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The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno

A Verse Translation by Allen Mandelbaum

*The Divine Comedy of
Dante Alighieri*

INFERNO

A Verse Translation

with an Introduction by
Allen Mandelbaum



Notes by Allen Mandelbaum
and Gabriel ~~Marruzzo~~

with ~~Larry Wagnus~~

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INTRODUCTION

Dante is an exiled, aggressive, self-righteous, salvation-bent intellectual, humbled only to rise assured and ardent, zealously prophetic, politically messianic, indignant, nervous, muscular, theatrical, energetic—he is at once our brother and our engenderer.

We may ponder the divide between the modern and the medieval or profess our distance from Dante, but that profession only masks proximities more intimate than those that link us to antiquity. Even our recovery of the judgmental, ethical aspect of Dante, our anathemas against any Romantic falling prey to (heaven forbid) over-sympathy with Francesca, Farinata, or Ulysses, carries sanctimonious overtones only too easily available to us. Indeed, some contemporary Paraphrasts are more ready to bludgeon homiletically, to damn again the already damned, than even Dante himself—the greatest of execrators—is. And when we come to the allegorical efforts of the fourfolders, or to our frequent willingness to integrate even Dante's lateral similes into overbearing structures, we have not ventured that far from our selves. Ours, too, is an age of allegoresis; Walter Benjamin is always there, his riches ready to be ransacked or counterfeited. In sum, however more cunning he is than we are, Dante is certainly much nearer to us than is his guide, his governor, his master (*Inf.* II, 140), Virgil.

Therefore, the task of the modern translator of Dante is much more synonymic and much less metaphorical in kind than the task of the translator of Virgil. Virgil demands more

de-selving of the modern translator—so much more that I was slow to hear all his demands.

For I had begun by seeing Virgil from the Dante vantage during the six years I spent translating the *Aeneid*, a work which often interrupted my translation of the *Comedy*; I was seeking in the *Aeneid* what Macrobius (in his *Saturnalia* v, i, 19) called a style “now brief, now full, now dry, now rich . . . now easy, now impetuous.” That style (those styles) I reached with relative ease by the third draft. Only in the later drafts did I find a music that lay far beyond what I had first been seeking: measures where the violence of silence and the violence of speech are balanced and appeased in a uniquely Virgilian equilibrium (as in the Palinurus passage at the end of Book Five of the *Aeneid*).

That equilibrium involves almost unlimited compassion and patient, unjagged breath—but, also, limited curiosity, tight verbal decorum, the most drastic lexical restraints. In my own work as a poet, the release from Virgil produced *Chelmaxioms* and the forthcoming *Savantasse of Montparnasse*. And my return, as translator, to Dante, at least in the *Inferno*, delivered me again to one who is almost wholly given to the violence of speech—even when that violence is directed to talking about the impossibility of talking about the untellable. For Dante is an Aeolus-the-Brusque, a Lord-of-Furibundus-Fuss, the Ur-Imam-of-Impetus. Or, for brutish Scrutinists, who reach for similes among the beasts and not among the gods, he is the lizard that, “when it darts from hedge/ to hedge beneath the dog days’ giant lash,/ seems, if it cross one’s path, a lightning flash” (*Inf.* xxv, 79–81). However seen, he is surely the swiftest and most succussive of savants, forever rummaging in his vast and versal haversack of soughs and rasps and gusts and “harsh and scrannel rhymes” (which, in *Inf.* xxxii, 1, he claims he does not have—and then promptly produces). He is seeking those gusts that will most convince us of the credibility of his journey, the accuracy of his record, the trustworthiness of his memory. “Mistaking not” (*Inf.* ii, 6), he would offer us evidence as undeniable as

that of a historian, Livy, of whom we learn, twenty-six cantos later (*Inf.* xxviii, 12), that he, too, "does not err."

Finally, he would convince us that *his* are the supreme fictions; and he would do so without contradicting his own claims to truth, because *fictio* for Dante does not mean "pure invention" or "fantastic creation" but—as Gioacchino Paparelli has shown—a poetic composition, constructed with the concourse of rhetoric and music, or—we should say—prosody. And in the construction of such fictions, he is not only a strenuous emulator and intrepid pirate, but a competitor and self-announced victor (*Inf.* xxv, 94-102):

*Taccia Lucano omai là dov' e' tocca
del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,
e attenda a udir quel ch'or si scocca.*

*Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,
ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio;
ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte
non transmutò sì ch'amendue le forme
a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte.*

*Let Lucan now be silent, where he sings
of sad Sabellus and Nasidius,
and wait to hear what flies off from my bow.*

*Let Ovid now be silent, where he tells
of Cadmus, Arethusa; if his verse
has made of one a serpent, one a fountain,
I do not envy him; he never did
transmute two natures, face to face, so that
both forms were ready to exchange their matter.*

That announcement of victory over Ovid and Lucan, who had so collegially welcomed Dante to Limbo, is strategically abetted by Virgil's own incitement of Dante in the canto just before, when Dante had sought brief respite from his breathless impetus, a sedentary truce for his *triste chair*. And Virgil's

prodding links the journey of the voyager to the journey of the telling of the tale, in *Inf.* xxiv, 47-51:

..... *segghendo in piuma,
in fama non si vien, né sotto coltre;
sanza la qual chi sua vita consuma,
cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia,
qual fummo in aere e in acqua la schiuma.*

..... *for he who rests on down
or under covers cannot come to fame;
and he who spends his life without renown
leaves such a vestige of himself on earth
as smoke bequeaths to air or foam to water.*

However, that self-announcement rings its unique changes at the very beginning of the second canto of the *Inferno*: "The day was now departing; the dark air/ released the living beings of the earth/ from work and weariness, and I myself/ alone prepared to undergo the battle/ both of the journeying and of the pity/ that memory, mistaking not, shall show./ O Muses, o high genius, help me now . . ." (*Inf.* II, 1-7). The canto in which Dante protests, "I am not Aeneas, am not Paul," is the same canto in which he also says "*io sol uno*," "I myself alone," the first triple repetition of an "I" that we have in Western writing. That triplet is even more steeped in the certainty of fame than are the proclamations of either Sulmona's son, Ovidius-the-Garrulous, Amir-of-Metamorphosists and Sad-Seigneur-of-Scrutinists, at the end of the *Metamorphoses*, or Lucan in Book Nine of the *Pharsalia* (ll. 980-986), the same book in which some two hundred lines earlier, Lucan had sung of Sabellus and Nasidius. And if Dante proclaims his own victory over Lucan in Canto xxv, much later he will also appropriate the epithet "sacred" from Lucan's description of the poet's labor, twice calling his own poem a "sacred poem" in the *Paradiso* (a designation that may also echo Macrobius's term for the *Aeneid*), just as twice he calls his work a "comedy" in the *Inferno*.

Dante's "aloneness" casts a shadow, I believe, on attempts to read him as an Everyman, an exemplary pilgrim. If the first line of the *Inferno* carries with it what Leo Spitzer called the "possessive of human solidarity" in "our life's way," that is much more than counterbalanced by the resonances of "*io sol uno*" throughout the *Comedy*.

But the two most arduous emulations of the *Comedy* involve not Lucan or Ovid (though any Aeolus is perforce a closet Ovidian) but Virgil and Aquinas.

The first, Virgil, is involved in the most complex relation the *Comedy* presents. Dante is always with Virgil from the time he finds him "faint because of the long silence" (that strange amalgam of vision and sound, compounded by the "speechless" sun of *Inf.* I, 60) and hears him move from that silence into frequent, if not garrulous, speech, to the end of the *Inferno* and through much of the *Purgatorio*, until Virgil crowns and miters Dante over his own self (*Purg.* XXVII, 142). This finding of Virgil and this crowning of Dante are best seen against earlier way-stations in the natural history of literary affiliations.

Plato creates his relation to Socrates by annulling his own explicit voice and becoming the secret sharer and ambiguous transformer of one who had not written, devising or appropriating and developing a genre, dialogue, which has proved to be more inimitable than either tragedy or epic. Even one partial aspect of Platonic dialogue, the circumbendibus of its narrative framework—I am thinking especially of the beginning of the *Symposium*, where memory shuttles so uncertainly yet hauntingly—is so intricate, that we wait millenia before we find its match. But Dante, however much he knew of Platonism and neo-Platonism, knew no dialogue of Plato except—possibly—the Latin translation of the *Timaeus*.

Lucretius, with Dante, is the most moving exemplar of affiliation—although he was affiliated with a philosopher, Epicurus, not a poet:

Against the darkness you raised such bright light
 and first made clear the uses of this life;
 glory of the Greeks, I follow you
 and set my footsteps now on your sure way,
 and not as a contender but a lover
 who longs to imitate: how could a swallow
 sing against the swan, or could a young
 goat with trembling limbs outrun the strong
 stallion? You are my father, finder
 of things as they are, and give to us a father's
 teachings: in your pages, Epicurus,
 as bees in flowering fields sip every plant,
 we graze on every golden saying, gold
 and always worthy of unending life.

(Lucretius also shares one ancient/modern problem with Dante: the passage from the more conceptually supple Greek to Latin is not wholly unlike Dante's vying, in the vulgar, modern tongue, with Latin.) But, despite *Par.* xiv, 112-117, Dante surely shares the general medieval ignorance of all except snatches of Lucretius.

Virgil himself is often involved in tacit dialogue with Homer in the *Aeneid*. But it is tacit; and Dante, with Homer mute for him, could hardly have heard it.

Statius, at the end of the *Thebaid*, calls the *Aeneid* "divine" (an epithet that finally joins *Comedy* in the title of Dante's work in 1555), praying for his *Thebaid* to accompany—without rivaling—the *Aeneid*. That Virgil-Statius affiliation will be recuperated by Dante in the *Purgatorio*.

And, of course, we have the affiliation between two books and two sets of authors or One Author in two guises—and with many scribes—implicit, for some, in the Old and New Testaments.

However passionate these previous affiliations may have been, Dante is the first to welcome directly not only himself

but his "author," "lord," "governor," "master," "father," into an epic. (Where Curtius and Auerbach reject that term, "epic," for the *Comedy*, both Hegel and Lukács accept it. For me, Dante's radical newness, one that does require the Biblical warrant of the first-person prophet, does not destroy but complements the epic intent. The journey to the underworld of Book VI of the *Aeneid* is magnified into a new whole: new wanderings and wars, "the battle/ both of the journeying and of the pity" of *Inf.* II, 4-5. That battle and that journey offer us both the arms and the man—Dante himself—of whom Dante sings.) Virgil's presence is so indispensable that when one meets the first and only time that "father" is used with reference to him in the *Inferno*, in Canto VIII (the appellation will become frequent in the *Purgatorio*), one is tempted to gloss the unglossable lines in that canto (VIII, 97-100), "O my dear guide, who more than seven times/ has given back to me my confidence/ and snatched me from deep danger that had menaced,/ do not desert me when I'm so undone," thus: the "seven times" are the seven cantos before this eighth. Without Virgil, those seven cantos would not have been written. But perhaps the most paternal moment is Virgil's maternal semblance in *Inf.* XXIII, 37-42:

*Lo duca mio di subito mi prese,
come la madre ch'al romore è desta
e vede presso a sé le fiamme accese,
che prende il figlio e fugge e non s'arresta,
avendo più di lui che di sé cura,
tanto che solo una camiscia vesta . . .*

*My guide snatched me up instantly, just as
the mother who is wakened by a roar
and catches sight of blazing flames beside her,
will lift her son and run without a stop—
she cares more for her child than for herself—
not pausing even to throw on a shift . . .*

In prefacing the *Aeneid*, I had noted that critics' "variations on the theme of Homer versus Virgil, using the father to

club the son," were "coupled at times with some variations on the theme of Dante versus Virgil, using the son to club the father. Whichever way one turned in the line of affiliation (Homer-Virgil-Dante)—toward parricide or filicide—the middleman Virgil lost." But Dante's own tears at Virgil's departure and his triple invocation of Virgil's name in *Purgatorio* xxx, 49–51, after quoting words of Dido, tell a more provocative, more rich, and ultimately more heartening tale for readers. If one text can engender a second, perhaps the engendering need never end, and no antecedent need be forgotten.

The other text, beside the *Aeneid*, that most provokes Dante is the *Summa Theologica*, the second of Aquinas's *summas*, begun in the year when Dante was born and left incomplete at Aquinas's death in 1274, nine years later. Dante is not to be called an unequivocal Thomist, but Thomas's is the other epic (here used more loosely) achievement of Dante's centuries. Where Bonaventura had seen the inventions of the poets as fragile, Aquinas saw poetry as *infima doctrina*, a lesser mode of teaching (and more vulgar—and some unvulgar—theologians saw only lies). But he could call it lesser, too, because his own second *Summa* had evolved a style that Thomas Gilby limned so accurately:

Nevertheless St Thomas's style remains an instrument of precision once we appreciate that he was not writing a mathematical treatise or a legal document where single terms can be treated as atoms of discourse or forced into their fixed univocal sense: misapprehensions on this point brought him into false credit and discredit. He was renewing Aristotle's achievement of a synthesis beyond the static world of Parmenides and the fluid world of Heraclitus without, like Plato, finding meaning by forsaking the material world about us; he was addressing himself as a philosopher to the things first shown us through the senses and not to disembodied essences, and as a theologian to the works of God in history from which he suffered even less temptation to escape. He had to render things that were at once dark and shimmering, deep and on the surface, single and complex, firm and supple,

irreducibly individual yet sharing in the common whole; and he paid them the compliment of attempting to do so without breaking into poetry.

And even a Dante smitten with, transformed by, Beatrice, or intent on loving, affiliated inquiry with Virgil, is hard pressed to surpass the anatomy of eros in Aquinas, of which the following miscellany assembled by Gilby can offer us some indication:

Love is more unitive than knowledge in seeking the thing, not the thing's reason; its bent is to a real union, though this can be constituted only by knowledge. Other effects of love are enumerated: a reciprocal abiding, mutua inhaesio, of lover and beloved together; a transport, extasis, out of the self to the other; an ardent cherishing, zelus, of another; a melting, liquefactio, so that the heart is unfrozen and open to be entered; a longing in absence, languor, heat in pursuit, fervor, and enjoyment in presence, fruitio. In delight, too, there is an all at once wholeness and timelessness that reflects the tota simul of eternity; an edge of sadness similar to that of the Gift of Knowledge; an expansion of spirit; a complete fulfilment of activity without satiety, for they that drink shall yet thirst.

To vie with Aquinas, to lift poetry from its *infima* status, Dante needs every adroit gavotte of Wholes and Parts and capriole of Part and Wholes.

He needs seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, to the point where he might well have personified Visus, Auditus, Tactus, and Odoratus. (Taste or Gustus is seldom called upon—but when summoned, it is for unforgettable purposes: the “bread of the angels” in *Par.* II, 11 and the salt taste of “others’ bread,” the bread we beg for in exile, in *Par.* XVII, 59). The verbs of seeing appear so often that even the most patient Scrutinist might falter in his tallies, but one—with his abacus—has told us that there are sixty-seven pairs of eyes in the *Inferno* alone, ninety-seven in the *Purgatorio*, and ninety-four in the *Paradiso*. Where others’ baffled lenses may falter,

Dante's never do: gazing, peering, squinting, scowling. If he has Virgil summon the "optic nerve" (*Inf.* ix, 73), we can be sure that, had his physiological manuals been more complete, he would have called on the intrepid foveae and fervid canaliculi, the everglaring glands of Moll as well as the zonules of Zinn.

He needs every tangibility he can summon from the world of the shades—but summon *personally*, crossing into that world, witnessing. He needs to begin his journey from a state *as like* to death as one can get while still alive. He needs to read his Hegel well (just as Hegel must read him) to understand that not only the Christian but the Hegelian—or the Heideggerian—poet can gather ultimate energy from only one sure fount: the fear—the absolute fear—of death, a wood "so bitter—death is hardly more severe" (*Inf.* i, 7). And to that end, it matters little whether what is feared is divine judgment or causeless nothingness, Madame Oubli and her company of Slabby-Mists, of *Nebel*, *Nichts*, *Néant*, and Dun-and-Dirty-Erebus, Unwashed-Subfusc, or more simply, just Victor Hugo's "old usherette" with her "black spectacle." Hegel's formulation of that fear couples it, of course, with service and obedience (functions Dante fulfills most immediately in relation to Virgil and Beatrice—and, ultimately, to his God):

Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains formal and does not spread over the whole known reality of existence. Without the formative activity shaping the thing, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become objective for itself. Should consciousness shape and form the thing without the initial state of absolute fear, then it has a merely vain and futile "mind of its own." . . . If it has endured not absolute fear, but merely some slight anxiety, negative reality has remained external to it, its substance has not been through and through infected thereby. Since the entire content of its natural consciousness has not tottered and shaken, it is still inherently a determinate mode of being; having a "mind of its own" is simply stubbornness, a type of freedom which does not get beyond the

attitude of bondage. As little as the pure form can become its essential nature, so little is that form, considered as extending over particulars, a universal formative activity, an absolute notion; it is rather a piece of cleverness which has mastery within a certain range, but not over the universal power nor over the entire objective reality.

For "the entire objective reality" read the Great-Gestalt-of-All-Gestalten. And if life and the living are but A-Part, then he who would sing The-All must visit The-Rest. (That Rest is, as descent to the underworld, an epic constituent of both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, but without the urgent fiction-prophecy of personal witness borne by the poet. Also, in Homer, more than in Virgil, it does not carry Orphic but demystifying Enlightenment elements—elements that are also present in Dante. Rescanning the way-stations of affiliation, but in some disorder, we can see that, while the Old Testament leaves its Sheol wholly lateral, an indistinct, great grey hole that *may* lie near the Musée de l'Homme, or even in unimportant, suburban precincts, the New Testament places that Rest very close to its center. As for the death of Socrates, it surely is essential to the resonance of Plato's work; but I should agree with Lukács that Plato's rejection of tragedy as the proper genre for the life of Socrates carries with it a sense of Socrates' death as an *accidental*, unessential interruption of his substance, which is speech, speech, speech—in effect, dialogue as a polemical rejection of the death-centeredness of the tragedians.)

He needs an adroit *ars poetica*, so that even when he works in plain style, he can mobilize extraordinary combinatorial precisions. Witness Canto xxxiii, 67-75:

*Poscia che fummo al quarto di venuti,
Gaddo mi si gittò disteso a' piedi,
dicendo: 'Padre mio, ché non m'aiuti?'*

*Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi,
vid' io cascar li tre ad uno ad uno
tra 'l quinto di e 'l sesto; ond' io me diedi,*

*già cieco, a brancolar sovra ciascuno,
e due di li chiamai, poi che fur morti.
Poscia, più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno."*

*But after we had reached the fourth day, Gaddo,
throwing himself, outstretched, down at my feet,
implored me: 'Father, why do you not help me?'*

*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."*

Salvatore Quasimodo, in one of the two essays I chose to complement his poems in the 1960 volume of his *Selected Writings* that I translated into English, in dealing with the first eight lines of this passage, refers to Dante as "the greatest master" of the simple style. But neither he nor I had noted then that, in this passage, which has so little adornment, the sequence of ordinal and cardinal numbers obeys an all-enclosing law—no element escapes. We start with four, move to three, one, five, six, and end with the one number needed to complete the set: two. (Proof enough, if any were needed, that one textual variant which would have had "three days" instead of "two days" was incorrect.) It is as if even accidental elements combine to become a vise that locks Ugolino into the ineluctable. Of course, the last line in the Italian, one which Quasimodo omitted when he quoted the passage, is the most obviously patterned of the nine, with the anaphoric closure of "*poscia*" and very strong internal alliterative links.

Or witness the extraordinary intuition-in-labor of Dante's tercet rhymes. For ABA exists not only on the level of interword relations but on two other levels: 1) The hendecasyllable line itself is often accented on its sixth and central syllable. And even when that syllable is unaccented, it may serve as a kind of center for accents on the fourth and eighth

syllables, symmetrically placed to its right and left. When we couple this frequent function of the sixth syllable with what is the most frequent Italian line-end (and, of course, the most frequent stress placement in Italian words), the *piano* or feminine ending, then—following Giuseppe Sansone's patient elaborations—we can see that the hendecasyllable often has what I should call an internal balancing needle. Around that needle, when the obligatory stress on the tenth syllable is complemented by an initial iamb and consequent stress on the second syllable, we can generate not only homeopodic (or superimposed) symmetry but antipodic (mirror) symmetry—reinforcing ABA on the level of the line. 2) To this I should now add a reinforcement of ABA in terms of the constituents of the single rhyme word, a reinforcement that may seem as astonishing as the metamorphoses of Canto xxv. For the most frequent word termini in Italian are vowel-consonant-vowel termini; and that vcv echoes, on still another level, the ABA of the first two levels. English, with its even-numbered metrical positions in each line (even Milton, the most sensitive to Italian of our major poets, has little taste for feminine endings in his major work) and its paucity of vowel-consonant-vowel termini can never mime the depth of that prosodic intuition. That is *not* the reason for my forgoing tercet rhyme in this translation (which was simply dependent on my need to reach as clean and precise a rendering as possible); but it is the reason for the close phonic packing, whether in stressed or unstressed positions, which I have sought throughout this translation—with pure rhymes, pararhyme, assonances, alliterations, and consonances often called into service. (One pause is needed here: The possibility of Dante's conscious awareness of this level, the vowel, consonant, vowel trinity of the single rhyme, reinforcing the other levels, does find warrant in this: the vast majority of *piano* rhyme termini have, as we noted above, three phonemes; but two of the three phonemes are outside the stress situation. In vcv, it is the first element only that is stressed. This should lead, ideally, to heightened awareness of the poetic weight of all elements, tonic or not. And the ideal terminus for that ideal awareness would be the lexical independence of those

two non-tonic elements, the terminal consonant and vowel. Our ideal fable finds its incarnation when Dante, in the middle of the *Purgatorio*, enjambs on the definite article, "la," the first of his three such enjambments on definite articles. English will wait almost half-a-millennium for Blake to enjambs on "the"—and longer for Wallace Stevens' final "the" in "The Man on the Dump.")

Or track Aldo Scaglione's analysis of *Inf.* III, 25-30, using the translation to heighten the detailed sense of what can and cannot be taken across a linguistic border:

*Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
facevano un tumulto, il qual s'aggira
sempre in quell' aura senza tempo tinta,
come la rena quando turbo spira.*

*Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,
accents of anger, words of suffering,
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—
all went to make a tumult that will whirl
forever through that turbid, timeless air,
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls.*

Here my English has tried to embody as much as I could of what Scaglione saw in the Italian, with the crescendo from noun and epithet in the first line, to noun and complement in the second, to noun and two epithets in the third line. Then I had to forgo the noun and two complements in that same line (with my "beating hands" for "*suon di man con elle*") but did recoup the enjambment at the end of the fourth line and the force of sudden closure in the sixth.

The sum of Dante's needs encompasses a progression of three "words," a progression detailed in a fable that rises far from the Arno or the Tiber. (But in a climate as syncretistic as Dante's, where antiquity is appropriated by Christianity in a