

## DANTE'S BACK IN BOSTON WITH NEW BESTSELLER: A Critical Review

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Boston is, without a shadow of a doubt, the American home of Dante Alighieri, with its long tradition in both Dante scholarship and translation, going back to the times of the great American critics of the Harvard Italian Circle of the 19th-century, among whom, to mention but a handful, the great Dante translators Thomas William Parsons (1867), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1867) and Charles Eliot Norton (1891), all writers of stature and major contributors not only to modern Italian literary criticism and translation practice but, indeed, who were also instrumental in shaping American literary history and literary criticism as a whole.

It should, therefore, come as little surprise to learn that yet another Bostonian has come to the fore with a new and highly acclaimed translation of Dante's *Inferno*, a bilingual edition published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux of New York, introduced by John Freccero and sombrelly, sinisterly illustrated by fellow Bostonian artist Michael Mazur. What does surprise, however, is its instant success as a bestseller, a break with publishing tradition in that Dante is notorious for his rather limited appeal to an élitist readership — except, of course, for the immensely popular Dorothy Sayers' translation available in Penguin Classics but that is an economical paperback edition whereas this is a 400-page hardback which sells at \$35 a copy and yet has already had numerous reprints in its short but nevertheless lucrative life.

The translator is Robert Pinsky who, like his eminent predecessors, is also university don and poet but who breaks with tradition on both counts in that, as professor of creative writing at Boston University, he has released Dante scholarship and translation from Harvard's virtually exclusive hold and that, as poet, unlike his illustrious predecessors, he finds himself surely better known now as a poetry translator than he is for his own four books of previously published poetry. Pinsky, an American Jew originally from New Jersey, with his own ultra-modern, computer-text poetry, would normally seem a very far cry indeed from the medieval poetry of Europe's master poet who, in the words of Thomas Carlyle (1841), is "morally great, above all", the very expression of "the grand Christian act".

So what attracted Pinsky to Dante's Hell and the Hell *par excellence* for all translators of poetry? For a start, Italian poetry and Dante's in particular has been

a main interest of Pinsky's since his university days as a student at Rutgers under the guidance of that great American Dantophile, Francis Fergusson, whose book *Dante* (1966), in the 'Masters of World Literature' series, still remains today a key textbook in many Italian Literature courses at university level.

Then there is the fascination for that age-old theme of 'Crime and Punishment', not just in terms of simple cause and effect but rather that complicated, intertwining relationship of punishment reflecting and indeed perpetuating the crime. As the *Boston Globe* reviewer, David Mehegan (1995), puts it:

Most compelling for Pinsky was that the sinners in hell are punished with the consequences of their own acts — they choose their punishments, in a sense, which is an acute perception of psychological reality. So Paolo and Francesca, condemned for excess of lust and physical desire, are buffeted about by powerful winds and storms, and the schismatics in Canto 28 are punished for their divisive acts by being split apart.

Both good reasons, these, but the real challenge, as always, is the translation itself, with the translator having to pit his wits against the Master Poet's, fitting all the pieces together in that Divine Puzzle which translating the *Inferno* into English involves.

It all started for Pinsky almost as a diversion, *un petit divertissement* — an assignment to translate just a few parts of the poem for a book to be published on Dante. He accepted the assignment, but once he had handed it in, he found that he could not stop, he had to go on to complete the puzzle, the challenge the translation posed had to be faced. Pinsky himself talks of the fascination of the translator's task when he says (again as quoted by Mehegan 1995):

For centuries, translation was the main form of literary study, and I'm not sure it isn't still the best form. You live through the sentences, walk through them as if each were a kind of interesting network of caves that you explore. It's like walking on a planet with less gravity; someone else has done the conceiving and you have the delicious technical problems. There was the exhilaration of having my work cut out for me every day, whereas in generating your own writing, there's that blankness and you have to get clay on the table.

Before analysing just how successfully Pinsky has been in dealing with these "delicious technical problems", Pinsky himself should be allowed to have the first say as to what he feels the main problems are when translating Dante and what it is exactly that he has tried to achieve by providing the turn-of-the-century reader with a new contemporary version of the *Inferno* in English,

especially as, to use the words of Ezra Pound (1934: 80), himself an illustrious translator of Dante,

In the long run the translator is, in all probability, impotent to do all the work for the linguistically lazy reader. He can only show where the treasure lies.

Indeed, through the now virtually universally-accepted tradition of a fairly lengthy, if not exhaustive, translator's note or preface, Pinsky does tell us where he thinks the "treasure" lies and how he has attempted to convey it in his target language version.

It transpires immediately, even from a cursory reading of the Translator's Note (1994: xxi), that Pinsky is almost exclusively preoccupied with Dante's verse, the poem's treasure that is the *terza rima* or triple rhyme scheme (aba bcb cdc) invented by the Italian Master Poet as the vehicle for his great epic. What he has to say about meaning, on the other hand, is limited to the following declaration:

I have tried to make an Inferno in English that stays true to the nature of English, and that conveys the meaning of the Italian as accurately as possible, in lines of *terza rima* that will suggest some of the force and suppleness of Dante's form. Above all, I have tried to translate a poem: in passages where my English is not literal, I hope it is faithful to the spirit.

He goes on to say of the verse form that its

effect [...] seems integral to the poem, something well worth trying to approximate.

This, if not an actual poetical manifesto, nevertheless represents a real and substantial breakaway from the approach of his Harvard predecessors for whom the very opposite aim was of the essence:

In translating Dante, something must be relinquished. Shall it be the rhyme that blossoms all along the line like a honeysuckle on the hedge? It must be, in order to retain something more precious than rhyme, namely fidelity, truth, — the life of the hedge itself. (Longfellow 1867: vi)

and indeed from other great American poets of the calibre of T. S. Eliot who was forced to confess that even for him the *terza rima* scheme was all but impossible in English:

in twenty years I have written only about a dozen lines in the style successfully (Eliot 1964: 170).

So what is it that Pinsky thinks he can do to tackle the *terza rima* problem in English, there where so many of his eminent predecessors failed or gave up in desperation? One solution proposed by translators in the past Pinsky (1994: xxi) rejects *a priori*:

[...] one way of dealing with the tortuous demands of *terza rima* in English has been to force the large English lexicon to supply rhymes: squeezing unlikely synonyms to the ends of lines, and bending idioms ruthlessly to get them there. This translation rejects that solution [...].

No, what Pinsky proposes for his version is real, unforced and "true to the nature of English" in terms of lexis and syntax, whereas "a more flexible definition of rhyme" is needed in order to make this possible and as a model he uses Yeatsian rhyme which is not based exclusively on equivalent final syllable sounds but more on equivalent final consonant sounds:

[...] the translation is based on a fairly systematic rhyming norm that defines rhyme as the same consonant-sounds — however much vowels may differ — at the ends of words. For example, the opening tercets of Canto I include the triads "tell/feel/well", "sleep/stop/up" and "night/thought/it". [...] This idea of harmony seems even more clear with disyllabic or "feminine" endings: "faces/houses" is more appealing than "faces/places"; "flavor/quiver" has more interest than "flavor/savor" or "giver/quiver". The reader who recognizes these examples I have taken from poems by Yeats, who is a master of such consonantal rhyming, might speculate that such sounds are similar for English [...] as are "terra/guerra" or "belle/stelle" in the tighter Italian fabric.

And as for pure rhymes, although of course many exist and are feasible in the English translation, Pinsky (1994: xxii) found that he almost started avoiding them intentionally:

As to hard rhymes, there are many, but as I worked I often found myself revising them out, or striving to make them the first and third members of the triad, rather than adjacent to keep them from leaping out of a pattern I have labored to make expressive in its variations.

This is not the only poetic/translator's licence that Pinsky (1994: xxiii) allows himself, for even compression and *enjambement* become acceptable devices for him in his attempt to render the pace and concision of the original, two aspects which are generally lost in the more traditional verse translations:

The prosodic embodiment Dante invented for his poem is characterized by tremendous forward movement, a movement that, in English, the prose translations have sometimes rendered more effectively than those in verse. To catch some of that quality, at once propulsive and epigrammatic, I have allowed myself the liberty of enjambment, at times letting the sentence run over the rhymed line ending more aggressively than in the original, and also crossing freely from tercet to tercet. This translation is not line-for-line, nor tercet-for-tercet. In order to represent Dante's succinct, compressed quality along with the flow of *terza rima*, I have often found it necessary to write fewer lines in English than he uses in Italian.

Clearly, both poets and poetry translators are expected to conform as closely as possible to the target language conventions of versification but, at the same time, the restrictions and difficulties that the poet has to contend with are often so insurmountable that licence of the kind Pinsky describes above becomes a necessity, and doubly so in Dante translation. The *enjambement* or run-on line is easily criticized (the run-on tercet even more so) but in a sense the translator is by very definition frequently obliged to ignore convention, he has frequently to become a law unto himself, having no scruples over the violence he does to convention in order to accomplish the extremely difficult task he has set himself. So the whole question of licence is not so much about the fact that the poet/translator allows himself liberty in fulfilling his task but rather the extent and the actual need of the liberties taken and whether or not, through them, the desired end is actually achieved.

From the outset, the reader cannot fail to notice Pinsky's desire to recreate the pace and movement of Dante's original and, consequently, the enormous amount of compression (and subsequent run-on lines and tercets) in his English-language version. There is little point in criticizing the liberties the translator takes in creating a new line and tercet structure in the target language as this choice is quite clearly and of necessity determined by Pinsky's *a priori* choice to compress whereas virtually all other previous translators of the *Inferno* have been forced to pad at least some of the time. Indeed, in the first three Cantos, there is no less than an average 18% line-for-line compression rate, which is an enormous amount — at least double that figure in real terms, considering the need to expand the formal framework of the English text so as to contain the full semantic component of the original. The 18-19% line-for-line compression rates of the first three Cantos are maximum values, after which the rates descend considerably to an overall but still high 8.5% average for the whole Canticle. On only four occasions is there exact line-for-line correspondence (Cantos 21, 23, 27 and 32), while in seven Cantos there is some actual expansion but then never reaching very high values (+6.5% Max.). However, as mentioned above, it should not be of concern to the translation critic that Pinsky has resorted to

somewhat extreme devices to render (a) the Italian *terza rima* through consonantal rhyming and (b) the pace and movement of Dante's original through run-on lines and tercets and through a very high degree of line compression, but rather it should be to ascertain whether or not, through these extreme devices, the translator has been successful in achieving what he set out to achieve and whether or not the end-product "conveys" — as Pinsky (1994: xxi) claims it does — "the meaning of the Italian as accurately as possible".

In order to assess the quality of the translation as briefly but at the same time as completely and as representatively as possible within the prescribed limits of this review, only three sample passages will be quoted from — but passages that readers are most likely to be familiar with — the opening of Canto I where Dante describes the Dark Wood, the very beautiful and famous Paolo and Francesca episode in Canto V and the gruesome narration of the final part of Count Ugolino's Tale in Canto XXXIII. As the extracts are so-well known, it will not be difficult for readers to come to their own conclusions regarding the quality of the translation. Moreover, the passages are also quite representative in that, as luck would have it, they turn out to be very different in terms of line compression, the first with an extreme of -18%, the second only slightly above the average for the work as a whole (-10%) and the third extract being relatively close to the original with only a -2% compression rate. What would quite naturally be expected *a priori* from this sort of decreasing compression rate is a corresponding increase in literal equivalence and therefore greater concern with semantic accuracy and less preoccupation with the verse form whereas the inverse would be expected earlier on when there is greater compression. And this is exactly what is going to be analysed now in order to see whether these expectations are verifiable or not.

To start with, from the very outset of Dante's descent into Hell, the reader will be able to see at a glance the amount of line compression in Pinsky's version (from 18 lines to 15 which is around -17%):

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
 mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
 che 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'io vi trovai  
 dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.  
 Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'entrai,  
 tant'era pien di sonno a quel punto  
 che la verace via abbandonai.  
 Ma poi ch'i' 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.

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself  
In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell  
About those woods is hard — so tangled and rough  
And savage that thinking of it now, I feel  
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.  
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well  
I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter  
I cannot well say, being so full of sleep  
Whatever moment it was I began to blunder  
Off the true path. But when I came to stop  
Below a hill that marked one end of the valley  
That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up  
Toward the crest and saw its shoulders already  
Mantled in rays of that bright planet that shows  
The road to everyone, whatever the journey.

Immediately noticeable, however, apart from the obvious verse compression, is the increased length of the English lines compared to those of the Italian source text. In fact, the compression that Pinsky talks of in his Translator's Note is purely illusory in that, notwithstanding the decrease in the number of lines in the translation, there are actually more words than in Dante's original, 137 to 128 words to be precise, which is an expansion of approximately +7%. To actually manage such lexical expansion within a fairly reduced line-for-line structure and, at the same time, maintaining, albeit very loosely, the hendecasyllabic metre of the original is indeed no mean feat and can only be achieved by resorting to that huge resource of the English language which is the monosyllable. To talk of Pinsky's monosyllabic translation of the opening verses of Dante's *Inferno* would indeed be no exaggeration as 79.6%, that is all but 20% of the words quoted above are monosyllables, all of the others being disyllabic, with just one polysyllabic exception.

Clearly, an English monosyllabic structure does, as Pinsky suggests, create that greater pace in poetry which is necessary to convey Dante's "tremendous forward movement" that is at once "propulsive and epigrammatic". However, overdoing it has led Pinsky to lay major emphasis on what he calls the "epigrammatic" nature of Dante's poetry, whereas the rhythm of the translation, far from being forward moving and "propulsive", tends to be *staccato* and fragmented, which is scarcely compensated for by the preponderance of run-on lines that Pinsky mentions in his preface. The worst example surely comes at a

particularly inopportune moment, the very first tercet — inopportune because unfortunately everybody remembers a weak beginning and a weak ending. Just compare the movement and flow of Dante's original with Pinsky's bitty, monosyllabic version:

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
che la diritta via era smarrita.

I found myself  
In dark woods, the right road lost.

This fragmented, *staccato* style of Pinsky's translation is even more evident when compared and contrasted with other English-language versions like, for example, Longfellow's (1867) famous lines

I found myself within a forest dark  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

But it is not necessarily a question of a polysyllabic structure that better renders the Italian rhythm. Consider, for instance, the monosyllabic version of British authoress, Dorothy Sayers (1949):

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,  
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

or the equally monosyllabic verse translation of fellow American, John Ciardi (1954), who also uses the run-on line in much the same way as Pinsky does but without detriment to the movement of the original:

I went astray  
from the straight road and woke up to find myself  
alone in a dark wood.

What is more, a further obstacle to the smoothness of rhythm and movement is created through the syntactic oddity of line 7

I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter  
I cannot well say, [...]

where the omission of the complement of place simply leaves the reader hanging, and quite unnecessarily so, as the addition of the monosyllabic 'there' prior to the infinitive, as Longfellow (1867) does

I cannot well repeat how there I entered

really changes little, in that the hendecasyllable has already been forced, presumably for the sake of a consonantal rhyme, into a dodecasyllabic structure.

As mention has been made of Pinsky's rhyming scheme based on Yeats' consonantal rhyming, here too it must be said that the translator's theoretical premises are somewhat loose when applied in practice. Pinsky does indeed

succeed in creating Yeatsian-style rhymes for the triads he mentions in his preface "tell/feel/well" and "sleep/stop/up", and one can even accept the 'impure' a—a rhyme that he creates between *myself* and *rough* in the opening tercet of the Canto (ll. 1, 3). What is surely impossible to accept is the e—e—e triad (ll. 11, 13, 15) as being consonantly equivalent when the final syllables of the words *valley—already—journey* quite clearly contain three distinctly different final consonant sounds /l/, /d/ and /n/ which should never ever be confused with the equivalent vocalic /i:/ sound that, graphologically speaking, the letter y represents. Surely, however, this has to be ascribed to Pinsky's rather loose theorizing about the translation of the rhyming scheme rather than him, somewhat ingenuously, creating confusion between simple vowel and consonant sounds or between the phonological and the graphological systems.

Semantically speaking, however, from what Pinsky has to say in the preface to his translation, it would indeed be reasonable to expect a certain amount of sacrifice, of omission or deletion of elements at this level of language, especially in view of the translator's declared priority given to the form, his intention to compress and his hope that his version would be at least "faithful to the spirit" of the original poem. Oddly enough, though, it is at precisely this level of language that he most successfully renders the Italian source text. This doubtless is due in part to the fact that, as has already been seen, there is only formal line-for-line compression whereas there is a *de facto* lexical expansion, at least as far as these opening lines are concerned. The only semantic deviations from the original to be noted are of very slight importance, *blunder* for *abbandonai*, *toward the crest* for *in alto*, *everyone* for *altrui*, and in all probability these were choices determined either for the rhyme or for the number of syllables in the metre.

Another reason, however, may also explain, at least hypothetically, Pinsky's tendency towards semantic equivalence, even though such literality appears to be in contradiction, not for the first time, with his theoretical declaration of intent. There are surely grounds to suppose that Pinsky, as an American, and notwithstanding his Boston University as opposed to Harvard pedigree, must have been to some extent influenced by his co-national predecessors, the famous Dante translators of the Harvard Italian Circle which, as has already been mentioned, bears the names of some of America's finest scholars and poets. The fact is that this School of Translation, if such it can be called, was very much of Victorian tradition and thus believed in conveying Dante's Divine Message as closely and as faithfully as possible, so much so that the formal aspect of their versions, usually in blank verse but on occasions even in prose, very much takes a back seat. Indeed, the American School's translations, remembered principally for their fidelity, are not revered for their poetic beauty. Now, Pinsky does indeed react against the literalist approach of his predecessors in favour of

the verse form, but possibly this once again is rather more at a theoretical rather than a practical level. Or is it simply that Pinsky's modern verse as a vehicle for Dante simply tends somewhat towards the prosaic?

In order to seek verification of this, a couple of other passages from the *Inferno* will now be analysed in view of what has been said above so as to see whether Pinsky continues with the rather loose verse form with which he opens his translation and also to ascertain whether his close literality is consistent throughout, or whether it is simply determined by the fact that the opening lines of the *Inferno* are indeed the most famous in the whole of the *Divina Commedia* and as such have been made as recognizable and, therefore, as literal as possible. The second passage taken for analysis is one of the most famous and indeed most tragic songs of love ever written, the Paolo and Francesca episode in Canto V (ll. 88-107), as full of passion and power as it is of pathos:

"O animal grazioso e benigno  
 che visitando vai per l'aere perso  
 noi che tignemmo il mondo di sanguigno,  
 se fosse amico il re de l'universo,  
 noi pregheremmo lui de la tua pace,  
 poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso.  
 Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace,  
 noi udiremo e parleremo a voi,  
 mentre che 'l vento, come fa, si tace.  
 Siede la terra dove nata fui  
 sulla marina dove 'l Po discende  
 per aver pace co' seguaci sui.  
 Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende,  
 prese costui della bella persona  
 che mi fu tolta; e 'l modo ancor m'offende.  
 Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona,  
 mi prese del costui piacer sì forte,  
 che, come vedi, ancor non m'abbandona.  
 Amor condusse noi ad una morte:  
 Caina attende chi a vita ci spense."

"O living soul, who with courtesy and compassion  
Voyage through black air visiting us who stained  
The world with blood: if for heaven's King bore affection  
For such as we are, suffering in this wind,  
Then we would pray to Him to grant you peace  
For pitying us in this, our evil end.  
Now we will speak and hear as you may please  
To speak and hear, while the wind, for our discourse,  
Is still. My birthplace is a city that lies  
Where the Po finds peace with all its followers.  
Love, which in the gentle hearts is quickly born,  
Seized him for my fair body — which, in a fierce  
Manner that still torments my soul, was torn  
Untimely away from me. Love, which absolves  
None who are loved from loving, made my heart burn  
With joy so strong that as you see it cleaves  
Still to him, here. Love gave us both one death.  
Caina awaits the one who took our lives."

The line compression of the Paolo and Francesca episode is much less than in the opening lines, 10% compared to the 18% of Canto I and therefore, not surprisingly, the lexical expansion rate increases too, but not in any sense proportionally, in that where it was only 7% in the previous passage, here the number of words increase from 138 in the Italian original to 163 in the translation, an expansion rate of 18%. Such an increase in the number of words should come as no surprise at all to professional translators or translation critics in that it is well known that target language versions tend naturally to be longer than the source language, at least as far as most European languages are concerned, but what again cannot fail to amaze is that Pinsky manages to do this in a reduced line structure. Clearly, as in the first extract, he must have resorted to an unnaturally high number of monosyllables in his English-language version. There are, in fact, out of the 163 words of the passage no less than 140 monosyllables, that is to say 86% of the text or, looked at from the opposite view point, only 23 words contain two or more syllables. Which is quite extraordinary, notwithstanding the fact that everyone knows that English does in fact have an enormous monosyllabic lexis upon which to draw especially, as David Crystal (1987: 86) points out, "in the colloquial spoken English, generally of Anglo-Saxon origin, that is used for example on the telephone".

Fortunately, Pinsky's monosyllabic verse may be accused of many things, it may well be loose and colloquial, but it certainly is not the language used on the telephone. He always maintains a generally high register in spite of the presence of Anglo-Saxon lexis but more probably because many of his monosyllables are actually of Latin origin (emphasis added):

Then we would *pray* to Him to *grant* you *peace*.

Pinsky's rhyming scheme is also more satisfactory (less adventurous for some, less deviant for others) than it was in the opening tercets. The triads (*compulsion*)—*compassion*—*affection*, *stained*—*wind*—*end*, *born*—*torn*—*burn* and *absolves*—*cleaves*—*lives* clearly fit the Yeatsian model very well and indeed are virtually hard rhymes (the first triad certainly is) whereas the triads *peace*—*please*—*lies* and *discourse*—*followers*—*fierce* are slightly 'impure' due to the mixing of voiced and voiceless consonants, which is perfectly acceptable licence, and due to the syllable variation, the mixing of masculine and feminine rhymes, in the last triad which is rather ugly.

What is more important, perhaps, is that in Canto V Pinsky has also managed to avoid repeating the syntactic and stylistic oddities that were observed in the opening Canto, probably thanks to the greater flexibility offered by the reduced line compression. Clearly a 10% compression rate compared to the 18% of Canto I certainly does give the translator just a little more space in which to work in his vocabulary and indeed to bring the tercet structure a little closer to that of the original, in spite of constantly being forced to run on. It must also be said that the monosyllabic structure generally means using commoner vocabulary which, together with having more lexical space, so to speak, leads to a clearer, more comprehensible English version, even when compared to the translations of his more illustrious predecessors. Consider, for example, that terribly tricky line about which so much has been written and which, for translators, with its triple word-play around the concept of love, epitomizes and will always epitomize Dante at his most difficult:

Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona

rendered feebly by Ezra Pound's friend and disciple, Lawrence Binyon (1933), as

Love, that to no one remits his fee

and equally feebly by Dorothy Sayers (1949)

Love, that to no loved heart remits love's score

and which even forced the great Romantic poet, Lord Byron (1901: 317), into a clumsy *enjambement*:

Love, who to none beloved to love again  
Remits.

By comparison Pinsky's own version

Love, which absolves  
None who are loved from loving,

albeit running on too, is admirable both for its clarity and comprehensibility. Clearly Pinsky's strength, far from that vague intention of rendering the "spirit" of the original, lies in his ability to translate Dante's semantic component closely and very clearly indeed and, generally, without in any way being detrimental to the register of the poem.

The only possible criticism that could be levelled against Pinsky, from a semantic point of view, is that his search for clarity has doubtless led him to one or two slight and, it could be claimed, fairly innocuous additions or, conversely, such additions are merely the padding necessary for the metre of an expanded target language text and the clarity of meaning is simply the natural consequence of such padding. It matters little what the reason behind these additions is, the fact remains that the translation is certainly very accessible from the readers' point of view. The additions that Pinsky makes really do not change the meaning very much and are, therefore, of little consequence. For example, he uses *voyage through black air* for *vai per l'aere perso* or *if heaven's King bore affection for such as we are, suffering in this wind* for *se fosse amico il re dell'universo* (for such as we are, suffering in this wind is simply not in the original text) or *in a fierce manner that still torments my soul* for *e 'l modo ancor m'offende*, though here the translator leaves Dante's form of expression quite far behind and somewhat dangerously approaches straight explanation or, worse still, personal interpretation. Nevertheless, on the whole, the semantic component is rendered and comes across well, essentially because in this Canto the translator gives himself more space which, in turn, is of benefit to both the syntax and phonology of the text, even though it may be justifiably claimed that this latter aspect is losing in pace what the text is gaining in clarity and comprehensibility. But a translator simply cannot win on all counts at this level of poetical complexity, even though Pinsky is clearly improving as he proceeds in his formidably exacting task.

So, to see whether he manages to maintain this trend, the final part of the Count Ugolino Tale (Canto XXXIII, ll. 37-78) has been chosen as the final extract for analysis because (a) its translation has one of the lowest line compression rates of the whole Canticle and (b) it is one of the last Cantos and, therefore, may well represent his peak form, "maintaining his original in its heights". Conversely, to go on using Alexander Fraser Tytler's wonderful expressions (1790), it may equally represent a "drooping of his wing" as a result of that quite natural and insidious phenomenon, translators' fatigue.

"Quando fui desto innanzi la dimane,  
 pianger senti' fra 'l sonno i miei figliuoli  
 ch'eran con meco, e domandar del pane.  
 Ben se' crudel, se tu già non ti duoli  
 pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziava;  
 e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?  
 Già eran desti, e l'ora s'appressava  
 che 'l cibo ne solëa essere addotto,  
 e per suo sogno ciascun dubitava;  
 e io senti' chiavar l'uscio di sotto  
 a l'orribile torre; ond'io guardai  
 nel viso a' mie' figliuoi senza far motto.  
 Io non piangëa, sì dentro impetrai:  
 piangevan elli; e Anselmuccio mio  
 disse: 'Tu guardi sì, padre! che hai?'  
 Perciò non lacrimai né rispuos'io  
 tutto quel giorno né la notte appresso,  
 infin che l'altro sol nel mondo uscìo.  
 Come un poco di raggio si fu messo  
 nel doloroso carcere, e io scorsi  
 per quattro visi il mio aspetto stesso,  
 ambo le man per lo dolor mi morsi;  
 ed ei, pensando ch'io 'l fessi per voglia  
 di manicar, di subito levorsi  
 e disser: 'Padre, assai ci fia men doglia  
 se tu mangi di noi: tu ne vestisti  
 queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia'.  
 Queta'mi allor per non farli più tristi;  
 lo dî e l'altro stemmo tutti muti;  
 ahi dura terra, perché non t'apristi?  
 Poscia che fummo al quarto dî venuti,  
 Gaddo mi si gettò disteso a' piedi,  
 dicendo: 'Padre mio, ché non m'aiuti?'  
 Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi,  
 vid'io cascar lì tre ad uno ad uno  
 tra 'l quinto dî e 'l sesto; ond'io mi diedi,  
 già cieco, a brancolar sovra ciascuno,  
 e due dî li chiamai, poi che fur morti.  
 Poscia, più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno."  
 Quand'ebbe detto ciò, con li occhi torti  
 riprese 'l teschio misero co' denti,  
 che furo a l'osso, come d'un can, forti.

"I woke before dawn, hearing the complaint  
Of my own children, who were with me there,  
Whimpering in their sleep and asking for bread.  
You grieve already, or truly cruel you are,  
As you think of what my heart began to dread —  
And if not now, then when do you shed a tear?  
They were awake now, with the hour when food  
Was usually brought us drawing near,  
And each one apprehensive from his dream.  
And then I heard them nailing shut the door  
Into that fearful tower — a pounding that came  
From far below. Hearing that noise, I stared  
Into my children's faces, not speaking to them.  
Inside me I was turning to stone, so hard  
I could not weep; the children wept. And my  
Little Anselmo, peering at me inquired:  
'Father, what ails you?' And still I did not cry,  
Nor did I answer, all that day and night  
Until the next sun dawned. When one small ray  
Found its way into our prison, and I made out  
In their four faces the image of my own,  
I bit my hands for grief; when they saw that,  
They thought I did it from my hunger's pain,  
and suddenly rose. 'Father: our pain,' they said,  
'Will lessen if you eat us — you are the one  
Who clothed us in this wretched flesh: we plead  
For you to be the one who strips it away.'  
I calmed myself to grieve them less. We stayed  
Silent through that and then the following day.  
O you hard earth, why didn't you open then?  
When we had reached the fourth day, Gaddo lay  
Stretched at my feet where he had fallen down:  
'Father, why don't you help me?' he said, and died.  
And surely as you see me, so one by one  
I watched the others fall till all were dead,  
Between the fifth day and the sixth. And I,  
Already going blind, groped over my brood —  
Calling to them, though I had watched them die,  
For two long days. And then the hunger had more  
Power than even sorrow had over me."  
When he had finished, with a sideways stare  
He gripped the skull again in his teeth, which ground  
Strong as a dog's against the bone he tore.

This chilling tale of Count Ugolino is a fairly typical example of what can be observed over virtually the whole of the second half of the *Inferno*, that is to say Pinsky's failure not so much as a translator *tout court* but as a theorist with very clear, fixed principles concerning the poetic frame into which he claims the *Divina Commedia* should be and indeed has been moulded. But gradually, Canto by Canto, it becomes increasingly evident that the original is taking over and that it is the translation that is being moulded back into the poetic frame of the original. The line compression that Pinsky proudly boasts of in his introductory Translator's Note has all but disappeared — there is only a one-tercet difference (-2%) over the whole Canto whereas the English translation extract above is actually one line longer than the original and this clearly would lead to a much closer structural correspondence between the source- and target-language versions.

Furthermore, as has already been noted in Cantos I and V, here too the line and tercet compression conceals an effective lexical expansion which, not surprisingly given the lack of line compression, together with Pinsky's virtual obsession with English monosyllables, is now really verging on padding (381 words against the 294 of the original, an all but 30% increase in the number of words used). Obviously such an expansion rate assists the translator by giving more space for the semantic content to fit into, as well as more lexical choice that gives greater rhyming flexibility.

It is precisely on these two aspects that Pinsky concentrates his efforts, thanks to his consistent monosyllabic structure that throughout the Canticle never drops below 75% and in this particular extract reaches 83% (only 64 words out of the 381 in the extract are polysyllabic). This apparent stylistic consistency, however, does not in itself necessarily mean that the stylistic effect remains constant throughout — quite the contrary. Whereas the monosyllabic style of the opening Cantos with its compact line and tercet structure and its not really significant increase in the number of words used actually does succeed in enhancing the pace of the poem and in rendering "Dante's succinct, compressed quality", there is very little that can be described as "compressed" in the later Cantos and "the true nature of English" that Pinsky strives for, its concision, its abrupt colloquial style, seems to be lost in its search for itself. The hunt for the monosyllable, which at the outset seemed a very viable translation approach, has simply led to a surplus of words which quite clearly does nothing for either Dante's succinctness or his "propulsive" and "epigrammatic" style.

When there are more words, though, the translation of both the rhyming scheme and the semantic components are clearly facilitated. And yet, in all honesty, the Yeatsian consonantal rhymes are not always as successful as they should be, given the greater flexibility made available through the high lexical expansion. There are still present the impure rhymes observed in the previous

Cantos like *stared—hard—inquired* and *away—day—lay* which may indeed seem to be simply a hard rhyme but, whatever it is, it is surely vocalic and not consonantal with Pinsky once again mixing the phonological with the graphological systems. But even worse is the feeblest of attempts to create a consonantal rhyme between *And I—die—me* which ends up as neither consonantal nor vocalic — quite simply it is not a rhyming triad at all, in that the third member /mi:/ simply does not fit in with either the /d/ consonants of a possible Yeatsian rhyme nor is it congruous with a possible hard vocalic rhyme which would require a third /ai/ diphthong in order to complete the triad.

At the semantic level, that at which most success would be expected of a translator making use of a 30% lexical expansion rate, as in the previous Canto Pinsky does indeed manage to convey Dante's meaning with utmost clarity and simplicity. What Pinsky does so well, apart from making the difficult as easy and as accessible as possible for his English reader, is to keep simple Italian simple in English — something very few translators actually manage to do because, in their search for possible triple rhymes, as Pinsky himself points out (1994: xxi), they have often had to "force the large English lexicon [...] bending idiom ruthlessly" in order to achieve this. Consider, for example, the simplest of lines in Canto XXXIII in terms of basic comprehension:

pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziava

which, under the pens of Pinsky's forerunners, has always become less than translucent and frequently more cumbersome:

Thinking of what my heart foreboded me (Longfellow 1867)

To think of what my heart misgave in fear (Binyon 1933)

Think what my heart misgave (Sayers 1949)

at the thought of what foreboding stirred in my heart (Ciardi 1954)

As you think of what my heart began to dread (Pinsky 1994).

Pinsky's monosyllabic verb may well be of slightly lower register than the more *recherché* and, dare it be said, more 'poetic' disyllabic verbs of his predecessors (even though both the verbs "forebode" and "misgave" are every bit as Germanic in origin as the verb "to dread") but, in terms of clarity, simplicity and comprehensibility, for a modern reader there can be little doubt as to who scores the highest.

Then, again, what was seen in Canto V as a slight and necessary tendency towards padding, either for the sake of clarity or for the metre or for the rhyme, is to be noted here too in Canto XXXIII as slight and rather innocuous changes to the original. These semantic variations are really of such little consequence (*we plead*, for example, in the line *we plead for you to be the one who cannot be*

found in the original as there is simply an imperative 'let it be you who' and later on the word *ciascuno* is certainly overtranslated as *brood* but is done so for the purpose of the rhyming scheme) that mention is only made *en passant* rather than out of any sense of criticism, as Pinsky's excellent solutions certainly outnumber these occasional semantic imperfections.

Rather more serious, however, as can be seen more than once as the reader makes his way through the latter half of the Canticle and which is inexorably linked with an ever-increasing lexical expansion, is that the padding occasionally becomes excessive and seemingly gratuitous. In Canto XXXIII, for instance, there is a line and a half which can only represent padding pure and simple, in that half a line (underlined) is an altogether redundant repetition, whereas one whole line (in italics) is outright invention, having no apparent correspondence whatever in the original text:

And then I heard them nailing shut the door  
 Into that fearful tower — *a pounding that came*  
*From far below. Hearing that noise,* I stared  
 Into my children's faces, not speaking to them.

Clearly, this sort of addition to the translation can only be because the lexical expansion has led the translator to all sorts of trouble in terms of line and tercet structure and not through any desire on his part to explicate the sense, given that the previous lines are, to the translator's credit, already extremely clear and simple.

By way of conclusion, then, there are two ways that Pinsky's translation can be assessed, especially as it has many good points as well as bad: firstly, at the methodological level, which is to evaluate the degree of success with which the translator sets up and achieves his aims and, secondly, at a level that is at once more subjective but nevertheless intrinsically linked to methodology, which is the degree of success with which the English version works as a poem.

At the first level, it is evident from what has gone before that, as with so many translators of Dante's *Inferno*, there is a great deal of methodological confusion: Pinsky's primary aims of reproducing, on the one hand, the "forward movement", the "propulsive", "epigrammatic" quality of the rhythm and pace of Dante's original and, on the other, of finding an analogous rhyming scheme for the tortuous demands of the *terza rima* are really only partially achieved. Initially, where the translation is fast moving, the high compression rate makes the monosyllabic structure jerky and *staccato*, later on when there is a much higher degree of lexical expansion, the rhythm is smoother but the pace is lost.

As regards Pinsky's choice of a Yeatsian consonantal rhyming scheme to replace the highly vocalic and therefore essentially unmanageable triple rhyme in English, the idea is laudable, Pinsky's immediate aim of avoiding that "enormous strain on an English translation", of avoiding forced and unlikely

vocabulary and idiom, has certainly been achieved — again to a very high degree of success in the latter half of the translation where there is greater lexical expansion, as is to be expected. What a pity it is that Pinsky himself was not more rigorous, more consistent in his own rhyming scheme, perhaps allowing himself too much variation from his own norms. Variety in both metric scansion and in the rhyming scheme, the very spice of poetic originality, exists in Dante too but not to the excesses of Pinsky's extremely loose metre, his impure rhymes, his consistent and consistently irritating mixing of masculine and feminine rhymes and indeed the occasional non-rhyme — all loose and unnecessarily sloppy elements in what should be a tight poetic structure.

Where Pinsky is very successful, funnily enough, is at the semantic level which he hardly mentions at all, as if meaning correspondence were to be taken for granted or even as a secondary aim of his translation. Indeed he is even apologetic, when he does actually make brief mention of sense, for having been forced at times to resort to "the spirit" of the original whenever his translation "is not literal". But in perfect keeping with Bostonian tradition, Pinsky clearly is a literalist, he remains semantically very close to his original, allowing himself only very occasionally the odd addition for rhythmic padding or a reduction to sense for the sake of clarity. Indeed, Pinsky deserves much praise for having created one of the clearest, most accessible English-language versions due in part, it must be said, to his rather loose metre and rhyme as well as to his monosyllabic lexis and his high expansion rate later on in the translation.

When all is said and done, the question as to whether Pinsky's translation works as a poem must be asked. The answer, unfortunately, must be in the negative, although of course this area is very much a question of taste and of subjective response to a poetic text in translation. The clarity and accessibility of the English text, together with its monosyllabic structure, may be seen as a great quality by supporters of modern verse or, conversely, as prosaic and unpoetic by its detractors. The fact remains that there is little evidence that a consistent, coherent poetic structure runs throughout the text and certainly there is little evidence that Pinsky manages to maintain his intended structure as laid down in his preface. The translation does improve as it goes along but, strangely enough, only when Pinsky's intended compressed structure gives way a more traditional solution based on expansion. Indeed, the question has to be asked as to whether it would not have been a good idea for Pinsky to have revised thoroughly at least the first half of the translation and all of his methodological premises.

However, let there be no misunderstanding: even if Pinsky's methodology be loose, his theorizing weak and his poetry generally prosaic and ill-structured, his translation does deserve to be in lights, it is not a flop. Indeed, it is one of the clearest, most simply written translations that exists — which, as any Dante

translator knows, is in itself no mean feat. And although perhaps David Mehegan exaggerates not a little when he entitles his review "A Poet's Triumph in Hell" (but has any English or American poet or indeed any translator ever really succeeded with Dante's *Inferno*?) there is no doubt that Pinsky has triumphed in the bookshops and with his readership — and all credit to him for this achievement, for the enormous effort he must have put into this 'hellish' task and for rekindling widespread interest in Dante not only in America but throughout the English-speaking world.

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