To most well-informed readers Dante is mainly the poet of hell. The more direct appeal of that cantica is probably a sufficient explanation of this. Yet poets who use Dante in various ways in their poetry often turn to Inferno to the exclusion of Paradiso. This deserves to be looked at more closely, not merely in order to find out why this is so in an age when belief, and the poetry of belief, is the exception; but as a way of exploring from that angle the poetry concerned. One remarkable thing is that in the eighteenth century, as now, Dante became established as the poet of hell, and then, as now, this was in spite of the work of many artists, scholars and translators. We inherit a Dante tradition which includes names like Shelley, many of the Victorians, and Eliot, who all preferred and discussed at length the poetry of Paradiso. As for translators, it is true that the first translations from the Commedia (that is, the various versions of the Ugolino episode) mostly added gore and horror. But these translations were not particularly popular or well known. On the other hand, when we turn to the first complete renderings of the Divina commedia by Henry Boyd (Inferno, 1785; Commedia, 1802) and Henry Francis Cary (Inferno, 1805–06; Commedia, 1814), the very opposite is true. Boyd introduces the Commedia as a philosophical work, useful for moral instruction. As for Cary, in his preface he summarizes the Commedia in these terms: ‘It comprises a description of the heavens and the heavenly bodies; a description of men, their deserts and punishments, of supreme happiness and utter misery, and of the middle state between the two extremes’.¹ This hardly stresses hell-fire. But in spite of these translations the informed reader at the beginning of the nineteenth century still saw Dante as the poet of hell. Macaulay describes his features in these terms: ‘We think that we see him standing amidst those smiling and radiant spirits with that scowl of unutterable misery on his brow,

and that curl of bitter disdain on his lips, which all his portraits have preserved, and which might furnish Chantrey with hints for the head of his projected Satan.\(^2\) From a satanic gothic hero, Dante very smoothly turns into the Byronic Dante, ‘grim Dante’, whose brow bears the mark of Cain. He is proud, never smiles and strongly disapproves of gaiety and levity. He enters with the same solid step into the battlefields in defence of his country, into his study to compose, and into hell. Dante the poet is Dante the traveller through hell; the poem is demonic.

The reception of Dante in England, therefore, seems to suggest that there is an added frustration to the task of a translator: in spite of his sensitive or careful rendering of the original, his readers – like the readers of Boyd and Cary – will read into the translation what their own preferences or prejudices enable them to recognize. One might hope that this was only true of the dark ages of the past, and that contemporary readers were well-enough equipped, through such informative magazines as the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *New York Review of Books*, with varied and flexible expectations, to be good readers of Dante. One would, in that case, be disappointed. What seems to be the paradox of the early reception of Dante in England seems to be still true of his reception in recent years. This becomes particularly clear when one looks at recent translations, and the use some perceptive readers of Dante have made of the Italian poet in creative writing. The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of some translators’ and some poets’ use of Dante in terms of the poetry of hell and of paradise.

Between 1980 and 1983 two versions of Dante appeared. The authors carefully considered the choice of verse-form and, as in the past, they judiciously weighed alternative readings for individual images and concepts. However, in addition the authors meditated upon the basic vision of the nature of Dante’s work, and upon the function of translation. With their translations Allen Mandelbaum and Charles Sisson, one an American, the other British, have brought into the field of Dante translation the results of the scholars’ work, the insights of Eliot and Pound, and their own gifts and skills as poets.

In his review of Mandelbaum’s translation in the *New York Review of Books*, D. Carne-Ross quotes Freccero’s indictment of it.\(^3\) According to Freccero, Mandelbaum stresses too much the idea of Dante’s ‘individualism’, and thereby fails to show how Dante spoke to and from an old tradition. The reviewer comments that a

\(^2\) Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Criticism of the principal Italian writers’, *Knight*\(^1\) Quarterly Magazine (January 1824); and in *Miscellaneous writings* (London, n.d.), 38.

translator can get his scholarship wrong, but can still illuminate his author in a way scholarship never could. He decides to ‘look at the matter more closely’. This would indeed be particularly useful since what we see in Freccero’s indictment is another example of the mistrust scholars feel towards poets as translators. Unfortunately, by this Carne-Ross means that he will observe how ‘within your life’ is unnecessarily literal for ‘ne la tua vita’, or that ‘there is a place in hell called Malebolge’ is weak compared to the ‘harsh bulging sounds’ of ‘Luogo è in Inferno detto Malebolge’. The reviewer is still screwing up his eyes to examine the leaves and branches of the individual trees, rather than standing back and opening up his eyes and mind to view the forest as a whole. Had he trusted the translator, he would have seen how it is through the stress on ‘individualism’, or more precisely, what Mandelbaum calls Dante’s ‘aloneness’, that this translation is a new and very much needed version of Dante.

From very early on until quite recently translations provided an account of the experience of the protagonist travelling through hell, purgatory and paradise. Whenever a gap in the speaking voice was noticed, it was explained as a lapse by Dante the writer, who had forgotten that he was writing a poem and was giving vent to his anger against personal enemies. Only in the last fifty years have scholars consistently worked out the presence of two personas in the poem – Dante the protagonist, and Dante the narrator. The consequences of this view are far reaching; particularly central is the prophetic nature of the narrator’s voice, and the prophetic mission of the protagonist moving towards the vision which he imparts to the reader. The arguments of these scholars imply that Dante’s poem is a lesson in resisting intellectual and emotional persuasion and in freeing the will. This requires a great participative effort on the part of the reader, and great stress to be placed in the text on the voice of the narrator, the figure who appears superimposed on the figure of the traveller in the very first lines of the poem.

In that well-known opening, the first tercet describes the situation of the protagonist, but the second and third contain the present reflections of the writer; the fourth reconnects the reader smoothly with the forest, and the contrast in tense between ‘non so ridir’ (‘I cannot rightly tell’) and ‘v’entrai’ (‘how I entered there’) stresses the distance in time, as well as the contrast between the telling and the experience. No translator can recreate the clash, in the fourth line, between the adjoining words ‘era’ and ‘è’ (‘was’ and ‘is’); the first, a past tense connected to the tense in the previous tercet, describing the forest in which the protagonist found himself,

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4 The edition used for Dante (specific references to passages are in the text) is La divina commedia, 3 vols, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Firenze, 1955-56); Inferno (1981); Purgatorio (1967), Paradiso (1981).
and the second introducing the present tense of the following lines, describing the feelings of the narrator at the time of writing the poem. No translator can do that, but he must find a way of communicating the same basic idea. The importance of these apparently minor details only becomes clear when the difficulty of the writer's task, after steadily increasing throughout the poem, reaches its climax in the tension of the final lines, where the writer must find words to describe the indescribable.

Very little of this emerges in most twentieth-century translations, even less in reviews. Yet this is exactly what Mandelbaum is trying to use as a guiding light in his translation. He refers to Dante's 'aloneness' in his introduction to the translation: "'Io sol uno" – "I myself alone"... is the first triple repetition of an "I" that we have in western literature". This, according to Mandelbaum, undermines the reading of the journey as that of an Everyman, but substantiates two other possible major aspects of the poem: Dante's 'radical newness... which does require the Biblical warrant of the first-person prophet' (p. xv), and the moving impulse behind the poetry, the fear of death, whatever this means to the medieval or modern man. It is not surprising that this translator should analyse the nature of the 'aloneness' within the poem, and distinguish between the 'journey of the voyager' and the 'journey of the telling of the tale' (p. xii). The introduction shows how Mandelbaum is deliberate about his approach; the poem shows how he actually puts his choice into practice. In the first cantos this distinction is given a clear structural function, so that in the argument to the first canto a split is clearly indicated: 'The voyager-narrator astray by night in a dark forest. Morning and the sunlit hill. Three beasts that impede his ascent. The encounter with Virgil, who offers his guidance and an alternative path through two of the three realms the voyager must visit' (p. 3). The poetry dramatizes the two personas:

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray,
Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was,
that savage forest, dense and difficult,
which even in recall renews my fear:

so bitter – death is hardly more severe!

(Infemo, I, 1–16)

'[W]hat it was' throws into question the actual existence of the forest, and the consonance of 'dense and difficult' underlines that it

5 Allan Mandelbaum, The divine comedy of Dante Alighieri, 3 vols (Berkeley: Barry Mose 1980–83), xiii.
is also a forest of words. This phrase is a small example of that 'close phonic packing' with which Mandelbaum attempts to stress the craft of the poet at work. Yes, it diverges from the original, but it does reproduce one main effect of the lines, that is, the clear impression that there is a speaking voice now, telling of the journey then, and that it is the poetry of this voice we hear. The stress is continuously on the speaking voice, on the poet's skill. The dash in line 7 is one of many, often including asides and further explanations, which in the original flowed with the rest of the text. This is Mandelbaum's contribution to the illumination of Dante for the modern reader, and connected with this is its consequence: that it is in Paradiso, where the prophetic voice of the narrator and the experience of the voyager approaching his prophetic mission come together, that Mandelbaum's poetry achieves its best effects. In the last canto of Paradiso Dante is perfecting his 'aloneness', his unique experience, and the personal tone and the music of Mandelbaum's lines add a sense of felt experience to the subject matter translated:

In its profundity I saw — ingathered
and bound by love into one single volume —
what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered:
substances, accidents, and dispositions
as if conjoined — in such a way that what
I tell is only rudimentary.
I think I saw the universal shape
which that knot takes; . . .
(Paradiso, XXXIII, ll.85–92)

The tentativeness of the dashes and of the search for the right words ('separate, scattered') fit in with Dante's search for the right image, and with the tentativeness of 'I think I saw'. Mandelbaum's is poetry, as he expressly states in the introduction, which should be read aloud (something which is true of the original but which has seldom been appreciated even in Italy); this brings out the rhythm of the lines, but also the effect of a mind at work, creating and personally uttering the words and images, a mind which is very intensely at work in these lines, where the narrator is speaking. The clear but poised language Mandelbaum has used throughout the Commedia is particularly appropriate in these final passages:

Eternal Light, You only dwell within
Yourself, and only You know You; Self-knowing,
Self-known, You love and smile upon Yourself!
That circle — which, begotten so, appeared
in You as light reflected — when my eyes
had watched it with attention for some time,
within itself and colored like itself,
to me seemed painted with our effigy,
so that my sight was set on it completely.
(Paradiso, XXXIII, ll.124–132)
The perfect solipsism of the 'You' is soon superseded by the impotence of the solipsistic 'I'; the resolution only occurs when Dante, trying to mirror himself in the human image of the Trinity, is struck by the still undescribed vision. The consonance of 'f' in line 142 ('here force failed my high fantasy') underlines the enclosure within the circle of the self, resolved by the absorption into the eternal wheel of Love. The words are clear, the diction is simple; but the sentences and the phrases are structured into complex units. Mandelbaum's stress on the prophetic role of the two personas makes him choose a language which has poise and dignity, and is not colloquial; while the relevance of the poetry for our time is underlined with great effect by the accompanying illustrations by Barry Moser. His contrasts of light and shadow, the designs for the human frame are unmistakably recognizable for present-day readers, who are only too familiar with the pictures of the Nazi death camps.

In the same year that saw the publication of Mandelbaum's *Inferno*, Sisson's *Divina commedia* was published. The very look of the volume is a revolutionary gesture in Dante translations. The pages set out the poetry canto after canto, without interruption or mediation by summary, footnotes or diagrams. The scholar or commentator would not even find line numbers to help references: the translation is intended for the reader of poetry. And the poem on the page confirms the appearance of the page: Sisson gives us a modern poem, in direct, often colloquial language. Different as this translation is from Mandelbaum's, it is similar in that both translators have weighed and deliberately chosen and worked at a specific vision of Dante's work. In his translator's introduction, Sisson says:

> [the translator] must 'make sense of' [his author] . . . in advancing line by line and tercet by tercet speaking in his own voice as modified by the presence of that august original - for it must still be his voice, even if his success is to be measured by the degree to which it resembles that imaginary English in which his author 'wou'd himself have spoken'.

The voice we hear is indeed Sisson's - a modern poet's; and the accuracy with which it lets itself be modified by the original can only be assessed, in this translation, on the basis of longer passages. Sisson's translation moves in long units of poetry, line after line, tercet after tercet:

> Halfway along the road we have to go
> I found myself obscured in a great forest,
> Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.

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It is hard to say just what the forest was like,
How wild and rough it was, how overpowering;
Even to remember it makes me afraid.

(Inferno, I, 1–6)

The discursive tone, the description of emotions, without the exclamative to dramatize them, and the colloquial language turn these tercets into a modern utterance. The accuracy of effect is also there, both in details and in more general issues. So, to mention a few small points, if the protagonist has literally lost his way in a realistically present forest – ‘wild and rough’ – he is not only ‘bewildered’, but also, metaphorically, ‘obscured’. Both the literal and the allegorical levels are present. Similarly, the lack of rendered emotion in both personas is redressed by Sisson’s very effective translation of the many visual pictures Dante gives. The description of the man who, ‘practically winded,/ Staggers out of the sea and up the beach,/ Turns back to the dangerous waters and looks at it’ reproduces with the simple monosyllabic speech a sense of slowness and tiredness, and recreates both the relief of the protagonist, and the distance of the narrator, with his choice of a simile, from the past experience. It is only in the composition of all these features that Sisson’s version is ‘accurate’; his closeness to Dante cannot be pinned down within one line or even tercet, but is achieved within longer units of poetry. In fact, the accuracy of Sisson is in the very movement of the tercets. Dante’s poem has been called one of the most fast moving of long poems, and Dante’s language and rhyme and rhythm help the reader read on; Sisson’s contemporary, clear language does exactly the same. Again this is part of Sisson’s intention. He points out the ‘luminous clarity of his [Dante’s] lines’ (p. iii). It is ‘the great pressure of his matter which makes the clarity possible’, but this does not provide the translator with ‘a style to imitate’ but with a lesson. It is a lesson in achieving great effect with only a few words, and it is ‘a lesson in silence’. Sisson has learned this lesson and it serves him particularly well in the canticas where silence, luminosity and clarity are central. Purgatorio is probably the cantica in Sisson’s translation which is closest to Dante in tone and feel:

It was the hour when those who are at sea
Long to be back, and when their hearts grow tender,
The day they have said goodbye to their gentle friends:

The hour when the new pilgrim’s heart is pierced
With love, if he hears the far off bells
Which seem to weep for the dying day;

(Purgatorio, VIII, l.1–6)

The music within the individual line is lost. But who could reproduce the lull of ‘era già l’ora’ in line 1, where ‘era’ and ‘ora’ echo each other in the undulating rhythm of the line. Still, the simplicity, directness
and sincerity of language are there, and so is the central impulse of the similes, the slow movement throughout the six lines. Dante's directness communicates without trappings the sense of irretrievable loss and nostalgia in a unit of six lines. Since he cannot reproduce his effects in the way Dante did, Sisson uses whatever the modern poet has at his disposal, in this case, the varying length of the lines. The first tercet grows and lengthens and slows down, while the second tercet step by step withdraws into silence.

Dante's Purgatorio is filled with the nostalgia for earth, for the dawns and sunsets which offered such beauty, for the community of family and friends, and with the wonder of the pilgrim in a new place. Sisson recreates these impressions, feelings and correspondences in a sustained version of Purgatorio; but it is perhaps his Paradiso that becomes a modern poem in its own right. Sisson's closing of Dante's vision is, on its own, a modern poem of frustration and the struggle to create; it is a poem of vision with the awareness of the impossibility of vision. In a very interesting review of this translation, Roger Scruton says that:

(There is) a kind of persistent undercurrent of despair. Sisson cannot quite believe in Dante's vision. Therefore he removes from his versification every rhetorical gesture, everything that might imply a self-induced afflatus of emotion. . . . Thus his translation is the most sincere, the most modern, and yet in some ways the most distanced from the original . . .?

Is this so distant from Dante? Where in the original are the rhetorical gestures and self-induced afflatus of emotion? Maybe in a hundred years' time readers will be able to respond to some note of triumph now hidden in Dante's poetry; but even the present reader must admit to being fettered by those limits in perceptions which make one respond to the 'poetry of unbelief', to seeing in Dante's final movement the superhuman struggle of the creator with his medium, the slow nightmare of the attempt to overcome the limits of speech and communication, as well as of man's mind. Sisson's final lines are a poem of the mind:

O how my speech falls short, how faint it is
For my conception! And for what I saw
It is not enough to say that I say little.

O eternal light, existing in yourself alone,
Alone knowing yourself; and who, known to yourself
And knowing, love and smile upon yourself!

That circle which, conceived in this manner,
Appeared in you as a reflected light,
When my eyes examined it rather more,

Within itself, and in its own colour,
Seemed to be painted with our effigy;
And so absorbed my attention altogether.
(Paradiso, XXXIII, 114–25)

The horror of exclusion from the smiling, perfectly self-contained knowledge, and the final relief of being caught in the movement of the wheel of love, of being struck by the still unexpressed vision are almost obsessively at work here. The poet as exile could find no better personification than in Sisson’s version of Dante’s Paradiso.

The remarkable poetry produced by both Sisson and Mandelbaum in their versions of the Commedia leads me to a general point about the status of translation. This is still greatly misunderstood. We have now realized that each period produces its version of the great poems, and that a final translation of a poem is not a possibility. We should also accept that, although, with regard to the source text (Dante’s Commedia), translation is always a fallen version, with regard to the receiving culture the translation can in certain ways be as good as, or theoretically even better than, the original for its time, in terms of its chosen focus. But reader and critics still generally evaluate the product only in terms of the original. Of the examples I have mentioned, Freccero and Carne-Ross are both critics of this kind. They greatly outnumber critics like Roger Scruton, who looks at Sisson’s work more objectively, and yet does not face the real issue of translation.

I now move to the second part of my discussion – the use made of Dante by Davie in his poem ‘Summer lightning’ and by Heaney in three of his poems. I appear to be very selective in my choice of poets and of poems, and it would seem to be impossible to draw any valid conclusions from such a choice. But, first, the choice is only partly mine. The poems discussed form something like a daisy-chain of texts, and so they chose themselves. Secondly, it is my intention to explore intensively what these texts do with Dante, in order to shed some more light upon a particular process, rather than draw a general inference from a wider survey.

One of the first reactions to Sisson’s version of Dante appeared in the Times Literary Supplement, and it was written by Donald Davie. In his poem ‘Summer lightning’, dedicated to Seamus Heaney, Davie says:

... I think Sisson
Got it, don’t you? Plain Dante, plain as a board,
And if flat, flat...³

Here the first comment, that Sisson 'got it', is maybe more complimentary than the second, but one would in general agree. But Davie continues:

... The abhorrent, the abhorred,
Ask to be uttered plainly.

It seems that Davie chooses to take into consideration only Inferno, and to totally ignore Paradiso, where, in fact, Sisson's plain style comes into its own. Such a choice fits in with Davie's own poem, which focuses on the poetry of hell, both in terms of what is described and of the means of describing it. In the first part, Davie surveys and classifies the makers of the poetry. Here there is place only for images of damnation. The poet is fixed in hell, and is put there by poetry, the punisher. The Muse chooses its victim at random and 'he whom she picks, she clips indeed'. In the ensuing survey of poets, Davie uses Revelation as modified by Dante for the structure of his hell. Some poets are frozen, some burn in fire, some are the lukewarm. The first group of poets is that of the 'versifiers'; their work is 'all too cold, ice cold'. Others seem:

In their own sense of themselves, in an extreme
Consumption of the fire. Whatever odd
sense 'poet' has, they pass it on the nod;
Fed, for their part, on Terror, and on God.

The combination of 'Terror' and 'God' places these poets within the Gothic sublime of the eighteenth century. This visionary group of poets is also rejected. There is another group of poets, whose status is ambiguous. Like Dante's 'lukewarm', they seem unworthy even of being placed in hell, and are left, instead, in 'evening classes'. But the central image of this part of the poem is of the poet as the summer lightning of the title, burning briefly and vainly.

The second part of the poem worries about the nature of poetry. First it sets out the nature of present conditions, then the nature of the poetry which best fits it, and it is in this part that the reference to Sisson, and further references to Dante, occur:

Tragic plots are what,
So it was thought, some few great houses foster:
Plantagenet, Gore-Booth, Adams, Malatesta,
Atreus, Thebes. But ritual couplings, treasons,
Condign kills and shames are for all seasons
And all conditions. Thinking of your bog-queen
Intact, tar black when disinterred, I've seen
This calls for Comedy, never more demonic
Than when Divine, involved and unironic,
Painful and pitying. (This she also knew,
Your wife, who took the cannibal Ugolino
As type for poets: brain devouring brain,
One 'rabid egotistical daisy-chain').
Knowing what's out of joint is our dilemma
In Ireland, Denmark, England, the Maremma;
What is, what isn't. In your singing school,
Dante's and yours, the dreadful is the rule.

Dread; yes, dread – the one name for the one
Game that we play here, surely. I think Sisson
Got it, don't you? Plain Dante, plain as a board,
And if flat, flat. The abhorred, the abhorred
Ask to be uttered plainly. Heaney, I
Appeal to you who are more in the public eye
Than us old codgers: isn't it the case
The Muse must look disaster in the face?

The denial of the solemn in the tragic, and further down of the peacefulness and innocence of the georgics, leads the poet to find only the demonic and the comic muse appropriate for present conditions. And the poet of the demonic comedy expands and grows throughout the poem, starting from the limited 'your singing school,/ Dante's and yours', moving to the more general 'we' – 'the game we play' – and ending on the universal 'The Muse'. Dante's infernal methods are, so the poem states, for all seasons and all conditions; there is no time and no place for paradise. Thus the poem takes us back into the 'dread' of the Gothic, and the picture an innocent reader would receive of Dante is again of the hellish, demonic poet, 'involved and unironic'. Yet irony within the *Commedia* is one of the recent discoveries about the *Commedia*.

But it is not just a question of ignoring the poetry of paradise because present conditions do not require it. In the very conclusion of the poem, the poetry of paradise is faced. Davie uses Heaney's own early poetry, 'your early georgics', to make his point. Such poetry should not be 'denigrated', but, as it recalls a 'pre-Dantesque Homeric virtue', it must be rejected in a post-Dantesque world. It is because of this that the main image of the second part is the one borrowed from Heaney, of poets as a daisy-chain of cannibal Ugolinos, consuming and regurgitating the previous poets' brains. 'Summer lightning' is written 'in imitation of Ronsard', and Davie not only picks up Heaney's image of a daisy-chain of cannibal poets, but produces such a chain himself – Davie, Ronsard, Heaney, Dante, Shakespeare, and further down Homer. I see two main implications in this image. First, poets have eaten of Dante's brain; and as a consequence there is no return to a pre-Dantesque virtue, and so 'The Muse must look disaster in the face'. Secondly, of the two images central to the poem, the first suggests burning and extinction, but the second implies some survival of the burning, if only into another's creations. Yet surely lightning suggests the spiritual energy of the individual poet, whereas the biting into the brain is the survival of matter. Life for the poet is hell, and all that survives is matter. Eternity, spiritual continuity do not exist. Not
only is a state of bliss not envisaged, or used negatively as material; it is not even wished for. All this poet prays for is the fulfillment of the prayer of Eliot's Magus:

\[\text{... let me, after one death, have another, terminal.}\]

The sub-title of Davie's poem was 'l'argument du Comicque est de toutes saisons'; but this comic mode hardly includes laughter or happiness. Paradise, or even purgatory must be denied. Throughout this poem there is a resolute rejection of whatever has traditionally offered consolation - in visions of the past, present or future. There is no sense of domesticity, no nostalgia for the past, no hope of afterlife, not even survival of poetry - except in the mouth of the next poet.

The poem by Heaney, to which Davie refers in this connection, the poem on 'your bog-queen', is similar in many ways. Here, too, there is no relief, no spiritual future. The bog-queen describes her own slow decomposition back into vegetal matter, and she describes her 'life' in the bog in terms of animal instincts, with no reference to spirit:

My skull hibernated in the wet nest of my hair.

Which they robbed.\(^9\)

Thus crime and evil break even into this state of existence, which is affected by hell rather than paradise. The paradox of the poem is that what is being described is a rising from the dead, but what rises is nothing but matter:

The plait of my hair, a slimy birth cord of bog, had been cut
And I rose from the dark . . .

The dramatic presentation of the bog-queen describing this process, as an omniscient narrator, might suggest some surviving life. But, as Davie so clearly sees, the story told is an act of ventriloquism on the part of the poet. It is particularly here that Heaney's poem is Dantesque, for he animates the dead to make them reveal the true state of things. Davie also points to the theme of survival of matter when he summarizes the poem as describing the bog-queen as 'intact when disinterred'. Two other poems, 'Punishment' and 'Strange fruit', develop the same theme and are therefore relevant to my

In 'Punishment', the poet's metamorphic sight sees the young girl who has been disinterred as, in turn, the girl with flaxen hair and a beautiful face as she might have been; a submissive animal led by a halter with a noose round its neck; but mainly the vegetal thing she is now. Her hell, like Dante's hell, has revealed her true nature, it seems, by making her regress to the simplest form of being - vegetal matter. Her body is a sapling, oak, fir, stubble of black corn. She has become a fisher-queen of a wrong kind, an inverted corn-dolly portending death instead of fertility. She thus assumes the rôle of the scapegoat in a vegetation rite, but it is a rite which fails.

Heaney inserts this figure also within the pattern of Dantean hell. The title of the poem is 'Punishment', and the nature of this punishment is further explained in the last words of the poem:

... (I) would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

The little adulteress died for love, and is punished with the algebra of revenge so many scholars - even recent ones - identify with Dante's hell. But this scapegoat refuses to turn into a martyr, and the ring of her noose only barely begins to suggest the form of a halo - the halo of her love. For we soon see that her audience does not recognize her death as a sacrifice. Neither those witnessing her death, nor the speaker and writer of the poem are true witnesses, accepting and consenting to a spiritual insight:

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs

Instead of offering a redeeming vision, art can only, it seems, expose matter, an exposure which fascinates and repels at the same time, the exposure of the true reality of human nature, as revealed in Dante's hell. The human frame, having become transparent, only reveals the workings of the body - there is no further reality more spiritual than that.

The same movement and argument is carried on in another poem by Heaney, 'Strange fruit'. The exposure here is of a beheaded girl's head, 'like an exhumed gourd', preserved by the bog:

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10 Heaney, 'Punishment', in North, 37-8.
11 Heaney, 'Strange fruit', in North, 39.
they unswaddled the wet fern of her hair
And made an exhibition of its coil,

There is no reference, in the poem, to any spiritual force released by the exhumation. All that is shown is the preservation and revelation of matter. The revelation of what should be intimate, the exposure not only of the limitation of the body to the vegetal, but of the crime committed in the past, which could be forgotten, seems a denial of human dignity by those who expose. Here, too, the speaker just begins to make an idol of the human. But the girl's head silences the desire or even need to turn her into something more than the matter she is:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe
And beatification, outstaring
What had begun to feel like reverence.

Both 'Punishment' and 'Strange fruit' deny the comfort of turning murder into martyrdom; of turning this strange fruit into an idol, an object of devotion. But the dignity of the human survives even this exposure, as it survives the attempt at ingratiating through rite and idolatry. It is the very truncated human form which commands respect. This is what art, all these poems suggest, can do: it bears witness and records the sheer existence of the human in spite of any emotional distortion caused either by feelings of reverence, or by the original evil which caused the death of that human being.

Heaney's recurrent concern with the poem as exposure of the human body, and with the head and brain as a strange fruit, easily explain why he should have translated one episode from Dante's Divina commedia – the Count Ugolino passage.

... I walked the ice
And saw two soldered in a frozen hole
On top of another, one's skull capping the other's,
Gnawing at him where the neck and head
Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,
Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread.
So the berserk Tydeus gnashed and fed
Upon the severed head of Menalippus
As if it were some spattered carnal melon.
'You', I shouted, 'you on top, what hate
Makes you so revenous and insatiable?
What keeps you so monstrously at rut?
Is there any story I can tell
For you, in the world above, against him?
If my tongue by then's not withered in my throat
I will report the truth and clear your name'.

Heaney is strikingly effective in creating a dynamic picture of hell. Even the protagonist is rough and wild. The poetry of violence and horror is vivid; the curse of Pisa which closes the story of Ugolino even more so. In no other translation have I seen a more divergent, yet curiously literal (because corresponding to the basic sense of the original) rendering:

Pisa! Pisa, you sound like a hiss
Sizzling in our country's grassy language.

Heaney has seized on the echo of 'si' and 'Pisa', and worked on it in terms of a similar image in English. It is almost a paraphrase of Dante's curse: here the very name of Pisa has become a term of abuse, a curse, a four-letter word.

Is the translation of the episode as a whole based on a clear understanding of the original? Is Heaney's intention that of reproducing accurately the spirit of the original? Does Heaney see, as Dante scholars now see, that the protagonist has been corrupted by hell? Is that why Heaney makes him so aggressive, so absorbed by the experience of hell as to become a traitor himself? All one can say, on the basis of the one episode, is that the poetry of hell is powerful and horrifying - much more than Dante's was. Like early translators of the Ugolino episode, Heaney adds colour and gore where there was little or none. 'The sweet fruit of the brain' in line 5 of Heaney's version is a complete addition, and the words suggest that the speaker shares the appetite of Ugolino. Also, where Dante had been so careful as to only vaguely say 'il cervello e 'l'altre cose' ('the brain and the other things'), Heaney continues with his image of the sweet fruit of the brain. In fact he chooses a specific fruit, and adds the graphic image 'as if it were some spattered carnal melon'. This cluster of images makes very clear what it is that Heaney finds in the original: he sees Dante's text in terms of his own images. Reminding us of the gourd which was the strange fruit of the poem by that title, these images indicate that Heaney is not translating Dante, but giving voice to his own vision through the medium of Dante.

Heaney's Dante is the poet of hell because Heaney is obsessed by the poet as Ugolino - an image to which Davie can obviously relate. In 'An afterwards' - the other poem to which Davie refers, the speaking voice of the poet actually takes up the role of Ugolino, one link in the 'rabid egotistical daisy-chain'. In fact, the poem closes as the speaker feels a bite in his own neck, but all through Heaney himself has been biting into Dante's - and some phrases are, in fact, lifted from Heaney's translation of Ugolino.

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain. 13
What a horrid, graphic image these words present; what a specific physical sensation they suggest. The poem describes a possible future – a possible afterlife (‘An afterwards’). It is, therefore, a vision, but the revelation it offers is very ambiguous. The reader is faced by the rôle of Ugolino, played by a poet, and by Dante, impersonated, in a curious choice of roles, by the poet’s wife. The situation and the story pose two main contrasts: first, the status of the wife in this alternative universe is not singular, for she is accompanied by at least another wife – so it is a question of wives of poets judging their husbands. Secondly, what is at stake is the nature of poetry and of the poet:

And when she’d make her circuit of the ice,
Aided and abetted by Virgil’s wife,
I would cry out, ‘My sweet, who wears the bays
In our green land above, whose is the life
Most dedicated and exemplary?’

Who, indeed? The question, which is presented as one, consists surely of two separate parts, the first being: Which one of us (‘me’ the poet, or ‘you’ the wife) is the poet? An added twist to the meaning is that it is unclear whether the ‘me’ is the poet, or Ugolino; and, more importantly, whether the ‘you’ is Dante, or the wife. The second question is: Which one of them is more dedicated? Here the poet challenges the traditional self-sacrificing status of wifehood and motherhood, and suggests that ‘poethood’ is even more demanding.

The mixture of rôles suggests further implications. The poet is seen by the wife as a traitor, and the reader must agree with this judgement because of his manipulation of words and exercise of power even from the pit, as revealed by the contrast between ‘my sweet’ and ‘who wears the . . .’. What this poem has which the others did not, is an ironic stance. The answers to the questions are clear, in their different ways, to the two protagonists of the poem (each putting himself/herself first), but not yet to the reader. But we soon arrive at some degree of clarity, for the wife (including, presumably, other poets’ wives) has a different view of life, and even an alternative poetry – so that the question which invites us to choose between the poet and his wife as poets is not a rhetorical, but a real question. For the wife can imagine and describe a different life:

‘Why could you not have, oftener, in our years
Unclenched, and come down laughing from your room
And walked the twilight with me and your children –
Like that one evening of elder bloom
And hay, when the wild roses were fading?’
This poem is also about the writing of poetry; it is a choice between the poetry of hell – that is, the Muse who ‘must look disaster in the face’, the poetry worked at with teeth and tongue in skulls and brains – and the lyrical twilight poetry of nostalgia and the family, of innocence, laughter, beauty and love – the poetry of purgatory and paradise. The question really is: why not the poetry of paradise?

As in the poem by Davie, so also in this text the question is faced and an answer provided – an answer which is final. Heaney has made a definite choice. Clearly, the wife – or is it Dante? – is deluding herself. The possibility she offers could not in actual fact materialize. The poetry she gives voice to offers a vision of paradise – bliss, laughter, the family, natural beauty – but it is a lost paradise, a finished harvest, darkness approaching: ‘twilight’, ‘evening’, ‘fading’. After all, it is the wife who does not see that that evening was the last. The poet, in Heaney, has no choice: he is a traitor by definition because he lives in a post-Dantean world, because he has eaten of the gourd, the sweet fruit of Dante’s hell. Like Heaney and Davie the modern poet must look disaster in the face, and not delude himself with any form of consolation.

Poets as creative translators of Dante give us the poetry of the inner movements of the mind; poets as readers and creative users of Dante give us the poetry of the body, and the poetry of hell. The opposition, however, is more one of mode than of kind. Sisson and Mandelbaum are only partly interested in providing the reader with an English version of Dante. They want to be possessed, and speak their words while being moved by Dante’s vision. This gives them the opportunity of writing the poetry of paradise, the poetry of perfect spirituality, something which is more viable through translation. But, as Scruton points out, Sisson radically undercuts any possible triumph in the conclusion of the vision. Thus the translators’ use of Dante is not dissimilar from Davie’s and Heaney’s in the poems discussed. Indeed, in a way, Davie and Heaney have a more positive stance than Mandelbaum and Sisson. For the latter leave the reader with the spiritual uniqueness of the poet, his aloneness, his status as an exile, but the former leave the reader with a sense of community, although this is only the community of the body and even of crime, and not of the spirit and of goodness. This is the truth behind Freccero’s indictment of Mandelbaum’s translation: its stress on individualism, its denial of the ‘old tradition’ from which the poem proceeded is a denial of an important sense of continuity, and a statement of the unique selfhood of the poet. Most modern readers, like Sisson, as Scruton has pointed out, cannot believe in art as the medium for offering a redeeming vision, which, as Heaney and Davie suggest, would be only a delusion and an attempt at self-consolation. By facing the poetry of paradise, the poetry of vision and prophecy of spiritual
regeneration, and by rejecting it, Davie and Heaney in these poems give a view of the world of contemporary poetry. The prevalence of the poetry of hell, therefore, is not a question of preference, or ignorance; but it is a question of exploring the possibilities and juxtaposing the poetry of hell and the poetry of paradise in order to embrace the former and clearly and deliberately deny the latter. All in all, both the modern poets as translators and the modern poets writing their own visions find in Dante the language and the images which best express what they themselves want to say, and, behind the different material, their views are remarkably consistent.