

**Dante and His Translators: Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander; introduction and notes by Robert Hollander, New York: Doubleday, 2000, pp. 634.**

Not one single year goes by, or so it seems, without the publication of a new English translation of one of Dante's works. Let us just make very brief references to some of the translations of the so-called minor works of Dante: Dante's lyrics poems (Joseph Tusiani, Brooklyn: LEGAS, 1992; 2000); the translation of Dante's *Vita nuova* with facing Italian text (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1995); the two translations of *Monarchia* (Prue Shaw, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995; Richard Kay, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998); and the *Fiore* (Christopher Kleinhenz and Santa Casciani, Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2000).

As far as the *Comedy* is concerned, counting only what I have in my personal library, I can list the following: 1993, *Dante's Inferno: Translations by Twenty Contemporary Poets* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press), with notes (169-99) but no Italian text; 1994, *The Inferno of Dante, A Verse Translation* by Robert Pinsky, illustrated by Michael Mazur, with Notes by Nicole Pinsky [377-427], foreword by John Freccero [xi-xix] (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), with facing Italian text; 1996, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 1, *Inferno* (New York: Oxford UP), edited and translated by Robert M. Durling, notes by Ronald L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling (a massive volume of 654 pages); 2000, *Purgatorio*, a new verse translation by W. S. Merwin (New York: Knopf), with facing Italian text and notes (333-59). Finally, at the conclusion of the second millennium of the Christian era, there appears Robert and Jean Hollander's new translation of Dante's *Inferno*, with an introduction, facing Italian text, and notes.

One can easily understand the motivations that prompt recognized poets such as Pinsky and Merwin to put themselves to the test in rendering in English what Kenneth Clark called humankind's greatest philosophical poem and what has become the greatest best-seller ever right after the Bible. At the same time, one cannot help but ask what reasons might prompt accomplished Dante scholars not only to provide a commentary to the *Comedy*, which is obviously the scholar's task, but to embark on a journey as perilous as that of rendering in English Dante's *Comedy*, which — let us not forget — has been called *Divine* for longer than four centuries (by Ludovico Dolce in 1555), thus making its translation in any language, as it were, rank among one of the many human *impossibilia*. Unquestionably, what spurs poets and scholars to confront themselves with Dante's *Comedy* is neither *hubris* nor humility but rather their devotion to and their love for the great poet. And to all such poets and scholars all readers are much indebted.

The genesis of the new translation, with commentary, by Robert and Jean Hollander is sufficiently described at the book's beginning ("Note on the Translation" vii-ix). Making his own what Montaigne says of his *Essays*, the two translators state: "Reader, this is an honest book" (vii). Such straightforwardness is so unusual and striking that the readers who are not immediately won over by it may be at least disarmed by whatever prejudices they might have at first. The readers' benevolence is further conquered by the additional disclaimers that follow: "This is not Dante, but an approximation [...]"; "Every translation begins and ends with failure" (vii); and finally, at the conclusion of the "Note": "It is our hope that the reader will find this translation a helpful image to the untranslatable magnificence of Dante's poem" (ix). In brief, the translation is viewed as a

means to approach Dante himself in the Italian text, available to the reader next to the English version.

The two translators' "Note" provides further information worth the readers' attention: "The accuracy of the translation from the Italian text established by Giorgio Petrocchi [...] has been primarily my [Robert Hollander's] responsibility, its sound as English verse primarily that of the poet Jean Hollander [...]" (vii). That the two translators view their translation as poetry, in fact, is reiterated shortly below in the same introduction ("a new verse translation" vii), and the same epithet ("A verse translation") also appears on the volume's dust jacket, although it does not appear as part of the book's title.

Further comments in the "Note" emphasize the introductory statement concerning the book's honesty. Thus credit is given to several Italian commentaries, especially that of Francesco Mazzoni and Bosco/Reggio, to the paraphrases provided by H. E. Tozer (1901), and to an earlier translation begun by Patrick Creagh and Robert Hollander. Moreover, the Hollanders profess their debt not only to Singleton's but also to Sinclair's translation (New York: Oxford UP, 1939). Such a straightforward avowal cannot but be much appreciated; at the same time, the two translators take it upon themselves to make Singleton recognize what he failed to do in his translation of the *Comedy*, as we read at the end of the first volume of Singleton's six-volume translation and commentary: "[...] I have constantly kept before me a considerable number of other English translations [...]. I have incurred a great debt which, regretfully, cannot be acknowledged in any detail" (*Inferno* 1, "Note" 372). What no honest teacher and no honest scholar would consider permissible — namely, consulting and borrowing without quoting — Singleton thought he could do, and in fact he did without being faulted by his few reviewers. (E.g.: Morton W. Bloomfield, *Speculum* 48 [1973]: 127-29; *Speculum* 51 [1976]: 116; *Speculum* 52 [1977]: 644-45; also: C. B. Beall, *Comparative Literature* 28 (1976): 164-65. Strengthened by a temporal perspective, a review essay of Singleton's six-volume *Divine Comedy* appeared in *Annali d'italianistica* 8 [1990]: 104-14, penned by Rocco Montano, who, among many other comments, reflects negatively on Singleton's prose rendering of Dante's masterpiece: "[...] una prosa preoccupata della fedeltà ma del tutto incurante di rendere le sfumature formali, ritmiche, le variazioni del linguaggio, che pur fanno parte della poesia di un'opera [...]" 105.)

What is surprising and also refreshing, therefore, is that the Hollanders state categorically Singleton's debt to Sinclair's translation, although Singleton never acknowledges any of the borrowings he admits to in general terms. The Hollanders write: "To his [Singleton's] credit, his changes [of Sinclair's translation] are usually for the better; to his blame is his failure to acknowledge the frequency of his exact coincidence with Sinclair" (viii). The paragraph concludes with a forceful statement: "Let there be no mistake: the reason our translation seems to reflect Singleton's, to the extent that it does, is that ours, on occasion, and Singleton's, almost always, are both deeply indebted to Sinclair" (viii).

Before verifying Singleton's and the Hollanders' debt to Sinclair, one might find it worthwhile trying to determine whether Sinclair, whose translation appeared in 1939, is indebted to any of his many predecessors. The fact is that Sinclair recognizes his "indebtedness to the commentaries" of many Italian, American, and British scholars, including the *Temple* editors (Sinclair's 1977 reprint, *Inferno*, "Preface" 11-12); as to his translation, however, although he acknowledges borrowing "an occasional phrase from

one or other” of his predecessors (*Inferno*, “Preface” 9), Sinclair singles out none, thus giving the impression that he hardly owes any debt to anyone, and regrettably proposing the same strategy of concealment to be followed a few decades later by Singleton.

And yet, Sinclair’s indebtedness to the previous translators of Dante has already been recognized and outlined by scholars, primarily Gilbert F. Cunningham. In his two-volume study titled *The Divine Comedy in English: A Critical Bibliography*, vol. 1, 1782-1900; vol. 2, 1901-1966 (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965 and 1967), Cunningham establishes Sinclair’s debt to (just to name a few of Dante’s prose translators) Charles Eliot Norton (“Sinclair’s version is nearer to Norton’s [1891-92] than to any other [...]” 2:164) and the Temple Classics’ translators (2:166). At the same time, Cunningham reminds us that Norton himself “praises the prose versions of Carlyle, Dugdale [*Purgatorio* 1883], and Butler [*Purg.*1880; *Par.* 1891; *Inf.* 1892], and acknowledges his indebtedness to the latter [...]” (1:160). Thus, as far as the *Inferno* translation is concerned, the ancestral lineage of descent links, in very broad lines, Singleton not only to Sinclair but also to Norton, Dugdale, Butler, and ultimately to John Aitken Carlyle (1801-1879), the younger brother of Thomas Carlyle. J. A. Carlyle’s translation first appeared in 1849 and then in 1867 with some revisions and corrections (Cunningham 1:56); finally, with “less than a hundred changes” by H. Oelsner, Carlyle’s translation “now forms the first volume of the Temple Classics edition [first appeared in 1900] of the *Divine Comedy*” (Cunningham 1:51). Cunningham’s concluding lines on J. A. Carlyle’s translation should be etched in stone: “Like Cary [*Inf.* 1805-07; *The Vision* 1814] and Longfellow [1867], Carlyle has earned the right to have his name permanently linked with that of Dante among the English-speaking peoples” (1:51).

This same very illustrious ancestry, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, can thus be claimed, at least to a certain extent, by Robert and Jean Hollander’s translation of the *Inferno*. The following quotation of the beginning of the *Inferno* (1:1-9) will help the reader understand the extent to which four translators, spanning two centuries, are inextricably linked together.

*Carlyle:*

In the middle of the journey of our life I came / to myself in a dark wood where the straight / way was lost.

Ah! How hard a thing it is to tell what a wild, / and rough, and stubborn wood this was, which / in my thought renews the fear!

So bitter is it, that scarcely more is death: but / to treat of the good that I there found, I will / relate the other things that I discerned./

[In the above quotation, the slash indicates the end of the line, which equals the width of the page; in Carlyle’s translation available in the Temple Classics, each *terzina* starts a new paragraph.]

*Sinclair:*

In the middle of the journey of our life I came / to myself within a dark wood where the straight / way was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of / that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought / of which renews my fear! So bitter is it that death / is hardly more. But to give account of the good / which I found there I will tell of the other things / I noted there./

[Sinclair marks a new paragraph, indenting the text, only two or three times per page; the above slashes indicate the end of the line, which equals the width of the page in Sinclair's prose rendering. These same comments apply also to Singleton's prose translation.]

*Singleton:*

Midway in the journey of our life I found / myself in a dark wood, for the straight way / was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very / thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter / that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of / the good that I found in it, I will tell of the / other things I saw there./

[The term "midway" appears in Cary's translation — "In the midway of this our mortal life" — and also in Longfellow's: "Midway upon the journey of our life."]

*Hollander:*

Midway in the journey of our life  
I came to myself in a dark wood,  
for the straight way was lost.

Ah, how hard it is to tell  
the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh —  
the very thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter death is hardly more so.  
But to set forth the good I found  
I will recount the other things I saw.

What can be briefly said about these four translations is that, once their authors decide to pursue accuracy and readability above any other characteristic — and such was the goal of Carlyle (Cunningham 1:47), Butler (1:148-52), Norton (1:160), and Sinclair (2:166) —, then the translation is, precisely as Singleton rightly points out, "doomed to display a coincidence of phraseology with other translations at every turn, and it would be a mistake to seek to avoid this and try to make one's effort strictly 'original'" (*The Divine Comedy*, trans. with a comm. by Charles S. Singleton, *Inferno*, vol. 1, *Italian Text and Translation*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1970, "Note" 372).

Thus, unavoidably linked to such an illustrious translators' lineage of descent, the Hollanders' "verse translation" can lay claim to accuracy as well readability. At the same time, the two translators themselves, by linking their work to at least two of the prose translations mentioned above — Singleton's and Sinclair's — seem to invite the readers to ask a question for which I have been unable to find an answer in their volume, namely: How can the Hollanders' rendering of the *Inferno* be called "a verse translation" while at the same time pursuing not only "maximum readability with complete fidelity" (dust jacket) but also a direct connection with two prose translations? Among recent translators of the *Inferno* in "verse," Robert Pinsky, for instance, premises his work with a "Translator's Note" in which he lays down the principles of his poetic rendering (xxi-xxiv). Other fairly recent translators — e.g., Mark Musa, Allen Mandelbaum, and even the twenty contemporary poets of *Dante's Inferno* of the Ecco Press — offer some guidelines as to what kind of verse the reader might expect. Since the Hollanders' translation is not *terza rima*, any modified rhyme scheme thereof (Pinsky), or blank verse (Musa; Mandelbaum), it is perhaps free verse. I, for one, would have certainly welcomed

some explanations about the kind of “verse” the Hollanders employ or the poetic principles at work in their translation.

And yet, although the two translators have not sought, regrettably, to shed any light on the poetic principles concerning the art of translation they have pursued, their “new verse translation” lays claim to another merit that furthers that of fidelity; namely, it is a line-by-line rendering of Dante’s poem. Here I must add that the Hollanders’ decision to provide a line-by-line rendering makes their translation far preferable, both poetically and visually, to that of Singleton and Sinclair, whose prose renderings fill so densely each inch of their pages as if they sought to exorcize totally Dante’s poeticality from the unaware reader’s mind. I would also like to add that the Hollanders’ decision to render Dante’s *terzina* line by line is also preferable, at least in this reviewer’s mind, to Robert M. Durling’s prose translation of the *Inferno*, which, while beginning a new paragraph for each *terzina*, does not do so at each line of Dante’s original. At the same time, Durling’s decision to start a new paragraph at each new *terzina* is preferable to Singleton’s and Sinclair’s prose translations that typically contain no more than three spatial and visual breaks per page.

The reference to Durling’s translation of the *Inferno* is of paramount importance because the accompanying commentary (penned by Martinez and Durling) cannot but constitute a term of comparison for that of Robert Hollander, just as Singleton’s is for these two recent volumes.

With the publication of so many commentaries in English in the 1970s (Singleton), in the 1980s (Mark Musa, whose work in part appeared in the 1970s and now replaces the venerable Dorothy Sayers’s *terza rima* translation in the Penguin Series; Allen Mandelbaum), and finally in the 1990s (Durling/Martinez; Hollander), English-speaking people have at their disposal a wealth of information that by far surpasses what is available to the French and German readers and that, in fact, compares well to the countless commentaries available to the Italian public. The commentaries to Dante’s *Comedy* listed immediately above, despite their differences in approach, are all highly commendable and informative, whether the first-time reader of Dante relies exclusively on a single commentary or the veteran and consummate scholar consults several or all of them. The attributes of the commentaries by Singleton and Musa, because of the lapse of time since their first appearance, are well-known. Although Musa’s glosses may strike us at times as subjective, they are far less so than those of the Dorothy Sayers’s Penguin edition that Musa’s volumes have replaced. (To Musa’s merit, his blank-verse translation is also arranged in triplets, which read smoothly and also commend themselves for their originality.) In contrast to Musa’s, Singleton’s three-volume commentary is striking, on the one hand, for its lack of aesthetic and hermeneutical interpretations of the text, and, on the other, for the wealth of information, including countless quotations of primary sources, that provide the reader with the essential historical, textual, philosophical, and also theological elements needed to the text’s proper understanding. The fact that the information provided by Singleton is by and large already available in Italian commentaries, either through bibliographic references or direct quotations of primary sources (e.g., Scartazzini-Vandelli) hardly detracts from the usefulness of the information he provides in his commentary. In spite of, or precisely because of, its brevity, Mandelbaum’s glosses, written in collaboration with several Dante scholars, are always extremely useful and in most instances very satisfactory for either classroom use with undergraduate students or the first-time reader of the *Comedy*.

The two commentaries that have appeared in the second half of the 1990s — i.e., Martinez/Durling's and Hollander's — belong, however, in a totally different category. While providing much of the background information already available in Singleton's commentary, the extensive glosses penned by Martinez/Durling and by Robert Hollander fill the interpretive and exegetical gaps present in Singleton's commentary. Both commentaries, in fact, seek to go beyond the positivistic nature of Singleton's work, and both offer, put simply, much food for thought, drawn from their authors' vast knowledge of American and European Dante scholarship, which they have tested over several decades of classroom teaching and personal research.

Also, both Hollander and Martinez/Durling ought to be praised for their humility in introducing their commentaries. The two latter scholars very modestly present their commentary as a tool for "readers approaching the poem for the first time" (vi), while Robert Hollander also seems to have in mind "any first-time reader of the poem, or any reader at all" (xxii). And yet, readers, beware: These two volumes constitute a first-rate commentary comparable or even superior to most Italian commentaries, whose intended audience consists typically of high-school students (*liceo*, or equivalent secondary schools). At the same time, although the authors of both commentaries rely, for their exegesis, on the centuries-old tradition of commentary commenced right after Dante's death, they are also very open to international and specifically North-American Dante scholarship. Thus, just as Singleton's commentary can be commended for its positivistic character and neutral information, but chided for its lack of textual hermeneutics, the abundant presence of textual hermeneutics in the two commentaries by Martinez/Durling and by Hollander guide and challenge the reader at the same time. Also, while both commentaries display an in-depth knowledge of the critical literature written in Italian (at times mediated via the six-volume *Enciclopedia dantesca*), secondary sources in English seem to play a major role in the text's exegesis. And yet, readers should not look for comprehensive bibliographies in either volumes: there are only 30 pages listing the secondary works cited in Hollander's notes (604-34) and only 16 pages listing the "Modern Works" quoted in the Martinez/Durling's commentary. Consequently, exclusions of studies in either Italian or English, even of scholars who professed or profess in North America, are by necessity plentiful. For instance, although Hollander's bibliography lists several essays by Amilcare Iannucci, it does not contain the latter's *Forma ed evento nella Divina Commedia* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1974), while the Martinez/Durling's commentary lists no study whatsoever by the same Canadian Dante scholar. Again, Rocco Montano's *Storia della poesia di Dante* (Napoli: Quaderni di Delta, 1962) is listed by Hollander but not by Martinez-Durling; and finally, neither commentary mentions any of the Dante volumes and essays by Tibor Wlassics, Ricardo J. Quinones, and many others as well. Obviously, neither volume can be seriously faulted for these gaps in their bibliographies, apart from any considerations whether a more comprehensive use of the critical literature could have enhanced the commentators' exegesis. Suffice it to say, nevertheless, that these two North-American commentaries of Dante's *Inferno* provide the reader with more extensive commentaries and ampler bibliographies than their Italian counterparts, e.g., the three-volume *Divina commedia* edited by Umberto Bosco and Giovanni Reggio (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1988), referenced in both commentaries.

Finally, I would like briefly to discuss an issue that is central to the understanding of Dante's *Comedy* as a narrative, and is very much at the core of so much Dante criticism

in Europe and America (e.g.: Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), and thus, also, of the Hollanders' work. Let me state the obvious: The first cantica *narrates a story*, which the author divides into 34 *cantos*, whose 34 beginnings, endings, and everything in between, also because of their intrinsic nature and the work's manuscript character, continuously hark back and echo each other throughout the first cantica and beyond. In brief, Dante the author invites us to read his story as a narrative continuum, to be understood and pondered from beginning to end. By contrast, the Hollanders' *Inferno* (and so also that of Durling and Martinez, of Musa, and so many others, but not that of Mandelbaum and Singleton) *forces* the reader to stop, time and again, 34 times. Thus, after reading *Inferno* 1, in Italian, English, or both (2-11), the reader cannot continue sharing the Pilgrim's story narrated in *Inferno* 2 (pp. 22-31) without first going through, or at least thumbing through, the eight-page commentary separating the two cantos (12-20), which are also preceded, like all the others, by a useful one-page "Outline" (1; 21). One cannot but hope that the commentary, as extensive as the story itself whose meaning it is called upon to elucidate, will not discourage the first-time reader it intends to serve, thus turning into the Dantean "acqua perigliosa" (*Inf.* 1:24), or, worse, "lo passo / che non lasciò già mai persona viva" (*Inf.* 1:26-27).

In summary: These two new translations, with commentary, of Dante's *Inferno* — by Robert and Jean Hollander, and by Durling and Martinez — have much to be commended for, and will be extremely useful not only to the first-time reader of Dante but also to the scholar. Both would have received my full endorsement if their extensive commentaries had been printed at the end of the entire text of Dante's *Inferno*. As it is, the Dantean text is interrupted 34 times by an otherwise highly commendable commentary, which, while explaining the Dantean text eminently well, slows down Dante's unified story that symphonically plays out its music in the 34 closely and inextricably arranged cantos of the first cantica.

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