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MISCELLANEA DEL DIPARTIMENTO
DI SCIENZE FILOLOGICHE E LINGUISTICHE

(2)

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Esercizi
(2)

*Miscellanea del Dipartimento
di Scienze filologiche e linguistiche*

interventi di

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CHIARA SCIARRINO

A contrastive Analysis of the first Canto of Dante's *Inferno*:
an Examination of the Translations of Seamus Heaney
and Ciaran Carson

In 1993 a new translation of the *Inferno* by Dante was published by the Eco Press, in New Jersey, which included contributions from twenty contemporary poets. The first three cantos of the collection were translated by the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (1939-).

Heaney's interest in Dante's *Divine Comedy* dates back to the late 1970s, when his collection of poetry *Field Work* was first published. The influence of the Florentine poet on Heaney has been identified and extensively examined by critics in relation to such collections as *Seeing Things* (1991), *The Spirit Level* (1997) and *Station Island* (1985), the latter being based on a series of pilgrimage sequences and encounters with familiar ghosts.

Heaney himself acknowledges the role Dante has played in the process of writing poetry. In an essay entitled 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', Heaney recalls how modern poets such as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Geoffrey Hill, Thomas Kinsella, Ezra Pound and Osip Mändel'stam have all drawn inspiration from his work. As Heaney states, what concerns him most is:

local intensity, the vehemence and fondness attaching to individual shades, the way personalities and values were emotionally soldered together [...] The way in which Dante could place himself in an historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history, the way he could accommodate the political and the transcendent, this too encouraged my attempt at a sequence of poems which would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country [...] to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognition of the emerging self.

Analogies drawn between Medieval Florence, infernal atmospheres and Irish contemporary life allow Heaney to deal with the important issue of the historical experience of the Northern Irish troubles. From here he can move to the experience of the transcendent, which is made possible through descriptions of a series of meetings with different souls, i.e. characters. Though not clear, the motif of the occurrence of the transcendent and its association with the element

¹ Seamus Heaney, "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet" in *Irish University Review*, ed. by M. Harmon, n. 1, vol. XV, Spring 1985, pp. 5-19.

² S. Heaney, *art. cit.*, pp. 18-9.

of history, makes the reading of the *Commedia* more adaptable to an Irish context. Indeed Heaney undertakes a physical and spiritual journey to the Station Island, on Lough Derg, in County Donegal, a place that is very well known as St. Patrick's Purgatory³.

Chronologically speaking, one should first consider Heaney's first Dantean experience, his attempt at translating Dante's work, which involved cantos I, II, III, XXXII and XXXIII of the *Inferno*. This work was carried out during the period following the publication of the collection of poetry entitled *North* (1975) and was published four years later, as part of the collection *Field Work*⁴. Here he is also trying to reconcile his sense of being a Catholic from the North who has moved to the Republic of Ireland.

From a mere translation exercise which also involves the difficult task of practising the form of *terza rima*, a more distinguishable and mature poetic form which is anchored to the local and contemporary world around him, begins to take shape. Episodes, events and characters that appear in Dante's work offer themselves as multiple occasions for alluding to, referring to and dealing with local Irish realities. His reading of the *Commedia* then appears as a dramatisation, an all-personal interpretation of the poetic form as well as an adaptation of the topics dealt with by Dante. *The Divine Comedy* becomes a starting point from which the Irish poet is able to observe the political reality of his time and to define his own aesthetic theory. Writing is the expression of language itself whereas translation necessarily means misunderstanding, being unfaithful in reproducing both the feeling and the sounds of the source text. This is what Heaney affirms and this is possibly the reason – together with the actual difficulty of rendering Dante's words into English – why he avoids too much translation and lets himself be more generally moved by Dantean atmospheres as they occur in the collection *Station Island*⁵.

³ Heaney himself talks about having admired a fresco in Todi. This fresco, which dates back to the first half of the fourteenth century, depicts the so-called Station Island. V. K. Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, Between the Lines, BTL, London 2000, pp. 34-5. According to tradition, during a fifty-day fast, Saint Patrick, who was living in a cave, had a vision of the afterworld and suffered the pains of Purgatory. One of his disciples named Saint Davog, founded a penitential refuge which, from the Middle Ages on, took the name of 'Saint Patrick's Purgatory'. During the twelfth century, a knight named Owein visited the place and had visions of 'souls tormented by devils'. Accounts of his experience soon spread all over Europe and are likely to have influenced Dante in the writing of his *Commedia* where this episode is actually referred to.

⁴ Heaney used his translation of canto II as part of the collection *Seeing Things*. He also employed Ugolino's episode, from cantos XXXII and XXXIII, in the last part of his *Field Work* published in 1979.

⁵ From the recollection of Pier delle Vigne's destiny in 'The Loaning' to an almost

What at a first glance Dante seems to propose is therefore the structure and pattern of a long poem as well as the use of the *terza rima* in the translation of cantos II, IV, VI, VII and XII. Heaney's poems tell about the meeting with people who had some influence on him both as a person and as a writer: from king Sweeney who was turned into a bird to the Irish novelist William Carleton; from Virgil to the poet Patrick Kavanagh; from a girl he fell in love with to an IRA prisoner who died during the well-known hunger strikes that took place in the 1980s.

Heaney goes back to translating passages from both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* in the collection of poetry *Seeing Things*, published in 1991. The concluding verses on Caronte, from canto III of the *Inferno*, which are added to the poem 'The Crossing', act as a sort of prologue which outlines and completes the theme of the collection, while confirming the mystical nature of the pilgrim poet. Besides, the motif of the pilgrimage – which is never undertaken – acts more as a poetic structure than as an inspiring religious background. Overall, Dante's work, which is admired for its versatility, its attention towards language and artistic freedom as well as its universal character due to its roots in classical and medieval Latin, gives Heaney the opportunity to give voice to his preoccupations, to his fears as well as perceptions and interpretations of the world that surrounds him.

Many have forgotten that in order to reach a wider readership, Dante wrote in vernacular Italian, claims Ciaran Carson (1948-), an Irish poet who was born and lives in Belfast, author of many collections of poems as well as of prose books and professor at Queen's University of Belfast. In the introduction to his translation of the *Inferno*, published for the first time in 2002⁶, he quotes from Ezra Pound: 'Dante, small gutter-snipe, or small boy hearing the talk in his father's kitchen'. He does so to emphasize the role that colloquial language plays in his transposition of the original text.

What immediately strikes one on a first reading of his text is an inventive contemporary idiom which stands in neat contrast with all the literal renderings, to his view often difficult to understand, offered by previous translators of the *Commedia*, which Carson needed to read not only to become familiar with the Italian language but also to get a more comprehensive overview of the source text. What previous translators into the English language conveyed, he argues, is some form of 'translationese', that is what critics generally define as that kind of target text which is neither fluent nor elegant.

Indeed, Carson wanted to distinguish himself by offering a text which would

interlinear transposition of the passage on the little flowers, with 'Sandstone Keepsake', we come to an explicit evocation of a typical hellish atmosphere.

⁶ Ciaran Carson, *Inferno*, Granta, London, New York, 2002.

have been comprehensible not only to himself but to the reader of his time. Though he is well aware of the difficulties entailed in the process of translating such a work, he admits that all translators can take the liberties they want and produce their own version once they get hold of the source text, especially when it is poetry to be translated. This is especially so for the kind of language Dante used for his *Commedia*, which, Carson claims, could look and sound as archaic as the variety of English used by Chaucer. Apart from the lexical element – he insists – one should also find worth considering a metrical system which does not find any equivalent in the English language, that is the *terza rima*, here replaced by a rhyme pattern characterised by marked enjambments and inversions in normal patterns of word order. Coming from a musical background and speaking Irish as first language, Carson inevitably comes to consider the rhyme pattern as an essential prerequisite for a good translation exercise. While doing so, he always keeps the Irish ballad-makers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – ‘whose songs in English reflect the internal assonance and rhyme of Irish language poetry’ – in mind. Sounds then are much more relevant than the actual content of the text he is reading.

Besides this is his first translation exercise. Before this, he translated Ovid, Baudelaire and Rimbaud:

Translating ostensibly from the Italian, Tuscan or Florentine, I found myself translating as much from English, or various Englishes. Translation became a form of reading, a way of making the poetry of Dante intelligible to myself. An exercise in comprehension: “Now tell the story in your own words”. What are my own words? I found myself pondering the curious and delightful grammar of English, and was reminded that I spoke Irish (with its different, curious and delightful grammar) before I spoke English⁷.

Indeed, what distinguishes Heaney’s and Carson’s experiences as translators of the *Inferno* is first of all their educational background: even though both grew up in Northern Ireland, one was brought up and through English, the other through Irish. Furthermore, the Belfast poet, who plays music, is fascinated by the influence that music and music structures can have on poetry:

When I began looking into the *Inferno*, it occurred to me that the measures and assonances of the Hiberno-English ballad might provide a model for translation. It would allow for sometimes extravagant alliteration, for periphrasis and inversion to accommodate the rhyme, and for occasional assonance instead of rhyme; it could accommodate rapid shifts of register. So I tried to write a *terza rima* crossed with ballad⁸.

⁷ Carson, *op. cit.*, ‘Introduction’, xx.

⁸ Carson, *op. cit.*, xxi.

Translating from one language to another also means transposing from one world to another and trying to find similarities between the other and ourselves, between the foreign and the familiar:

The deeper I got into the *Inferno*, the more I walked. Hunting for a rhyme, trying to construe a turn of phrase, I'd leave the desk and take to the road, lines ravelling and unravelling in my mind. Usually, I'd head for the old Belfast Waterworks, a few hundred yards away from where I live. The north end of the Waterworks happens to lie on one of Belfast's sectarian fault lines. Situated on a rise above the embankment is the Westland housing estate, a Loyalist enclave which, by a squint of the imagination, you can see as an Italian hill-town. Flags proclaim its allegiance [...] Often, a British Army helicopter eye-in-the-sky is stationed overhead. As I write, I can hear its ratchety interference in the distance; and, not for the first time, I imagine being airborne in the helicopter, like Dante riding on the flying monster Geryon, looking down into the darkness of that place in Hell called Malebolge. 'Rings of ditches, moats, trenches, fosses' military barriers on every side': I see a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences. For all the blank abandoned spaces it feels claustrophobic, cramped and medieval. Not as beautiful as Florence, perhaps, but then Florence is 'the most damned of Italian cities, wherein there is place neither to sit, stand, or walk,' according to Ezra Pound. And we see again the vendetta-stricken courtyards and surveillance towers of Dante's birthplace, where everyone is watching everyone, and there is little room for manoeuvre⁹.

Carson goes on drawing comparisons between his native Belfast and Dante's Florence. He insists on the well detectable differences – accent, body language, clothes and so on – between local Catholics and Protestants, which he likens to the Guelfi and Ghibellini. After having extensively contextualised the work of Dante within his own time, Carson focuses on the difficult task he set about and he does so by starting to employ the allegory of the wood to refer to the writing process.

The main aim of the present contribution is to compare the ways in which the two Irish poets responded to Dante and to show how the essential spirit of Dante's writing and particularly of the *Inferno* may live on in the work of two contemporary poets. Dante does indeed come to both Irish poets as a guide-figure, as the poet who also happens to be an exile from his native Florence and who came to terms with the violence of his country and of his own time.

⁹ Carson, *op. cit.*, xi.

The translator can be forgiven all metaphors as long as he makes sure the thought keeps the same body and the same life.

Batteaux

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 1-9

Seamus Heaney

Ciaran Carson

<p>In the middle of the journey of our life/ I found myself astray in a dark wood/ Where the straight road had been lost sight of</p> <p>How hard it is to say what it was like/in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled/the very thought of it renew my panic.</p> <p>It is bitter almost as death itself is bitter./ But to rehearse the good it also brought me/ I will speak about the other things I saw there.</p>	<p>Halfway through the story of my life/ I came to in a gloomy wood, because/ I'd wandered off the path, away from the light.</p> <p>It's hard to put words to what that wood was;/ I shudder even now to think of it,/ so wild and rough and tortured were its ways;</p> <p>and death might well be its confederate/ in bitterness; yet all the good I owe to it,/ and what else I saw there, I'll relate.</p>
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From the beginning, Carson's translation distances itself from the numerous existing English translations of the *Inferno*. The possessive adjective 'my' already signals such a difference by making the story more introspective, hence more felt. It is not a physical and spiritual journey the author is about to undertake but the telling of the 'story of [his] life', which therefore appears not only more approachable but also self-reflective.

The language Carson uses is more down-to-earth: the subordinating conjunction 'because' wants to set a more colloquial and explicative tone which stands in neat contrast with the original 'so that' as well as with the more generic term used by Heaney, i.e. the conjunction 'where', which brings us to another clause. Heaney succeeds in conveying the idea that it is a dark place by also employing the verb 'to lose sight of', whereas Carson seems to fall into the repetition of this image by using both the adjective 'gloomy' and the locution 'away from the light'.

The initial interjection 'ah!' expressing the apprehension of the original text is not rendered in any of the two translations. Even though both Irish poets make use of the adjective 'hard', the result is different: Heaney gets in some way much closer to the original by brilliantly reproducing the difficulty in recounting with his own words what he experienced in the 'thick of thickets'. The adoption of the rhetoric figure of reduplication which consists of choosing at least two words with the same root makes Heaney's translation stand as a more faithful and effective one. The three lines of the following *terzina* are evidence of this.

On the other hand, Carson's narrator, whose presence is made tangible by the final 'I'll relate', seems to be wanting to give more emphasis to what happened to him, i.e. his actual experience than to being unable to find the right words for conveying the feeling of fear which overwhelmed him and which is vividly recalled in the moment of writing. This is achieved by the noun 'confederate' – which rhymes with 'relate' – applied to 'death', thus giving a stronger and gloomier tone to the lines in question. From the very beginning Carson wants to establish a closer relationship with his readers. He wants to make himself understood and he does so by underlining – through a periphrastic statement, i.e. 'it's hard to put words' – the difficulty inherent in his task, which consists of giving his own version, recounting, translating.

lo non so ben ridir com' i' v'intraï,
tant' era pien di sonno a quel punto
che la verace via abbandonai.

Ma poi ch'ï fui al piè d'un colle giunto,
là dove terminava quella valle
che m'avea di paura il cor compunto,

guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta
che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 10-18

Heaney

Carson

How I got into it, I cannot clear say/
for I was moving like a sleepwalker/ the
moment I stepped out of the right way,

But when I came to the bottom of a
hill/ standing off at the far end of that
valley/ where a great terror had dis-
heartened me

I looked up, and saw how its shoulders
glowed/ already in the rays of the
planet/ which leads and keeps men
straight on every road.

How I got into it, I still don't know,/
for I was well upon my way to sleep/ be-
fore I ever left the straight and narrow.

It seems I'd found myself at the foot of
a steep/ hill; here, the valley formed a
cul-de-sac;/ and there, I fell into de-
pression deep.

Then I looked up. Clouds were riding
pickaback/ on the high-shouldered
peaks, as, bursting through,/ the sun
pursued its single-minded track;

The colloquial tone immediately distinguishes the next three sets of lines translated by Carson. He acknowledges his incapacity for recounting how he got into the wood by simply saying 'I still don't know' and by using the idiomatic expression 'the straight and narrow' to mean the path, which establishes the all-personal and uncertain quality provided by the initial 'it seems' – which has the power of questioning everything that is about to be said – applied to the experience which the contemporary reader can easily imagine as that of the Irish poet himself. Confused by being in a cul-de-sac to the point of feeling depressed, the poet is still able to inventively figure embodied 'clouds riding pickaback on the high-shouldered peaks' and an egotistical sun which has lost its main aim of being a guide to people. Furthermore, mistranslating the pronoun 'altrui' has the effect of depriving the sun of its metaphorical value and spiritual significance as symbol of God. In other words, it is vital that even mere oblique references to religion are avoided, by neglecting what is the holy element of Canto I.

It is here worth drawing attention to the choice of the word 'cul-de-sac' which, while bringing us back to a urban setting, evokes images of rows of middle-class houses in the suburban areas of Belfast, overshadowed by easily recognisable clouds which have for the occasion completely 'neglected', for the sake of rhyme (cul-de-sac/pickaback) the presence of rays of sunlight. Besides, analogies between Italy and Ireland, Florence and his native Belfast are acknowledged and deemed essential in the process of transposing and rendering Dante's lines:

I see a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened

side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences. For all the blank abandoned spaces it feels claustrophobic, cramped and medieval. Not as beautiful as Florence, perhaps, but then Florence is "the most damned of Italian cities, wherein there is place neither to sit, stand, or walk", according to Ezra Pound¹⁰.

In its turn, Heaney's translation – in an attempt to be as close as possible to the original – offers an example of good translating exercise which fails in one aspect: the image of the 'sleepwalker' is an unsuccessful one because it is out-of context.

Allor fu la paura un poco queta,
che nel lago del cor m'era durata
la notte ch' i' passai con tanta pieta.

E come quei che con lena affannata,
uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,
si volge a l'acqua perigliosa e guata,

così l'animo mio, ch' ancor fuggiva,
si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo
che non lasciò già mai persona viva.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 19-27

Heaney

Carson

Then I sensed a quiet influence setting/ into those depths in me that had been rocked/ and pitifully troubled all night long	so was the lake of fear in me subdued/ a little, that had festered like a cyst/ all night, till I thought dawn long overdue
And as a survivor gasping on the sand/ turns his head back to study in a daze/ the dangerous combers, so my mind	And, as a sailor washed up by the tempest/ flounders gasping on the half-drowned shore,/ yet turns to watch the ocean's huge unrest,
Turned back, although it was reeling forward,/ back to inspect a pass that had proved fatal/ heretofore to everyone who entered.	so did my spirit, like a bold survivor,/ turn to view the dreaded mountain pass/ that no one yet has overcome alive.

¹⁰ Carson, *op. cit.*, 'Introduction', xi, xii.

Once more, the colloquial nature of Carson's lines seems to prevail over the more pretentious and presumably more literal version offered by Heaney. Already from line 19, the original fear has given way to a 'quiet influence settling'. Heaney does not make any effort to look for words which could convey the original atmosphere. Yet, though he sometimes seems to load it with strong terms – such as the verb 'rocked' which gives a more lasting meaning to the Italian 'durata' or the adverb 'pitifully' – he renders well the idea of distress suffered by the one who speaks, and who looks back, unable to think clearly or understand what is happening and, as a consequence, moves in an unsteady way. Carson, on the other hand, gives free play to his imagination. He borrows the elegant turn of the phrase 'lago del cor' and changes it into the prevailing feeling of fear which putrefies 'like a cyst' all throughout the length of one seemingly long night. It is no wonder then that the object of the simile which follows in the next tercet is not an indefinite survivor but a more distinguishable sailor who struggles through the waters of a wider and more startling ocean landscape and, once saved from the danger, looks back to the main path.

Poi ch'èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,
ripresi via per la spiaggia diserta,
sì che 'l piè fermo sempre era 'l più basso.

Ed ecco, quasi al cominciar de l'erta,
una lonza leggiera e presta molto,
che di pel macolato era coverta;

e non mi si partia dinanzi al volto,
anzi 'mpediva tanto il mio cammino,
ch'ì' fui per ritornar più volte vòlto.

Temp' era dal principio del mattino,
e 'l sol montava 'n sù con quelle stelle
ch'èran con lui quando l'amor divino

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 28-39

Heaney

Carson

Heaney	Carson
I rested a little then, for I was weary, Then began to climb up the waste slopes once more/with my firm foot al- ways the lower one beneath me	Tired limbs somewhat relieved, on- wards I pressed/ across the wasteland, one foot firmly set/below the other in iambic stress.

<p>When suddenly the spotted fluent shape/ of a leopard crossed my path/not far up from the bottom of the slope,</p> <p>Harrying me, confronting my advance,/ loping round me, leaping in my face/ so that I turned back downhill more than once.</p> <p>The morning was beginning all above,/ the sun was rising up among the stars/ that rose with him when the Divine Love</p>	<p>And then, behold! just where the mountainside/ began to rise, up sprang a lithesome leopard,/ splendidly arrayed in spotted hide,</p> <p>who would not be faced down by me, but barred/ my every path, no matter where I went,/ confining me as in a prison yard.</p> <p>It now was early morning, radiant/ with those same stars that had accompanied/ the rising sun, when in the Orient</p>
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In the above tercets, the way Carson embarks on the rendering of the obscure 'più fermo sempre era 'l più basso' by using one type of metre such as the iambic stress, leads to a remarkable and unexpected interpretation which, with its uniqueness, introduces the elegant image of a leopard magnificently portrayed as 'arrayed in spotted hide'. Carson misunderstands the meaning of line 34 – the poet was about to go back to where he had come from but did not actually do so – by claiming that the act itself of going, of moving, takes place. He also draws the reader's attention to a place which is out of context, i.e. a prison yard, a place that could however be familiar to a twenty-first-century reader from Northern Ireland; someone who has more than once looked back at the history of the six counties and the so-called 'Troubles'. Heaney, for his part, tries to remain faithful to the original and he gets some excellent results like 'the spotted fluent shape of a leopard crossed my path' and the idea of the mellifluous movement of the animal who lopes around him and is 'leaping' in his face.

mosse di prima quelle cose belle;
 sì ch'a bene sperar m'era cagione
 di quella fiera a la gatta pelle

l'ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;
 ma non sì che paura non mi desse
 la vista che m'apparve d'un leone.

Questi pareva che contra me venisse
 con la test' alta e con rabbiosa fame,
 sì che pareva che l'aere ne tremesse.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 40-48

Heaney

Carson

<p>First set those lovely things in motion, so I was encouraged to face with better hope/ the beast skipping in its merry skin</p>	<p>They first were set by Love Divine; in- deed,/ I was encouraged by that goodly light/ to think the prancing beast of spotted breed</p>
<p>By the time of day, the sweetness of the season:/ but not enough not to be frightened by/ the sudden apparition of a lion</p>	<p>might bear me no ill-will, and would- n't bite,/ when suddenly, from nowhere, sprang a fearsome/ lion! Pic- ture for yourselves the sight:</p>
<p>That came for me with his head in the air/ and so maddened by hunger that it seemed/ the air itself was bristling with fear.</p>	<p>this animal with mane frizzed high and handsome,/ charging towards me, roar- ing oh so loud,/the air around him trembled at the volume.</p>

What strikes one on a first reading of these lines is the adoption of the subject pronoun 'I': 'I was encouraged to face with better hope' and 'I was encouraged by that goodly light' stress the position of the narrator as opposed to the main role attributed to 'quelle cose belle'. By so doing, it is as if such things were deprived of their divine quality. This is strengthened, in Carson's version, by the presence of an adjective like 'goodly' which means 'of good appearance' 'of good quality', 'of good size', in reference to the more generic noun 'light'. The reader finds nothing that is significantly or overtly ascribable to the religious, godly content of Dante's telling, except for the previous 'Love Divine' which refers to what was created and not to its inspiring presence and its role.

Instead, Carson wants to emphasize the effect of surprise that the appearance of a lion provokes in him. This is noticeable by the exclamation mark in the second set of three lines, by the use of the informal verb 'picture' – which has the aim of arousing his readers' interest – and the colloquial verb 'to spring', as well as by adding the interjection 'oh', which sounds more like a child-like comment on an animal behind the bars of a zoo. Carson's look is a dispassionate one which almost gets rid of its supposed strength and which once again stands in contrast with Heaney's more pretentious translation. If we look closely at Heaney's interpretation we do find from the first of the above tercine expressions that could be termed inappropriate. An example of these is 'head in the air', which, while sounding odd in the English language, mistranslates the whole meaning of the line in an attempt to reproduce the original 'con la testa' alta'. The occurrence of conversational terms like 'skipping' and of sur-

prising and inexplicable terms like 'merry' to define the skin of the animal makes this further contribution from Heaney not a successful one.

Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame
sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,
e molte genti fé già viver grame,

questa mi porse tanto di gravezza
con la paura ch'uscìa di sua vista,
ch'io perdei la speranza de l'altezza.

E qual è quei che volontieri acquista,
e giugne 'l tempo che perder lo face,
che 'n tutti suoi pensier piange e s'attrista;

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 49-57

Heaney

Carson

<p>And a she-wolf, so thin she looked as if/ all her appetites were gnawing at her./ She had already brought many to grief</p> <p>And I was so overcome at the sight of her/ my courage broke and I immediately lost heart/ in climbing the mountain any farther</p> <p>And as somebody who thinks he is going to win/ every time will be the most distressed one/ whenever his turn comes to be the loser</p>	<p>What next? A wolf, her body sunk and bowed/ with hunger, slunk into my view, like one/ well used to singling from a crowd</p> <p>a weakling for her weekly dinner. Stunned/ with fear at this dread apparition, I/ tried to summon up the nerve to run</p> <p>Then, like a venturer for whom the sky/ was once the limit, finding that his shares/ have reached an all-time low, and not a high,</p>
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Again, a comparison between the two translations shows two completely different ways of dealing with the source text. In his constant endeavour to be as faithful as possible to the original meaning and sentence construction, Heaney is sometimes capable of providing interesting results: 'che di tutte brame semiava carca ne la sua magrezza' maintains the idea of being corroded by greed to the point that 'all her appetites were gnawing at her'. At other times, Heaney's version sounds too artificial and inelegant: 'and as somebody who thinks he is going to win', which reproduces the repetition of the conjunction 'and' at the

beginning of each set of three lines, does not seem to properly convey the specific image of somebody who is getting richer and richer.

Carson returns to the previously-used informal tone with the initial question 'What next' which he readdresses to the reader in order to continue the sequence of animals encountered. The animal, however, seems to have lost the traits that characterise her: merely 'bowed with hunger', the wolf is well distinguishable, detectable among a crowd, but not so menacing. On the contrary, she is 'physically weak' as the term 'weakling' suggests. Yet, the *I*-subject seems – or is it simply an attempt to keep up with the meaning of Dante's text? – to be filled with fear to the point of deciding to run, which is something that is never stated in the original. The line, though, has the overall effect of sounding too extreme in its position, too ironic in its tone, hence derisory in its message. It is indeed a different context experienced by the reader in the *terzina* that follows: no sign of the second simile, that of the venturer, nor of the domain of finance specifically identified by such terms as 'shares' and 'all-time low'.

tal mi fece la bestia senza pace,
che, venendomi 'ncontro, a poco a poco
mi ripigneva là dove 'l sol tace.

Mentre ch'ì rovinava in basso loco,
dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto
chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco.

Quando vidi costui nel gran deserto,
«Miserere di me», gridai a lui,
«qual che tu sii, od ombra od omo certo!».

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 58-66

Heaney

Carson

<p>I was like that as I retreated from/ the animal's turbulent head-on attack/ gradually, to where the sun is dumb.</p>	<p>he weeps, and wrings his hands, and tears his hair,/ I too was driven by that lupine brute/ to stagger back, as down a broken stair,</p>
<p>While I was slipping back, about sink/ back to the depths, I caught sight of one/ who seemed through a long si- lence indistinct.</p>	<p>to where the sun becomes irresolute;/ and in that lower place, a shape ap- peared/ to glide across my vision, pale and mute</p>
<p>When I saw him in that great waste land/ I cried out to him, "Pity me,/ whatever you are, shade or a living man."</p>	<p>from long restraint. As through that wasteland weird/ he skimmed, I cried: 'O pity me, you shade,/ or man! Whate'er you be, please make it clear!'</p>

The effect of paradox is pursued in line 58, which still focuses on the character of the venturer who, having lost all that he owned, despairs and ends up by crying out nervously, wringing his hands and tearing his hair. The resulting recognition of such a character on the part of the speaking voice bears all the traits of an incongruous situation in which the animal has assumed the attributes of an almost monster-like creature who forces the poet to draw back to the place from whence he came. It is at that point that he sees – to add up to the surreal atmosphere – what he first identifies as a shade. He soon corrects himself by acknowledging that it might be a man, a human being, though a pale one, a detail he adds with no discomfort. This acknowledgment is given with an exclamation mark, even though he has to beg him, in an ordinary spoken language, to tell him who he is. Heaney's voice still retains the idea of uncertainty as to the nature of the 'creature' in front of him: his 'pity me, whatever you are, shade or living man', placed at the end, is certainly less definite, even though well rendered, in confirming the sense of vagueness which surrounds the 'one who seemed through a long silence indistinct'.

Poeta fui, e cantai di quel giusto
figliuol d'Anchise che venne di Troia,
poi che 'l superbo Ilión fu combusto.

Ma tu perché ritorni a tanta noia?
perché non sali il diletto monte
ch'è principio e cagion di tutta gioia?».

«Or se' tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?»
rispuos' io lui con vergognosa fronte.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 72-80

Heaney

Carson

<p>I was a poet, and I sang of that just son/ Of Anchises who came out of Troy/ After the burning of proud Ilium.</p>	<p>I was a poet, and to some acclaim/ I sang of bold Anchises' son, who sailed/ from Troy when Ilium went up in flames.</p>
<p>But why do you face back into misery?/ Why do you not keep on up the sweet hill, the source and cause of all felicity?"</p>	<p>But as for you, why have you left the trail?/ Why look so down? Why don't you climb the Mount/ of Joy, where every happy thing prevails?"</p>

"Oh, are you then Virgil, are you the fountainhead/ of that wide river of speech constantly brimming?"/ answered and for shame kept my head bowed.

'Are you then Virgil, that superior fount/ which spouts so generous a verbal brook?'/ I bashfully replied to his account.

He is no longer a living man, though he once was, answers Virgil to the poet, thus beginning his personal account. In Dante's imagination, Virgil's great force derives from his epic, the *Aeneid*. The work, which tells of the founding of Rome by Aeneas, a survivor of the destruction of Troy, is relevant to Dante's experience in that it also recounts the story of Aeneas's journey to meet his father's shade in the underworld.

If we look at Heaney's lines, we notice that his rendering is quite accurate also for its use of literary and literal terms such as 'fountainhead' and 'just son' for 'giusto figliuol' to mean 'pious', 'honorable', while also trying to be explanatory by specifying that 'si largo fiume' is a rhetorical 'wide river of speech', which is not overtly conveyed in the original, but simply suggested and implied. Heaney is free to value and describe – through verses – what he observes. The fountain – a dominant image in the poetry of Juan de la Cruz, translated by him – is a symbol of poetry and of the poetic journey he undertakes.

In Carson's version, such a figure of speech is, on the contrary, reproduced in a more unravelled way so as to have a longer and richer subordinate like 'which spouts so generous a verbal brook' so that the reader has in mind both the image of water gushing from a real fountain and Virgil's work as a great source of eloquence. Carson's language accepts the role of the Latin poet who seems more eager to know why the recounting voice has not undertaken the journey to salvation than anything else. His three questions seem to ignore the idea of weariness that accompanies the physical movement towards the mountain. Rather, they focus on the desire to know the reasons for his choice. To which, Dante replies in a timid way.

«O de li altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.

Vedi la bestia per cu' io mi volsi;

aiutami da lei, famoso saggio,
ch'ella mi fa tremar le vene e i polsi».

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 84-92

Heaney

Carson

<p>“You are the light and glory of other poets./ O let it avail me now, the long devotion/ That made me love your book and cleave to it.</p> <p>You are my master, my authority./ I learned from you and from you alone/ the illustrious style for which they honor me.</p> <p>Look at the beast that has force me to turn back./ Help me, O famous sage, to confront her/ for she makes my veins race and my pulses shake.”</p>	<p>‘O you, to whom all other poets look!/ may that long study and great love endure/ which brought me first to delve into your book!</p> <p>You are my paragon, my favourite author - / you, the very one from whom I stole/ the noble style that critics praise me for.</p> <p>Behold the beast that kept me from my goal;/ O help me, famous sage! her very presence/ makes me tremble, and my blood run cold.’</p>
--	---

The lack of respectful condescension towards the Latin poet naturally leads the Belfast-based poet to write the way a teenager would speak: ‘You are my paragon, my favourite author’ sounds more like a simplified statement reflecting the admiration a youngster could have towards a musician. Such a tone is confirmed by the lines that follow which have the simple word structure subject–verb–object together with unproblematic and informal words like ‘tremble’ and ‘run cold’, in contrast with Heaney’s more suggestive and effective ‘for she makes my veins race and my pulses shake’. Yet, Carson himself – being a poet and a critic at the same time – unconventionally declares his concern for what is a contemporary issue like plagiarism.

«A te convien tenere altro viaggio»,
rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,
«se vuo’ campar d’esto loco selvaggio;

ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
ma tanto lo ‘mpedisce che l’uccide;

e ha natura sì malvagia e ria,

che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
e dopo 'l pasto ha più fame che pria.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 93-101

Heaney

"You will have to go another way
around,"/ he answered, when he saw
me weeping;/ "to escape the toils and
thickets of this ground;

Because this animal you are troubled
by/ lets no man pass but harasses him/
until she kills him by her savagery.

And she is so consumed by viciousness/
that nothing fills her, and so insatiable/
that feeding only makes her ravenous.

Carson

"You need to go another road from
hence,"/ he answered, when he saw my
tearful face;/ "if ever you're to bid this
place good riddance,

for this rough beast will let no mortal
cross/ her path, but will entangle them
to death;/ and worry them to their
eternal loss.

Her appetite is such, that every breath/
she draws enfevers her with lust for
life;/ the more she feeds, the more she
feels a dearth.

At this point Virgil explains what way Dante has to go through. Heaney's narrating voice does so in a brilliant way. In order to be as close as possible to the source text, he continues using literary terms, like 'weeping' and 'ravenous', and such expressions as 'toils and thickets' to refer to the wood. This is to lay emphasis on the dangers of the place and the feelings of being trapped by them as well as on the savagery of the animal who lets nobody pass through her way. Carson's translation seems to entangle – and the choice of this word is not a random one – in a whirl of tortuous sentences in which passive verbs should be active ones ('will entangle them to death'), prepositions are not in their usual place ('worry them to their eternal loss') and some vocabulary, like the verb 'enfever' or 'feel a dearth', are used in unusual contexts.

Molti son li animali a cui s'ammoglia,
e più saranno ancora, infin che 'l veltro
verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.

Questi non ciberà terra né peltro,
ma sapienza, amore e virtute,
e sua nazione sarà tra feltro e feltro.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 102-107

Heaney

Carson

There are many animals she couples with/ and there will be more of them, until the Hound/ shall come and grind her in the jaws of death.	She's lain with many animals as wife;/ she'll breed with many more, until the Greyhound/ comes, who'll slay her after awful strife.
He will not glut himself on ground or riches,/ but wisdom, love, and virtue will sustain him/ and the two Feltros will vie to be his birthplace.	He'll not be fed by capital, nor found/ to take a bribe, but will be brave, and wise;/ he'll make a nation of the common ground.

The recurrence of verbs in unusual forms is also a feature of lines 102-107.

Virgil tells him that he cannot overcome the beasts which obstruct his path; they must remain until a 'Greyhound' comes who will drive them back to Hell. Rather, by another path will Dante reach the sunlight. Dante begs Virgil to lead on, and the Guide starts ahead. Dante follows. Their journey all the way through the Border looks like a metaphor for the journey through the border of Northern Ireland.

Ambiguously depicted as lying with animals 'as wife', contrary to the explicit coupling to which Heaney refers, the wolf Carson presents is soon to be replaced. The transposition of the vague term 'Veltro', which many critics have interpreted in different ways with the more specific 'greyhound' in his case (and hound in Heaney's), has the effect of depriving the lines of their mysterious, indefinite atmosphere. Dante is indeed here deliberately obscure regarding the details of his prophecy. The reference to love, wisdom, and virtue is generic and could potentially apply to any virtuous individual.

The imprecision and the vagueness in the portrayal of such an enigmatic figure gives Carson the opportunity to freely move from literary and old-fashioned terms like 'to slay' to contemporary and familiar ones like 'capital', which draws the reader back to an unusual context already hinted at, sustained by a term like 'bribe', that is a sum of money illegally given, which is somewhat surprising if one recalls that the Veltro has also been interpreted by some as a godly creature and by some others as a political figure who will establish a spiritually cleansed world empire. The energy of the hound is increased by his being a projection of attributes usually associated with God: wisdom, love and power.

Heaney's translation, providing the plural for 'feltro' with capital F, indicates his acceptance of at least two of the hypotheses on the symbolic meaning of the hound. He could be a member of the clergy (most probably a monk or a friar

since friars' cloaks were made out of felt – *feltro* in Italian). He could also be an elected officer, as the urns for elections were felt-lined or one of Dante's noble hosts in the period of his exile – Cangrande della Scala, whose state extended approximately from the cities of Feltre and Montefeltro¹¹.

Virgil then promises to guide him on the path through Hell and Purgatory¹², after which another spirit – 'a soul worthier than I' says Virgil – called Beatrice, will lead him to Paradise:

A le quai poi se tu vorrai salire,
anima fia a ciò più di me degna:
con lei ti lascerò nel mio partire;

ché quello imperador che là sù regna,
perch' i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge,
non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna

In tutte parti impera e quivi regge;
quivi è la sua città e l'alto seggio:
oh felice colui cu' ivi elegge!¹³.

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, vv. 122-130

Heaney

Carson

<p>If you want to ascend among these, then you/ will be guided by a soul wor- thier than I/ and I will leave you with her when I go;</p>	<p>and should you want its wonders to perceive,/ a female soul, one worthier than I/ will take you when it's time for me to leave.</p>
<p>For that Emperor above does not allow/ me or my like to come into His city/ because I was a rebel to His law.</p>	<p>You see, that Emperor who reigns on high,/ prohibits me from entering His state/ because I once opposed His polity.</p>

¹¹ In the note to the actual Canto published in the volume, Heaney himself admits "The line has been much discussed and is subject to two main interpretations. I have (without compelling reasons) gone for the reading that takes "Feltro" as a place name, and situates the round's birthplace between (say) Feltre in Venezia and Montefeltro in Romagna. But equally attractive is the reading that translates "feltro" as felt, or frieze cloth, and understands the line to predict a "saviour" coming from those who wear this humble cloth and do not "glut... on ground of riches." Halpern Daniel, ed. by, *Dante's Inferno. Translations by Seventy contemporary Poets*, The Ecco Press, Hopewell, NJ 1993, page 170.

¹² Having lived before the coming of Christ, Virgil is deprived of the graces of Christ's Resurrection and is confined to Limbo.

His empire is everywhere but His high seat/ and city are there, in His proper kingdom./ O happy is the man He calls to it."

Then He rules as supreme potentate;/ His the city, His the sceptred throne;/ O happy whom he welcomes through His gate!

Again, Heaney's and Carson's translations seem to differ in their respective attempts on one hand to be as faithful as possible to the source text and to offer an all-personal reading on the other. A closer look at Carson's one reveals more interesting points: the emphasis on the sex of the spirit who is going to accompany Dante to Paradise, accomplished by placing 'the female soul' at the beginning of the line instead of leaving it⁹ as it is, seems to reflect Carson's interest in the subject of sexuality. Carson also sets himself apart by using 'you see' at the beginning of the following *terzina*, to draw the reader's attention to Christ who is here truly compared to an Emperor. He emphasises this comparison by employing such terms as 'state' (line 126), 'polity' (line 127) and 'potentate' (line 128), which pertain to the lexical sphere of a 'nation, country, region that has its own government'; a real form of government rather than a religious one like that designed by Dante.

To conclude, what Carson seems to underline is the power music and sounds play over the content of the source text itself. Different rhyme patterns and assonances which belong to the Hiberno-English ballad and the Hiberno-English language, offer a model for translation, something to rely on and to enrich with – as he specifies – alliterations, circumlocutions, inversions, metaphors, similes, and, when necessary, 'rapid shifts of register' and of style. His turn of phrase, frequent colloquialisms and unusual simplifications make his writing less allegorical and more down-to-earth. Carson's lines have indeed offered different examples of that which has been defined as an 'imaginative tour de force'. His language can look as amusing and innovative as artificial and vulgar. His version can be defined more as a real transformation than as an adaptation.

On the other hand, Heaney develops his own *terza rima* by employing tercets, with each second line remaining unrhymed and by extensively using alliterations and assonances. His is an overt appropriation of features from the original text, which is accomplished in the light of a more faithful view of the translating activity and which tries to adopt the style as well as the content of

⁹ As Heaney does to the third line of the *terzina* and as Dante himself does both at the first and at the last line of the *terzina*.

the source text. Heaney fully accepts to play the role of the invisible translator which he does even at the cost of sacrificing fluency and coherence.

Translation is therefore a privileged mode of interrogation of creative possibilities, as well as a form of release from the restraints of Irish traditional poetic forms for both contemporary poets. Overall, though, the feeling is that a faithful rendering such as Heaney's version is less effective than Carson's all-original adaptation, the two target texts representing two opposite ways of conceiving the process of translating such a complex work as the *Divine Comedy*. Undertaking such a task obviously raises issues of readership and communication while indicating to would-be translators two different strategies, two directions which could be examined further with the support of more material.

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