

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 literastics. 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 *fuscina*.

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 *Pettinaio* to line-end to give me: "Pier *Pettinaio* / 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 "t"; and grateful, too, for the juxtaposition in line-end position of that anagrammatic pairing of the *proper-name noun*, "Pettinaio," and the *common noun*, "petitions" (with some resentment against the intrusive "s").

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'altri"; 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 tercet translations of the Tuscan. And hecklers might see a moment too-Saussurean for comfort in that anagrammatic moment, or an overdose of Jakobson. More central to my itinerary, however, were, of course, Mallarmé, and the fervid outbursts *re* vowels and consonants of Mandelstam and Chlebnikov: the latter scorning vowels as the "feminine element" of language fit only for "linking masculine 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 forgotten that resolute vowelism, Anne Pierre Jacques de Vismes (1745-1819), who in his *Pasilogie; 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 fourteen 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 hallucinarium can be lifted to a trans-sound level:

1) Free of any *o altitudo* one can see the sublimity of the daily in "natural costume" in the *sermo humilis* 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 combinatory dance of vowels and consonants a *figura* of the *destatoio* of *Paradiso* x, the clock that wakes us "*con sì dolce nota*":

Indi, come orologio che ne chiama  
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.

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.

P.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 scanni*; and there the terminal words in the second line are *nostra vita*, with *nostra*'s "n" always in the sixth position of the hendecasyllable (*fanno*, *scanni*, *armonia*) and "t" 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 dolci note;  
 così diversi scanni in nostra vita  
 rendono dolce armonia tra queste rote.  
 (*Par. vi*, 124-126)

For more on *Par. vi*, 124-126, see my *Visione e Visibilia*, in Vol. I 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

Prier and Jane Dickman in *Countercurrents: On the Primacy of Texts in Literary Criticism*, Albany, SUNY, 1992.

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).