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"THE BODY FOR A POEM": RECENT AMERICAN
AND BRITISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE INFERNO

The first four years of the present decade saw some striking re-appearances of Dante in English on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1991, Seamus Heaney continued the process of appropriation, begun in *Field Work* (1979) and continued in *Station Island* (1984), by including his earlier translation of Dante's encounter with Charon (*Inferno* III) at the end of his collection *Seeing Things*. In 1993, Heaney also contributed the first three cantos to a composite *Inferno*, made up of versions by twenty contemporary poets published by the Ecco Press in New York. This collection also contained translations of cantos XX and XXVIII by the now laureate American poet, Robert Pinsky. In the following year, 1994, Pinsky published his own complete translation of the *Inferno*; and the same year saw the appearance of another and very different rendering: *Hell*, by the British poet and critic, Steve Ellis.¹

I shall be giving some specific attention to significant differences of approach in the turning of Dante into English for the 1990s – especially to those between Pinsky and Ellis as American and British translators of the *Inferno*. But, before doing that, I should like to construct a context for the discussion of Pinsky's translation by focusing upon some differences between the ways in which he and Heaney address Dante.

For both Pinsky and Heaney, the direction to Dante may well have been sign-posted not only by T.S. Eliot (about whom they have both written) but also, in part, by a poet of an intervening generation: Robert Lowell. Translation was a significant

¹ The main 'recent' translations to which I shall subsequently refer are as follows: *Dante's 'Inferno': Translations by Twenty Contemporary Poets* (ed. Daniel Halpern) New York, Ecco Press, 1993.

The Inferno of Dante: a New Verse Translation by Robert Pinsky New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

Dante Alighieri: Hell, translated, annotated, and introduced by Steve Ellis London, Chatto & Windus, 1994.

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: a Poetic Translation in iambic pentameter and terza rima, Stephen W. Arndt, Lewiston NY & Lampeter, Edwin Mellen, 1994.

Dante: The Divine Comedy in a terza rima translation by Peter Dale, London, Anvil Press, 1996.

part of Lowell's poetic agenda, as (for instance) his *Imitations* and his version of Racine's *Phèdre* clearly show. Dante is also a recurrent presence in his writing: from transcription in the Notebooks of 1939-43 – through translation in *Near The Ocean* (1967) – to the allusions and reinventions in *Notebook* (1970), *History* (1973) and the bleak breakdown poem, "The Visitors", which delivers the poet to a kind of Limbo:

Where you are going, Professor.
You won't need your Dante.²

Lowell's rendering of the "Brunetto" canto (*Inferno* XV) in (for the most part) unlinked *terzine* appeared in *Near the Ocean*, 1967. It has recently been acknowledged by Heaney as a model and as one of the stimuli towards his own version of Ugolino at the end of *Field Work* (1979). In a letter of 1993, Heaney indicates that part of the idea of translating the "Ugolino" episode, his earliest direct response to Dante, came from reading Robert Lowell's version of the Brunetto Latini canto: "[...] I found that particular canto, in its orphaned state, away from the main body of the poem, still powerfully affecting".³

Pinsky, whose early work Lowell had praised, and who about this time (the mid-seventies) was writing at some length about him in an essay called "Voices", must also have been aware of the range of Lowell's responses to Dante.⁴ Indeed, in the essay he devotes some space to discussion of Lowell's 1973 collection, *History* – a collection which (although Pinsky doesn't mention it here) includes five unrhymed sonnets on explicitly Dantean subjects (two of which are translations from *Purgatorio* V and *Inferno* V).⁵

There are, however, some crucial differences between the routes that Pinsky and Heaney have taken to and through Dante since the seventies. Heaney, after *Field Work* and "Ugolino", began the eighties, as he says (again in a letter of 1993) "in a fit of excitement, of doing the whole of the *Inferno*. And I got launched on that around 1982/3 [...] But after completing three cantos I reneged".⁶ The three cantos that Heaney completed then are those that, ten

² The poem then goes on explicitly to evoke Dante's Limbo ('my little strip of eternity'), as G. McFadden has shown; see "Prose or This" in Robert Lowell: *Essays on the Poetry*, ed. S.G. Axelrod and H. Deese, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

³ The letter was written to Maria Cristina Fumagalli (19 July 1993) and is quoted on pp. 204-205 of her article in *Agenda*. See M.C. Fumagalli, "Seamus Heaney and Dante", *Agenda* XXIV, 3-4 (1997), pp. 204-234.

⁴ The essay appeared in Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 16-23.

⁵ The five 'sonnets' appear on pp. 56-58 of Lowell's *History*, London, Faber, 1973.

⁶ See Fumagalli's *Agenda* article (n. 3, above), p. 205.

years later, were to appear in the Ecco Press translation of *Inferno*. The direction that he subsequently took towards Dante was that of appropriation rather than direct translation, and it is evident primarily in *Station Island* (1984), with its Purgatorial structure of encounters with dead friends and earlier writers. Dante has continued to be a presence in Heaney's work – notably as a way of confronting the turbulent flow of Northern Irish politics in poems like "From the Frontier of Writing", in *The Haw Lantern* (1987). In the latter poem, both the unlinked *terza rima* and the probable allusion to Dante's vulnerability on the brink of the river of pitch in the "Malebranche" cantos reinforce the writer's uneasy sense of exposure as he crosses a military checkpoint "on the *black current* of a tarmac road".⁷ A similarly tense encounter with troops on the road in *Seeing Things* (1991) reinvents an image that also derives from the depths of Dante's *Inferno*. Here, section xxvi from "Crossings", ends with the vision of "a speeded-up/ Meltdown of souls from the straw-flecked ice of hell", thus combining the vocabulary of nuclear disaster ("Meltdown") with a simile from Dante's Cocytus (the *festuca in vetro* of *Inferno* XXXIV, 12). The crossing of a border again evokes "Dante's scurfy hell" in a poem from Heaney's most recent collection (*The Spirit Level*, 1996). Here, in "The Flight Path" (part 4), return to Belfast conjures up the "red eyes" of a Long Kesh prisoner, along with an uneasy reference back to lines about Ugolino in *Inferno* XXXIII that Heaney had 'translated freely' back in 1979.

It is, however, *Station Island* (1984) that remains Heaney's most sustained and ambitious encounter with Dante. It seems, quite literally, to have taken the place of Heaney's uncompleted *Inferno*, since, as he himself says in the letter of 1993, "that work [the projected translation] paid into *Station Island*".⁸ And, as Pinsky recognized in his review of *Station Island*, Heaney's poem is "bold enough to be consciously Dantesque in elements like its encounters with figures from the poet's life, and tactful and wise enough that the project does not seem overweening or vainglorious".⁹

⁷ For the point about the adaptation of Dantean *terza rima* and its effect here, I am indebted to the reading of the poem in Helen Vendler's *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap, 1995, p. 189. The suggestion of an allusion to the Malebranche cantos (*Inferno* XXI-XXIII) is my own, and it may perhaps be reinforced by the way Heaney's 'marksman' is compared to a 'hawk', as are the Malebranche in *Inferno* XXII, 130-2 and 139.

⁸ See Fumagalli (n. 3, above), p. 205.

⁹ The review initially appeared in *The New Republic* and is reprinted in Pinsky's *Poetry and the World*, New York, Ecco Press, 1988. The passage quoted here is on p. 80 of the latter volume. On *Station Island* and Dante, see N. Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, London, Faber, 1986, pp. 158-169, and B. O'Donoghue's fuller account (with some corrections of Corcoran's reading) in *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester, 1994, pp. 93-107.

Pinsky's own main Dantean project, the translation of the *Inferno*, appears to have developed in a quite radically different way. For one thing, unlike Heaney, he does not seem to develop any substantial dialogue with Dante, either in his published criticism or in his own poetry. Thus, for instance, whilst Heaney clearly places the *Commedia* on his poetic map in the essay "Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet" (1985), Pinsky, on the other hand, seems comparatively reticent about what has led him to and through Dante.¹⁰ His recognition of Dantean structure and resonances in his review of *Station Island* is sympathetic and (as we shall see) responsive to detail. But there is little or nothing else in his collection of essays *Poetry and the World* to indicate a significant interest in Dante, let alone the contemplation of any major Dantean project. He does, it is true, mention that he was taught at Rutgers University (presumably in the late fifties or early sixties) by Francis Fergusson, but does not mention that Fergusson was well known by then as author of a major critical work on Dante, or suggest that this might have been a stimulus towards the reading of the *Commedia*.¹¹ It is also true that *Poetry and the World* devotes a substantial essay to T.S. Eliot, but it is notable that Pinsky here finds himself totally out of sympathy with what is arguably Eliot's most Dantean poem, *Ash Wednesday* (which he dismisses out of hand for its "plushy grandiosity").¹² It may be that I have missed some crucial article or letter that would locate Dante more clearly within the framework of Pinsky's reading and his work, but at the moment my impression is, as I have said, one of marked critical reticence on this score. This even appears to be the case in the apparatus to the translation of the *Inferno* itself. The volume contains some terse and vivid prefatory comments by Pinsky to the notes on a number of the cantos (most strikingly on cantos 21 and 25), together with an important "Translator's Note", which I shall be considering shortly. But even these seem, in certain respects, to defer to the contributions of John Freccero, the *capo di tutti i capi* of American Dante studies, who provides the main critical introduction, as well as the prefatory comments to all the more well-known cantos.¹³

This reticence is, I would argue, even more marked in Pinsky's poetry. In the recent collection of all his work up to 1996 (*The Figured Wheel*) there are trans-

¹⁰ Heaney's essay appeared in *The Irish University Review* XV, 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 5-19.

¹¹ Fergusson's *Dante's Drama of the Mind: a Modern Reading of the 'Purgatorio'* was first published by Princeton in 1953. On p. 152 of *Poetry and the World* (see n. 9, above), Pinsky refers to him only as the author of *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton, 1949).

¹² The essay on Eliot is on pp. 152-157 of *Poetry and the World* (see n. 9, above), and the quoted reference to "Ash Wednesday" is on p. 156.

¹³ Freccero's comments preface the notes on the cantos (V, X, XV, XXVI-XXVII and XXXIII) in which Francesca, Farinata, Brunetto, Ulysses, Guido da Montefeltro and Ugolino appear.

lations from modern French and Central European poets, as well as imitations of Latin classics ("Horace, *Epistulae* I, xvi" and "Creation According to Ovid"), and throughout there are explicit allusions to a wide range of medieval and renaissance texts and writers: from *The Song of Roland*, *El Cid* and *Tristan* to Wyatt, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.¹⁴ This collection concludes with Pinsky's translation of the final canto from *Inferno*; but such a conclusion clearly does not set up the kind of Dantean dialogue that Heaney established between "Ugolino" and the earlier poems in *Field Work*. Indeed, Dante seems elsewhere in Pinsky's collected works to be remarkable by his absence. In *The Want Bone* (1990) there is a prose fantasy, "Jesus and Isolt", which ends with a somewhat Dantean (perhaps Francesca-like) scene of recognition and parting at the gates of Hell.¹⁵ But the allusion here, if there is one, is very indirect. The most potentially 'infernal' of Pinsky's poems, from an earlier collection, *History of My Heart* (1984), is the vision of Auschwitz in "The Unseen". Yet this powerful and troubled poem, based presumably on an actual visit, as a foreigner on a guided tour around the death camp, seems in several quite striking ways to turn away from Dantean modes of imagining justice. Visions of retributive "fire and blood" are here rendered void by an experience through which the pilgrim, initially at least, does not "feel changed, or even informed"; and the vocabulary with which he attempts to negotiate that experience derives not from the *Inferno* but from *King Lear* and, more importantly, the Psalms.¹⁶

Unlike Heaney, therefore (or even Lowell), Pinsky does not seem to find in Dante a language through which to address the history and the crises of his culture. It may be significant that his own response to the question: "Has the *Inferno* [...] affected your own poetry" was to acknowledge that its effect seemed "indirect and hard to define", and then to cite as the single example of such influence, a personal elegy "in memory of my poker friend Bernie Fields, [which] was written in three-line stanzas and is spoken by a dead person who addresses me."¹⁷ This poem, "The Ice Storm", does indeed allude to some features of the Dantean

¹⁴ See: 'History of My Heart', last line of section IV (*Roland*); 'The Figured Wheel', stanza 8 (*El Cid*); 'Jesus and Isolt' (*Tristan*); 'Sadness and Happiness', section 2 (Wyatt); 'The Unseen', stanza 9, and 'Flowers', stanza 4 (Shakespeare, *Lear*); and 'An Explanation of America', Part Three, I.: 'Braveries' (Jonson). Quotations from Pinsky's poems follow the text in *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966-1996*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1996.

¹⁵ See *The Figured Wheel* (n. 14, above), p. 71.

¹⁶ The half-line "Then kill kill kill kill" in stanza 9 of 'The Unseen' clearly evokes Lear's fantasy of revenge (*Lear* IV, vi. 185). The repeated phrases "poured out like water" and "Thine is the day and thine also the night" are from Psalms 22: 14 and 74: 16 (Authorised Version).

¹⁷ This response comes at the end of "An Interview with Robert Pinsky", on p. 8 of the "Reader's Guide" issued with Pinsky's translation of the *Inferno*.

afterlife – both infernal (“across dark water to this other side”) and purgatorial (“terraces”). But there is not much else that seems significantly Dantean about the encounter. The initial conscious act of ventriloquism – the rigging up of a “Contraption made of grammar, with ‘I’ for ‘he’” – perhaps recalls in a very general way the struggles with speech and language experienced by some of Dante’s souls.¹⁸ But the poem as a whole clearly does not aspire to set up the range of Dantean resonances (public and personal) that are registered by, say, Heaney’s encounters with souls after death in *Station Island*, or by Eliot’s in *Little Gidding*.

Both “The Ice Storm” and “The Unseen”, like a large number of Pinsky’s poems, from his earliest collection through to his latest, are composed in tercets. There is, however, very little that seems to me Dantean about this form. Unlike Pinsky’s tercets for his *Inferno*, they are not linked by either consonantal or vocalic rhymes, nor do they even use unlinked rhyme or pararhyme, as Heaney does in “Ugolino”, “From the Frontier of Writing”, or his versions of the first three cantos from the *Inferno*. Pinsky was clearly aware of the potential for reinforcing Dantean allusion by this means: in his review of *Station Island*, for instance, he notes how in Heaney’s encounter with his murdered friend, in poem VII of the sequence, “the full and partial rhymes shape the march of syntax without hobbling it, echoing the great model’s *terza rima* just enough”.¹⁹ Yet this does not seem to be a model that Pinsky himself has so far chosen to follow. Again, I am open to correction, but it seems to me that appropriation of Dante is, for Pinsky’s own poetry, the path not taken.

The verse-form (or, as he calls it, ‘body’) that Pinsky chose for his version of *Inferno* is, however, a very different matter. His own response, as translator, to “the great model’s *terza rima*” is consciously articulated, and its place in the long debate on the subject deserves some further attention. “The body for a poem”, the phrase I have used in my title, is Pinsky’s own description of Dante’s *terza rima*, and it is worth quoting a couple of sentences from his “Translator’s Note”, in order to clarify the meaning of the phrase. Pinsky here argues that:

By devising *terza rima* as the body for a poem about the fates of souls and bodies, Dante added an expressive element as well as a kind of movement. His variations in tone and idiom – from direct to elaborately rhetorical, for example, or from high to low – have an

¹⁸ For instance: *Inf.* XIII, 40-4; XXVII, 58-66; XXXIII, 4-9 etc. – although there is clearly no other parallel between the situations of these souls and that of the figure in Pinsky’s poem.

¹⁹ *Poetry and the World* (see n. 9, above), p. 81.

emotional truth that moves in counterpoint with the current of interlocking rhymes.²⁰

There have been various assertions – some more plausible than others – about the effect and significance of the *Commedia*'s rhyme-scheme. P.N. Furbank, in his recent review of Pinsky's translation, speaks of its "knitting or weaving effect, a combination of stasis and forward motion" and of how this form of rhyme often gives Dante's lines "the effect of a charm or incantation, a necromantic quality which arouses superstitious awe".²¹ More tersely, Seamus Heaney, reviewing C.H. Sisson's version of the *Commedia* in 1980, characterized what he saw as "the cajolment and fetch of the *terza rima*, the sense of the verse reeling out, pulling its future out of the hat, pulling it off".²² And Robert Fitzgerald in 1981 even went so far as to argue that "Terza rima is a formal paradigm of Aristotelean Becoming – the latent or "virtual" thing constantly coming into actuality, as each new tercet fulfills with enclosing rhyme the rhyme enclosed in the preceding one".²³

Most readers of Italian would, I think, agree that at least some of these dynamic effects – of "forward motion", "reeling out", even (perhaps) "coming into actuality" – are characteristic of Dante's *terza rima* in the original. The question for a modern verse translator, however, is whether such effects can or should be replicated today.

The argument that *terza rima* is not suited to verse in English has been rightly dismissed by a number of critics.²⁴ It has also been vindicated as a medium by a long and continuing tradition of poetic practice: from (for example) Chaucer's *Complaint to his Lady*, through Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, to Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Sequel* (1954), Allen Tate's poems of the early Fifties, Douglas Dunn's

²⁰ *The Inferno of Dante* (see n. 1, above), p. xx.

²¹ P.N. Furbank, "Confounding the Apes", *London Review of Books*, 22 August 1996, p. 26.

²² S. Heaney, "Irreely and Rurally", *Quarto*, August 1980, p. 14.

²³ R. Fitzgerald, "Mirroring the *Commedia*: An Appreciation of Laurence Binyon's Version", in *Dante Among the Moderns*, ed. S.Y. McDougal, Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 165. The essay previously appeared in *Paideuma* X.3 (1981), 489-508, and in *Dante in America: The First Two Centuries*, ed. A.B. Giamatti, Binghamton, New York, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1983, pp. 390-410.

²⁴ Most notably by Ezra Pound, for instance in a letter to Laurence Binyon in 1938, where he comments that the latter's rendering of *Purgatorio* XVII "Utterly confounds the apes who told you terza rima isn't English" (quoted from Fitzgerald, "Mirroring the *Commedia*" [see n. 23, above]). For more recent arguments, see B. Reynolds, "Translating Dante in the 1990s", *Translation & Literature* IV.2 (1995), especially pp. 223-5.

"Disenchantments" (1992), and (most recently) Derek Walcott's *The Bounty* (1997). A number of the more sustained *terza rima* projects in English, of course, have other Dantean dimensions, too: this is obviously the case with *The Triumph of Life*, with Byron's *Prophecy of Dante*, with the 26 hendecasyllabic cantos of the *Autumn Sequel*, and with at least one of Tate's poems in this form ("The Buried Lake"). Douglas Dunn's more recent "Disenchantments" appears also to have a partially Dantean agenda, as a work concerned with "the state of souls after death", and it consciously acknowledges its "parodic/ Purloining of a thirteenth-century beat,/ Dante's drum-kit, a metronomic tick ...".²⁵ Parodically and otherwise, "Dante's drum-kit" clearly lends its beat to Dunn's acerbic and at points satirical speech through this relatively long (15-page) work, and indeed provides the title for the whole collection in which the poem appears; whilst in the title-poem of Walcott's 1997 collection ("The Bounty"), a quotation from Dante seems to act as cue for a loose *terza rima* pattern.²⁶

The vital presence of linked, vocally-rhymed *terza rima* within English and American poetic traditions has led some to insist that this is the form that necessarily has to be used for the translation of Dante. Such insistence has even at times taken on a kind of macho tone – as when, for instance, one of Dorothy Sayers's male friends urged her on to "terza rima or nothing".²⁷ And one of the more successful early twentieth-century translators of the *Commedia* into *terza rima* quite explicitly aligns his project with contemporary record-breaking exploits – asserting that "the arguments against the attempt to translate Dante in the corresponding English meter were much on a plane with those raised against the attempts at the conquest of the Poles and of the Air".²⁸ A more recent translator, Stephen Wentworth Arndt (whose "poetic translation in iambic pentameter and terza rima" appeared in 1994), takes a "hard sell" approach to the issue, and advertises his version as "the first and only to make an exclusive employment of perfect rhymes" – adding (as on a product-label) that "14,231 lines out of 14,233, or 99.99% of the total number of lines, are perfectly rhymed".²⁹

²⁵ "Disenchantments" section V, in Dunn's *Dante's Drum-kit*, London, Faber, 1993, pp. 37–8. Dunn's phrase recalls Allen Mandelbaum's assertion that "Dante is a Drummer" (in the way that he "hastens always in the direction of Volume, toward the violence of speech"); see *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, tr. Allen Mandelbaum, Berkeley, Ca., University of California Press, 1980, p. xxiii.

²⁶ Walcott's slightly distorted quotation of *Paradiso* III, 85 is followed by a set of three rhymes ('harbours', 'labours', 'neighbours'); see *The Bounty*, London, Faber, 1997, p. 4.

²⁷ Maurice Hewlett, quoted by Fitzgerald (see n. 23, above), p. 167.

²⁸ M.B. Anderson, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Yonkers-on-Hudson, 1921, quoted in W. De Sua, *Dante into English: A Study of the Translation of the Divine Comedy in Britain and America*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, p. 94.

²⁹ From the "Translator's Note" to Arndt's version (see n. 1, above), p. iii.

The problem, however, remains one that has long been identified by translators and has been recognized again in their different ways by Pinsky and Ellis. The quest for 'perfect' rhyme can lead not only to needless obscurities and distractions – as Arndt's and, to a lesser extent, Peter Dale's more recent *terza rima* versions illustrate – but can also turn the forward motion, the "reeling out" (as Heaney puts it) of Dante's verse into mere jogtrot.³⁰ Pinsky himself has pointed out the danger of relying on the richness of the English vocabulary for this purpose. In a *New York Times* article he is quoted as saying that "one of the classic mistakes you can make is to draw on that huge wealth of synonyms to supply rhymes. If you do that, you have an extremely unnatural, unidiomatic language; you end up with phrases that no one would ever say".³¹ And, as he had recognized already in his "Translator's Note", to go further along this road through the use of dissyllabic rhyme could also engender what he calls "the comic feeling of limerick, or of W.S. Gilbert".³²

It may be, however, that *terza rima* (of whatever kind) is just one of several means through which the larger purpose of rendering Dante's narrative can be achieved. Hence, Steve Ellis, in the Introduction to his free-verse translation emphasizes the need to create "readerly momentum" whatever form is chosen, and he allows that "if Tony Harrison, say, turned his attention to Dante we might have a successful *terza rima* version".³³ Ellis's reference to Tony Harrison, one of the most skilled and powerful practitioners of rhyme, reason and passion in translation, is significant and illuminating in this context. It acts as a reminder that rhymes can, as Harrison memorably put it in the preface to his version of Racine's *Phèdre*, "keep the cat on the hot tin roof".³⁴

This will not, of course, be the case, if the cat happens to be a corpulent tabby and the roof is barely warm; but both Pinsky's and Ellis's verse-forms in their different ways maintain a fairly high surface-temperature. Ellis opts for a short (three-or four-stress) unrhymed line, which as most reviewers have agreed achieves considerable "readerly momentum".³⁵ He also seeks to convey Dante's

³⁰ From the 'Translator's Note' to Arndt's version (see n. 1, above), p. iii.

³¹ For the references to Arndt's and Dale's translations, see n. 1 (above), and for the reference to Heaney's phrase, see n. 22.

³² Pinsky is thus quoted in Diana Jean Schemo's article, "Bringing Dante into the Realm of Contemporary English" in "The Arts" section of *The New York Times* (31 January 1995), p. 13.

³³ Pinsky's "Translator's Note" in *The Inferno of Dante* (see n. 1, above), p. xx.

³⁴ Ellis's "Introduction" to *Dante Alighieri: Hell* (see n. 1, above), p. xi.

³⁵ See *Phaedra Britannica*, by Tony Harrison after Jean Racine, London, Rex Collings, 1975, p. xxv.

³⁶ See, for instance: Stephen Spender, "Dante Breezes through Hell", *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 May 1994; and Grevel Lindop's review in *The North* (November 1994), especially p. 40.

concision by allowing himself usually no more than seven words to a line. Pinsky's solution is less radical but still original. He aims to maintain the "onward movement" of *terza rima* but adopts what he calls "a more flexible definition of rhyme", retaining some "hard" (or "perfect") rhymes, but arguing that "consonantal or "Yeatsian" rhyme can supply an audible scaffold of English *terza rima*, a scaffold that does not distort the English sentence, or draw excessively on the reaches of the English lexicon".³⁶

The "readerly momentum" of both Pinsky's and Ellis's versions, and their different responses to what Pinsky senses as Dante's "dense web of moral and physical realities", can be compared in the two examples (from cantos XXIII and XXV) that are included in the Appendix to this essay. I do not propose to compare the two versions of these passages very closely. Instead I should like to treat them as a means by which to move, in conclusion, from "the body for a poem" to the voice or voices of Dante's poem as translated.

In his scrupulous review of both translations (Pinsky's and Ellis's), P.N. Furbank praised Pinsky in particular for creating "a verse line which catches the rhythmic pulse – grave and at the same time springy, even at times dancing – of Dante's original".³⁷ As an example of the "shapely" qualities of Pinsky's verse, Furbank points to its management of parenthesis in Virgil's speech at the end of canto XIV: "Lethe you shall see, but out of the abyss: / There where, repented guilt removed, souls gather / To cleanse themselves". Pinsky himself cites the first passage I have quoted (from canto XXIII), to illustrate the theme of "embodiment" in the poem and the "tremendous forward movement [...] at once propulsive and epigrammatic" of its prosody.³⁸ And in a more explicitly laudatory vein Bernard Knox, in the *New York Review of Books*, cited Pinsky's rendering of the scene where Vanni Fucci is silenced (at the start of canto XXV) as illustrative of the translation's lively "forward motion".³⁹

It is at this point that I must admit to having a serious problem with Pinsky's version. I can appreciate the "shapely" and "musical" qualities of the verse, as characterized by Furbank and Knox, and am aware of its success on a number of occasions in conveying a vivid impression of movement in and through the topography of the *Inferno*.⁴⁰ What I fail, however, to hear in these passages and

³⁶ Pinsky, *The Inferno of Dante* (see n. 1, above), p. xx.

³⁷ Furbank, "Confounding the Apes" (see n. 21, above), p. 28.

³⁸ Pinsky, *The Inferno of Dante* (see n. 1, above), p. xxi.

³⁹ B. Knox, "Our Dante", *New York Review of Books*, 19 October, 1995, especially p. 6.

⁴⁰ Examples of Pinsky's success in conveying this impression of movement are his renderings of *Inferno* I, 31-60; VI, 1-12; XVI, 22-7; XXII, 133-51; and XXV, 49-93.

elsewhere in Pinsky's rendering of dialogue are *voices* that speak and can be convincingly spoken.⁴¹ Almost half a century ago John Ciardi was insisting that Dante's original is "overwhelmingly [...] a spoken tongue", and Allen Mandelbaum more recently has emphasized that his translation "asks to be read aloud".⁴² This is not to say that I find Pinsky's rendering unreadable, let alone "dull" (the verdict of Clive Wilmer in his *TLS* review).⁴³ The "shape", "music" and indeed vigour of much of the descriptive verse all resist that blanket condemnation. But since so many of Dante's voices seem to me encumbered here by (to quote Pinsky himself in the *New York Times*) "phrases that no one would ever say", I find it difficult to imagine this version reaching a wider audience through oral performance.

On the other hand, Ellis's version lends itself readily to live reading. This is evident, for example from the voices that his rendering of the opening of *Inferno* XXV transmits.⁴⁴ The "lively forward motion" that Knox claims to find in Pinsky's version of this passage is, to my mind, much more effectively achieved through Ellis's concise colloquialism than through such inert phrases as Pinsky's "I aim them squarely", and such rhyme-forced prolixities as "from your mouth" and "decreed / Your own incineration". Ellis has been criticized for not being flexible enough in his responses to Dante's *plurilinguismo*, for instance in his rendering of Pier della Vigna, Farinata, Brunetto and Ulysses.⁴⁵ Yet his treatment of dialogue and his handling of the *Inferno*'s narrative voices undoubtedly carry the assurance of a local or (to use Heaney's term) "parochial" vernacular – which, in Ellis's case, is a language deriving from his own "native Yorkshire background".⁴⁶ His version thus gains a cogency of dramatic effect that (for all its other virtues) seems absent in Pinsky's. It may well be that, as an English reader, I have failed to register the signals of an American vernacular in the tones of Pinsky's voices. But the diction and idiom of his dialogue and narrative voicing still, in my view, seem to have been plucked from what Pinsky elsewhere called

⁴¹ Examples here are Pinsky's renderings of Dante's dialogue in *Inferno* II, 30 and 95; III, 18; V, 16, 50-1, 112-13, 124-5, 127-8 & 131; VI, 64-6; X, 27 & 94-6; XV, 60 & 65-6; XXI, 124-6; XXII, 113-15; and XXIV, 142-4.

⁴² See John Ciardi, *The Inferno*, New York, The New American Library, 1954, p. 10, and A. Mandelbaum, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno* (see n. 25, above), p. xxiii.

⁴³ C. Wilmer, "Dante Made Plain", *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1996, especially p. 4.

⁴⁴ I.e., those of Vanni Fucci, the serpent, and Dante as narrator/author addressing Pistoia.

⁴⁵ Mark Balfour's shrewd and generally favourable review of Ellis's translation, in *Medium Aevum*, LXV.1 (1996) argues that the version "fares less well when dealing with the intricate word-play of Pier della Vigna or the powerful rhetoric of Ulysses" (p. 149). Robert Gordon, in the *Review of English Studies* XLVII (1996), p. 231, makes similar points about Ellis's handling of Farinata's and Brunetto's speech.

⁴⁶ Ellis, Introduction to *Dante Alighieri: Hell* (see n. 1, above), p. x.

the "cultural cookie jar".⁴⁷ And some of those cookies taste distinctly stale.

A good deal of publicity has accompanied Pinsky's version, and it clearly deserves its public for the reasons I have attempted to outline. Ellis's translation has had a rather more mixed reception, and several critics have dismissed its chosen register as merely "monolingual" or (more crudely) *linguaggio punk*.⁴⁸ Others, however, have seen it as a significant and innovative new departure, implying a *portata rivoluzionaria* that may point towards a plurality of locally spoken Dantes.⁴⁹ Something, finally, of the essential difference I see between these two translations can, perhaps, be illustrated by comparing the idiom of their reception in two newspaper headlines. The article that hailed Pinsky's translation in the 'Arts' section of the *New York Times* was titled: *Bringing Dante Into the Realm of Contemporary English*; whilst the piece that greeted Steve Ellis's version in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* was headed: "WELCOME TO HELL, IT'S YORKSHIRE!"⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Pinsky's illuminating phrase is quoted in Diana Jean Schemo's *New York Times* article (see n. 31, above).

⁴⁸ The first comment is from D. Robcy, "Colloquial Comedy", *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 April 1994, p. 26; the second is from the headline to P. Floridi, "Nel mezzo del cammin 'of our life'", *La Repubblica*, 9 February 1995, p. 28.

⁴⁹ See Balfour, p. 148, and Gordon, pp. 230-1 (n. 45, above). The phrase quoted is from the perceptive discussion by Edoardo Crisafulli: "Dante in inglese", *Culturiana* XXIX (June 1996), 10-11.

⁵⁰ For the *New York Times* article, see n. 31, above. The article in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* is dated 17 March 1994.

The following quotations are intended to illustrate some of the different ways in which episodes and voices from the *Inferno* are rendered by the two main translators discussed in this essay:

Inferno XXIII, 37-51

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;
e giù dal collo de la ripa dura
supin si diede a la pendente roccia,
che l'un de' lati a l'altra bolgia tura.
Non corse mai sì tosto acqua per doccia
a volger ruota di molin terragno,
quand'ella più verso le pale approccia,
come 'l maestro mio per quel vivagno,
portandosene me sovra 'l suo petto,
come suo figlio, non come compagno.

Pinsky

My leader took me up at once, and did
As would a mother awakened by a noise
Who sees the flames around her, and takes her child,

Concerned for him more than herself, and flies
Not staying even to put on a shift:
Supine he gave himself to the rocky place

Where the hard bank slopes downward to the cleft,
Forming one side of the adjacent pouch.
No water coursing a sluice was ever as swift

To turn a landmill's wheel on its approach
Toward the vanes, as my master when he passed
On down that bank that slanted to the ditch,

Hurtling along with me upon his breast

Not like his mere companion, but like his child.
Ellis

So master grabbed me immediately,
like a woman woken by shouting
who sees that fire's broken out,
who picks up her baby and runs
without even a vest on her back,
more worried for it than herself;
and down that rough, rocky face
that walls in the next circuit
he slid all the way on his back.
Water running through a conduit,
even when it gets to the blades
of a water-wheel, it's more slow
than master was down that bank,
with me in his lap all the time,
more like a son than companion.

Inferno XXV, 1-15

Al fine de le sue parole il ladro
le mani alzò con amendue le fiche,
gridando: «Togli . Dio, ch'a te le squadro!».
Da indi in qua mi fuor le serpi amiche,
perch'una li s'avvolse allora al collo,
come dicesse 'Non vo' che più diche';
e un'altra a le braccia, e rilegollo,
ribadendo sé stessa sì dinanzi,
che non potea con esse dare un crollo.
Ahi Pistoia, Pistoia, ché non stanzi
d'incenerarti sì che più non duri,
poi che 'n mal fare il seme tuo avanzi?
Per tutt'i cerchi de lo 'nferno scuri
non vidi spirto in Dio tanto superbo,
non quel che cadde a Tèbe giù da' muri.

Pinsky

The thief held up his hands when he was through,
And "God", he cried, making the fig with both –
"Take these: I aim them squarely up at you!".

The serpents were my friends from that time forth,
For them one coiled itself about his neck
As if to say, "That's all then, from your mouth,"

And another went around his arms to snake
Them tight and cinch itself in front, so tied
They couldn't budge enough to gesture. Alack,

Pistoia, Pistoia Why haven't you decreed
Your own incineration, so that you dwell
On earth no more, since you surpass your seed

In evildoing? In all the circles of Hell
I saw no spirit so arrogant to God,
Not even him who fell from the Theban wall.

Ellis

With this, the thief stops speaking,
raising his hands in two V-signs
and shouting out, "Up yours, God!"
Well, the snakes became my friends
as one clamped round his throat
as if saying, 'No more of that!'
and then another rebound his arms,
tightening itself into such a knot
he couldn't move them at all.
Ah, Pistoia, Pistoia, why your delay
in razing yourself off the globe?
Even your founders weren't as bad.
In all the murky circles of Hell
I saw no one as insolent to God,
not even him shot down at Thebes.