

DANTE'S *INFERNO*?: TRANSLATIONS

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Dante's *Commedia* has been translated, recast, and transposed into English more often than any other work of poetry, often accompanied by the apologies of the translator. John Ciardi, whose aim was to reproduce the music inherent in the poetry of the *Inferno*, acknowledged his debt to all previous translators of Dante: "without their failures I should never have attempted my own" (Ciardi xi). The problems of translating the *Commedia* are enormous, for it is a complex structure whose style is born anew in almost every canto, whose images are alive with color, clouded with gloom, aflame with passion, or wallowing in human excrement. It is an adventure, a vehicle for pedantry; it is an allegorical and fantastic journey that is also quite real. The poem is recounted in words, which the poet calls "abstract, sadly approximate, dull with use" (Inf. XXXII, 5-6), and so the words are attended by the interplay of images and incidents (Merrill xi) and by the "melody of thought" (Mazzotta 162).

The *Commedia*'s first tercet, perhaps the most recited in western literature, sets the tone for Dante's entire poem. It is an end-stopped tercet with two extremely important rhyme words, *vita* 'life' and *smarrita* 'lost', which De Sua calls "opposing semantic spheres" (De Sua).

**Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la via diritta era smarrita.**

**[In the middle of our life's walk
I found myself in a dark wood
for the straight road was lost]**

Dante uses hendecasyllabic meter based on the magic number three, which represents the Trinity, and multiples of three: in particular, three-squared, which represents Beatrice, and three times ten, the symbol of perfection, or God. There are thirty-three syllables per tercet and three metrical units per line, nine per tercet. The rhyme scheme (ABA BCB CDC, etc.) is Dante's own invention, and has the effect of bringing the action of the poem forward like a gently rolling wave folding over into itself, weaving it into a huge, complex net: transmogrify just one tercet, and the rhythm and flow are interrupted, unsettling the tercets that follow. Bickersteth is among many who assert that "in no other very long narrative poem in European literature . . . are form and content so closely integrated" (xxviii). He traces the *terza rima* directly to the *servantese* of the Provençal poets in which two or three mono-rhymed hendecasyllables are followed by a *quinario* that supplies the rhyme for the next stanza: AAAb, BBBc, CCCd, etc. The implication, of course, is that Dante created *terza rima* as a tribute to the Provençal poets, without whose contributions his "divine comedy" could not have been created.⁽¹⁾ Given this, it might seem improbable that the translator's first decision is whether to render or not to render the *terza rima*, which seems indispensable to the structure of the poem. For some translators, however, there is too high a price to be paid in trying to reproduce *terza rima* in English (Musa viii), a relatively rhyme-poor language in comparison to Italian.⁽²⁾ Indeed, rhyme can be an absolute dictator in a poem such as the *Commedia*, which demands the production of as many as 4,500 triple rhymes, and in fact Dante's intricate rhyme scheme has been referred to as a "no-tresspassing sign, protecting the text" (Merrill x).

Charles Singleton--Montale called him "*l'americano che ci spiegò Dante*" (Mackey 45)-- avoids the use of rhyme altogether and recasts the *Commedia* in prose:

**Midway in the journey of our life
I found myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.**

He writes that his prose version "is but one more answer to the perennial question: How do we read this verse, this tercet, this canto?" And he concedes "the painful loss of the poetry of the *Comedy* that any prose translation inevitably brings about" (372). For this reason, his text appears alongside an edition of the original, not as a substitute for Dante, but as a partial answer for those searching for the *real* Dante. The consensus among prose translators is that their renderings must remain Dantesque; that is, they must retain the ideas and music of the original. Gilbert observes that the prose translator, unconstrained by rhyme, iambic pentameter or the tercet, "can be succinct where Dante is succinct, plain where Dante is plain" (x) and is not obliged to elaborate or truncate the original.

Allen Mandelbaum is criticized by Freccero for placing too much emphasis on Dante's individualism,⁽³⁾ but other critics find his translation a needed addition to the twentieth-century repertory. Tinkler-Villani applauds Mandelbaum's success in producing the same dramatic effects as the original. For example, in the first four tercets of Canto I (Inferno) he recreates the time transitions that underscore the existence of two Dantes: the protagonist, Dante the pilgrim, and the narrator, Dante the poet. The critic acknowledges that no English-language translator can recreate the juxtaposition of *era* and *è* in English (*Ahi, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura*), which refers back to the previous tercet and connects it to the present tense of the fourth; but Villani insists, "this [effect] is exactly what Mandelbaum is trying to use as a guiding light in his translation" (77).

The savage wood in Mandelbaum's translation is not *aspra e forte*, but "dense and difficult." Villani defends his verbal digressions with the argument that his work stresses the "craft of the poet [Dante] at work" (77). Compare Mandelbaum's dense and difficult wood with Singleton's in which the poet seems to be searching for an appropriate modifier for that dark wood: "Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh."

Ciardi's Dante is lost in a "drear and dark wilderness"; Pinsky's pilgrim finds himself in a wood that is "tangled and rough and savage"; Musa's poet tells us that he had wandered into a "wilderness, savage and stubborn, a bitter place!" Clearly, each translator creates a somewhat different image of Dante's "*selvaggio, e aspra e forte*," but none leaves doubt as to the terrible nature of the place.

Critics, especially those with incurably deconstructionist leanings, are always eager to pronounce judgment on translators for minute sins of elaboration, truncation, or too literal an interpretation. Consider Ross's warm praise of Mandelbaum for having substituted "an anapest for an iamb" in four lines out of 139 or "about two or three per cent" of the time (Ross 60). Clearly, his concern is for four leaves in a forest of millions, a preoccupation that disregards the translator's task, which is to bring a body of work, as *intact* as possible, across linguistic and poetic borders. The above-cited translators fulfill this mission precisely because they do not coerce and coax their English into unnatural linguistic registers. Ciardi's analogy is well taken:

When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognizable the same 'music,' the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano (ix).

.It is interesting to see how translators treat the problem of tercets that have the same initial word. Bickersteth insists that there is no problem; the translator must never diverge from the original (xi). Let us consider Francesca's recounting of her ill-fated love affair with Paolo in Canto V (100-8):

**Amor, che'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,
prese costui de la bella persona
che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.
Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,
mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,
che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.
Amor condusse noi ad una moret.
Caina attende chi a vita ci spense.**

Here is Singleton's prose translation:

**Love, which is quickly kindled in a gentle heart,
seized this one for the fair form that was taken from me--
and the way of it afflicts me still.
Love, which absolves no loved one from loving,
seized me so strongly with delight in him, that,
as you see, it does not leave me even now.
Love brought us to one death.**

In Dante's text *love* appears as the lead word of the tercet three times in a row. But, Singleton conjoins the three words in one paragraph; a device no less effective in stressing Francesca's insistence that she and Paolo are not to blame, "for none may withstand love's power." Thus, Singleton recreates the music and rhythm of Dante and elucidates the doctrine of courtly love, which places earthly love before the love of God (Singleton 89).

Comparing Singleton's prose text with the poetry of Ellis's *Hell*, we note that, although Ellis writes in verse, it is Singleton's prose that remains faithful to the rhythmic flow of Dante's poetry. Here is Ellis:

**Love, swift in seizing noble hearts,
It took this man with the loveliness
taken from me, and still it hurts.
Love insists the loved loves back,
and pleased me with him so much
that it's still with me, as you see.
Love brought us both to one death:**

Ellis argues that English is not equipped to reproduce the *terza rima*, and that some other means must be found to structure the text and give momentum to the poetry. His solution is to reproduce Dante's linguistic "concision and economy" (Ellis xxi) by translating it into free verse tempered and constrained by the octosyllabic trimeter. In this way, Ellis hopes to be faithful to the text without padding it unnecessarily. Ellis maintains the initial word *love*, but his determination to avoid verbal padding oversimplifies Francesca's diction: "and still it hurts. Love insists the loved loves back . . ." does not recall her forceful and rhythmic *s'apprendi/m'offende, forte/persona, perdona/m'abbandona* with their initial plosives and nasals. Thus, he tells us the *story* of Dante the pilgrim, but eclipses Dante the poet.

Robert Pinsky relegates the repetition of *love* to the second line of each tercet:

.....
**Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born,
Seized him for my fair body--which, in a fierce
Manner that still torments my soul, was torn
Untimely away from me. Love, which absolves
None who are loved from loving, made my heart burn
With joy so strong that as you see it cleaves
Still to him, here. Love gave us both one death.**

Here, Francesca's insistence on passing the blame is attenuated by the placement of *love* on the second line of each tercet. Pinsky, however, is constant to the *terza rima*, and has developed a poem that is "faithful in spirit" (Pinsky xxi) to Dante's. His definition of rhyme is far less restricting than the traditional definition, which matches vowel sounds in the end words.

[My] translation is based on a fairly systematic rhyming norm that defines rhyme as the same consonant sounds--however much vowels may differ--at the ends of words (xxi).

The system, taken from Yeats, is Pinsky's personal preference, which he finds more interesting than the predictable, same-vowel sound on the final or penultimate syllable. In fact, Pinsky suggests, "perhaps [rhyme] *must* be made more approximate, in order to avoid the comic feeling of limerick, or of W.S. Gillbert"(xxi).

In order to transpose Dante's verbal economy and precision within the structure of the *terza rima*, Pinsky uses enjambment much more often than Dante uses it. This has the effect of speeding the action of the poem to such an extent that Pinsky includes stanza breaks between tercets (xxiv). Thus, the repetition of *love*, although less visible because of its placement, is energized by the enjambment of the three tercets and by the robust rhyme scheme of the end words: *born, torn, burn* and *fierce, cleaves, lives*. The result is a shift in focus from the initial *Amor...Amor...Amor*, but this is counterbalanced by the Pinskian (or Yeatsian) interlocking rhyme scheme.

Thus, in order to remain faithful to Dante, the translator must sometimes depart from him. To paraphrase Ciardi, the English-language translator must play the instrument of English, not of Italian. Ciardi's answer to the *terza rima* is a poem of tercets whose rhyme scheme is aba with no linking rhyme. He seeks "to preserve the [Commedia's] *gestalt*" in a language that approximates Dante's and that is "distinguishable from prose only in that it transcends every known notion of prose"(Ciardi ix). His language is clear and economical, his syntax and rhythm have been hailed as "streamlined"(De Sua 115), and at times he recasts and rearranges Dante's tercets in order to effect a more Dantesque English (or is that an oxymoron?). Examining his translation of Count Ugolino's story in Canto XXXIII, we are swept along by the fast pace of his rhyme and rhythm.

**And just as you see me, I saw them fall
one by one on the fifth day and the sixth.
Then, already blind, I began to crawl
from body to body shaking them frantically.
Two days I called their names, and they were dead.
Then fasting overcame my grief and me.**

The tercets are linked by enjambment, but Ciardi makes no attempt to reproduce the harsh consonantal alliteration of *quivi, come, cascar*, and *quinto*; or the plosive *poscia, più, poté*. The rhyme scheme is a polite acknowledgment of Dante's poetic device as well as an admission of the impossibility of reproducing it in English. Let us read Dante:

**Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi,
vid'io cascar lì tre ad uno ad uno
tra'l quinto dì e 'l sesto; ond' io mi diedi,
già cieco, a brancolar sopra ciascuno,
e due dì li chiamai, poi che fur morti.
Poscia, più che'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno.**

And now, let us hear this music played by other instruments:

**And there he died; and just as you see me,
I saw the other three fall one by one
between the fifth day and the sixth; at which,
now blind, I started groping over each;
and after they were dead, I called them for
two days; then fasting had more force than grief.**
Mandelbaum:

**I watched the others fall till all were dead
Between the fifth day and the sixth. And I,
Already going blind, groped over my brood--
Calling to them, though I had watched them die,
For two long days. And then hunger had more
Power than even sorrow had over me.**

Pinsky:

**There he died; and even as you see me,
I saw the three fall, one by one,
between the fifth day and the sixth;
whence I betook me, already blind,
to groping over each, and for two days,
I called them after they were dead.
Then fasting did more than grief had done.**

Singleton:

**There he died. Just as you see me here,
I saw the other three fall one by one,
as the fifth day and the sixth day passed. And I,
by then gone blind, groped over their dead bodies.
Though they were dead, two days I called their names.
Then hunger proved more powerful than grief.**

Musa:

The commonality prevalent in all of these translations is Dante's diction. Pinsky and Ciardi are the most liberal in rearranging Dante's tercets. Indeed, both are poets in their own right and for this reason are perhaps better equipped to translate poetry (with no apologies to translation theorists) while remaining true to English. Singleton's "whence I betook me" recalls early English-language translators of Dante who insisted on polishing his "crude and improper diction"⁽⁴⁾ and making him sound as though he were a very "up-to-date" Victorian

indeed.⁽⁵⁾ Mandelbaum does not make it clear that he was groping over dead bodies; instead, he "started groping over each; and *after* they were dead, I called them for two days." Musa's straight-forward, "And I, by then gone blind, groped over their dead bodies" is perhaps even more vivid and gruesome than the picture drawn by Dante.

Finally, let us look at Ulysses' much discussed speech in Canto XXVI. It is here that Dante's style conforms to that of the epic, and it is here that the reader notes Ulysses' egocentricity, his repetition of *io* and single mention of *noi*, and his oration delivered as though he were standing before an audience of thousands. He tells Virgil and Dante that he convinced his followers to pass the Pillars of Hercules with these three tercets:

**'O frati,' dissi, 'che percento milia
perigli siete giunti a l'occidente,
a questa tanto picciola vigilia
d'i nostri sensi ch'è del rimanente
non voliate negar l'esperienze,
di retro al sol, del mondo senza gente.
Considerate la vostra semenza:
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.'** (112-120)

Ciardi caused an academic stir with his translation, which eliminated three lines, including *considerate la vostra semenza*:

**'Shipmates,' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand
perils have reached the West, do not deny
to the brief remaining watch our senses stand
experience of the world beyond the sun.
Greeks! You were not born to live like brutes,
but to press on toward manhood and recognition!'**

Ciardi's departures from Dante's text are both Dantean and Ciardian in their effect. For example *frati* is translated as *shipmates*, a word that creates, one might argue, an even stronger image of the bond among Ulysses' men and recalls their journey by sea, their confinement and vulnerability; hence, their common bond or brotherhood. His translation of *virtute* as *manhood* instead of *valor* or *virtue* has raised objections for semantic reasons. Yet, Ulysses is challenging his men to go where no one has gone, to do what no one has done, and to do it during their declining years when youth and manhood are slipping away. Like the good politician that he is, he promises them that they will regain their youth if only they "press on toward [their] *manhood*."⁽⁶⁾ Instead of *considerate la vostra semenza*, Ciardi's Ulysses simply exclaims, "Greeks!" Yet, this message is not unlike Dante's; it is an exhortation that they honor the valor and nobility of their blood. Finally, Ciardi departs from the original by translating *canoscenza* as *recognition*; his reason might well be as pedestrian as the fact that the end syllable rhymes with *sun*.

Cunningham is particularly strong in his indictment of Ciardi for having taken "extreme license" in what to him looks and sound like blank verse. Even more emphatic is Cunningham's objection to Ciardi's "liberal" definition of rhyme, specifically, his mixing of near rhyme with exact rhyme. The effect, says Cunningham, has just the opposite effect of the *terza rima*; it slows rather than accelerates the pace of the poem. Worse, he believes it to be jarring to the ear and distracting for the reader. In other words, Cunningham suggests that the translator use either near rhyme or exact rhyme, not both.

Pinsky, as we mentioned, uses near rhyme based on same-sound consonants. He, too, rearranges some of the tercets in Canto XXXIII. Here is Ulysses' speech to his men:

**'O, brothers who have reached the West,' I began
'Through a hundred thousand perils, surviving all:
So little is the vigil we see remain
Still for our senses, that you should not choose
To deny it the experience--behind the sun
Leading us onward--of the world which has
No people in it. Consider well your seed:
You were not born to live as a mere beast does,**

But for the pursuit of knowledge and the good.'

"The movement of Dante's *terza rima*," writes Pinsky, "is the great challenge for anyone who tries to render Dante's epic in English" (36). Ulysses' voice, translated into Pinsky poetry within the structure of the *terza rima*, is retained, and Pinsky succeeds in making the Inferno sound like a poem written in English, not a translation (Schemo C19). Some critics prefer Mandelbaum's translation because they claim it "corresponds line for line to verses as Dante wrote them, making it easier for students to grasp the relation between the Italian and English" (Schemo C19). But poetry cannot be lifted line by line from one language to the next and remain intact as a poetic or linguistic unit, for poetry is not a collection of words, but an alpha and omega of images, thoughts, rhythms, and music within the words, the text, and even, as Montale would say, in the white spaces in and around the text. Merrill argues that Mandelbaum makes only "a courteous gesture" to Dante's poetic form, yet "[his] unrhymed verse allows him a priceless fidelity to Dante's word order and emphasis"(xii).

Let us read Mandelbaum's Ulysses:

**'Brothers,' I said, 'o you, who having crossed
a hundred thousand dangers, reach the west,
to this brief waking-time that still is left
unto your senses, you must not deny
experience of that which lies beyond
the sun, and of the world that is unpeopled.
Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
you were not made to live your lives as brutes,
but to be followers of worth and knowledge.'**

This is not precisely a line-for-line rendering as Merrill claims; for if it were, it would not be poetry. It is, nevertheless, a tercet-by-tercet rendering. Ross notes that "Mandelbaum does not work on a high wire, facing danger and taking obvious risks . . . and, as such, [he] must eschew the constrictions of triple rhyme"(Ross 63).

Dante himself wrote about the difficulties of translating across linguistic borders, and Musa questions, "should it be the poet's voice that is heard, or the voice of the one who is making the poet accessible in another language?"(Musa ix). An obvious first response is that it is of course the poet's voice that must emerge in any translation. Here, the questions arise: who interprets the poet's voice? Is there a "correct" interpretation, or one interpretation that is more correct than another? Is it possible to carry meter across linguistic lines without diminishing or exaggerating rhyme? Is it possible to reproduce rhyme without sacrificing meaning? Is it possible to transport meaning without dispensing with rhyme and meter? Is there a definitive answer to any of these questions?

Longfellow writes that it is "the business of the translator to report what the author says, not to explain what he means."⁽⁷⁾ All art, original or translated, is interpretation and explanation. The painter's vision is interpreted by color and form, the choreographers's fantasy is expressed by the movement of the dancer's body; the images born in the poet's mind are translated into words on a page. Dante writes that translation is "the very metaphor of poetry at the moment in which [the poet] perceives as unavoidable the discrepancy between his words and his vision."⁽⁸⁾

The translator, then, is critic, commentator, interpreter, and in the case of poetry, musician. Some of the following English-language translations of the first tercet of Canto I may be more pleasing than others, some seem to express Dante's meaning with greater clarity, and some seem to have abandoned his poetry altogether.

**Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in some dark woods,
for I had wandered off from the straight path.**
(Mark Musa)

**In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood
where the straight road had been lost sight of.**
(Seamus Heaney)
**At midpoint of the journey of our life
I woke to find me astray in a dark wood,**

perplexed by paths with the straight way at strife.

(Geoffrey L. Bickersteth)

Midway in the course of our life

**I found myself within a dark wood,
where the right way was lost.**

(Rev. H.F. Tozer)

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself

In dark woods, the right road lost.

(Robert Pinsky)

Halfway through our trek in life

**I found myself in this dark wood,
miles away from the right road.**

(Steve Ellis)

Halfway through the journey we are living

**I found myself deep in a darkened forest,
For I had lost all trace of the straight path.**

(James Finn Cotter)

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.**

(Allen Mandelbaum)

Half-way upon the journey of our life

**I roused to find myself within a forest
In darkness, for the straight way had been lost.**

(Henry Johnson)

Halfway along the path of this existence

**I found that I was in a gloomy wood,
My right way being blotted by the distance.**

(Louis How)

Upon the journey of our life midway

**I came unto myself in a dark wood,
For the straight path I had gone astray.**

(Jefferson B. Fletcher)

In the midway of this our mortal life,

**I found me in a gloomy wood astray
Gone from the path direct.**

(Henry F. Cary)

Midway upon the journey of our life

**I found myself in a dark wood,
where the right way was lost.**

(Charles Eliot Norton)

In the midst of my journey through this life of ours,

**I was in a dark forest,
because I had lost the right road.**

(Allan Gilbert)

Halfway upon the road of our life,

**I came to myself amid a dark wood
where the straight path was confused.**

(Arthur J. Butler)

Midway life's journey I was made aware

**That I had strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.**

(Laurence Binyon)

**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.**

(Sisson)

**Just halfway through this journey of our life
I reawoke to find myself inside
a dark wood, way off course, the right road lost.**

(Tom Phillips)

**Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
from the straight road and woke to find myself
alone in a dark wood.**

(Joan Ciardi)

In the middle of the journey of our life
I came to myself within a dark wood
where the straight way was lost.

(John D. Sinclair)

**Midway in human life's allotted span,
I found myself in a dark wood,
where the straight path I sought in vain.**

(Ronald Bottrall)

**Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straight forward pathway had been lost.**

(Henry W. Longfellow)

**In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in gloomy wood, astray,
Gone from the path direct . . .**

(Mario Praz)

De Sua is correct in his observation that "it is the nature of a translation to fade more quickly than its original, just as it is the nature of a classic to be interpreted anew by each age"(De Sua 25). In fact, the variety of these translations is a tribute to the richness and profundity of Dante's original and underscores the fact that there will never be a definitive translation of the *Commedia* in any language. The best any translator will ever do will be to play Dante's poetic score. The instruments will not be Dante's instruments; the musicians will not be Dante; yet the *real* fourteenth-century Dante will be carried into the modern era and into all the *modern* eras to come in as many poetic and prosaic forms as there are translators. Each new translation of the *Commedia* enriches our knowledge of Dante the poet and Dante the pilgrim; each new translation casts a new light on Francesca, Ulysses, and Ugolino, on all the comedic and tragic souls confined to the dark side of *Acheronte*, on the hopeful penitents in Purgatorio, and on the cleansed and blessed souls who bask in God's light in Paradiso.

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Notes

1. Cf. University of Utah on the web: "La terzina si emancipa dal sirvantese."
2. Although some dispute this assertion; English, for example has more vowel sounds than Italian; see Bickersteth's Preface.
3. cf. Tinkler-Villani, pp. 76-77.
4. cf. De Sua's quote from Dr. Johnson.
5. For example, here is Bickersteth's translation of one tercet: "And there he died; then, as *thou* seest *me*, did I / between the fifth and sixth day even so / see the three, one by one, fall and die." Note that Longfellow had some influence here; here is his translation: "And there he died; and, as thou seest me, / I saw the three fall one by one, between / the fifth day and the sixth; whence I betook me, / Already blind, to groping over them"
6. Cf. Freccero. "In [Ulysses'] speech to his men, the comfort he offers them is their own manhood and stature." p. 144.

7. cf. De Sua, p. 65.

8. cf. Mazzotta, 164.

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