ALLEN MANDELBAUM

A DANTE DIARY: IN—AND AFTER—THE HALLUCINARIUM

Over the years, the word hallucinarium — my homemade lexical counterpart to Honoré d’Autun’s Elucidarium — has been a key item in my reveries. Some may well have seen it as somewhat mannered, a weight I carried over from too-early immersion in literatistics. But there is something unquestionably hallucinatory about those working moments when the collocation of sounds becomes a pervasive, obsessive concern. I don’t think we would be too wrong in seeing Dante’s breaking off his De Vulgari at chapters xi and xii as a head-shaking, murmuring awareness that basta, basta, enough is enough, prosodic passion has its limits, or (perhaps in the case of Dante) boredom waits in the wings — now it is time to make of the officina a lucina.

Yet, without a stay in the hallucinarium, Dante would never have arrived at the tercet form, nor have climaxed his re-view of Romance predecessors with Arnaut Daniel in Purg. xxvi; nor would I, in translating Dante, ever have sought the anagrammatic end words I deployed in Purgatorio xiii. 128, displacing Pettinato to line-end to give me: “Pier Pettinato! I remembered me in his devout petitions” — where I was grateful for the “p,” the “e,” the “i”, the “o,” the “n,” and above all — the doubled “i”; and grateful, too, for the juxtaposition in line-end position of that anagrammatic pairing of the proper-name noun, “Pettinato,” and the common noun, “petitions” (with some resentment against the intrusive “y”).

That last instance was no match, of course, for one of Dante’s most resonant rhyme juxtapositions — “Plato” and “turbato” — in Purg. iii. 43-45:

io dico d’Aristotile e di Plato
e di molt’altre; e qui chinò la fronte,
e più non disse, e rimase turbato

though there I could get at least some consoling echo in “Plato” and “sorrow” in Purg. iii, 40-45:

You saw the fruitless longing of those men
who would, if reason could, have been content,
those whose desire eternally laments:
I speak of Aristotle and of Plato —
and many others." Here he bent his head
and said no more, remaining with his sorrow.

Small solace, you might say, for one who had foregone tercet rhyme out of
discontent with all previous (and later) attempts to trap meaning in English ter-
cet translations of the Tuscan. And hecklers might see a moment too Serrasquean
for comfort in that anagrammatic moment, or an overdose of Jakobson. More
central to my itinerary, however, were, of course, Mallarmé, and the fervid out-
bursts re vowels and consonants of Mandelstam and Chlebnikov; the latter
scorning vowels as the "feminine element" of language fit only for "linking mas-
culine sounds" and the former insisting that "consonants are the seed and the
assurance of posterity of language, the atrophy of the sense of the consonant is
evidence of enfeebled linguistic awareness." But as one who — not only in the
Comedy but in his work on the Aeneid, The Odyssey, and the Metamorphoses —
has been often drunk with assonance, one can be sure that I have never forgot-
ten that resolute vowelist, Anne Pierre Jacques de Vismes (1745-1819), who in
his Pasilologie; ou, De la Musique, Considérée comme Langue Universelle (Paris,
1806) makes clear the relation between letters — especially vowels — and the
musical scales used in antiquity, nor have I forgotten Mallarmé's chiming four-
teen times on terminal "i," the resonating spine for his best known sonnet. Nor
have I forgotten that my earliest over-dose came from Augustine's intoxicated
De musica. Nor that in the most frequent rhyme terminus in Italian, vcv, vowels
outnumber consonants two to one.

Let us then, arrive at a conciliatory parity between v and c. Above all, let us
remember that even the hallucinariun can be lifted to a trans-sound level:
1) Free of any o altitudo one can see the sublimity of the daily in "natural cos-
tume" in the sermo humis that allows any diligent birdwatcher a translation of
Par. XXI, 34-39:

And just as jackdaws, at the break of the day,

together rise—such is their nature's way—
to warm their feathers chilled by night; then some

fly off and never do return, and some

wheel back to that point where they started from.

while others, though they wheel, remain at home.

2) And then we may turn to one of the most moving invitations offered us by
Dante and see in that combinatorial dance of vowels and consonants a figura of
the destatio of Paraldiso X, the clock that wakes us "con si dolce nota":

Indi, come orologio che ne chiami

ne l'ora che la sposa di Dio surge
a mattinar lo sposo perché l'ami,
che l'unà parte e l'altra tira e urge,
tin tin sonando con si dolce nota.
che 'I ben disposto spirito d'amor turge:
cosi vidi' fo la gloriosa rota
muniversi e render voce a voce in tempra
ce in dolcezza ch'esser non pos nota
se non colà dove gioir s'insempria.

Then, like a clock that calls us at the hour
in which the Bride of God, on waking, sings
matins to her Bridegroom, encouraging
His love (when each clock-part both draws and drives),
chiming the sounds with notes so sweet that those
with spirit well-disposed feel their love grow;
so did I see the wheel that moved in glory
go round and render voice to voice with such
sweetness and such accord that they can not
be known except where joy is everlasting.
(Par. x, 139-148)

Here, in truth, the wedding of sounds evokes — at once — sposa and sposo,
bonding the Drawn and the Driven, Theos and Mortal, as well as the Translated
and the Translator, the Speaker and the Spoken, the Reader and the Read.

E.S.: The nota and rota of Par. x are the sequel to the note and rote of Par. vi.
124-126. There, in Par. vi, nota and rota accompany diverse voci and diversi scan-
ni; and there, the terminal words in the second line are nostra vita, with nostra's
"n" always in the sixth position of the headceasyllable (fanno, scanni, armonia)
and "r" in the tenth (note, vita, rote). In sum, this "nostra vita" of Paradiso vi
echoes and incredibly enriches Inf. i, 1 and prepares us for the "nota" and "rota"
that conclude Paradiso x.

Diverse voci fanno dolce note:
costi diversi scanni in nostra vita
rendon dolce armonia tra queste rote.
(Par. vi, 124-126)

For more on Par. vi, 124-126, see my Visione e Visibilità, in Vol. 1 of Letteratura
italiana e arti figurative, ed. Antonio Franceschetti, Florence, L. S. Olschki, 1988,
pp. 29-40. That address, given and published, was later translated by Raymond

All translations from the *Comedy* are from my U. of California Press volumes 1980-1984, also available in Bantam Classics edition (always with facing text) and in the Everyman edition (English only).