

DANTE TRANSLATING

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This essay is intended as a discussion document. Its argument is that translation does not involve a search for conclusive authority but is rather a performative act, engaging the reader of a translation as well as its author in close critical engagement with the text. This may be said even in considering the translation of Dante's *Commedia*—a work which all too often is thought to aim at final, definitive utterance.

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It is a great privilege to play some part in a discussion of Dante—and of Translation, too. It is also for me a pleasure to be back here, where forty years ago I worked very happily for several months. In that period, I learned at first hand that Dublin—since at least the days of Joyce and Beckett—has been the world-capital of linguistic brilliance; and the phrase 'linguistic brilliance' might well sound the key-note in any approach to Dante's poem. In practice, the especial pleasure of translating Dante's text—or of analyzing the many translations that already exist—is to engage directly with the poet's own scintillations. It is for that reason that you will find a lot of stuff in the following pages, mainly my own stuff. This is intended later, to allow sparks to fly, *contra* as well as *pro*. Everyone, of course, ought to translate the *Commedia*—at least once in a lifetime. So perhaps you already have versions in your pockets very different from mine.

For all such talk of pleasure, one had better admit at the outset that there is a difficulty here which bears as much upon the theory as upon the practice of translation. For does not Dante himself declare in *Convivio* 2.7 that Translation is impossible, arguing that no translator can ever replicate the patterning, rhythms and aural music of an original text? Should we all then 'Abandon hope,' mindful of what Dante does in the *Inferno* to those who cross him? Well, my answer would be that one certainly should not give up. Indeed I would suggest that Translation is only possible because it is impossible. This flashy paradox is pretty much the essence of

what I might say as a contribution to translation theory. What I mean is that there is, quite obviously, a logical distance between any original text and its translation. Having admitted that, however, as the very condition of all translation, questions – and possibilities – begin to proliferate around the meaning of accuracy. And great fun is to found—as well as sophistication of theory—in addressing such questions, at least in the literary sphere. It wouldn't be fun at all if one translated the warning on an Italian train 'not to lean out of the window' as 'feel free to feel the wind in your hair'. But in a poem this rendering might – just – be possible if it was meant to translate an implicit irony or transgressive tonality. Might a fixation on the accuracy of single words lead one simply to disregard such features of a text as rhythm, tone, colour and surprise. Dante might number such features of a text among the impossibles. But still, the ingenuity involved in attempting to do so might, imaginatively, be as exhilarating as, say, rock climbing without ropes.

So, what is accuracy? What is truth? It is in response to questions such as this that theory displays its own particular subtlety. And I shall leave the nuances of this issue, largely, to the to/-and-fro of later conversation. For my part, however, the two words that will probably guide me in my own response are Interpretation and Performance.

As to interpretation, in translating the *Commedia* one is likely to discover, as early as *Inferno* 5, that there already 103 translations of this episode – and 10 more in active preparation from Reykjavic down to the suburbs of Wellington, New Zealand. But if that seems dispiriting just google Beethoven's 9th symphony and you'll discover something like 935 recorded versions of that piece. And each is likely to have its own contribution to make to our understanding or appreciation of Beethoven's original score. Is not Dante's text, likewise, a score where vowels, rhymes assonances and alliterations are the equivalent of crotchets, crescendos and tempo markings? A final, supposedly authoritative translation is not simply impossible. It isn't really desirable. Interpretative translation is rather a form of creative micro-criticism, responding to that – yes – brilliant or mercurial detail in the text.

Or else say that translation is a Performance. This designation has emerged out of the many years that have been spent in research seminars on the present subject. Take for instance biblical translation—where you might have thought authority really would matter. A Jesuit academic arrived once in our lecture room. He was very venerable, very scholarly and very Oxford-style individual. But while on missionary work in Africa he had single-handedly

translated the Bible. And when he came to the Beatitudes his ingenuity, even his glee, had reached a peak of inspiration. The predictable translation of Matthew or of Luke requires something like 'Blessed are the poor, blessed are those that mourn, blessed are the peace-makers.' But in this new version, the phrase is 'Congratulations' – congratulations to the poor, the grieving the peace-makers. And this isn't just a matter of jazzing it up. At a stroke, the original text is transformed as well as translated so that the thick air of sanctimonious commandment is swept away and in rushes the exuberant, victorious vitality which Christ's message must surely announce as a central element in spiritual happiness. 'O gioia! O ineffabile! O allegrezza!,' says Dante in *Paradiso* 27.

So, casting off from the shores of lexical accuracy, may I now suggest that Translation can also act not only as an interpretative or performative act but also as a creative art. For many centuries the cultivation of such an art has been one of the main motives in the enterprise of translation. In and through a close engagement with foreign texts, translators have regularly attempted to enlarge and enrich the creative resources of their own vernacular tongue. Think of Petrarch: his own engagement with the pure forms of classical Latin initiated an attention to the characteristics of classical language which in the course of the Renaissance led translation to become a matter of imitation and subsequently of what came to be called 'innurition,' a nourishing of the vernacular on the fine provisions of Latin and Greek. More especially think of *Petrarch-ism*. In the early Renaissance, poets throughout Europe—even belatedly in 16th century England—turned to the translation of Petrarch so as to learn for themselves something of his fluency, melodic refinement and lyrical *sprezzatura*. And out of this eventually comes Shakespeare, in resistance as much as deference to the Italian model; nor do similar processes seem likely ever to end. Ezra Pound, for instance, must always be an important, if somewhat zany, protagonist in the arena of translation-theory; and he adopts a whole spectrum of masks or personae in attempting to release English from the withering grip of Petrarchan poeticism, trying his hand at Anglo-Saxon, Occitan and above all Chinese forms of linguistic organization. This is why I would like to start with the famous example of his version of the Chinese lyric (by Mei Sheng, 140 BC) 'Blue, blue the grass ...'

Ezra Pound (translating Mei Sheng)

Arthur Waley

Blue, blue the grass about the river

Green, green,

The grass by the river-bank.

And the willows have overfilled the garden.	Thick, thick, The willow trees in the garden.
And within the mistress, in the midst of her youth,	Sad, sad, The lady in the tower.
White, white of face, hesitates, passing the door.	White, white, Sitting at the casement window.
Sender, she puts forth a slender hand;	Fair, fair,
And she was a courtesan in the old days,	Her red-powdered face.
And she has married a sot,	Small, small,
Who now goes drunkenly out	She puts out her pale hand. Once she
And leaves her too much alone	was a dancing-house girl. Now she
	is a wandering man's wife. The wandering man went, but did not return.
	It is hard alone to keep an empty bed.

Some authorities would say—and by this I mean my wife, who is Chinese—that this is perfectly literal, since ancient Chinese did not distinguish between ‘blue’ and ‘green.’ I might meekly want to argue that Pound’s version introduces a delicately surreal note into a hauntingly imagistic line, refreshingly far from any merely descriptive ‘green.’

We might want to follow such general considerations through in discussion. So, in the next example, you will also find lines from TS Eliot’s *Four Quartets* where he engages with Canto 15 of *Inferno*.

TS Eliot: ‘Little Gidding’

***Inf.* 15.16–30**

In the uncertain hour before the morning	Quando incontrammo d’anime
Near the ending of interminable night	una schiera
At the recurrent end of the unending	che venian lungo l’argine, e ciascuna
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue	ci riguardava come suol da sera
Had passed below the horizon of his homing	guardare uno altro sotto nuova
While the dead leaves still rattled on like tin	luna;
Over the asphalt where no other sound was	e sì ver’ noi aguzzavan le ciglia
Between three districts whence the smoke arose	come ’l vecchio sartor fa ne la cruna.
I met one walking, loitering and hurried	Così adocchiato da cotal famiglia,
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves	fui conosciuto da un, che mi
Before the urban dawn wind unresisting.	prese
And as I fixed upon the down-turned face	per lo lembo e gridò: «Qual maraviglia!».
That pointed scrutiny with which we challenge	
The first-met stranger in the waning dusk	

I caught the sudden look of some dead mas- ter Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled	E io, quando 'l suo braccio a me distese, ficcai li occhi per lo cotto aspetto,
Both one and many; in the brown baked features The eyes of a familiar compound ghost Both intimate and unidentifiable.	sì che 'l viso abbruciato non di- fese la conoscenza sù a al mio 'ntel- letto;
So I assumed a double part, and cried And heard another's voice cry: "What! are you here?" Although we were not.	e chinando la mano a la sua fac- cia, rispuosi: «Siete voi qui, ser Bru- netto?».

Eliot's profound devotion to the precision and visual impact of Dante's poetry is well attested. In this section of *Little Gidding*, his extant drafts make clear how closely he wrestled with the form of Dante's original. Yet the plain, even brutal encounter that Dante depicts between himself and his Brunetto Latini is mesmerically (and creatively) transformed: Dante encounters a figure who, though scorched by eery Hell-fire, is still recognizable and nameable: 'Siete voi qui, Ser Brunetto?' Yet this is translated (or re-created) by Eliot as 'the familiar compound ghost' Right, wrong, good, bad, interesting ... or what? Then, also in the following case, is Seamus Heaney, a wonderfully engaged reader of the *Commedia*.

Seamus Heaney from
"Ugolino" in 'Field Work'

Inf. 33.22-27

Others will pine as I pined in that jail Which is called Hunger after me, and watch As I watched through a narrow hole	Breve pertugio dentro da la Muda, la qual per me ha 'l titol de la fame, e che conviene ancor ch'altrui si chiuda,
<i>Moon after moon, bright and som- nambulant</i> Pass overhead until that night I dreamt The bad dream	m'avea mostrato per lo suo forame <i>più lune già</i> , quand'io feci 'l mal sonno che del futuro mi squarciò 'l velame.

But what is happening in this snippet here—translation or creative interpretation? Picturing Ugolino's terrible imprisonment in the Tower of Hunger, Dante records the passing of months of starvation by three words which speak of 'many moo' waxing and waning as seen through a painfully constricted chink in the wall of his prison: *più lune già*. The constriction of the repeated 'u' and the dull unechoing 'gia' take away all the easy lyricism that mention of

the Moon often generates: moon/ June/ croon. But Heaney chooses to put it all back, repeating the sonorous double O and introducing the lovely but languorous 'somniaulant'. Why?

So close and committed attention to the original can still produce performances with an electric vitality of their own. But before I leave the notion of performance, I want to extend it one step further and consider, briefly, translation as it occurs between the linguistic original and other forms or artistic genres. Is it merely a matter of dumbing-down to translate a text into, say, dramatic or musical or choreographic adaptations. Maybe, but not necessarily, I think. I will take just two examples (though, as a response to Dante's Ugolino episode, Blake and Rodin are there to invite further consideration [figs. 1-2]).



Figure 1. WILLIAM BLAKE, *Count Ugolino and his sons in prison* (1826). Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum.



Figure 2. AUGUSTE RODIN, *Ugolino and his sons* (1881). Paris, Musée Rodin.

In Ravenna the *Commedia* is regularly presented in dramatic form by the excellent Teatro delle Albe. In these performance—which are also interpretations—a group of actors leads the audience through various sites in the city, being careful not to make the mayor’s house a location in Hell. And then the audience-members themselves become participants. Groups are designated to read a particular *canto* in chorus. Now, as an interpretation, this seems to me very revealing. We do not know whether Dante himself read his poem aloud. But a communal promenade to my mind evokes civic life as Dante longed for it to be: the city is for once a space where voices can join together, free from faction or corruption, in the productive harmony that civilization was always meant to cultivate—as Dante learns from Cacciaguida in the Heaven of Mars.

Or take two another two cases closer, to home. Both of these refer to the representation of Movement. And I shall shortly return to the verb ‘move’ – muovere – as a crux in translating the *Commedia*, along with a range of other verbs such as *vedere* and *sentire*. For Dante, speaking philosophically, everything in the created universe moves: ‘Love moves the sun and other stars.’ Equally, mushrooms grow, while human beings move for good or ill to their chosen goals under impetus of free will. Well: I once put all this to a teacher of theatrical movement at RADA and she went away to make the *Purgatorio* the text for her movement choruses for a whole academic year. I had also suggested to her that Samuel Beckett was probably one of the best ever readers of Dante, as is especially evident in his wonderful depiction of ‘Belacqua,’ a name drawn from *Purgatorio* 4. Belacqua—represented by Beckett as a particularly lethargic student at Trinity College Dublin—reveals the significance of movement by being disinclined to move at all. But at RADA the chemistry produced a miraculous mash-up. The movement-chorus did move with those variations of tempi that are characteristic of Dante’s *Purgatory*; and then, translating into Go-dot-mode, all slumped down until two of them rose slowly to their feet and put on bowler-hats.

Or else take the wonderful line with which Dante celebrates Beatrice’s presence—and her pace—in the *Vita nuova*: ‘Ella si va.’ In this case, I was talking to a group of very good dancers, wondering how they would interpret this movement. It is a really difficult phrase to translate, precisely because of its simplicity (and Rossetti’s version here show what can go wrong: ‘she walks with humbleness.’ Really?).

Dante, *Vita nuova* 26

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare

Dante Gabriele Rossetti

My lady looks so gentle and so pure

la donna mia, quand'ella altrui saluta,	When yielding salutation by the way,
ch'ogne lingua devèn, tremando,	That the tongue trembles and has
muta,	nought to say,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.	And the eyes, which fain would see,
	may not endure.
<i>Ella si va</i> , sentendosi laudare,	And still, amid the praise she hears se-
	cure,
benignamente e d'umiltà vestuta,	<i>She walks with humbleness for her ar-</i>
	<i>ray</i>

But 'She moves,' 'she strides,' 'she floats,' all seem to coarsen the simplicity of Dante's phrase—and to lose the hint of self-motivation that comes quite naturally in that Italian reflexive *si*. But I was happily interrupted. 'Just shut up,' the dancers said, 'and let us give it a go.' So they did. And I'm glad to say that none of them chose to do pirouettes and entrechats or to adopt simpering pre-raphaelite poses. All of their versions sought poise, self-possession, and dynamism. In fact, someone tried out a flamenco version. And there's some justification even for this if you look at the Botticelli version (fig. 3). Beatrice needs somehow to be seen, not as a plaster saint or over-enthusiastic schoolmarm but rather as a source of energy, poised yet dynamic.



Figure 3. SANDRO BOTTICELLI, *Paradiso 6* (1480). Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett.

So far I've been concerned with questions that might arise in the discussion translation-theory, but I'm moving now towards a consideration of practice. This will involve putting my own neck on the block and inviting full and frank criticism. But on the way to the scaffold, I might suggest that we need to consider the relationship between the theory and practice of translation. There was a time when I thought there was no relationship at all. The

experience of translating seemed a bit like playing a fruit-machine: you sit in front of the screen; the wheels go round; one is the original text; the second is the full range of native possibilities; the third is one's own limited competence within that language, and every now and then you hear the chink of coin in the pay-out. But mostly it's two cherries and a banana. Or else I might say that reading a translation was akin to playing ping-pong, especially if one is publishing in a parallel text. I have been lucky in that respect: Penguin—the best publisher, by the way, I've ever encountered—did eventually produce a single language version; and that helps to emphasize that Dante is a great narrative writer, or even a page-turner, who needs to be read through without intrusive footnotes or commentaries. But their first version as parallel text reflects the origins of the translation in many years of fruitful discussion with brilliant students who might not know much Italian but could conjure up marvelously unexpected readings from a quick flick between pages set side by side. It was, in fact, one of these students who suggested the ping-pong analogy. This is Professor Matthew Reynolds at Oxford, who is now one of our most important authorities in Translation Studies—and, ping-pong notwithstanding, he is still a friend.

For all that, one must agree that any translation will reveal important preoccupations in regard to theory, demonstrating what matters, to the translator, in a critical evaluation of how the original proceeds. Such concerns must be especially acute in the case of Dante who is so deeply involved, as in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, with questions of linguistic theory and, equally, of critical, even polemical, evaluation. From that work, I would like to pick out for later consideration just two sentences, each with theoretical implications: 'Words are rational and sensuous signs,' and 'It is more human to be understood than to understand.'

But in the main, I shall be concerned from now on with four mainly practical topics—all of them pointing to aspects of language where English writers have still a lot to learn from Dante's Italian. The first I will call 'lexical density.' The second concentrates on Dante's technical terminology. The third—to me the most exciting—is syntax and argument, in relation especially to the verbs in all its forms, tenses, moods subjunctive and conditionals, along with conjunctions and even prepositions. The fourth, following the passages quoted from the *De Vulgari*, emphasizes the materiality or sensuousness of language and will include the question of rhyme—which is the elephant in the study of any translator of the *Commedia*.

So, first, there's 'density.' The issue here correlates to Dante's concern with the untranslatable quality of verse and also with his emphasis upon the sensuousness of human language. It is a fairly well-established principle in literary translation that if one cannot find a dictionary equivalent for a certain word or phrase then one might compensate by seeking equivalents. This is especially applicable in the case of word-play or ambiguity. And here I am very glad not to be translating from English into Italian. Shakespeare makes many such demands not infrequently in his lewd or scurrilous puns; but take another case: Hopkins speaks of God as 'world's strand sway of the sea' and Google translates 'strand' here as 'filo'—the divine thread that binds up all creation:

G. M Hopkins
'The Wreck of the Deutschland'

Thou mastering me God!
giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones & veins in
me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what
with dread,
Thy doing:

But this misses two other entirely apposite meanings of strand: God is the beach or limit of the human landmass; God is also the all-powerful ocean that destroys human beings on its rocks or leaves us deserted on a foreign shore. Please let me know if anyone comes up with a fuller or 'denser' version than the estimable Google:

(Google Translate)

Tu mi stai padroneggiando
Dio mio! donatore di respiro e pane;
Il filo del mondo, l'ondeggiamento del mare;
Signore di vivere e morto;
Tu hai legato ossa e vene in me, mi hai fissato la carne,
E dopo averlo quasi sfatto, cosa con terrore
Tuo modo di fare

Meanwhile, let's be grateful for Dante. There are occasionally moments like this in the *Commedia* as when Francesca comes to meet Dante through 'l'aere perso.' 'Perso' can be the deep blue-black,

inky color known in heraldry as *perse*; or else it can be the past participle of *perdere* ‘perduto:’ lost. And both meanings add to the drama of the description. But Dante’s style—for all its variety of voice—is fundamentally a plain style. It is, after all, ‘more human to be understood than to understand.’ And the strangeness or tension of Dante’s language, especially in English eyes, comes largely from the poet’s avoidance of ambiguity in favor of crystalline precision and clarity of intent.

Yet this same clarity and precision is responsible for its own form of ‘density.’ And this brings me to a consideration of Dante’s handling of technical terminology. Take for instance the case of the word *virtù* which occurs in the poem some twenty-eight times. It would surely be a distortion of Dante’s philosophical principles if one translated this, unthinkingly, with the English ‘virtue.’ ‘Virtue’ in English has a tendency to imply a rather pallid conformity to a rule of conduct; but Dante draws on Aristotelian conceptions whereby the virtues are the inner strengths that we cultivate in seeking to enjoy a fully flourishing existence. Moreover, Dante seems to be aware of what happens when we do not give full consideration—or density or precision—to that term. So in *Inferno* 26 Ulysses, stirring his shipmen with his rhetorical pyrotechnics to undertake a final and disastrous journey, proclaims that human beings were made to follow ‘*virtù e canoscenza*:’

Inf. 26.88-99, 118-120

indi la cima qua e là menando, come fosse la lingua che parlasse,	Drawing its pinnacle this way and that, as though this truly were a tongue that spoke,
gittò voce di fuori e disse: «Quando	it flung out utterance, declaring: ‘Once
mi dipartì’ da Circe, che sottrasse	I’d set my course from Circe (she had kept
me più d’un anno là presso a Gaeta, prima che sì Enëa la nomasse, né dolcezza di figlio, né la pieta del vecchio padre, né ’l debito amore	me near Gaeta for a year or more, before Aeneas, passing, named it that) no tenderness for son, no duty owed to aging fatherhood, no love that should
lo qual dovea Penelopè far lieta, vincer potero dentro a me l’ardore ch’i’ ebbi a divenir del mondo esperto e de li vizi umani e del valore.	have brought Penelope delight, could overcome in me my long desire, burning to understand how this world works and know of human vices worth and valour.
.....

Considerate la vostra semenza.	Hold clear in thought your seed and origin.
Fatti non foste a viver come brutti	You were not made to live as mindless brutes,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza	but go in search of virtue and true knowledge

Yet, said like that, as a sweeping abstraction, the word might easily be the motto of some over-ambitious language academy. We need something more focused and concrete than this. Which is what Dante in his many iterations of the word actually provides. There is a kind of lexical narrative which sees the word enriched and expanded in meaning as the poem goes its own far from disastrous way. The first step occurs as early perhaps as in *Inferno* 2, where Dante's 'virtude stanca' comes to itself again like a flower recovering by virtue (exactly) of its inner sap from the effect of over-night frost:

Inf. 2.127-130

Quali fioretti dal notturno gelo	As little flowers bend low on freezing nights.
chinati e chiusi, poi che 'l sol li	closed tight but then as sunlight whitens them,
'mbianca,	
si drizzan tutti aperti in loro stelo,	grow upright on their stems and fully open.
tal mi fec'io di mia virtude stanca	now so did I. My wear powers reviving

And the journey will come close to its conclusion in the scintillating *Paradiso* 2—a canto which Beckett's Belacqua thought to be rather stodgy but to me seems a radiant example of delight in the technical force of *virtù*. Why are there black blotches on the surface of the Moon? This is not at all because 'blackness' indicates any deficiency or negative state. Black and white each have their own reality in the patterned diversity of the cosmos. Each is the product of a particular *virtù*, each generated in the highest heaven. So the word *virtù* occurs six times in Canto 2, and three of these instances occur in the exuberantly technical passage that follows:

Riguarda bene omai sì com'io vado	Look closely at the steps I'll take from here
per questo loco al vero che disiri,	to reach the truth that you so much desire,
sì che poi sappi sol tener lo guado.	so you'll know how to cross this on your own.

Lo moto e la **virtù** d'i santi giri,
come dal fabbro l'arte del martello,
da' beati motor convien che spiri;
e 'l ciel cui tanti lumi fanno bello,
de la mente profonda che lui volve
prende l'image e fassene suggello.
E come l'alma dentro a vostra polve
per differenti membra e conformate
a diverse potenze si risolve,
così l'intelligenza sua bontate
moltiplicata per le stelle spiega,
girando sé sovra sua unitate.

Virtù diversa fa diversa lega
col prezioso corpo ch'ella avviva,
nel qual, sì come vita in voi, si lega.

Per la natura lieta onde deriva,
la **virtù** mista per lo corpo luce
come letizia per pupilla viva.
Da essa vien ciò che da luce a luce
par differente, non da denso e raro;
essa è formal principio che produce,
conforme a sua bontà, lo turbo e
'l chiaro.

Motion and **virtue** in these holy
spheres
rightly draw breath (as hammer skill
from smith),
in turn deriving from angelic moves.

The sphere of stars. so fine with all
its lights,
receives from that deep mind that rolls
it round
the image that it has then prints that
seal.

And as your soul within the dust you
are
diffuses and resolves through different
limbs,
adapting thus to various powers of life.
so too angelic intellect unfolds
(while turning still round its own
unity)
its goodness multiplied through all the
stars
so different **virtue** forms a different
bond
with all the precious bodies that it
brings
deriving as it does from happy kind

The **virtue**, fused with body, shines
throughout
To life – as life in you its strength is
bound,
as joy does in the pupil of an eye.
From this there comes – and not from
rare
or dense – apparent differences from
light to light.
That is the formal principle that
makes,
according to its goodness, clear and
cloud.

Now there is a range of such words to which the translator will need to bring not only attention but also something of Dante's own intensity of concentration. Some of these are, scholastically technical such as *sustanza* or *fine* (in the sense of aim, defining purpose or telos). Others derive from the vocabulary of courtly or feudal ethics. So *larghezza* may originally signify aristocratic largesse but in Paradiso 5.19 the word then comes to express the generosity—or infinite spaciousness—of God as our Creator. Likewise, *valore*

moves through some fifteen occurrences—indicating ‘worth, prowess and chivalric valor.’ Like *virtù*, *valore* is another word that Ulysses uses with inebriated panache. But in Dante’s own voice the term becomes rich enough to be applied at the opening of *Paradiso* 10 (to designate divine activity as manifest in the energetic oneness of the Trinity: ‘lo primo ed ineffabile valore’). Then there are those words to which Dante gives particular attention from as early as the *Vita nuova* and the *Convivio*. *Pietà* and even *nuovo* are examples of this. But I would draw especial attention to the verb *mirare*. The temptation is to translate this as ‘to wonder’ or ‘to gaze.’ But this—rather wonderfully—just will not do. ‘Wonder’ and ‘gaze’ in English tend, I think, to imply a rather vapid gawping or gormlessness; but in the *Commedia* *mirare* reveals ever more deeply its etymological association with *ammirazione* and *miracolo*. A translation would need somehow to signify a precisely focused act of pure intelligence such as one might give to the finest works of art—say to Cimabue’s *Maestà*—which itself depicts the wonder of intelligent attention.

But this brings us to syntax. Syntax, among its several functions, serves to hold single words in an interconnected context of definition, so that we can appreciate their precise significance. Yet in 20th-century poetics, under the influence of figures such as Pound and TE Hulme, syntax has come to be frowned upon as an impediment to imagistic freedom. Yet, for me, Dante’s *sic che* -s, *tanto ...quanto*-s and *perché*-s have always seemed especially gripping. And if we disparage such factors one not only deprives language of a primary resource but also, in translating Dante’s poem, blurs the vigorous articulation both of argument and of progressive, purposeful narrative. Syntax is one of the things that English really does need to learn from the *Commedia*. But Dante, as early as *Inferno* 1.9, shakes himself out of torpid self-indulgence, ‘questa selva, selvaggia ed aspra e forte,’ with a muscular ‘ma;’ ‘but to treat of the good I found in this infernal wood.’ Or else one might examine later, perhaps in detail—one of the most philosophical and simultaneously passionate speeches in the whole poem, Marco Lombardo’s diatribe in *Purgatorio* 16:

***Purg.* 16.67-78**

Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate
pur suso al cielo, **pur come se** tutto

You who, living there, derive the
cause of all
straight from the stars alone, **as if**
alone,

movesse seco di necessitate.	These made all move in mere necessity.
Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto	Yet were that so , in you would be destroyed
libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia	the freedom of your will – and justice fail
per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto.	in giving good its joy and grief its ill.
Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;	The stars initiate your vital moves.
non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica ,	I don't say all and yet suppose I did ,
lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia,	You're given light to know what's good and bad
e libero voler; che, se fatica	and free will, which if it can endure
ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura,	beyond its early battle with the stars,
poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica .	And if it's nourished well , will conquer all.

We could look here at the marvelously tense conditionals – ‘se... se.. se’ and especially the subjunctive in the daring thought-experiment; ‘posto ch’l dica ...,’ all of these grammatical elements being emphasized and punctuated by enjambments and caesurae. This, for me, is language at its fullest stretch—and that is what poetry is: language at its fullest stretch.

I could go on, getting rhapsodic, perhaps, about Dante’s gerunds or even about his prepositions. Dante himself seems to be especially excited by the preposition ‘in,’ witness those extraordinary neologisms, especially in *Paradiso* 9, where reflexive verbs are created out of pronouns and the prefix *in-*:

Par. 9.79-81

perché non satisface a' miei disii?	Bring my desires the satisfaction due
Già non attendere' io tua dimanda,	If I in-you-ed myself as you in-me,
s'io m'intuassi, come tu t'inmii».	I would not still await what you might ask.

But verbs in particular, even, or especially in their simplest form, are of crucial importance to Dante, as they should also be to his translator. The trouble is that verbs in certain creative writing courses tend to induce a kind of purple overkill. So if you happen to be writing a romantic novel—à la Barbara Cartland—the

chances are you would not say, plainly, ‘Sir Hugo kissed Evangeline; and she kissed him,’ but rather ‘Sir Hugo bristled towards her tweedily while Evangeline—graceful even as she swooned—puckered her roseate lips in reply.’ Well, against opposition like that I do not think that Dante would have won a Booker prize. It is, rather, an aspect of his plainness that he should trust the simplest verbs of motion, sight, and feeling. These are of course the very words around which the narrative action of the *Commedia* is centered. Equally, they point to those fundamental actions that attract Dante’s philosophical attention. In that light, let me return to that fundamental word *muovere*. Yes: Love moves the sun and other stars, and Justice in *Inferno* 3 ‘moves’ the maker of Hell Gate. Beatrice not only moves with absolute poise but commissions Virgil to move at *Inferno* 2.67 ‘con la tua parola ornate.’ But what about the last line of *Inferno* 1: ‘Allora [Virgil] si mosse e io gli tenni dietro.’ Supposing (now that we’ve rejected Barbara Cartland) one were to attempt a hip-hop version of the verse; well, I am less *au fait* with hip hop than with romantic *novelettes* but here goes: ‘so he popped away and I cracked on behind.’ Here, too, the desire for color not to say flash would destroy the gravitas and the significantly modest advance that Dante here registers. All we need if we are to give the plain words poetic weight is the rhythm and balance created by the linked two halves of the line.

I come now to the vexed question of the rhyme and the *terzina*—both of which my version deplorably ignores. Now I am not going to rely on the familiar excuse, which asserts, wailingly, that rhyme is far easier in Italian than in English. There are some translations that do valiantly approximate to *terza rima*, and some are very revealing. However, for the most part, the danger is that an obsession with line-endings will distort equally important considerations—especially in regard to syntax—that occur in the preceding part of a line.’ I name no names but some rhyming versions seem to delight in pulling rabbits (rhyming rabbits) out of the hat: ‘look I got there in the end!’ The alternative is to analyze what rhyme actually does in the deep structure of Dante’s verse and try, no doubt in vain, to achieve a similar effect by other means.

It is here, I suggest, that Dante’s description of words as rational and sensuous signs has an especial significance. In regard to rationality, the progressive rhyme scheme of the poem—with its unfailing elegance—shapes and forms the development of Dante’s thinking. It is sometimes said that *terza rima* is a metrical homage to the Trinity: maybe, but that suggestion will hardly be enough if it means merely that rhyming threes symbolize the divine triad. The

Trinity involves a conception of dynamic inter-relationship, sometimes viewed as a dance or perichoresis; but it is the dynamism and generative patterning of Dante's verse that manifests its intelligence and indeed its participation in life of a divine Creator. James Joyce captures something of this when he pictures the *terzina* as three ladies dancing down the Dantean page.¹ But Dante himself goes somewhat beyond the prettiness of that suggestion. In *Paradiso* 28 he contemplates the interweaving of the nine orders of angels, acting in three triads of three:

Par. 28.115-126

L'altro ternaro, che così germoglia	The second triad where the sap thus flows
in questa primavera sempiterna	within the sempiternal spring-time season –
che notturno Ariete non dispoglia,	which night-ascendant Aries never spoils –
perpetüalmente 'Osanna' sberna	sings out perpetually that winter's done,
con tre melode, che suonano in tree	"Osanna" in three tunes that sound in three
ordini di letizia onde s'interna.	orders of happiness, each en-threeing here.
In essa gerarcia son l'altre dee:	The other gods in this hierarchic rank
prima Dominazioni, e poi Virtudi;	are firstly Dominations, Virtues next,
l'ordine terzo di Podestadi èe.	then, thirdly, there's the Order of the Powers,
Poscia ne' due penultimi tripudi	In threesome reels the two penultimates
Principati e Arcangeli si girano;	are Principalities, Archangels, too,
l'ultimo è tutto d'Angelici ludi.	The last of al is all Angelic games.

One notes, incidentally the sheer relish for technical terminology that is displayed here in the catalog of the angelic names—Dominations, Virtues, Powers and so forth. But above all, there is here a wonderful rhythmic progress through 'tre' to 'dee' to 'ee' in which three is brought into animated relationship with the notion of deity and then with being itself, the *essere* or ee|of the divine 'I am.'

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 175: "...la tua pace / ...che parlar ti piace / ...mentrechè il vento come fa, ci tace. / He saw them three by three, approaching girls, in green, in rose, in russet, entwining, *per l'aer perso*, in mauve, in purple, *quella pacifica orifamma*, in gold of oriflamme, *di rimirar fe più ardenti*."

That, I think is what linguistic rationality looks like. As for ‘body,’ one might point to the sheer carnality, even brutality, that is so often displayed in the *Inferno*, as for example in the voice of Vanni Fucci in Canto 24: *Fucci/mucci/cruci*.² But body, too, is for Dante an integral and defining aspect of the human person, restored in us immortally at the Resurrection of the Dead. So in that sustained hymn to the Resurrected Body that begins in *Paradiso* 10, even philosophers such as the twenty stone Aquinas join in a dance where Dante’s rhymes run through a gamut which includes the rhapsodic concepts of harmony (‘tempra’) and eternal life (‘s’in-sempra’) but equally evoke the erotic physicality of ‘urging,’ ‘surg-ing’ and ‘swelling:’

Par. 10.139-148

Indi, come orologio che ne chiami
ne l’ora che la sposa di Dio surge
a mattinar lo sposo perché l’ami,
che l’una parte e l’altra tira e urge,
tin tin sonando con sì dolce nota,
che ’l ben disposto spirto d’amor
turge;
così vid’io la gloriosa rota
muoversi e render voce a voce in
tempra
e in dolcezza ch’esser non pò nota
se non colà dove gioir s’insempra.

And now, like clocks that call us at
the hour
to which the Bride of God will
leave her bed
to win the Bridegroom’s love with
morning song
where, working, one part drives,
the other draws –
its ‘ting-ting’ sounding with so
sweet a note
that now the spirit, well and ready,
swells –
so in its glory I beheld that wheel
go moving round and answer, voice
to voice,
ruined to a sweetness that cannot be
known,
except up there where joy in-evers
all.

Well; Dante is no doubt right (again!): effects such as these are un-translatable. But one might at least look for some pale equivalent. To my mind rhyme in any mechanical sense is unlikely to be the answer. So one looks instead—or I do—for the kind of rational animation that syntactical emphasis can instill in a sentence and, correspondingly, for the corporeality or sensuous presence that alliteration assonance and at least internal rhyme might offer to a reader’s tongue. It is for this reason perhaps that, for my part, I

² *Inf.* 24.124-35: “Vita bestial mi piacque e non umana, / sì come a mul ch’i’ fui; son Vanni Fucci / bestia, e Pistoia mi fu degna tana». / E io al duca: «Dilli che non mucci, / e domanda che colpa qua giù ’l pinse; / ch’io ’l vidi uomo di sangue e di crucci»

prefer verse translation to prose paraphrase. There is, of course, quite a lot to be said in favor of prose paraphrase. Yet only verse can reflect, however feebly, that delight in clear cadence and a relish for the embodied word that Dante displays in every part of his poem.

Even if, as a translator, one can hardly expect to encompass such things, one can at least keep hope alive and engage one's own and the reader's ingenuity. Something of what one is searching for may, after all, emerge in the critical ping-pong of discussion. So, these final passages are here mainly to get the ball rolling and to hint at one or two considerations that so far one hasn't had time to pursue. The first of these in *Inferno* 32, from the depths of Hell, is, explicitly, as harsh—grossly material, contorted and frustrated—as any could be. This passage will infallibly dispel any suggestion that Italian is a merely mellifluous language.³ It also calls into question the presumption which TS Eliot tends to favor that Dante's Italian attains to a certain universality by virtue of its close relation to Latin. On this score, I would say that Samuel Beckett is closer to the mark in his essay 'Dante, Bruno Vico and Joyce.' Here, he emphasizes a vernacular dimension in Dante's diction—along with a certain experimentalism and idiosyncrasy which might indeed anticipate James Joyce. In the *Convivio* and *De Vulgari* Dante resolutely devotes himself to the vernacular as against Latin. And one might indeed see his representation of Virgil in the *Commedia* as a sustained and subtle analysis of the different capacities of Latin and the Mother tongue. There is scope here for a discussion of how Dante translates or re-performs the Virgilian mode; but even in this present passage Latin and the vernacular are drawn into a contentious relationship. To describe the depths of Hell is no task for an unsophisticated tongue which is still lisping 'mum' and 'dad.' So Dante indirectly invokes the Latin poet Statius, who shows all-too effectively in his own epic, the *Thebaid*, how best to describe the utter corruption of ancient Thebes. But the vernacular and innocent 'mum and dad' call into question whether linguistic sophistication on the model of Statius' orotund style is a healthy model to be following. When in *Purgatorio* 22 Statius is actually introduced into Dante's narrative he is 'translated'—against all historical evidence—into a Christian penitent. And when he speaks of his debt to Virgil, he describes the earlier poet as his 'mum' and his 'nurse:'

³ *Inferno* 32: 7-9: "ché non è impresa da pigliare a gabbo / discriver fondo a tutto l'universo, / né da lingua che chiami **mamma o babbo**." Tr.: "It's not (no kidding) any sort of joke / to form in the universal bum, / no task for tongues still whimpering 'Mum! and 'Dad.'"

‘mamma fummi e fummi nutrice poetando.’ Doesn’t all language, in seeking its divine origins, aspire to the innocent simplicity of the mother tongue, abandoning pretension and rhetorical refinement in favor of a primal mumuring?

The next passage—from *Purgatorio* 24—stands in complete contrast. Here an angel wafts away the penitential wound from Dante’s forehead. The moment represents no ascent to some disembodied state of spiritual transcendence; rather, the angel restores Dante—and the reader, also—to the physical senses in their most refined and responsive form. The crucial word here is *sentire*—and the question for a translator is whether to repeat this word as Dante does no less than four times in these five lines—or else to capture somehow by variation all the possible meanings that the Italian word may carry—sensing, hearing, touching, understanding:

Pur. 24.145-154

E quale, annunziatrice de li albori,	And as the breeze in May – first messenger
l’aura di maggio movesi e olezza,	of whitening dawn – is moved in fragrant waves,
tutta impregnata da l’erba e da’ fiori;	pregnant with grasses, greenery and flowers,
tal mi senti ’ un vento dar per mezza	so here I sensed , midbrow, wind touching me,
la fronte, e ben senti ’ mover la piuma,	and sensed the moving feathers of a wing
che fé sentir d’ambrosia l’orezza.	that brought ambrosial senses to the air,
E senti ’ dir: «Beati cui alluma	and made me sense the words. ‘The truly blessed
tanto di grazia, che l’amor del gusto	are lit so much grace that in their hearts
nel petto lor troppo disir non fuma,	a love of food fumes forth no false desire,
esuriendo sempre quanto è giusto!».	esurient always for the good and true.’

Admitting that there are various ways of doing this, I choose here the repeated *sentire*, partly to emphasize Dante’s trust in fundamental verbs but mainly to hunt at the extraordinary synaesthesia that the poem here generates. And then the task is to replicate, however remotely, the delicacy of rhythm in which the play of all these senses is here registered. One hopes, at least, that anyone reading the English will go off immediately and learn Italian.

Then, finally, at the opening of Canto 23, which in its own way is no less vibrant than the *Purgatorio* passage:

Par. 23.1-12

Come l'augello, intra l'amate fronde,	Compare: a bird among her well-loved boughs
posato al nido de' suoi dolci nati	has rested all night long while things lie hid
la notte che le cose ci nasconde,	poised where her dear brood sleeps within their nest,
che, per veder li aspetti disiati	and then to glimpse the looks she's longed to see,
e per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca,	and find the food her fledglings feed upon
in che gravi labor li sono aggrati,	(these efforts weigh with her as pure delight)
previene il tempo in su aperta frasca,	before dawn comes she mounts an open sprig,
e con ardente affetto il sole aspetta,	and there, her heart ablaze, awaits the sun,
fiso guardando pur che l'alba nasca;	eyes sharpening, fixed, till day is truly born,
così la donna mïa stava eretta	So, too, head raised, tall straight my <i>donna</i> stood,
e attenta, rivolta inver' la plaga	attention wholly on that stretch of sky
sotto la quale il sol mostra men fretta	where, under noon, the sun displays least speed.

There are a great many fundamentally Dantean features in this passage. There is, for instance, its kinetic visuality, linked to a miniature narrative as the syntax of this long sentence leads one from the depths of protective foliage into an exposure on the 'aperta frasca.' And, as in so many of Dante's narrative moments, the scene—unrolling in a long periodic sentence—is one of attentive waiting and expectation; the sun has not yet shown itself, it is a 'virtual' sun (hence the subjunctive 'nasca'). But I want to conclude with a note simply on that opening word: 'Compare.' This may seem an unjustifiably free translation since all we have in the original is 'come;' but I use 'compare,' here and throughout, for a particular reason—which you must judge for yourselves to be right or wrong. In my view, where metaphor is often taken to be a defining characteristic of poetry, *simile* is the central feature in Dante's rhetorical palette. And the implications of this bear upon the poet's philosophy or

theology and also upon the way in which his poem invites us to read it. In *simile* the phenomena of the created order are left unchanged but are placed one beside the other, so that one thing in creation can be seen to illuminate every other. Metaphor transforms our perceptions. By contrast, simile invites us to sharpen our appreciation of the inter-related plenitude of existence. The mother bird is comparable to Beatrice; and Beatrice in this canto is, in her own way, comparable to the Virgin Mother, Mary. Degrees of similarity may differ; but we can trust each in turn to reveal the intricacy of God's creation. And through attending to the comparison, however humdrum this might appear, we as readers may orient ourselves in the order of creation, participating directly in its choreography. 'Compare, I would like to think, invites one see things, to trust one's eyes and to enter into the dance. In this regard as in others, we cannot read Dante passively as onlookers or only as dispassionate scholars. We need—even at the risk of translating him poorly—to perform his words for ourselves, in the visual imagination, on the tongue and larynx. down to our very nerve ends.