* (descent into the underworld) and *nekylia* (communion with the dead). Due to the particularly violent and destructive history of the 20th century from the World Wars to the Holocaust, contemporary poets tend to portray *katabasis* and *nekylia* in their works as tragic (See Falconer's *Hell in Contemporary Literature*). Heaney subverts this view of a tragic descent and communion with the dead in his poetry, instead opting for a journey through Hell which is more optimistic and efficacious. Heaney's rejection of the contemporary tragic *katabasis* and *nekylia* allows these classical tropes to become a metaphor for translation. I argue Heaney demonstrates how he views translation and the role of the translator through this metatranslational instance in "The Riverbank Field." For Heaney, not only can a poet descend to the underworld where spirits of the literary dead wait for translation into a new medium, but the translator actually can succeed in bringing an ancient author to a modern readership.

Keywords: Seamus Heaney, translation, *Aeneid*, classical reception, poetry

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Introduction

We have lost the overall, ordering Christian myth of 'down there, up there, us in between'. It's been lost as a living myth. But its place in Western culture has been taken by general awareness of classical myths.
—Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones* 295

When asked about how the classics have influenced his poetry, Seamus Heaney responded, “I just happened to belong to the last generation that learned Latin, that read Virgil, that knew about the descent into the underworld” (*Stepping Stones* 295). Now that a classical education in Greek and Latin is extremely rare, it is interesting to note the interest of late 20th and early 21st century poets in the Greek and Roman tradition. Like Heaney, many of the greatest poets of the past half-century made the literature of ancient Greece and Rome central to their own works.¹ Some critics have remarked on this seeming paradox of a flourishing classical poetry during a simultaneous decline in classical education.²

This relationship with the classics has introduced into English poetry a variety of interpretations of the classical topoi *katabasis* and *nekyia*. *Katabasis*, or the descent into the underworld, is a common method used by epicists and mock epicists³ and frequently coupled with *nekyia*, an augury through conversation with the dead. Each hero descends to meet a particular ghost in the underworld in order to understand the hero's purpose and future destiny.

For Odysseus, the hero must descend to speak with Teiresias in order to learn how to return to Ithaca. In his *nekyia*, Odysseus speaks with the blind prophet's spirit and then he is freed to speak with his deceased mother, Anticleia, whom Odysseus last saw alive. Odysseus

¹ See Graziosi and Greenwood, Martindale and Thomas, Hardwick 342, Hardwick and Stray, Rees, DeMaria and Brown, and Harrison.

² See, for example, Harrison 1-16, Talbot 149. See also Hall 315-322 for a discussion on contemporary students experiencing the classics increasingly through translation than from the original and how that is influencing classical curriculum.

³ See, for example, *Odyssey* 11, Dante's *Commedia*, and Books 1-2 of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Alexander Pope will satirize this technique in *Rape of the Lock*.

then meets other great men and women in Greek mythology in another common epic trope, the parade of heroes. While conversing with these dead heroes, Odysseus apparently exhausts the time he is allotted as a mortal in hell. He is attacked by the other shades of the underworld and narrowly escapes back to his ship. Virgil takes this Homeric *katabasis* and uses it slightly differently to discuss to glory of Rome. Aeneas descends not to speak with Teiresias but instead with his father, Anchises, who dies on the Trojan refugees' journey to Italy. Once he reunites with Anchises, for his own *nekyia*, Aeneas is favored with a future vision of how Rome is eventually founded in Virgil's version of the parade of heroes. Dante borrows from Virgil's underworld and expands it, using *katabasis* and *nekyia* to comment on contemporary and literary heroes and villains but he then devotes a significant portion of his work to *anabasis*, or the ascent after descending to the underworld, as his pilgrim journeys through hell, purgatory, and eventually paradise.

Most 20th century poets in English who include *katabasis* and *nekyia* in their poetry create what could be called an unfortunate descent, a descent into hell without a positive resolution. This is understandable considering how much devastation and death occurred in the 20th century. These poets have found a way to explore the living hells of the Great War, post-colonialism, the Holocaust, and, for poets like Seamus Heaney, even local conflicts like the Irish Troubles, by revisiting the ancient hell of Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante. Rachel Falconer, in her study *Hell in Contemporary Literature*, argues that post-1945 authors who explore hell in their work do so often without offering a return from the underworld (*anabasis*). Instead hell and reality are interconnected and inseparable, and "the protagonist's task [...] is to acquire the ability to live with the double-vision or to stand astride the two realities" (Falconer 5). The modern poet journeys to hell and finds it inescapably merged with "normal" life with little or no reconciliation

with the dead.⁴ Contemporary poets who use *katabasis* and *nekyia* do so in a way which creates a connection with the past that is tragic or at least ambiguous.

What has gone unnoticed, however, is the distinctive practice of Seamus Heaney. In his handling of the classical topoi of *katabasis* and *nekyia*, Heaney subverts the contemporary practice of an unfortunate descent and communion with the dead. It is in Heaney where *katabasis* and *nekyia* culminate in a full reconciliation with the dead. I argue that in his metatranslational poem, “The Riverbank Field,” Heaney re-embodies *katabasis* and *nekyia* as a figure for translation, stressing that for Heaney the very act of translation is about connection and reconciliation with the dead. Due to his unusual treatment of the classical tropes of descent and communion with the dead what would seem to be an odd choice to translate this moment in *Aeneid* 6 becomes instead the ideal scene where Heaney can fully express his claims about translation and the role of the translator. Because Heaney believes in an optimistic and efficacious *katabasis* and *nekyia*, this allows Heaney to also make similar observations about translation, namely that the poet *can* descend metaphorically, commune with the literary spirits of the past, and bring these great works back to a modern readership. “The Riverbank Field” is the essential poem in this interpretation of Heaney’s translation method. It is necessary to first establish Heaney’s unique version of *katabasis* and *nekyia* in order to fully grasp his statement on translation in “The Riverbank Field.”

Contemporary Poets, *Katabasis*, and *Nekyia*

The 20th century has led poets to an unhappy association with hell. The world wars and Holocaust left a world largely jaded and unheroic. It is only natural, then, for poets to conflate these events of terror with descent imagery. For example, in Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* Plunkett

⁴ See Falconer 4-5.

sees the horrors of concentration camps in a katabatic scene while visiting Soufrière, an island volcano.

Holes of boiling lava

bubbled in the Malebolge

[...]

This was the gate of sulphur through which he must pass,

singeing his memory, though he pinched his nostrils

until the stench faded into verdurous peace,

like registering skulls in the lime-pits of Auschwitz. (10.2.62-69)

The imagery of the dead and the use of “Malebolge” overtly signal the underworld. The gate suggests an entrance⁵ similar to the gate Aeneas had to enter, and, later, Dante’s pilgrim. But the evocation of Auschwitz jars the reader. The descent imagery combines here with a modern atrocity, calling into question connection or communion with the dead. Walcott does not allow Plunkett to escape from hell—the underworld is mixed too much with reality.

While the physical geography of hell can be found in 20th and 21st century poetry, *nekyia* is an even larger classical shade in the writings of these poets. Michael Longley, a poet frequently discussed along with Heaney because of their Northern Ireland backgrounds,⁶ exhibits this tragic *nekyia* in his poetry.⁷ Unlike Heaney’s emphasis on connection and reconciliation in

⁵ Walcott may in fact be evoking the gate which *exits* the underworld “singeing his memory.” Having Plunkett actually leaving hell and still seeing Auschwitz further creates a sense of ambiguity regarding descent and communion with the dead.

⁶ Longley and Heaney were also undergraduate fellows at Belfast. They dedicated mutual poems to each other further demonstrating their friendship and collegiality. See Heaney’s “Personal Helicon” and Longley’s “Letters.”

⁷ Longley’s “Laertes” and “Antecleia” both retell scenes where Odysseus meets his parents for the first time after his long years at war and his journey home. “Antecleia” seems to be a translation of *Odyssey* 11.219-222 where Antecleia tells Odysseus she cannot embrace him because she no longer has a body. “Laertes” is a similarly loose translation of *Odyssey* 24.223-231 in which Odysseus sees his father working in their fields and approaches him.

his descent and communion with the dead, Longley's tone emphasizes a feeling of elegy and loss. In his exquisite "In Memoriam," Longley addresses his father, Richard Longley. The poet recounts how his father was injured by shrapnel in World War I in such a way that might have rendered him impotent. The poem concludes:

Finally, that lousy war was over.
Stranded in France and in need of proof
You hunted down experimental lovers,
Persuading chorus girls and countesses:
This, father, the last confidence you spoke.
In my twentieth year your old wounds woke
As cancer. Lodging under the same roof
Death was a visitor who hung about,
Strewing the house with pills and bandages,
Till he chose to put your spirit out.

Though they overslept the sequence of events
Which ended with the ambulance outside,
You lingering in the hall, your bowels on fire,
Tears in your eyes, and all your medals spent,
I summon girls who packed at last and went
Underground with you. Their souls again on hire,
Now those lost wives as recreated brides

Where "Laertes" is a retelling of a scene that did happen, Longley alters the language of "Antecliea" to be an interrogative, calling into question whether Odysseus every truly met his mother in Longley. This ambiguity causes the reader to question whether *nekyia* is possible.

Take shape before me, materialise.

On the verge of light and happy legend

They lift their skirts like blinds across your eyes. (31-50)

On the surface this may not seem like a very classical poem but closer examination shows a strong relationship to the *Odyssey*. Longley's extensive appropriation of the epic in this poem helps us understand how he uses *katabasis* and *nekylia* in his work. The post-war sexual encounters (Circe, Calypso); the unwelcomed visitor, Death (the suitors); and the sex workers who "went / Underground [...] their souls again on hire" (the parade of heroes) all evoke Odysseus's journey back to Ithaca.

Longley becomes a sort of Telemachus, with some similarities and some differences from Homer's character. Both Longley and Telemachus wait for their respective fathers to return from a war. But unlike Telemachus, who assisted in purging his father's house of their unwanted visitors (the suitors), Longley is unable to help as his father ultimately succumbs to cancer, the "visitor who hung about." Fran Breartom maintains that the final line shows a positive closure to the pain Richard Longley suffered, the lifting of skirts tapping into "centuries of myths and traditions: skirt-lifting as dispersing evil influences, [...] as banishing pests and devils" (39). The skirt image is undeniably present in the poem, but Longley focuses too much upon impotence, loss, and suffering to fully support a positive reading of the skirt figure. In the end the most that can be said is Death has finally erased the horrors of war Longley's father had to endure but Longley could do nothing to continue the relationship. The story of Odysseus is a story of reunification and homecoming. However, the *Odyssey* as seen through Longley's "In Memoriam" instead becomes a work emphasizing the *nekylia* of the 20th century, one in which pain and suffering is felt more than a reconciliation.

Walcott also questions the effectiveness of communion with the dead. Perhaps the clearest example of Walcott's *katabasis* and *nekylia* comes at the beginning of Book 3 of *Omeros* where Achille returns to Africa in a dream. The ocean voyage home reminds the reader of Odysseus, but Odysseus' and Aeneas' *katabasis* are also found in the imagery of the text. The "skeletal warrior," is a term for the undead but also skeletal in the sense of malnourished (25.2.13). The people who "looked unkindly // or kindly in their silence," lining the river, call to mind the underworld rivers like the Lethe (25.2.3-4). Achille sees an apparition of his father just before arriving, "Achille saw the ghost / of his father's face shoot up at the end of the line. // Achille stared in pious horror at the bound canvas / and could not look away" (24.2.86-89). All of these images prepare us for the *nekylia* Achille will have with his father. Walcott's selection of "pious" here can hardly be overlooked, the most commonly known attribute of Aeneas.

But instead of gaining greater understanding and knowledge as Aeneas does with his encounter with Anchises, Achille is left only with barriers and estrangement. When Achille meets his father, "they walked up the settlement, // and it seemed, as they chattered, everything was rehearsed / for ages before this. He could predict the intent / of his father's gestures; he was moving with the dead" (25.3.9-12). The scene has an automatic quality, one in which Achille seems to have no individual free will. The dialogue and behavior of both father and son "was rehearsed" stilted, and predictable.

Walcott has said "what this poem [*Omeros*] is doing, in part, is trying to hear the names of things and people in their own context, meaning everything named in a noun, and everything around a name" (*Conversations* 173). Naming is important to the text and Achille's *nekylia* with his father illustrates this importance. Afolabe, Achille's native father, asks, "Achille. What does the name mean? I have forgotten the one that I gave you." Achille replies, "Well, I too have

forgotten. // Everything was forgotten. You also. I do not know” (25.3.22-25). Neither Afolabe nor Achille can remember the name Afolabe gave him. The father challenges the son about names and meaning:

AFOLABE

A name means something.

[.....]

Unless the sound means nothing. Then you would be nothing.

Did they think you were nothing in that other kingdom?

ACHILLE

I don't know what the name means. It means something, maybe. What's the difference? In the world I come from we accept the sounds we were given. Men, trees, water.

[.....]

AFOLABE

[.....]

but you,

if you're content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost

of a name. Why did I never miss you until you returned?

Why haven't I missed you, my son, until you were lost? (25.3.28-59)

Walcott cannot create a favorable reunion between Achille and Afolabe. They end not on a note of anticipation and victory, as Aeneas and Anchises, but with defeat and distance. Achille is nameless, or Nobody, as Odysseus was, but unlike the famous great tactician, Achille is Nobody even to his own family. Achille will later realize that his life and the life of his past are more connected than he initially thought. He sees the African people wearing masks and skirts similar to what his people in St. Lucia wear and he realizes as the Africans dance, “That was how they danced at home, to fifes and tambours [...]. Achille saw the same dances // that the mitred warriors did [...] the drumming the same, / and the chant of the seed-eyed prophet to the same / response from the blurring ankles. The same, the same” (26.3.35-45). Achille returns then to St. Lucia and has a greater understanding of his own culture and his own roots because of his *katabasis* but there is still a tragic note when he cannot even tell his people what will happen to them in their future. “[T]hey muttered about a future Achille already knew / but which he could not reveal even to his breath-giver // or the council of elders” (26.1.2-4). Later in Achille’s vision, when the slavers come to abduct his people, “Achille could not hide / or fight. He stood in their centre, with useless arms” (27.1.11-12). It is not the father who knows the son’s destiny—king of a glorious new empire, but the son who knows the father’s fate—to become a slave in a hostile empire. Achille ultimately reconciles his past, even to the point of wanting to name Helen’s child an African name (63.2.10-11). But this use of *katabasis* and *nekyia* remains less jubilant than Heaney’s treatment of the same tropes. As Lance Callahan writes, “What Walcott cannot share

with Homer, Virgil, or Dante is the sense of manifest destiny informing their work” (69). Because of the complex nature of Walcott’s Caribbean background and the tensions between Western and Caribbean culture, *Omeros* cannot ultimately be celebratory. “Such consistency,” Callahan continues, “cannot exist in the context of a contemporary Caribbean text” (69). There is still too much pain and distance in Achille’s communion with Afolabe, making *Omeros* at best an ambiguous descent and communion with the dead.

Heaney’s Comedic *Katabasis* and *Nekyia*

Where contemporary poets seem to see a tragic or ambiguous *katabasis* and *nekylia*, Heaney returns to the classical view of these tropes. He rejects the prevalent view of the unfortunate descent and ambiguous communion to create instead an optimistic *katabasis* and *nekylia*. It is important to first illustrate Heaney’s comedic⁸ view of descent and communion with the dead before coming to the critical poem, “The Riverbank Field,” in Heaney’s newest collection, *Human Chain*. Knowing Heaney’s view of *katabasis* and *nekylia* brings greater understanding of Heaney’s concept of translation. Once Heaney’s optimistic interpretation of descent and communion with the dead is established, it will clarify why he chose this particular moment in *Aeneid* 6 to discuss translation in the very moment of translating.

Where Longley and Walcott both incorporate *katabasis* and *nekylia* mostly through Homer, Heaney chooses instead to follow Virgil and Virgil’s successor, Dante. The *katabasis* and *nekylia* of Virgil end more triumphantly than those of Homer. Odysseus finds out what he needs to do when he returns home and the formula for appeasing Poseidon. Virgil rewrites this prophecy and Aeneas is not just shown his immediate future, but also the destiny of his family and descendants. In their use of *katabasis* and *nekylia*, Walcott and Longley draw from Odysseus

⁸ As opposed to tragic.

primarily,⁹ who knows, as the man of pain, he must endure more hardship on his journey home. Heaney instead uses Virgil's Aeneas who learns of the ultimate glory of his progenitors through his future labor. Dante, Virgil's literary successor, will call his epic, *La Commedia* (The Comedy), a story which descends into misfortune but rises at the end to blessing and joy. Heaney in turn has evoked Dante in his poetry as well as Virgil. The end result of *katabasis* and *nekylia* for Heaney is the same as it was for Dante and Virgil before him: struggle and difficulty culminating in ultimate triumph.

Like Dante before him, Heaney enjoys a special affinity toward the Book in Virgil's *Aeneid* where the hero Aeneas embarks on his own descent and communion with the dead. Heaney has said in response to an inquiry into the relationship of his poetry to the *Aeneid*, "there's 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" (*Stepping Stones* 389). In his collection, *Seeing Things*, written just after Heaney's own father died,¹⁰ Heaney frames his poems with a translation of *Aeneid* 6 as a beginning, "The Golden Bough," and with a translation of *Inferno* 3 as an end, "The Crossing." Heaney's friend and mentor, Robert Fitzgerald, also died while Heaney was composing poems which would later be included in the collection, *Seeing Things*. Fitzgerald had just finished translating the *Aeneid*. Heaney recalls:

Then when Robert [Fitzgerald] died, there was a memorial reading held for him.
And I thought, "Book Six." I thought of the bit where Aeneas meets his father in
the underworld, because Robert had been a father figure in my life at Harvard

⁹ Walcott employs *terza rima* and occasionally evokes Dante in *Omeros* but these methods seem to be less concrete than his overt use of Homer in his title and in his poem, as well as his preference toward Achilles, Hector, Helen, and Philoctetes, all heroes from the Greek classics, not the Roman.

¹⁰ See Fowler for a discussion on the relationship between *Seeing Things*, Heaney, and his father.

[...]. And I had been thinking of the finding of the golden bough and of being given the branch as symbolic of being given the right to speak. Then my father died, and I had a number of poems about him, and [...] I thought, “I’ll go and get permission to go down to the underground to see him.” So I began to translate the bit where Aeneas goes to see the Sybil and she tells him that in order to go down to see Anchises he has to find the golden bough. It was a perfect little narrative in itself and it ends with that moment of discovery and triumph when Aeneas finds the bough and the bough comes away in his hand and he has been given the right of way. (*Sounding Lines* 16)

Katabasis, *nekyia*, and, by extension, translation, requires permission for Heaney.¹¹ Moreover, this reinforces Heaney’s personal relationship to *Aeneid* 6. He was first exposed to it as a boy in primary school when his teacher lamented that the exams focused on Book 9 of the *Aeneid*.

But the teacher was a wonderful teacher. He taught obliquely, because he kept saying, “Oh boys, I wish it were Book Six.” All through my life, then, I thought, “Book Six.” And of course it’s irresistible, once you read it. The journey into the underworld, the golden bough, and so on. (*Sounding Lines* 16)

Heaney would later say, “I like that book [Book 6] of the *Aeneid* so much I’m inclined to translate it as a separate unit” (*Stepping Stones* 440). For Heaney Book 6 and especially *nekyia* is about connection, about maintaining relationships not complicating them as in Longley and Walcott and other English poets. It was a vehicle for him to “go down to the underground to see [his father].”

Human Chain and Connection

¹¹ Walcott catches this epic trope when Achilles returns to Africa, God tells him “Look, I giving you permission / to come home” (XXV.i.31-32).

This need to connect is found throughout *Human Chain*, Heaney's latest collection which has received relatively little critical attention until very recently.¹² *Human Chain* includes many poems that illustrate Heaney's view of *katabasis* and *nekyia*. In "Route 110," Heaney uses Book 6 of the *Aeneid* as an autobiographical journey through life, death, and rebirth. The poem begins with the poet asking for a copy of *Aeneid* 6, and the female bookseller acts as the poet's Sibyl, giving the text to him for a price, which begins the journey of the next eleven sections. The poem continues to mirror Aeneas' *katabasis* and *nekyia*¹³ finally coming to a riverbank where there are "shades and shadows stirring on the brink / And stood there waiting, watching, / Needy and ever needier for translation" (xi.10-12). After contemplating these spirits waiting at the shore of Lethe for rebirth, Heaney concludes with "the age of births" when the poet first meets his granddaughter "talking baby talk" (xii.1,12). Heaney's descent results in a beautifully intimate moment creating a sense of optimism through *katabasis*, unusual in contemporary hell poetry.

The poems in *Human Chain* are also concerned with connecting with humanity physically. In the eponymous poem, "Human Chain," Heaney recalls a time when he saw

bags of grain passed hand to hand
 In close-up by the aid workers, and soldiers
 Firing over the mob, I was braced again

With a grip on two sack corners,
 Two packed wads of grain I'd worked to lugs
 To give me purchase (1-6)

¹² See Parker and Putnam.

¹³ See, for example, in Section II, the poet must pass through the local market on his journey, where "racks of suits and overcoats" are compared to "their owners' shades close-packed on Charon's barge;" a bus depot manager Minos in Section III; a funeral, an "age of ghosts," in Section VI, naturally; a recollection of funeral rites, reminiscent of Palinurus in Section VII, see also Putnam 93-94; a Dido watching her Aeneas drive off in Section VIII; a remembrance of those killed in the Troubles in IX, contrasted by Orpheus and "Virgil's happy shades" in X; and finally the "the ages of births" like "those whose long wait on the shaded bank has ended," in XII, an allusion to *Aeneid* 6.748 (*ubi mille rotamvolvare per annos* "those who roll the wheel of 1000 years"). For more on "Route 110" and Heaney, see Putnam.

“Seeing the bags of meal passed hand to hand,” during a violent event in his life, possibly during the Troubles, conjures images of another time in Heaney’s life when he participated in a human chain. Like so many similes in Homer and Virgil, this is a recollection of peace in a time of conflict. But the conclusion of that line is what concerns us in the current study: “I was braced again.” The multi-layered word “braced” must be examined in the context of the collection as a whole. Here Heaney means the bracing to receive a new bag of grain, and likely bracing himself for the shock of seeing more violence, but the diction cannot help but also summon an image of *embracing*, particularly as two arms move from one person to the next, never quite enfolding the others’ bodies but connected nonetheless through a common labor.

In “Canopy,” the most musical poem in *Human Chain*, and one in which Heaney altered significantly from its original,¹⁴ the voices of the past are whispering all around us, inviting us to listening to what they teach us. The poem was written for a special occasion when David Ward placed speakers and lights in the boughs of trees on Harvard University campus. The sounds the speakers made prompted Heaney to write the poem. He observed passers-by

cocking their ears,

Gathering, quietening,

Stepping on the grass,

Stopping and holding hands.

¹⁴ For the original version, see Ward 13. Of particular interest is the modification of the final quartets of the poem. The twig in *Human Chain* now “refused to let go.” This conspicuous alteration coupled with the addition of “boughs” in the last line suggests a connection with the golden bough and the permission to descend to the underworld. Its refusal, however, would imply that the request would be denied—not fated by the gods. In this way, Heaney makes his poem about Dante, yes, but also about Sybil and *Aeneid* 6. “Mistletoe” also reminds the reader of the simile in *Aeneid* 6 where Aeneas sees the golden bough, “*quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos [...] talis erat species auri frondentis opaca ilice.*” (As in winter’s cold, amid the woods, the mistletoe, sown of an alien tree, is wont to bloom with strange leafage [...] such was the vision of the leafy gold) (*Aeneid* 6.205-209).

Earth was replaying its tapes

Words being given new airs:

Dante's whispering wood –

The wood of the suicides –

Had been magicked to lover's lane. (20-28)

Heaney appropriates Dante's *nekylia* here, turning the misery of the suicides into the rapture of "lover's lane." Other contemporary poets would likely use the cries of the suicides to find meaning in the tragic taking of one's own life. Instead, Heaney alters the image to focus on connection and understanding and even romance. The suicides' screams become the voices of the past, benevolent and loving. He alters an autobiographical moment, similar to "Route 110," showing again his feeling that communion with the dead is possible and worthwhile.

Heaney and Translation

Heaney's comedic *katabasis* and *nekylia* allow for a similarly magnanimous view of literary translation. Seamus Heaney has translated Greek and Latin literature throughout his career but perhaps his single most well-known translation is of *Beowulf*. When Heaney was teaching at Harvard University he was approached by Norton to make a translation of the Old English epic. Heaney enjoyed his time in America but was somewhat lost listening to American English daily. "Saying yes to the *Beowulf* commission would be (I argued with myself) a kind of aural antidote, a way of ensuring that my linguistic anchor would stay lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea-floor. So I undertook it" (*Beowulf* xxii). Heaney proceeded to translate the poem but found instances where a term or phrase from Irish dialect fit better than what he considered a literal translation. Making no apology for the perceived discrepancies, Heaney writes, "I have

been reluctant to force an artificial shape or an unusual word choice just for the sake of correctness” (xxix). A now famous example comes from the opening line of the poem, “So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by” in which Heaney wrestles with the first word *hwaet* in the original language. “Conventional renderings of *hwaet*,” Heaney writes, “tend towards the archaic literary, with ‘lo’ and ‘hark’ [...] and—more colloquially—‘listen’ being some of the solutions offered previously. But in Hiberno-English Scullionspeak, the particle ‘so’ came naturally to the rescue” (xxvii). Heaney draws on his Irish background to solve a translation difficulty just as he draws on Irish idiom in his original poetry.

Heaney’s reliance on Irish dialect in his poetry provides a foundation for his translation methodology.

I have not a theory of it [translation] but a metaphor for it. It’s based upon the Viking relationship with the island of Ireland and the island of Britain. There was a historical period known as the Raids and then there was a period known as the Settlements. Now, a very good motive for translation is the Raid. You go in—it is the Lowell method—and you raid Italian, you raid German, you raid Greek, and you end up with booty that you call *Imitations*.

Then there is the Settlement approach: you enter an *oeuvre*, colonize it, take it over—but you stay with it, and you change it and it changes you a little bit. Robert Fitzgerald stayed with Homer, Lattimore stayed with him, Bob Hass has stayed with Czesław Miłosz. I stayed with *Beowulf*. But I also raided Dante in the late 70s. (*Sounding Lines* 1)

The two methods of translation—raiding, and settling—are everywhere in Heaney’s work. The settlement is essentially traditional translation: sticking close to the original text, translating line

by line with little embellishment. The raid creates a new and original poem in the target language that is perhaps only loosely tied to the source text. Heaney raids the Greeks and Romans in poems from “Personal Helicon” in his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, on through to “Album,” in his latest collection, *Human Chain*. The raids can be anything from a vague allusion to Aeneas embracing Anchises at the end of “Album” to a close imitation of Horace in “Anything Can Happen.” His settlements occur less frequently but some samples are the famous, “Ugolino,” a translation of a moment in Dante’s *Inferno*, “The Golden Bough,” a version of *Aeneid* 6, “The Crossing,” also from *Inferno*, and a translation of one of Virgil’s eclogues, “Virgil: Eclogue IX.” His full translations of *Beowulf*, *Burial at Thebes*, and *The Cure at Troy* also fall in this category of settlement. Some of Heaney’s settlements are direct translations like “The Golden Bough,” and others contain more of Heaney’s voice interjected as asides, like “The Riverbank Field” in *Human Chain*.

“The Riverbank Field,” more than any other poem in *Human Chain*, helps readers understand Heaney’s view of poetry, the role of the translator, and his relationship to the classics. It was necessary to first establish Heaney’s positive descent and communion with the dead before coming to this crucial poem. “Riverbank Field” is a nexus where descent, communion with the dead, and metatranslation converge to illustrate Heaney’s method of translation. Heaney chooses to translate a moment of *katabasis* and *nekylia* where Aeneas speaks to his father, Anchises. The act of translating becomes, for Heaney, an act of reconciliation with the dead. I quote the poem here in full:

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

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 owed 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.’

after Aeneid VI, 704-15, 748-51

As Heaney did in his translations of Sophocles and *Beowulf*, he incorporates Irish particularity into the original. These are Virgil’s words through Heaney now, and through Heaney’s experience. He will “confound the Lethe in Moyola,” the river in the area where Heaney grew up.¹⁵ He then proceeds to describe more of the Irish landscape in “Upper Broagh,” including its own riverbank, much the same as the riverbank at which the spirits of the dead swarm in anticipation of rebirth. Here the poet interjects the Latin *domos placidas* “those peaceful homes,” and he envisions the actual houses in the Moyola neighborhood.

While Heaney’s use of Irish landscape is compelling, the poem is more valuable because of how it functions as a translation. In Heaney’s terminology, Walcott only raids the classics, he imitates, instead of adhering closely to the original text. Longley raids and settles the classics, like Heaney, but in “The Riverbank Field” Heaney succeeds in both raiding *and* settling. Here Heaney follows the source text closely but also uses the classical moment to comment on something broader and more profound: the nature of translation. Heaney conspicuously reminds the reader that this is not just a translation, and not just a Latin translation, but specifically a translation “after [Virgil’s] *Aeneid* VI, 704-15, 748-51.” These passages from the *Aeneid* are where Aeneas has finally found his father, Anchises, in the underworld. “The Riverbank Field”

¹⁵ For a sampling of discussions on Heaney’s use of local Irish landscape in his other works, see Parker 85, 186, *Preoccupations* 6, *Finders Keepers* 131-132, 136-137, *Among School Children* 9, Russell 65.

takes up the tale immediately after Aeneas fails three times to embrace the shade of his father. Aeneas sees a group of spirits crowding around a river and asks Anchises why they gather there. Anchises answers they are souls “to whom second bodies are owed by fate.” These spirits await a new life. Anchises, in the portion that Heaney chooses not to include, tells of the birth, life, death, and afterlife of spirits (*Aeneid* 6.716-747). Most of the spirits, he says, picking up where Heaney resumes, will be summoned after a millennium, to the river Lethe, to forget their afterlife experience and be reborn a mortal.

“The Riverbank Field” and Heaney as Guide

As noted above, Heaney seeks to orient his readers—to give them cultural co-ordinates. From the epigraph, Heaney explains that the classics provide this orientation in a time when the “ordering Christian myth of ‘down there, up there, us in between’” has been lost (*Stepping Stones* 295). According to Heaney, contemporary readers are more comfortable with classical mythology, or at least they are more generally conversant, than with Christian myth. Heaney sees the classics as a means whereby he can connect with his readers in an age where Christian myth is less broadly known than in the past. Heaney believes that myth can help him connect with his reader, and the classics provide that added layer of common experience. In “The Riverbank Field,” Heaney presents the reader with a literal connection with the past, through “translation and commentary, glossing both the original text and the process of translation” (Williams 156). Heaney will signal this in his poem by starting precisely after Aeneas unsuccessfully attempts to physically embrace his father (*Aeneid* 6.695-702). It is as though Heaney does not want Aeneas’ inability to connect with his father to cloud the message of the remainder of his translation—that translation is about connecting with the past—so Heaney opts to begin after that moment of missed connection in Virgil.

Heaney also shows an awareness of the translations that have gone before him. They are voices and shades he must also acknowledge on his literary *katabasis*—prior translators are part of the discussion of the translation of their chosen texts. “Those peaceful homes” a translation of *domos placidas*, is a subtle nod to the otherness of the literal translation here. It is quite literally “peaceful homes” and this is how most translations render the passage. The notable exception is Robert Fitzgerald who translates this portion as “the stream of Lethe / Running past those peaceful glades.” Heaney admired Fitzgerald (Taplin 167). He called Fitzgerald the “Harvard Nestor, / Sponsor and host, translator of all Homer” (*Electric Light* 47). He and Fitzgerald were colleagues at Harvard when Fitzgerald was translating the *Aeneid*. The two scholars even debated how to translate the first line of the epic (*Sounding Lines* 16). Heaney would have been familiar with Fitzgerald’s translation especially at moments where Fitzgerald improvised in Book 6, Heaney’s favorite book of the poem. Indeed, Heaney is accustomed to examining not only the Loeb edition of the original, as is Longley (“Lapsed Classicist” 100), but also the works of previous translators, when embarking on a translation of his own (“Title Deeds” 134-135). He recognizes that the image of cottages on a riverbank is incongruous in Virgil. This is the underworld where buildings are not needed and indeed, few, if any, would exist. Perhaps with Fitzgerald in mind, Heaney offers the Latin to show he is aware of the paradoxical image of cottages on the Lethe but signals to the reader that he will still use the literal translation, imagining the actual “peaceful homes” in Upper Broagh, not Fitzgerald’s glades in the underworld.

Another cunning addition comes with his “spirit-troops,” which is not a literal translation of *hunc circum innumerae gentes populique volabant* at all (*Aeneid* 6.706). Fairclough renders

this as “About it hovered peoples and tribes unnumbered.”¹⁶ Whence then the spirit-troops? It is possible that here Heaney is again injecting in the text an Irish accent, perhaps of the Troubles.

There may be another possibility from Dryden:

About the boughs an airy nation flew,
 Thick as the humming bees, that hunt the golden dew;
 In summer’s heat on tops of lilies feed,
 And creep within their bells, to suck the balmy seed:
 The winged army roams the fields around;
 The rivers and the rocks remurmur to the sound. (958-963)

Dryden has ingeniously introduced something new into Virgil’s bee simile: the notion that the spirits roaming around Lethe are like a “winged army.” *Winged* like bees, but also because they are spirits, not confined to the ground; an *army* due to their great numbers. Heaney’s “spirit-troops” may be a reminder of Dryden here.

Another possible connection with prior translations comes in Heaney’s “grass so fully fledged / And unimprinted.” The “unimprinted” grass, although an odd word choice, reminds us that these are disembodied ghosts and as such would not have left a mark in the full grass. The word choice, “unimprinted” is an invention reminiscent of Dante¹⁷ (as are Heaney’s unrhymed tercets, visually representative of *terza rima*) even after Heaney claims “*stet* / To all the rest.” Virgil does not mention grass nor does he mention willow trees. The suffix “un” and the conspicuously awkward “can’t not” might occur here to connect the translation further to Dryden in his “unrememb’ring” and Fitzgerald’s subsequent retranslation, “unmemoried” (1019 and

¹⁶ From his opening quotation in “The Riverbank Field,” “In a retired vale... a sequestered grove,” it appears that Heaney is drawing on Fairclough’s Loeb translation.

¹⁷ When the pilgrim and Virgil first enter the Forest of the Suicides, it is described as *un bosco/ che da neunsentiero era segnato* (a forest / which no path had marked).

1007, respectively). However, these words are found in the Dryden's and Fitzgerald's translations of the second passage Heaney translates, *Aeneid* 6.748-51, which will be discussed momentarily.

These connections to previous translations aside, Heaney also tries to connect with his reader in a literary way. The insertion of Latin *domos placidas* could confuse or disorient those readers who, unlike Heaney, were born after “the last generation that learned Latin.” The poet, ever conscientious, provides a gloss for the Latin for his Latinless readers: “Those peaceful homes.” Heaney offers cribs in many of his poems when he quotes a language other than English. In his translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney even places section headings intermittently within the text and marginal glosses to orient the reader. In his original poetry, Heaney offers notes in the back of *Station Island* helping his reader understand the allusions he gives in some of the poems in the collection.

Heaney's second insertion of the Latin into his poem will further demonstrate Heaney's translation as *katabasis* and *nekyia*. Heaney weaves the Latin into his poem in such a way that he does not need (or want) to redistribute the line break for *Aeneid* 6.713-714: “*animae, quibus altera fato / corpora debentur.*” Fairclough has these lines read, “Spirits they are, to whom second bodies are owed by Fate.” Heaney opts to leave out Fairclough's “they are” which would not alter Heaney's meter in any way if he left them in. Choosing instead to replace them with the poet's voice saying, “that is,” the poet is conversationally glossing yet again for the reader, in this case, the reader who does not know what to do with the Latin. Moreover, Heaney again cuts off Anchises' role here in Virgil. The full line 713 reads *tum pater Anchises: “animae, quibus altera fato”* “Then said father Anchises, etc.” The word directly preceding Heaney's *animae* is Anchises but Heaney leaves him out entirely. It is not Anchises who answers the question, but

the poet. In effect, the new guide to the underworld, at least in Heaney's underworld, is not Anchises, but Heaney.

This statement is entirely appropriate in the context of translation. After Heaney's instruction, the poet returns to his purpose:

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.'

Ostensibly the last tercets appear to be a fairly faithful translation, but there are subtle yet significant differences, which illustrate Heaney's role as a poet/translator and the continuity and connection which cultural geography offers through literary tradition. After his initial complaint that he has been asked "to often" to translate the *Aeneid*,¹⁸ Heaney begins by translating *has omnis* as "All these presences." The extra word, presences, is vague and yet intentional. It is not spirits or ghosts, but presences. The ambiguity here can mean the spirits, yes, but also the literary ghosts of the past (Williams 157).

¹⁸ Heaney may also be exhibiting the chagrin he feels over publically declaring his desire to translate *Aeneid* 6, and the repeated requests from admirers to do follow through (*Stepping Stones* 440).

Heaney continues with a literal translation of *ubi mille rotam volvere per annos* but then deviates again by substituting “Are summoned here to drink the river water” for *Lethaeum ad fluvium deus evocat agmine mango* “the god summons in vast throng to Lethe’s river.” Two omissions are obvious, and not just because of Heaney’s partial pentameters. First, Heaney leaves out the Lethe. This is particularly puzzling when he purposefully mentions it in the beginning of the poem in which he will “confound the Lethe in Moyola.” To add the word to the tercet would have helped to maintain the meter of the poem. The second omission is perhaps more useful, and also would have ensured metrical continuity were it included—since it is not, these two omissions seem to even be signaled by the gap in meter. Heaney omits any mention of *deus* as an active participant, choosing instead the ambiguously passive “are summoned.”

Leaving out the gods who summon the spirits, the question must be asked, “Who then summons these spirits after a thousand years?” The answer is the translator, the poet, Heaney. It is he who has summoned these presences. Heaney steps in for Anchises and the gods to help maintain the human chain of literary experience, particularly in a time where he acknowledges himself “to belong to the last generation that learned Latin” (*Stepping Stones* 295). These presences, these literary ghosts, will not have “their memories effaced,” as Fairclough translates *immemores* or Dryden’s “unrememb’ring” and Fitzgerald’s “unmemoried.” Instead, because of Heaney, “memories of this underworld are shed,” but not lost entirely. “Shed” but still present, just as a garment that is shed still exists. “Shed” also connects itself to the last word of the next line, “blood,” again suggesting a residue of a previous life that remains in the underworld, but the new “flesh and blood” provided by the translator will be a rebirth. In this manner, Heaney is *our* guide to the distant underworld of Virgil, just as Virgil was Dante’s guide, and Anchises was Aeneas’. Heaney acknowledges, perhaps with a twinge of regret, that he is fortunate to be of the

last generation to know Latin well—he must pass his understanding of the original texts on to the next generation who do not have the same fortune.

Heaney uses *katabasis* and *nekyia* in very distinct ways from other similar poets. Heaney's poems which contain descent and communion with the dead have beneficence not present in other contemporary poets. Longley openly questions the afterlife and the ability to connect with previous generations. His "Antecleia" directly contradicts Heaney's communion with the dead. Longley is uncertain about communing with the dead and in the case of his dead father, Richard, it appears that Longley equally questions whether the dead would care about the living as his father sets aside Longley's poetic work. Walcott focuses on the complications of language and culture, in the end making understanding unknowable. In "Sea Grapes," a poem Walcott wrote early in poetic career, he concludes, "The classics console but not enough" (*Collected Poems* line 19). We have seen that later in his career, particularly in *Omeros*, that the consolation of the classics is still not quite enough, or at least is still complicated. Ultimately the classics have their uses but they cannot cure the cultural and political baggage of the past.

For Heaney, however, the translator's task is attainable. It is not easy. It requires a Sybil and a golden bough in order to attempt such a task, but it is possible. A translator *can* go down, commune with the dead, and return with greater understanding for the contemporary reader. The translator can be a guide to the reader, like Anchises and Virgil, bridging understanding across time, culture, and language. For Heaney to use Book 6 to explore translation is important—the translator must not only connect with the past but also with the contemporary reader, essentially serving as a bridge between cultures, times, and languages, just as the 1st century Latin Virgil served as a guide to the 14th century Italian Dante.

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