

TRANSLATED BY PATRICK S. DIEHL

Dante's Rime



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DANTE'S *RIME*

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INTRODUCTION

THE COLLECTION

These poems are the records of a great poet's achievement of his greatness. The earliest are juvenilia; the latest, products of Dante's full maturity. Among them, they span a quarter-century, the years from the early 1280s till 1308 or later which also saw the writing of the *Vita nuova*, the *De vulgari eloquentia*, and the *Convivio*. Their culmination is the *Divine Comedy*.

The collection as we have it is disorderly and heterogeneous, abandoned by its author to history. Yet, for the sake both of the light it casts upon the *Comedy* and of the masterpieces it contains, it has a claim upon our attention as great as do the works of a Virgil or a Milton written before the creation of their epics. Be cautioned, however, that there is no norm here to serve as benchmark; the very lack of any norm is the essential fact. From the beginning, Dante experimented restlessly, taking all the risks available and inventing new ones. The first sonnets (1-7) try out the style fashionable in his adolescence. It is a laboriously mannered style, and Dante had only harsh words in his later life for its chief exponent Guittone, but these gawky first attempts turn out to have been indispensable to the final synthesis. A fellow poet, Guido Cavalcanti, showed Dante the way to the next stage in his development, the creation of the *dolce stil novo* or "sweet new style." In full reaction against the grotesqueries of Guittonian verse, the two, along with their followers, made a poetic revolution. They banished political and moral themes in favor of an exclusive concentration upon love and its effects, sim-

plified their diction radically, and avoided nearly all the traditional rhetorical figures so prevalent in Guittone, including even simile and metaphor. All this made for much greater directness and emotional force, and one can see its results in poems 8 through 68 here and of course in the *Vita nuova*, the unrivaled triumph of the new aesthetic. But it also made for a narrowness which shut out most of experience. The poems which Dante incorporated into the *Vita nuova* do not appear in this translation. I feel that they ought not to be read in isolation from the gloss with which their author welded them into a masterpiece. The reader can refer to one of the numerous English versions of the *Vita nuova* to find the poems omitted here. They are numbers 6, 10-12, 20, 24, 26-29, 33-37, 40, 42-44, and 46-57.

The rest of the collection (ca. 1295 on) shows Dante moving out beyond the confines of the *dolce stil novo*. Poems such as the moral *canzoni* 69 and 70 or the flying with Forese Donati (72-74a) are entirely alien to it. The latest of the pre-exilic works (i.e., 1301 or earlier), the *rime petrose* ("stone poems" or "poems about Petra," 77-80), share the subject-matter of the *stil novo* period, but treat it quite differently; love is no longer compounded of light and air and clear refining fire, it has become a dark, devastating, obsessive passion. Number 80, the last in the set of four, gives full expression to the violence of Dante's feelings and stands among the greatest of medieval poems. The others in the set are more restrained and so less gripping, but they are scarcely less remarkable even so. In 77, each stanza handles the well-worn theme of "winter is here but I burn with love" from a different aspect—astronomical, meteorological, zoological, botanical, and geological—and this bravura display is rounded off by an exquisitely lyrical envoi. The lover's sufferings are in the foreground, and the lady herself is scarcely visible—there is only her impassive beauty at the back of the picture. Number 78 is a sestina in which the beloved is identified with

and dissolved into a series of views of one landscape. The form admirably reproduces the effects and movements of obsession with its reiterated key-words, but again the woman remains an archetypal, natural force, her body rock and grass, her glance the sun itself. The third poem (79) of the group raises the sestina to a higher power. The redoubled repetitions become incantatory; when the poem is read aloud, the form takes possession of the reader, and the key-words ring like struck metal. Critics generally describe this poem as an *étude transcendente* in pure technique; Dante himself is defensive when he mentions it in the course of *De vulgari eloquentia*; yet I believe that because—not in spite—of its form, it has an elemental ritual force rare in our European grand tradition.

With no. 81, "Around my heart, as if they went to earth," we enter the period of Dante's exile. The subject of this poem, perhaps the very finest in the whole collection, is highly esoteric, yet Dante sees it in movingly human terms. Who else could have successfully presented the concepts of divine law, the unwritten law of humanity (*ius gentium*), and actual law and the theme of human transgressions against justice in the form of a conversation between Love and three outcast, wandering women? Perhaps Langland, but he lacked Dante's discipline and control. This *canzone* demonstrates what the medieval gift for seeing abstractions in concrete terms as a part of human life could achieve when given wings by extraordinary imagination and complete technical mastery.

The remaining poems, save for the very last (89), deal with moral themes (83 excels even 69 and 70) or the laws of Love (the sonnet exchange with Cino da Pistoia, 84a-88).¹ They are utterly confident, and at least one, the sonnet "I have

¹ Though pre-exilic, nos. 84 and 84a are part of the exchange, and Foster and Boyde have therefore violated chronological order to place them alongside their brother sonnets.

stood now in the brightness of Love's beams" (86), ranks among the finest of Dante's lyrics. (In general, Dante is at his best in the longer forms, and his sonnets are of minor importance, but there are occasional exceptions.) The *canzone* that ends the *Rime* makes a splendid farewell; it incorporates elements of all prior periods in its style and imagery, harking back to a view of love and the beloved that Dante had, for some years already, left behind. Whether intentionally or not, its envoi closes out the long years of experimentation very neatly.

Looking forward to the *Comedy* (which Dante may have already begun by this time) and backward over the *Rime*, we see that all the skills Dante had developed are comprehended in his *magnum opus*. Many of the women there speak pure *stil novo*. The fine-drawn metaphysics of *canzoni* like 59 are indispensable to the disquisitions in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. The moral passion of *canzoni* 69, 70, and 83 burns brightly in the indignant speeches of Cacciaguida and Peter Damiani and St. Peter and of the Narrator himself. Even the vigorous scurrility of the exchange with Forese Donati (72-74a) finds its proper place, in the grotesque cantos xxi-xxii of the *Inferno* and in the squabblings of the damned. Of course, there are features of the *Comedy* that appear nowhere in the *Rime*: the extended *similes*, the economical and vivid characterizations, and the *terza rima* form itself. Yet even these features, scarcely to be expected, after all, in non-narrative poetry, derive clearly from traits of imagination and technique already in evidence in the *Rime*.

Thus, if the reader's interest is primarily in Dante's development as it relates to the *Comedy* and if his stamina is beyond question, it would make excellent sense to begin at the beginning and read straight through to the end. But if he is looking primarily for outstanding poetry that is reasonably accessible, it would be best to begin with the *petrose* (77-80), go on to 81, and thence to nos. 89, 83, 70, 61, 67, and

69, in that order. Only then should he dip into the earlier poems. Dante plundered the output of his youth for the *Vita nuova*, and what remains to represent that period in the *Rime* is not likely to win many post-medieval hearts. Therefore, my advice is to read this book as if it were Chinese, from back to front.

MATTERS OF FORM

Those not acquainted with medieval Italian versification should find the ensuing section useful. For a more comprehensive treatment, in English, the reader may turn to Foster and Boyde's *Dante's Lyric Poetry*, volume I, pages xliv-lv (see Select Bibliography). Except for the sestina and double sestina (concerning which see my notes to nos. 77 and 78), there are only three forms with which we need concern ourselves: the sonnet, the ballata, and the canzone.

The sonnet-scheme Dante follows will probably be familiar to the reader in the guise of the so-called Petrarchan sonnet as practiced by Milton or Wordsworth, for instance. Variants such as an ABABABAB rhyme-scheme in the octave (rather than ABBAABBA), or a sestet on two rhymes instead of three, appear here and there. Among the earliest poems, there is even the "double" sonnet, in which four lines are intercalated in the octave, two in the sestet (such as 8, 10, and 12). Lines in Dante's sonnets are of the standard hendecasyllabic length (eleven syllables, with a mandatory stress on the tenth, and at least one caesura within the line); the form itself can be seen as a type of *canzone* stanza, though with crucial differences (see below). It serves as the vehicle for occasional poetry, especially for correspondence on questions of love-service, and also for concentrated treatment of serious subjects of a certain weight.

The *ballata* was in theory suitable for lighter moments only, but in Dante's hands it shows itself capable of greater things (as in 64). It is composed either of one stanza or of several identical stanzas introduced by a brief preparatory strophe like the burden of a carol. The stanzas fall into two parts, with the first subdivided once more; the two main parts of the stanza are linked by rhyme. The introductory strophe, or *ripresa*, gives the theme of the *ballata* and the length and rhyme-scheme of the second part of each stanza (see 21).

The canzone could be described as a *ballata* without its *ripresa*, each stanza ranging from ballata-length (seven to ten verses) up to twenty lines long. Usually, though not necessarily, the chosen stanza-form is repeated up to seven times, with different rhyme *sounds* in each stanza, but the same rhyme-scheme and the same pattern of line-lengths. Usually, the *canzone* is rounded off by an envoi (*congedo*), which may be identical with the second part of the other stanzas, independent in form, or another full stanza to itself. For illustration of its many uses, one need only look through the *canzoni* here translated (13, 25, 32, 59, 61, 68-70, 77, 80, 81, 83, and 89). The stanzas themselves derive from the still more elaborate contrivances of the troubadours during the past two centuries. Their structure can be either monolithic or bipartite, with either or both of the two parts further divided. As in the *ballata*, the break between the two major sections, if there is a break, will be bridged over by the rhyme-scheme (here the sonnet, where the break between octave and sestet is sharply defined, is in clear contrast). Generally, the lines in a *canzone*-stanza are either seven or eleven syllables long, with the former restricted in Dante's practice to not more than one per subdivision. In a single poem, 70, penta-syllables appear, along with internal rhyme, but this is exceptional. As for the rhyme-scheme, Dante scrupulously connects the subdivisions of his stanzas. For the close of a stanza, he prefers

a forceful couplet, though usually without any pause in the sense to set it off from the rest of the stanza. In practice, the *canzone*-form is capable of an enormous variety of effects; in the *Rime*, nos. 59 and 70 give some notion of the range available. Its movement can be solemn and stately or brisk and aggressive; the only constant is its mass and complexity. Ben Jonson's "strict Pindarics" and Wordsworth's Immortality Ode provide an approximation in our own English tradition to the effect of the *canzone*, but even they are not quite the same. The *canzone* grew out of a tradition in which poets had themselves written the melody for their own texts. The very words *canzone* and *ballata* recall the origins of these forms in song and in dance. It is true that in Dante's time poets no longer set their own poems nor expected others to set them. But musical form survived in the structure of the stanza—witness the XXY, XYY, or XXYY construction, corresponding to the two melodies and their repetitions which we find in the music of the troubadours up to and including the relatively late Arnaut Daniel (d. ca. 1200), a poet particularly admired by Dante. English odes and pindarics, on the other hand, are an attempt at the distance of well over a millennium to revive a classical form once itself based on music, but without any real awareness of that lost music to undergird its revival. They can never have the naturalness and freedom that the *canzone* still possessed in Dante's time; it was a living form, not a resuscitation, and it did not become rigidified till after Petrarch.

Rhyme in Italian is usually disyllabic, though monosyllabic (*tronca*) and trisyllabic (*sdrucchiola*) rhymes are not uncommon. In Dante, and in medieval poetry in general, one also encounters homonym rhyme (*equivoca*), composite rhyme (cf. Byron's "intellectual / hen-pecked you all"), and, very rarely, rhyme between two occurrences of the same word without any change of sense or syntactical function. The early sonnets provide the clearest instances of *rime composte*

(especially 3a and 4) and *equivoco*, but these also appear in later lyrics and in the *Comedy* itself, where whatever stylistic device best meets Dante's purpose is called into service.

Finally, Dante's rhythm seems exceptionally free, even for Italian. The interplay between caesuras, stresses, and word-lengths, augmented by enjambement, is rich and supple. Rarely will two lines with the same rhythm occur in succession, and then only for special effect (as in 16). Beside these subtleties, metrical English verse seems stiff.

ON TRANSLATING DANTE

In the *De vulgari eloquentia* (II.viii-xiv), the *Convivio*, and throughout his verse, Dante lays particular stress upon the formal aspects of poetry. I have followed suit, not only in constructing this introduction, but more important, in translating the *Rime*. Iambic has replaced syllabic meter, and feminine endings have been reduced to masculine; otherwise, Dante's rhyme-schemes and line-lengths have been faithfully reproduced, even in the sonnet exchanges, where the correspondents will deliberately choose the rarest and most difficult rhyme-sounds in order to make the task of duplicating them in the reply all the more arduous. Like nearly all great poets, Dante was a superlative technician; certain of his poems (no. 70 in particular) would crumble to dust if stripped of their formal virtuositities; all draw heavily upon telling rhymes and careful construction within each stanza for their effect. The translator must embrace the technical demands of his task as a magnificent opportunity; to flinch from them would be fatal to this poetry. The only liberty taken here is occasional slant-rhyming of the mildest possible sort.

To pursue such a course puts considerable pressure on English idiom and syntax, so long as one aims at reasonable

lexical fidelity, as I have. The reader must judge how far I have succeeded in resisting this pressure. Certain subjunctive and conditional constructions no longer current appear intermittently and contribute to the suggestion of things past that I felt was necessary to maintain historical distance. I have tried to avoid the corrupting archaisms that seem to ease the task but spell the ruin of a translation; for instance, I have altogether excluded verb-object inversions (e.g., "I have no remedy *my wounds to heal*").

I have also sought to keep padding to a minimum. Nothing destroys the effectiveness of a verse more completely, or plagues more translations. The constant use of periphrasis is a direct reflection of the original; Dante's periphrases are not empty ones, and I hope that neither are mine. Occasionally, I have added a phrase, voluntarily, for interpretive reasons. For instance, the last six words of the first line of no. 81, "Around my heart, as if they went to earth" have no counterpart in the Italian. But the poem portrays Justice and her daughters as hunted animals, and it seemed right to have them seeking their burrow in the opening line. Likewise, "my scaffold" in the first line of 77 brings out what is latent in the poem as a whole. Dante describes himself as being in a condition of spiritual paralysis bordering on death; the macrocosm in all its aspects threatens to become his execution-ground, with heaven as the wheel on which he is broken.

At other points, I have diverged widely from the surface sense of the text in order to make its meaning clear. Sometimes Dante's contemporaries found him rather obscure; what was merely obscure to a fourteenth-century Italian reader will usually be opaque to a twentieth-century reader of English. To make my readers' task easier, I have moved a certain amount of material I discovered in the commentaries or puzzled out for myself up into the body of the text. Thus, no. 83, vv. 93-94, which translate "literally" as "I do not know, because that circle surrounds us which limits us from up

there," becomes in my version "No one—the stars that hem us in prevent / Our rising to the light . . .," which makes it clear that Dante is thinking of deterministic astrological influences. On similar grounds, at the end of 74a, I have replaced the millet seeds of the original with a more familiar but nonetheless contemporary counting-device, the abacus. By and large, it is probable that I ought to have done more of this, but period color and lexical fidelity have their claims as well. Nor should we forget that a perfectly accessible, lucid, easy Dante would be a falsification.

So far as rhythm is concerned, I have made no attempt at direct imitation of the effects Dante gets from his hendecasyllabics except in the matter of pauses in the sense and enjambement. What I have produced is fairly regular iambic verse seasoned with a number of inverted feet and clashes of stress. I hope that it catches the speed and energy of certain poems, the decorum and melodiousness of others. The main object, as I saw it, was to preserve a sense of movement *through* the stanza, with syntax dancing its own pattern within the patterns of rhyme and line-length. Local effects are less crucial, and often inimitable.

When all explanations have been made, the business of verse translation remains a perilous one. Rigorists anathematize it; among them is Dante himself, who writes in *Convivio* I.vii.14, "nothing which has been rendered harmonious through unifying musical means can be translated from its own tongue into another without destruction of all its sweetness and harmony." Scholars grumble at the lexical infidelities of translators committed in the name of fidelity to the manifold unity of all aspects of the poem or to the underlying meaning they perceive. Poets wince at the strained language and scrupulous obscurities to which translators are driven by their desire to preserve as much of the original as possible. Yet the enterprise continues. Rigorists are wrong to say that "all" the original is lost in transmission; the scholars

are wrong to ask that poetry play the role of a crib; the poets are wrong to expect the tang of native harvests in exotic hybrids. But translation is the art of compromise, and the pure in heart will never love her.

My own goal has been the creation of good, vital English verse that can stand by itself but that remains unobtrusively yet recognizably alien. In Dryden's terms, the results lie somewhat to the metaphrastic, or literal, side of paraphrase. They may serve to interest the reader in the original, or to convey some notion of what the original is like to those without Italian, or even to bring new insights to those already familiar with the original texts. Whatever the case, these are ultimately poems not by Dante but by the translator; to read Dante, one must read Italian. And yet—I think you will find Dante here, for all that!

CONCERNING THE TEXT AND NOTES

The text of the *Rime* that I am following and that is reprinted here is the same as the text printed in K. Foster and P. Boyde, *Dante's Lyric Poetry* (Oxford, 1967), volume I. In its turn, this is in all essentials but the order of the poems identical to the edition by Michele Barbi under the auspices of the Società Dantesca Italiana (Florence, 1960, reprint of the 1921 edition). The poems written by hands other than Dante's are denoted by being printed in italics in the Italian versions, and by the letter *a* following the number of each poem. About half the poems can be dated with reasonable precision; the other half can only be placed within whatever group they seem to belong to. This means that the main lines of Dante's poetic growth are clearly drawn, but that one must be careful when bringing specific poems in evidence to support generalizations about stylistic changes.

My notes are based upon the admirable commentary contained in volume two of the Foster-Boyde edition of the *Rime*. For further information, and for prose assistance in reading the originals, one need only turn to their work.

In closing, I want to render thanks to Peter Whigham, without whose early encouragement I would never have attempted to go beyond the *petrose*; to Jim Powell and Bill Tuthill, members of my verse translation class at Berkeley, and more particularly to John Frederick Nims, for their criticisms which spurred me on to a thorough revision of these texts; and to the University of California, for research grants which helped defray the expenses attendant upon the preparation of the typescript.

THE *RIME*

1a (DANTE DA MAIANO)

*Provedi, saggio ad esta visione,
e per mercé ne trai vera sentenza.
Dico: una donna di bella fazone,
di cu' el meo cor gradir molto s'agenzia,*

*mi fé d'una ghirlanda donagione,
verde, fronzuta, con bella accoglienza:
appresso mi trovai per vestigione
camicia di suo dosso, a mia parvenza.*

*Allor di tanto, amico, mi francai,
che dolcemente presila abbracciare:
non si contese, ma ridea la bella.*

*Così ridendo, molto la baciai:
del più non dico, ché mi fé giurare.
E morta, ch'è mia madre, era con ella.*

1a

Attend, O poet, to this dream of mine
And pray, extract its true significance,
As thus: a lady whom One had fashioned fine,
To do whose pleasure is pleasure in advance,

Gives me a wreath of blossom and of vine
Well-leafed and green, and shows no diffidence.
But feel! its coolness spilling down my spine,
A gown has clothed me—one of hers, I sense.

And then, dear friend, I make myself so bold
As take her gently into my embrace—
She does not struggle, lovely all in laughter.

And as she laughs, I kiss her times untold . . .
I'll say no more—I swore it to her face.
A woman, dead—my mother—followed after.

1

Savete giudicar vostra ragione,
o om che pregio di saver portate;
per che, vitando aver con voi quistione.
com so rispondo a le parole ornate.

Disio verace, u' rado fin si pone,
che mosse di valore o di bieltate,
imagina l'amica oppinione
significasse il don che pria narrate.

Lo vestimento, aggate vera spene
che fia, da lei cui desiare, amore;
e 'n ciò provide vostro spirto bene:

dico, pensando l'ovra sua d'allore.
La figura che già morta sorvene
è la fermezza ch'averà nel core.

You best expound the theme that you assign,
Your standing in the ranks of wit is high;
Avoiding all dispute lest you repine,
To choicest words I now attempt reply.

Unfeigned desire, which scarcely knows decline,
Which beauty moves or worth that will not die,
Such does your friend believe and here opine
The first gift that she gave must signify.

Hope, and be safe in hoping, by the clothes,
That she you seek will play a lover's part—
Herein, your dreaming spirit well foreknows

(This second gift, I read, was just the start.)
The figure which, already dead, arose
Is steadfastness that she will bear at heart.

Per pruova di saper com vale o quanto
lo mastro l'oro, adducelo a lo foco;
e, ciò faccendo, chiara e sa se poco,
amico, di pecunia vale o tanto.

Ed eo, per levar prova del meo canto,
l'adduco a voi, cui paragone voco
di ciascun c'have in canoscenza loco,
o che di pregio porti loda o vanto.

E chero a voi col meo canto più saggio
che mi deggiate il dol maggio d'Amore
qual'è, per vostra scienza, nominare:

e ciò non movo per quistioneggiare
(ché già inver voi so non avria valore),
ma per saver ciò ch'eo vaglio e varraggio.

The jeweller who would try his gold and know
 Its worth, if any, makes fire and puts it in
 And doing so, can tell, when it runs thin,
 Whether its price, dear friend, be high or low.

And for appraisal of my wordy show
 I come to you, the chief among that kin
 Who make a dwelling-place of learning's inn
 Or walk with praise wherever they may go.

With all the art I can, I sing my spell:
 Say which of all the woes of Love would be
 The worst—by all you know, tell me its guise;

I want to see (but let's not syllogize,
 You're far too quick with arguments for me)
 What I am worth, and if I promise well.