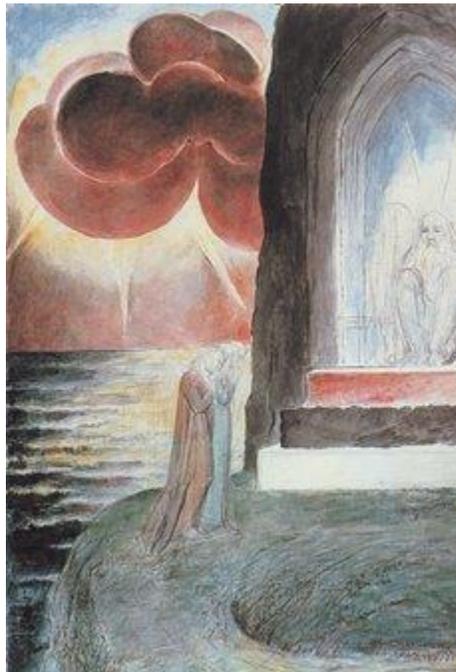


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The Mystery of Translation

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William Blake: Dante and Virgil Approaching the Angel Who Guards the Entrance of Purgatory, 1824–1827

Around 1990 Daniel Halpern wrote to invite me to contribute to a translation project that he was beginning to assemble, asking a number of contemporary poets to translate two cantos each of Dante's *Inferno*. I told him that I had said for years that there were degrees in the impossibility of translating poetry, and that Dante, the real, unique life of Dante's *Commedia*, could not be conjured into English. Dan did not take that for an answer, but said, "Take a while to consider." Then he baited the hook by saying, "If you did decide to do it, which cantos would you choose?"

As I pondered Dan's question, I thought of a passage in the twenty-sixth canto of the *Inferno*, which I had read, in translation, when I was eighteen, and which had seized me then and led me into the rest of Dante, and to the Temple Classics volumes I carried, for years, in my pockets. It was Odysseus' speech, his reply to Virgil out of the flame he shared with Diomedes, drifting in the dark void. Virgil had asked him where he had gone to die, after his return to Ithaca, and the voice said that nothing, not his love for his wife or for his son or for his kingdom, his native place, could keep him in Ithaca, and that he had assembled a crew of his old comrades-

in-arms and set out to sail farther, exploring parts of the world that were still unknown to them. They had voyaged as far as the western end of the Mediterranean, and “those pillars,” he said, “which Hercules had set up as landmarks” warning humans to go no farther.

There, the voice said, he had turned to his crew and made the speech that had mesmerized me when I first heard it in translation. The words, in Dante’s Italian, began: “*Io e i compagni eravam vecchi e tardi.*” In the Temple Classics edition, the John Aitken Carlyle translation read: “I and my companions were old and tardy,” and from the beginning I wondered about that “tardy.” While I was still a student I read the John D. Sinclair translation (1939) in which the word is translated as “slow.” I was dubious about that word too. “Slow” and “tardy” were literal renderings, but it seemed to me that they missed a point of Odysseus’ (and so of Dante’s) speech. In the Charles S. Singleton translation (1970), a masterful work of scholarly research, again the word was “slow.”

Each time I had read the translations I had taken my doubts away with me; I had done no more than that, since I did not intend to try to make a translation of my own. But this time I paused to consider how I might translate it myself, if I were to consider such an undertaking. I felt sure that “tardy” was not Dante’s principal meaning for the word, although Odysseus and his companions had already spent years growing up, starting families, becoming part of the expedition to Troy; and then there were the years in Troy, and the years of returning to their homelands, before joining again on the present expedition. I could not believe that “slow” was really what he meant at all. What indication was there in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* that they had ever been “slow”? I thought the point was not “late” in the sense of being “late for dinner,” but of “having reached their latter years,” and I considered “I and my companions were old and near the end,” and I went on to see how I would finish the line, and how it worked with the lines that followed. I was already caught, and I undertook to see whether I could make versions of that canto and the one that followed for Daniel Halpern’s volume.

Dante’s Odysseus and his story had remained, for me, one of the most magnetic passages in the *Inferno*. I learned that Dante is believed not to have read the Homeric poems themselves but to have known the classical account of Odysseus from Virgil and perhaps other Latin sources. His tale of Odysseus is probably his own invention. It made of Odysseus, it has been said, one of the first “modern” figures, one who makes history with a degree of independence of the past, and pursues knowledge for its own sake, beyond reference to precedent or previous authority. The eagerness of the fictional Dante, the protagonist of the *Commedia*, to converse with the ghost of this fictional Odysseus is so intense that Virgil fears that the figure he is guiding may fall into the abyss, and draws him back. The Odysseus of Dante’s invention is rare, and perhaps the sole figure whom he meets in that closed, immutable realm who has had a vision—though a fatal one—of Mount Purgatory, and Odysseus ends his last story telling of his one glimpse of that mountain.

Dante’s use of numerology, among his tools used in planning that most minutely planned of masterpieces, led me to look for links between that canto and the twenty-sixth canto of the *Purgatorio*, another perennial favorite of mine since I first read it. The theme of the later canto is carnal love contrasted with love in the form of generosity beyond selfishness and vanity, and Dante’s examples are artists—poets whom he regards as his ancestors and greets with profound reverence. Each of these in turn points out to him another figure, telling Dante that the other one had been a greater poet. It is from this sequence that T.S. Eliot took the phrase with which he dedicated *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, calling Pound “*il miglior fabbro*” (from Dante’s “*il miglior fabbro del parlar materno*”—“the finest workman in the mother tongue”). The “mother

tongue” is, of course, poetry itself, but for Dante it would also have been the language of the troubadours, whatever he would have called it.

The phrase refers to the figure in whom the series reached its culmination: Arnaut Daniel, whom Dante revered as the greatest of his ancestral figures, the troubadours. Daniel’s reply, with which the canto ends, is not in Italian but in Daniel’s own language, the *lati* of the troubadours. Dante could have paid him no deeper tribute. And in Daniel’s answer, the poet addresses Dante as someone who is on his way “to the top of the staircase,” in the highest realm, the Paradise that he himself hopes to see when his time comes.

It is never clear, from Dante’s portrayal of Daniel, whether the troubadour’s purgation was suffered for physical indulgence in carnal lust, or for glorification of erotic love and longing, which was the great central theme of the troubadours. Daniel’s reference to “the top of the staircase,” like the words of Odysseus describing his final glimpse of Mount Purgatory, conveys a vision of a life beyond, another world, indeed another dimension, for in Purgatory there is the dimension of hope, which was absent by eternal decree in the *Inferno*. That may be the link, or part of the link between the two cantos number twenty-six in the *Inferno* and in the *Purgatorio*.

When I had sent versions of the two cantos from the *Inferno* to Daniel Halpern, I went on to see what I could do with the *Purgatorio*. From the beginning of it until the disappearance of Virgil, near the end, it had always been my favorite part of the *Commedia*. It is the section of the poem that includes Dante’s love of music, song, and poetry. I had wondered for years about how the first generations of troubadours had come to be as familiar as they were with the Welsh Arthurian legends. At the time of the Norman invasion of Britain, the Welsh had sided with the invaders, against their own perennial enemy, the Teutonic people, Danes and “Anglo-Saxons,” who had invaded Britain in waves that began centuries before the Normans arrived.

The origins of Welsh poetry, or at least the earliest Welsh poems that survive, tell of an early, temporarily decisive battle between Welsh warriors and the Teutonic invaders. As the legends of that battle grew, the first surviving poem about it—Aneiran’s sequences of brief elegies for the already legendary warriors who had died there—became the embryo of the legends of the Round Table, and of Arthur. (The etymological root of Arthur means “The Bear.”) The historic Arthur, by the time of Aneiran’s poem, had already become a semidivine archetype, but in his lifetime he had indeed fought the Anglo-Saxons to a standstill.

The Arthurian legends, and perhaps some of the unique power of their language, both in poetry and prose, apparently became a welcome entertainment in the Norman courts, first in Britain and then in Normandy and the Occitan culture to the south. There must have been numerous storytellers and bards, with a body of glorious tales and poems. Jessie Weston in her seminal book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), from which Eliot drew the figure of the Fisher King in *The Waste Land*, tells of one such traveling bard and storyteller, but he must have been one of many. An early troubadour, Bernard de Ventadorn, addressed his *jongleur*, his singer, as Tristan. There is a legend that the book Paolo and Francesca were reading, on the day when they “read no more forever,” was a lost romance by Arnaut Daniel. But most of the Occitan romances did not survive: probably one more legacy of the Albigensian Crusade and the Hundred Years’ War. Their stories were carried north to the French culture beyond the Loire, and were incorporated into the great French romances of the next centuries. They were the source of the tales in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, and from there they traveled, in French, back to Britain.

The last of the Middle English romances that arose from that returning wave was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and it is one of the greatest of them all. It carries within it echoes

of its ancient Welsh origins and accretions from its Continental wanderings. There are learned, meticulous translations that reproduce, word by word, the alliterative form of the original, and I have paid close and respectful attention to them (Marie Boroff's above all).

But the alliterative pattern that was the convention used by the unknown original author sounds wearisome to us, and I wanted to see whether I could get closer to a rhythmic sound that would keep the audience, for I was assuming that the original audiences listened, before they read—if they could read at all. I remembered, and tried to listen, to two echoes. One of them was the Welsh language and the Welsh accent in English that I had grown up hearing in the coal-mining town of Scranton, Pennsylvania. The other was the work, above all the late fragments, of David Jones, whom I think of as the greatest overlooked poet in English in the twentieth century. I reread *Gawain* trying to hear those echoes and if they seemed to have anything to do with it, and it seemed to me that they did.

Only scholars of the archaic language can read the provincial or pre-Chaucerian Middle English now, and the version I produced is an attempt to bring into our hearing some of the original excitement of the story. I felt certain that it was something that would have to be audible, whether or not it was ever actually read, for I was sure that many of those who first came to it were unable to read.