

Seamus Heaney's Station Island: The Polyphonic Poetics of Exile

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the poem "Station Island" (Station Island, 1984) by Seamus Heaney as a "polyphonic poetics of exile". Heaney's oeuvre is impregnated with a poetic style that combines the geographical act of frontier crossing to the linguistic work with cultural translation. This technique is most clearly observed in "Station Island" and characterizes his work as a poetic heteroglossia.*

Keywords: *Seamus Heaney, Station Island; poetic heteroglossia.*

The *oeuvre* of the Northern Irish poet and Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney (1939 – 2013), is a source of inspiration for poets. The brilliance with which he mastered the craft, combined with the perfect articulation of sounds and concepts, appealed to a universal audience. As a modern Orpheus, the poet enchanted both the world and the "underworld". His use of supernatural images and transcendent perceptions were clear metaphors for very earthly personal identity and history. As someone who crossed literal and imaginary frontiers, migrating from the North to the South of Ireland, and often, to the United Kingdom and the United States, his poetry is impregnated with a "note of exile" ("Fosterage" *Selected* 2001, 89). Not simply as the physical act of leaving his country, but as a real and distressing presence, the theme of exile in Heaney's poetry is easily observed in many poems. However, the clearest example of this frontier crossing is his Dantesque¹ poem "Station Island" (*Station Island*, 1984).

The poem "Station Island" figures as a lyric penitence in which the poet tries to purge his personal guilt over leaving Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles (1972). In order to do that, his subjective voice assumes different personae with whom he establishes a mythic dialogue, each symbolic of his personal anguish: "[t]he main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self" (Heaney qtd. Corcoran 160). To overcome this state, Heaney experiences a three-day pilgrimage in *Lough Derg*, or the Sanctuary of St Patrick, in County Donegal. Through routines of prayers, and outdoor stations one must traverse barefoot, Heaney reenacts the fragmentations and divisions of his own community, whilst he himself recalls scattered

memories of his artistic and biographical past. The poem also holds the promise of an artistic change that will emerge after a transcendental and spiritual forgiveness. In other words, the poem holds a political premise.

The critic Michael Kenneally notes that Heaney, after leaving Northern Ireland, started to imprint a heightened sense of political responsibility onto his poetry. However, Kenneally clarifies that the poet's commitment does not mean a literal address of the situation, but rather an interpretation of it or, to use Heaney's own words, "telling [the] truth but telling it slant" (454). In order to justify his position, Kenneally also quotes a more incisive comment by Heaney: "A poem is a work of art... it is not a work of politics". (Heaney qtd. Kenneally 245). Even believing that political engagement is related to poetic freedom, Heaney recognizes that he is undeniably tormented by guilt.

Due to this problematic relationship between creative exile and political responsibility, the pilgrimage in "Station Island" has artistic and political resonance. While the former is observed in the virtuosic display of rhythms, rimes and metric experiments, the latter is reflected by the phantasmagoric characters he encounters on his way. Nevertheless, both techniques are deeply intertwined and connected hence the verse is also littered with political discourses. Specifically in "Station Island", this double-bind generates a "polyphonic awareness" through the aesthetic representation of transcendent meetings.

I develop the term "polyphonic awareness" based on two complementary ideas: Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and Edward Said's reflections on exile. The Russian formalist argues that texts present a heterogenic combination of discourses, which he calls heteroglossia.² However, this plurality of voices is not simply reminiscences of free-floating signifiers without meaning, but a repository of historical and cultural knowledge (Bakhtin 114-5). In my interpretation of the poem, the heteroglossic voices of "Station Island" are poetic traditions and political discourses.

The condition that enables this form of work is the poet's departure from Northern Ireland, or his symbolic exile, which brings us to the work of Edward Said. For Said³,

most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal. (148)

After leaving his "home", Seamus Heaney becomes conscious of the existence of contradictory perceptions of the Irish and Northern Irish context. Thus, the already schizophrenic awareness of the situation in Northern Ireland, results in an intricate poetic heteroglossia. The multiplicity of voices he portrays, through real conversations with specters from his memories, is part of an artistic project to reconcile divergent realities. In addition to that, the pilgrimage is a rite of passage to "a poetry of clarity and plain statement, a poetry of window glass rather than of 'stained glass'" (Homem 29). Thus, the poem promotes a change prompted by self and historical knowledge, exile and artistic maturity.

In the present article I will analyze the twelve stations of the poem, explaining how Heaney purges his guilt of leaving Northern Ireland by assuming different personalities – the ghosts he meets on his pilgrimage. Though there is an obvious relationship between Dante Alighieri's and Heaney's poetic enterprise, my aim here is not to show how Heaney translates or re-interprets Dante⁴. I am interested in showing how this plurality of voices composes a "polyphonic poetics of exile", in which a poetic heteroglossia enables the poet to reach a different form of self-understanding and political awareness. The importance of pilgrimage is such that the clarity it engenders is a characteristic which predominates in his poetry until his last collection, *Human Chain* (2010). I have divided this essay in three sections. In the first, I examine the first four poems of the pilgrimage – I, II, III, IV – in which Heaney addresses the personas that have contributed to his artistic constitution. This is the reason why I call it 'heteroglossia'. In the second, the next five poems are explored – V, VI, VII, VIII, IX – in which the poet expresses of the guilt he feels over distancing himself from Northern Ireland in the middle of a civil war. This means that a sense of guilt takes over the second part of the pilgrimage. And finally, in the third, the last three sections are analyzed – X, XI, XII – as a symbolic wish for artistic liberty and how it can be provided by the critical vision of James Joyce. Ultimately, the whole poem, although very much localized and involved with Irish themes and ideas, represents a universal reflection on the implications of writing poetry in contemporary society, which necessarily involves a fragmentation of the self in different personalities and discourses.

1. The Polyphony of Self: Heteroglossia

The first four poems of "Station Island" represent the outset of the poet's pilgrimage to Lough Derg. According to the ancient custom, the pilgrim has to go through nine stations of prayers that are performed with the whole body. This means that, in addition to reciting a series of prayers around six beds dedicated to Irish saints, he or she has to walk around those beds and not fall asleep or eat for at least 24 hours on the first day of the retreat. Due to the absence of food and sleep, the beginning of the "Station" appears to be the most demanding. However, in the poem, which is a symbolic re-enactment of the poet's personal experience during the three days, this is the moment when he encounters the first persons who contributed to his development as a poet. In addition to that, those he meets have also gone through the same pilgrimage. Owing to the fact that the pilgrimage takes place in the North of Ireland, although in Donegal, the main characteristic of this beginning is the recollection of the musicality of the verse, as he argues in "Crediting Poetry": When I was the eldest child... in rural Co. Derry ... we took in everything that was going on... .. as if we were in a doze of hibernation". (*Opened Ground: Poems*: 447, 448.). The transformation of the local accent into a literary material is seen in the ambiguity of the first encounter.

Although the ghost is Simon Sweeney, a blacksmith and friend of his parents, his symbolic surname evokes the memory of an Irish folk legend: Buile Shuibhne or King

Sweeney. The sixteenth-century tale had been translated by Heaney under the name *Sweeney Astray* (1983). The similarity between these two characters is seen in their refusal of the Christian tradition: while Simon Sweeney was “an old Sabbath-breaker” (“Station Island”: 241) King Sweeney was condemned to fly like a madman through Ireland, after throwing a psalter in the river and killing a clergyman. The gift Sweeney receives, though, is the ability to make poignant poetry. With this connection, Heaney is questioning the validity of the ritual. Since everything is so pregnant with sacred meanings, is it worth going through these days of sacrifices for faith and expiation of sins? The poem represents the poet’s uncertainty regarding his own choice of going through the pilgrimage.

The ambiguity of the theme and reluctance in the poet’s faith turns poem I (15 stanzas with five verses each) into a personal and mythical evocation of roots, which also follows the mode of writing in *Sweeney Astray*. The narrative tone, mixed with short verses of six and seven poetic lines, reproduce the musicality of the Irish tale. In the first three stanzas, the poet sets the scene of the poem: he describes the bell-notes, the silence, and the appearance of Simon Sweeney, who is accused of being a Sabbath Breaker. Nevertheless, Sweeney does not seem intimidated and continues by asserting he was a mystery to the poet as a boy, and describes how his own strangeness fascinated Heaney in the fourth to the tenth stanzas. When the poet reassumes the verse, he is caught up in the processions, despite being advised not to follow them. While confronting the poet’s identity with the Irish ballad tradition, the first station introduces the self-reflexive tone to the whole poem.

Poem II changes the meter completely. Heaney turns to *terza rima*, the meter used by Dante Alighieri in *The Divine Comedy*. Adopting a more solemn tone, with iambic pentameters, this poem has twenty two stanzas which follow the discussion with William Carleton, the author of the narrative *Lough Derg Pilgrim* – which describes someone who goes through the pilgrimage. The theme of the conversation is equally disturbing to the placidity of the verse: the poet’s childhood in Northern Ireland. Although being faithful to Dante’s structure, the *terza rima* is broken in three moments of the poem: in the fourth, seventeenth and twenty second stanzas. These are precisely the moments in which he mentions the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In an indirect way, Heaney hints that classical poetry cannot be fully complete in a place where there is still social turmoil.

The debate between Carleton and the poet involves the cultural elements that inspired Heaney. In the first three tercets, dedicated to the dramatic appearance of Carleton, the poet describes his presence as challenging. Nevertheless, on the fourth stanza, the caesura of the metre explains that this is due to the violence of Ireland in the nineteenth century. When Heaney sees him, he starts going on about the political disputes between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. However, Carleton’s biography indicates his own personal indecision, for he converted to Anglicanism after being raised as a Catholic. When Carleton provokes Heaney, saying that he is defensive, the poet

replies by stating his background kept him somewhat distant from disputes. The poet contradicts himself by simultaneously affirming the naiveté of his youth (marching bands, dances and fair-days) with the underlying menace of constant Orange drums and gunfire.

This is stanza seventeen, the moment when the *terza rima* is broken again and Carleton interrupts his talk. At this point, Heaney seems to be distracted by his own memories of childhood. Carleton claims these memories are “maggot[s] sown in wounds”, and he even goes so far as to state they both are “earthworms of the earth, and all that/ has gone through us is what will be our trace” (247). This grotesque metaphor concludes the section, implying that the act of poetic creation is a filtering of events, perceptions and emotions, be they enjoyable or painful. Moreover, the unification of this section in a Dantesque form supports the idea that aesthetic is very important for the organisation or filtering of this personal experience.

The third section injects a morbid and surrealist tone to the piece, since the prayers at the church remind the poet of a funeral mass of a girl who died prematurely. In order to express the confusion when confronted with death, Heaney uses metaphors of the ocean to describe the church: the wave sustaining the temple’s roof with mussels and cockles adorning the picture. It is clear that mussels and cockles refer to Molly Malone, one of the most famous popular songs of Ireland. In the poem, Heaney symbolically portrays his own vision of Molly Malone, a poor girl who dies while working in the docks of Dublin. For him, the girl’s body signifies something sacred: his discovery of death in his childhood. These nine quartets of the poem express the poet’s enchantment with the child, but it is only on the fourth stanza that he compares himself to her:

pearls condensed from a child invalid’s breath
into a shimmering ark, my house of gold
that housed the snowdrop weather of her death
long ago. (248)

This personal involvement between the poet and girl through the image of the pearl and gold symbolises the precious nature of childhood. But, differently from the girl, the poet is going to become an adult and lose his innocence, as the word *for-age* suggest. The poet’s discovery induces him to a personal involvement with himself, while in the seventh stanza he is requested to walk “round and round” in an empty space. Even with this personal self-devotion, the poet discovers how transitory life is. In the last stanza he treats the carcass and the hairs of his dog, who got lost weeks before, as a synecdoche of this discovery. The section is a transitory piece that connects the poet’s childhood to his early adolescence. Here, Heaney abandons the enchantment with the natural world of his rural Derry and starts to become acquainted with important dilemmas of life.

The fourth section concludes Heaney’s *heteroglossia* of the self with the presence of a priest who is sent away to foreign missions. The twenty tercets – which do not follow *terza rima* – reflect the afflictions of the priest in exile, preaching to native populations. However, at the same time the poem shows how poet and priest are different, Heaney

connects to the missionary in the middle of the poem: “I’m older than you when you went away” (250). They are also similar because the poet abandons his native traditions to pursue his vocation. Due to this fact, the whole poem IV works within a mirroring structure, while the priest’s voice is heard from the sixth to the tenth stanzas, Heaney’s is heard from the tenth to the fourteenth. If the priest talks about how painful reality in the missions is, Heaney goes on about his idealistic life in Ireland. The poet claims his faith gave hope to many people. However, this recollection angers his speaker, who makes him say: “What are you doing here but the same thing? What possessed you” (250). It is interesting to note the double meaning of the word “possession”, since Heaney is literally “possessed” with the presence of literary and ordinary people.

In stanza eighteen the priest has a revelation, which confirms the poet is taking the pilgrimage because he himself wants to take leave of his ordinary life and pursue something new. This is the moment when Heaney discovers he is taking a “last look” and, confirming the priest’s assertion, he follows him. With this section, the poet finally understands the importance of distance for his poetry. But, he needs to take a last look in order to be able to go through with his objective of writing and being truthful to what he believes. His departure, then, is permeated by a heteroglossia of self in which he transmutes and is reflected in the priest.

In general, this first movement of the poem enables the poet to achieve a consciousness that he needs in order to abandon a more naturalistic and family-oriented poetry in order to achieve artistic freedom. However, he is aware that this distance is not blissful, but bears traces of guilt, which are going to be further explored in the continuation of the poem.

2 .The Guilt of exile

The poet’s guilt over leaving his land during the time of the civil war is expressed in poems V, VI, VII, VIII and XIX. While poems V and VI talk about a subjective guilt – as a boy misbehaving in high school and viewing sexual intercourse as shameful –VII, VIII and XIX tackle the civil war in Northern Ireland in a clear way. These two versions of the poet’s self-penitence, personal and collective, are associated with the search for a guilt-free aesthetic. Therefore, after penitence, this new act of writing creates a sense of identity liberated from the fragmented unity of his native homeland.

In poem V, Heaney meets two masters of his secondary school and Patrick Kavanagh. The presence of ordinary persons and the poet indicates that Heaney is haunted both by his old teachers and the poets who influenced his writing. Giving depth to the poem, its formal structure is composed of five stanzas of nineteen, eleven, fifteen, seventeen and two lines, with variable meter. Due to the length of the verse, there is a similarity between lyric poetry and novelistic prose. It also bears resemblance with the epics, whose formulaic tone is abundant in the composition as a whole. However, in section V, the presence of prose serves the function of representing the poet’s first

experimentations with poetry. He transposed the simplicity of the childish jokes and the Latin classes to the musicality of his poetry.

The first master he encounters is called Murphy. After describing his bare foot as a “dried broad bean”, whose sonority takes him back to the botanic classes, the poet shakes hand with the specter. Apropos the comparison between foot and bean, what is relevant is the fact that the teacher is as rooted in this environment as he is in the poet’s personal imagination. The master speaks lightly of the poet saying he is a “good man yourself”. The use of “yourself” is a typical reflexive pronoun used by Irish people. It also has roots in Irish language, in which it is necessary to use the pronoun. His last words before disappearing are part of the naturalistic connection between teacher and land: “and the school garden’s loose black mould is grass” (253). The second master reminds him of the Latin declinations “Mensa, mensa, mensam”. He also reminds the poet that “the great moving power and spring of the verse” (253) is love and that it is always possible to learn something by giving lifts. Both masters are humble figures who teach the poet simple concepts with which he grows. This period represents a sort of “greenhouse” of poetic germination, in which languages mixed together like mulch, fertilizing his later output on poetic craft.

Contrasting with the peaceful atmosphere, the last ghost of the section, Patrick Kavanagh’s, ironizes Heaney’s pilgrimage. It is Patrick Kavanagh who asserts: “Where else would you go? Iceland, maybe? Maybe the Dordogne... In my own day/ the odd one came here on the hunt for women” (253). With this assertion, Heaney turns from the simple guilt of mocking his masters to the complex torment of leaving one’s land and being disturbed by a sinful view of sexual intercourse. This is the reason why in the sixth poem, the poet recollects both his exile and his first sexual encounter. While the former is represented through a verse from Ode 3.21 by Horace the latter is seen through the lens of the second cantica of *Inferno*, in which Dante meets Beatrice, the muse who guides him to paradise. Nevertheless, the experience he recollects is not simply sensual, but self-referential and political. The poem’s symbolic meaning of lovemaking is related to a poetic exploration of Ireland and its landscape. Nonetheless, because the poet is far from his land, he feels as a traitor for representing its troubles and anxieties.

The images Heaney uses to describe the sexual encounter are earthly tactile and based on a knowledge of agriculture. Like a modern John Donne, Heaney experiences Ireland in “the wheatlands of her back... a window facing the deep south of luck... [and] the land of kindness” (254). Nevertheless, there is a sense of guilt because he has left his country. In this sense, the sexual act, instead of uniting the poet and the land, is going to bring memories of violence and death. This is the connection between poem six and seven: if on the one hand the former describes love-making, the latter describes the death of a shopkeeper who was assassinated in his house by mysterious gunmen. The contrast between the two sections can only be understood in the light of a poetical guilt that does not let the poet forget that his poetry is shaped by a history of violent disputes.

This sense of repentance gets more punitive in poem VII, when the reader is presented, once more, with the poetic *terza rima*. The poet’s voice is practically unheard

and what predominates is the narrative by William Strathearn, one of Heaney's colleagues. In twenty eight tercets, Strathearn "speaks of his unmotivated, terrorist murder at the hands of two off-duty Protestant policemen" (Cavanagh 130). This number is relevant for it is the number of the stations of the cross multiplied by two. Thus, the grave tone of the poem is indicative of an emblematic attempt to consecrate an event that was widely discussed and portrayed in media. Nevertheless, such as the people who condemned Jesus Christ, the act of writing about the shopkeeper is not enough for Heaney, for he himself feels that he is partially guilty of his murder. Thus, at the end of the poem, the poet asks for his forgiveness:

Forgive the way I have lived indifferent –
forgive my timid circumspect involvement

I surprised myself by saying, 'Forgive
My eye', he said, 'all that's above my head'. (258)

The poet feels he lived a comfortable and indifferent life, while sectarian killings were enacted. In poem eight, Heaney's sense of guilt is multiplied for he meets the archaeologist Tom Delaney and his second cousin, Colum, who was murdered in a road block. The poem oscillates in tone between that of a friendly but serious chat and the accusations of the cousin for not being in Bellaghy when he was buried. With seven long stanzas of more than twelve lines, Heaney begins the poem by describing his last visit to the hospital. He dies prematurely at the age of 32 and his spirit comes back to ask the poet "Oh lucky poet, tell me why/ What seemed deserved and promised passed by?" (260). Heaney, at a loss for words, replies that he does not know, since the "banter" – the joking habit of the Irish – fails him. It seems as if in face of death his gifts do not let him proceed with his creative mode. As soon as the poet acknowledges his powerlessness, the ghost of Colum appears. His first sentence, "Your gift will be a candle in our house" (260), indicates that Heaney's poetry brings comfort, since candles are used for light and prayers. Nevertheless, in the continuation of the poem, the cousin states that even the press showed more sympathy for his death. Heaney replies by saying he regretted being absent and that the poem he wrote to him, "The Stand at Lough Beg", was a symbolic healing of his pain:

'I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg
and the strand empty at daybreak.
I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake'.

'You saw that, and you wrote that – not the fact.
You confused evasion and artistic tact.
The protestant who shot me through the head
I accuse directly, but indirectly, you (261)

The metaphorical guilt of the poet added to the cousin's resentment turn the poem into a debate about the nature of art. At the moment Colum accuses Heaney's poetry of avoiding the truth, the poet displays his personal dilemma of not addressing the Northern Irish situation in a clearer way. Conversely, this sentence subtly points to the criticism his work received throughout his career. Heaney, in "Station Island" recovers the political impetus of his lyric and discusses issues such as commitment and artistic freedom. However, it is clear that until poem IX, he could not reach a liberated form of art.

This dilemma is seen in poem IX, which starts with a reflection about the state of political prisoners in the voice of the hunger striker Francis Hughes. Hughes was a member of the IRA and, due to the death of a British policeman, was sentenced to 83 years in prison. Modulating the attitude of self-pity into self-punishment, the author starts the poem as Hughes. Further on, he tries to get rid of his historical burden, by stating "I hate how quick I was to know my place,/ I hate where I was born, hate everything/ That made me biddable and unforthcoming," (263). Heaney sees himself as a traitor and longs for liberation. At the end, wishing to be part of a tribe who adores the deer, the poet expresses his longing for a liberated form of art, which starts to take shape in the following poems.

3. Forgiveness: "Strike your own note"

In the last part of his poem, Seamus Heaney establishes the formal transformation of his lyric through a religious and symbolic absolution. Poems, X, XI and XII change the rhythm of the composition as a whole because of two peculiarities: 1) they represent the end of the station; 2) they are written from the point of view of the poet – with the exception of the last poem in which James Joyce's presence, like that of a mystic god, gives advice to the poet. This personal perspective alters the critical tone of the previous stations and introduces a sense of renewal in the presence of daylight. The last day is also celebrated with the mass, thus, it also reinforces the view of renewal. Moreover, it is as if the poet is leaving a symbolic hell and entering a creative paradise.

The poet is in the last day of the pilgrimage and the ghosts from the past are practically left behind. However, before his morning confession, in poem X the poet is in the lodge, having his break-*fast* (literally the end of two days of fasting). This is when he has a revelation through the careful observation of a cup. It is as if the cup, unifying references from childhood and the story of *Sweeney Astray*, had the power to transform ordinary objects into literary symbols. In the six stanzas of quatrains, Heaney describes how old objects are seen in new light. While in the first four stanzas the cup is compared to the one which was used as a prop in the play, *The Loving Cup*, in the last two, it is transformed into Ronan's psalter, recovered from the river. This transmutation of the cup from a loving to a cult object is related to James Joyce's technique of epiphany, in which the observation of a thing could bring about the transformation of a life-time. This cup

can also be referred to the moment of transubstantiation in a Catholic mass. This change that the object brings is the absolution he has been seeking to find throughout the poem.

Such is the importance of the cup that its revelation brings a “dazzle of impossibility” (264), or the glimpse of a lyric that would not be tormented by the burden of history. In Heaney’s words, “when I was writing... Station Island I needed something to represent the reality of the ‘magic, enchantment, spell’, something that consumed the ordinary... something signifying possibility, a farther range” (5). This range is given by the next poem, in which the poet, after a religious confession, translates the poem “Cantar Del alma que se huela de conocer a Dios por fe” by John of the Cross. This prayer also echoes *The Divine Comedy*’s structure, since it is written in tercets, but it differs in that because it inserts a chorus at the last verse, “although it is the night” (p. 265). The mystic poem seeks to prove that, even though the world is made of darkness, as the chorus suggest, it is possible to have a mystical connection with God. This is performed through an interior attitude of meditation and devotion.

The twelve stanzas dedicated to the translation of the poem by John of the Cross (it has seventeen totally) empties the senses of all sensation coming to them from the *outside*, and sensitize the body only from the inside. This is reached through the drinking of the “fountain of water” and the parting of the “living bread”. In addition to being clear biblical references to the Samaritan woman at the Well and the Last Supper of Jesus Christ, these elements indicate the poet is finally able to leave the poetry of darkness, as represented by initial poems, and reach enlightenment. Thus, the food or bread of this new lyric is going to be the lightness that stems from forgiveness. However, this is not simply an exterior absolution, but interior, since Heaney will not feel distressed for not writing about civil violence, but reinvigorated to dedicate himself to the possibilities of language and the enchantment that is brought by the small epiphanies of the ordinary life.

The presence of James Joyce in the last poem, in seventeen stanzas of *terza rima*, reinforces the necessity of change. If on the one hand this transformation is the poet’s reconciliation with himself, on the other hand, it is the acceptance of exile and the interchange of cultural values. In his personal search for forgiveness, the poet incorporates a heteroglossia of literary personas to finally, “write/ for the joy of it” (267). The end of the poem represents a paradoxical sacred and profane illumination: while translating John of the Cross, Heaney discovers James Joyce – while writing in the *terza rima* of Dante. *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, while enchanted by religious life, discovers his real vocation was an autonomous form of art, which would not dwell on nationalism or a constant search for “originality”. Like Joyce, Heaney left Ireland. Most certainly, Heaney’s poetry after *Station Island* will be faithful to the multiplicity of the larger world, in its differences and heterogeneity.

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Through the examination of the poem “Station Island” it is possible to envision a new form of poetry in the writer’s *oeuvre*. In search of an invigorated form of art, Heaney purges his sins in a Catholic pilgrimage that reconciles his childhood, youth and maturity. In this journey, the poet frees himself from the burden of history and becomes free to write about his personal beliefs. The act of writing “Station Island” produces a “polyphonic awareness” in which the poet becomes conscious of his poetic journey. More importantly, it reaffirms the power of poetic discourse. As he states in his “Crediting Poetry”, poetry’s strength lies in the persuasion of “that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it” (467). Thus, it reinforces the Classical view that poetry promotes self and cultural knowledge, while instructing and delighting.

Notes

- 1 Merriam-Webster (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dantesque>) dictionary offers Dantean, Dantescan and Dantesque as synonyms that refer to the Italian poet Dante Alighieri.
- 2 Even though Mikhail Bakhtin used the term ‘heteroglossia’ to characterize the novelistic genre, “Station Island” bears similarities to the novelistic structure due to the different dialogues it portrays. Also, recent poetic studies have been drawing parallels between Seamus Heaney’s work and the bakhtinian heteroglossia. Some examples are Eugene O’Brien’s *Irelands of the Mind*, and Michael Molino’s “Flying by the Nets of Language and Nationality: Seamus Heaney, the ‘English’ Language, and Ulster’s Troubles”. More broadly, Nerys Williams’ book on Modern Poetry, published in 2011 by Oxford University Press, also applies heteroglossia to poetry, along with Helga Geyer-Ryan’s *Heteroglossia in the Poetry of Bertolt Brecht and Tony Harrison*. Other sources are Larifs Pedersen’s article on “The Waste Land” (T. S. Eliot) and David Morris’s on Robert Burns. Based on the new trends of poetic research, it is clear that Bakhtin’s terminology answers many questions raised by modern and contemporary poets.
- 3 The text by Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile”, does not tackle a specific genre, but develops the problematic relationship between artists, intellectuals and their homelands. It is clear that poetry has inspired his theory since, at the end of the article, Said quotes Wallace Stevens: “Exile, in the words of Wallace Stevens is ‘a mind of winter’ in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable” (148, 149)
- 4 For Heaney and Dante see: Fumagalli, Maria Cristina Fumagalli. “Station Island”: Seamus Heaney’s “Divina Commedia.” *Irish University Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1996): 127-142 and Manganiello, Dominic. The Language of Exile: Heaney and Dante. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* , Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring, 2000): 100-113.

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