

W.D. Jackson

Of Comfort and Despair – From *Dolce Stil Nuovo* to *Rime Petrose*

Translations from the Italian of Dante Alighieri

“No girl or other short-lived vanity
Ought to have weighted down your wings
To wait for further arrows...”

Beatrice to Dante, *Purgatorio XXI*, 58-60

“Two loves I have, of comfort and despair”

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 144*

The poetry of Dante’s canzoni and other lyrics – unlike that of the Divina Commedia – tends to vanish almost completely if their content is separated from their form. As Dante’s own detailed analyses of the canzone in De vulgari eloquentia and La Vita Nuova imply, he viewed the form as an inseparable aspect of the meaning in these poems. I have therefore preserved as much of it as I could – i.e. the rhyme-schemes and approximate line-lengths of Dante’s stanzas, while shifting his basically syllabic verse (Italian being a ‘syllable-timed’ language) into the more ‘stress-timed’ rhythms of English. Except for the indispensable “Lady”, I have attempted to avoid the archaisms and inversions by which translations of this sort are sometimes weakened – also with the intention of raising more plainly the critical question of what do these thoughts / feelings / forms mean to us now. Hence as well the title and epigraphs... It is a matter of conjecture who Ladies such as the Fioretta of the first extract actually were, but any or all of them may have constituted the “short-lived vanity” referred to by Beatrice in Purgatorio XXI. The second of the poems is, of course, about Beatrice herself and is also the first canzone proper in La Vita Nuova. Whoever inspired the rime petrose (stony verses) – of which there are four, all great poems – remains a mystery. But one thing is clear: what Thom Gunn once called “the idealizations and the contempt” of Dantesque and Renaissance love poetry influenced Shakespeare (“Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds”), who influences us. Or let’s say they were all part of a historical ‘stream of consciousness’, which is – or, since it helped to form us, certainly should be – the concern of everyone:

i

**‘Per una ghirlandetta’ (To Fioretta)
(Rime LVI)**

Because of a sweet garland
I’ve seen, all gentle flowers
Now make me sigh. –
I saw my Lady wearing
A garland and, above her,
I saw a little angel
Of love devoutly fly,
While it subtly pierced my hearing
With its song: “My humble powers
Are all my Lord’s. So praise him, love her.”

'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore'
(Rime XIV)

Ladies who live in knowledge of true love,
 Let me commend my Lady now to you:
 Not that my words can praise her as is due –
 Yet it relieves my mind to sing her praises.
 For when I think how far she is above
 The rest of us, love flows in me anew
 So sweetly that if all my words rang true
 They'd make the world enamoured of her graces.
 Though not the sort of words whose tenor raises
 The tone so high that I'd lose heart from fear;
 But rather let me treat love lightly here,
 Out of respect for her sweet gentleness's
 Feelings – with you, o Ladies and loving girls,
 For my Lady is a theme for no one else.

An angel, in the fullness of God's knowledge,
 Exclaims, "O Lord, among the human race
 A marvel now is visible in the grace
 Proceeding from a soul whose light ascends
 As far as Heaven" – whose angels and great college
 Of saints lack nothing but my Lady's face
 And so beg God to let her grace that place.
 Pity alone, speaking in God, defends
 Our interests, since God's nature comprehends
 My Lady: "Dearly beloved, suffer in peace:
 Although your high hopes please me, let them cease
 Until he loses her, whom Providence sends
 To visit Hell, where he shall cry, *O lost*
And hopeless souls, I have seen the Hope of the Blessed!"

My Lady is desired in Paradise:
 So make yourselves acquainted with her worth.
 And if you wish to seem of gentle birth
 Walk with her when she walks, for she goes by
 Shielded by Love himself, who buries in ice
 All wicked hearts and thoughts, like frozen earth.
 But if you were to gaze on all she's worth,
 You would become a noble thing, or die.
 And when Love finds one worthy to set eyes
 Upon her virtue, he feels the power she gives
 As if it healed the very way he lives,
 Or angry pride became humility.
 Also, God's greatness grants that he who gladly
 Speaks to her, by His grace, cannot end badly.

Love says of her: "How can a mortal creature's
Appearance be so lovely, so divine?"
He stares at her, and swears she's so refined
God must have meant to make something quite new
When He made her. Her delicate, pearl-like features
Shine softly as a woman's ought to shine.
She is as good as Nature could design –
The very paragon of Beauty, who
Will wound the eyes of any who dares view
The flame-like essences of burning love
She shoots from her bright eyes – which, when they move,
Penetrate to the heart and wound it too.
Thus in her face one sees the vital strength
Of Love portrayed where none may gaze at length.

(Congedo)

My song, when I have sent you on your way,
I know you'll speak with many women. Now
I recommend that you – in view of how
I've raised you as Love's daughter – should be plain
With everyone you meet, and merely say:
"I'm searching for the one I praise. Please show
Me where I have been told I ought to go." –
That where no love is you should not remain,
Unless you want the world to claim you're vain,
But only be quite open, if you can,
With ladies and the sort of courteous man
Who'll quickly send you on your way again.
When you find Love, you'll find my Lady too:
Remember me to him, who send them you.

iii

'Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro'
(Rime CIII)

With words as harsh as that unfeeling block
Of loveliness, let me now carve in stone
Her hard-faced flesh and bone,
The things she does which prove how cruel and crude
Her nature is, which, like a sparkling rock,
Is so impervious – or so far withdrawn –
That, of Love's arrows, none
Will ever pierce or catch her in the nude.
But *her* looks kill. No man can hope to exclude
Or run from her outrageous slings and stings
Which, as if they had wings,
Penetrate every normal sort of armour;
So that I've no idea how to disarm her.

Nor have I found a shield her shots can't shatter –
Or hiding-place from which my eyes can't see
Her eyes. Like a flower on a tree
My love, borne up by her, sticks out a mile.
To her, my tears of bitter misery matter
No more than a ship might care about a sea
That's calm: she forces me
Down with a weight no rasping rhyme or style
Could ever equal. Oh, heartless, fearful *file* –
Deaf and abrasive – *why* won't you refrain
From causing me such pain
By gnawing at my heart, skin by thin skin,
As I refrain from saying whose hand you're in?

For I tremble even more when I perceive
I'm thinking of her in some crowded room –
Where prying looks presume
The light that's in my eyes means I'm in love –
Than at my very death, which, with Love's teeth,
Already frays my nerves, keen to consume
My entire life to come;
Or so I fear, till I can hardly move. –
Love's got me on the ground, and stands above
Me brandishing the sword he used to slay
Dido. I humbly pray
For mercy. – Or, my love-tormented cries
Beg him to grant the mercy he denies!

From time to time he raises his strong hand,
Perversely challenging my helpless form
Which lies as weak as a worm,
Too tired to put up any sort of fight.
But then again cries start to fill my mind;
A surge of blood goes rushing to my warm
Heart which, fearing more harm,
Dilates, until I'm left as white as white...
Love wounds me under my left arm – with quite
So hard a hit that in my heart pain blazes
Once more. And if he raises
His sword again, I swear the hand of Death
Will have me before the blow lets out my breath.

If only I might see that same sword cut
Her heart in two, whose beauty quarters mine!
The end for which I pine
Might seem less black then... But why should *I* die,
When she's the thief, the murderess who'll do what
The night conceals, though the bright sun should shine?
And why should she not whine
For me, who yelp for her, in Love's hot sty?

“I’ll rescue you, I’ll rescue you!” I’d cry
At once to her. How gladly I’d have saved
Her by the hair he’s waved –
And gilded – to destroy me. Oh, I’d seize her
By those blonde, lovely locks. And that would please her.

Once having got my fist in her fine tresses,
Which have become a whip and scourge to me,
I’d keep it there, and we
Would pass the hours from terce to nones, and later –
Instead of with coy noes and courteous yesses –
As if a bear had grabbed her playfully.
Though Love whips *me* now, she
Would find that I’d avenge what’s made me hate her
A thousand-fold. As if my eyes could eat her,
I’d stare at hers close up, whose sparks have burned
My heart so long it’s learned
To die alive. Nor would my vengeance cease
Till love had brought us both some sort of peace.

(*Congedo*)

My song, now go away and find that woman
Who shuns my love, starving me of attention
And other things I could mention.
Stick arrows in her heart. For I’ll feel better
If you’ll pursue, for my sake, this vendetta.

[*Biog. Note:*] W.D. Jackson was born in Liverpool in 1947. He has lived in Italy and, since 1973, in Munich. The first two parts of his work-in-progress, *Then and Now – Words in the Dark* (2002) and *From Now to Then* (2005), are published by Menard Press. A selection of new work from the third part, *Boccaccio in Florence and Other Poems*, came out recently from Shearsman / Menard.

Maeterlinck

Translated by Will Stone

Hothouses

Amen

Finally the hour comes to bless
the snuffed out sleep of slaves
and I await the coming of his hands,
white roses in vaulted chambers.

I await at last his cool breath
on a heart finally barred to frauds,
paschal lamb in the marshes
and sunk in hot waters, the wound.

I await nights with no day after
and weaknesses without cure.
I await his shadow on my hands
and his image in warm water.

I await your nights, so I can see
the face of my cravings washed clean
and in evenings' bath my dreams
dying in a palace of ice.

Circle of Boredom

I sing the wan ballads
of kisses never to return.
I see weddings of the sick
on love's lush lawns.

I hear voices in my sleep,
so nonchalantly do they come
and lilies open on the streets
without stars, without sun.

And these momentums still so slow,
these desires that I thirst for
are paupers in a palace,
weary candles in the dawn.

I await the moon in my eyes
open on the brink of endless nights,
so she'll staunch my dreams
with her slow blue sheets.

Hothouse

Glasshouse deep in the forest's heart,
your doors forever barred
all that lies beneath your dome,
and your analogies beneath my soul!

Thoughts of a starving princess,
tedium of a sailor adrift in the desert,
sounds of brass at the windows of incurables.

Seek out the corners that seem warmest!
Think of a woman fainting on the day of harvest;
there are sputterings in the yard of the hospice;
in the distance, a hunter of elk becoming a nurse, passes.

Inspect all this by moonlight
(nothing is in its rightful place!)
Think of a madwoman before the judges,
on the canal in full sail, warships
nightbirds upon lilies,
a noontime tolling
(yonder beneath those bell shapes!)
On the meadow a halt for the lame,
odour of ether on a sunny day.

My God, my God! When will the rain come,
the snow and the wind to this glasshouse!

Oraison

Have pity on my absence
at the threshold of my ambition!
My soul is ashen with impotence
and white inaction.

My soul with works abandoned,
my soul pale with sobbing
regards in vain her weary hands
tremble in the flower of unblossoming.

And while my heart expires
the bubbles of lilac dreams,
my soul, with frail hands of wax,
waters the weary moonlight;

A moonlight through which shows
the yellowed lily of our tomorrows;
a moonlight where nothing is born
save my hands mournful shadows.

Winter Desires

Of lips now faded I weep
where kisses no longer form,
and desires lie abandoned
beneath harvested dejection.

Always rain to the horizon!
Always snow on the shore!
Whilst at the threshold of my dream,
stretched on the grass, wolves

observe in my jaded soul
eyes dulled with past,
all the blood once spilled
by dying lambs on the ice.

Only the moon finally shines
in her monotonous dejection,
and sick with hunger my desires,
where autumn grasses stand frozen.

Dull Hours

Here old desires that ebbed,
still dreams of the weary,
still dreams that weary;
and there days bereft of hope.

Where to flee today?
Not a single star remains;
only ice blanketing boredom
and blue linen beneath the moon.

Still our sobs are caught in the snare!
Observe the sick left to the dark
and lambs cropping the snow.
Lord, have pity on us all!

As for me, I await a little waking,
I await the long sleep to end,
I await only a little sunshine
upon these hands the moon has iced.

Omar Sabbagh

A Note On The Versions

The first thing to say and stress is that these are ‘versions’, poems ‘after’ Darwish. Though I speak idiomatic Lebanese my knowledge of the literary language is very limited; accordingly, I was aided by my father, who offered a literal translation or crib, line by line and stanza by stanza. This was often almost identical to the Udhari literal translations in my source book, a bilingual edition of poetry by Adonis, Darwish and al-Qasim, titled, *Victims of a Map* (Saqi, 2005.) My aim was then to internalise the literal meanings, both in their parts and in the context of the whole, and then write my own poem according to my own sensibility and in my own native language, English, based on the literal crib.

This idea of internalisation, much like a Jungian individuation, is central to my as yet embryonic thoughts on version making. It is a making of one’s own any poem from a different tradition, voice/soul or language, much the way Paterson speaks of his version making of Machado in his *The Eyes*. The connection with analytic individuation is not fortuitous: indeed, if writing poetry is a confrontation with death, giving that oft-felt feeling of annihilation after the act of creation, then writing the poems below in my own voice and language is a way of keeping that confrontation with death just as urgent as it may well have been for the original poet. By first internalising the literal meanings, and then seeing how it flows from your voice, one keeps that element of surprise, searching and discovery alive from line to line.

It seems to me that this salvaging of the metaphysics, if you will, of poetry writing involves interpretation immanently. How I have rendered certain images and meanings, either adding to them or taking something away, is essentially an interpretative activity; and yet it is not wholly destructive or deconstructive, as the organic sense of writing a whole poem anew remains with you, with all the exigencies of making a poem work in a different language, by use of assonances, consonances, rhyme, internal; rhyme, rhythm – which formal properties mimic the formal cohesiveness of the poems in Arabic. (This latter is lost in Udhari’s literal translation.)

In short, if these versions are translations at all, they are extremely free translations, mapping one sensibility onto another, both of whom belong to the same muse. Much like philosophy, which doesn’t progress as material science does, the problems remaining objective through millennia, so once one has an intention for a poem, a cohering and cohering sense and sense of direction, one hopes that there is something objective about the poem which allows it to be spoken in two different languages.

When The Martyrs Go

After Mahmoud Darwishⁱ

When the martyrs bend low to the dark chamber of sleep, I waken
and guard them from the kitsch professions
of the moneyed mourners.

I tell them: rise on a country of wool and willow,
dreams and streams.

I commend them to the keep, saved from the horror
of the unspeakable event,
and from the cup of blood brimming over with slaughter

And I write their lives in verse
to become immortal as them:
aren't we all martyrs, waiting patient in the hearse
of the living?

And I whisper: leave one wall steady
for the laundry lines, give us moonlight
so we may sing in tandem and tow.

I will drape your names with the backwash of your parting desires,
so go in peace, and peacefully lie
on the boughs of the sour-vine tree.

I guard your sharpest desires
from the softening of the gods
and the sharper bones of the prophets' tome.

Be the voice of those who have no voice
when you pass over us tonight, for we are the sump of your sacrifice
and choice...

however choiceless...

I tell you: rise on a motherland that was suckled
then whisked away on a galloping mare.

I whisper: my friends, you'll never be like us...
who live and lose, speaking amidst unspeakable gusts.

A Gentle Rain In A Distant Fall

After Mahmoud Darwish

A gentle rain in a distant fall,
The birds one phase of the sky,
The meaty earth a giant pie
For all of us.

Don't tell me that I'm
The pregnancy of clouds, low and real,
Smothering the airways.

All I want from my chucked away
country,
Toppling as it falls away
From a metal train's
Open window,

All I want is the musk of my mother's linen
And different reasons
For death.

A gentle rain in a distant fall
And the windows are one phase of the sky
And the sun is yellow and orange
Fruit at sunset, and I
Am a stolen orange,
a different yellow –

Why do you flee from my aching body
When all I want from a country
Of daggers and nightingales, busy
In the dark with their sorrow song,

Is the musk of my mother's whitest linen
And different reasons
For death.

A gentle rain in a sad Autumn,
And my word, my bond, is naive, naive,
And the sun is like the earth:
A beige bald head, unthinking.
Don't say: we saw you in the killing of the jasmine.
Ah, seller of aspirin and death,
My face was ebbing with the evening
And my death was a Spring,
A foetal thing.

All I want from my country,
Which has forgotten the inclined accents
Of those now absent,
Is the musk of my mother's linen

And new reasons
For Death.

A gentle rain in a distant Autumn,
The birds one phase of the sky
And the meaty earth is a giant pie
For all of us
And the birds ascended
The very spine of time, so time, without rhyme,
Never returns.

Do you want to know my country, love?
Do you want to know what doves
Fly between us?
My country is desire, imprisoned, my kiss
Sent and lost in the post.

All I want from my country,
Which massacred me,
Is the musk of my mother's whitest linen
And new reasons
For Death.

ⁱ With thanks to Mohamad Sabbagh, who offered a literal crib for my version of the poem.

Rudige Goerner

translated by Simon Thomas

Five songless songs

for Peter Horst Neumann

I Eisenach

Kindred beyond recognition:
Venus was wasting away
on the local mountain
while ink flowed in the heated apartments.
Today a diversion sign blocks off
fraternity from the streets.

II Utopia

To turn into twins,
focal points
of an ellipse; since
longings need
their orbit.

III Walhalla

Morning light
gleams
in the gaunt oak leaves;
Attic pillars
shore up the azure;
on the cliffs of the Danube
hares heroically brave
the barking of dogs.

IV The Homeless One

I, singular
among forgotten words.
Under the Bridge of Sighs
corpses are drifting,
wave-swollen,
though the rooves at my feet
lie upon me.

V Lot of Conscience

Before burnt-out asylums
candles flicker
and cold lips bear witness:
we can only
appear strangers.

Located

I Tribschen

Idyll. Idyll. Idyll.
Cosima's labour pains
until she was reborn
as Ariadne.
Columns of poplars all around,
grown for the purpose

of becoming Attic.
Idyll. Idyll. Idyll.
Silence in E Major.
Twilight in the strings.
Also on display: the silk
work jacket. Soon, soon,
its threads will be pulled
to spin an unheard-of cocoon.
Idyll. Idyll. Idyll.

II In Kierling
for Joachim Reiber

Visions full of black seeds,
night spores
which will sprout;
in this way muses are
asleep in the stone.
Here deer bestow scent.

III Enraptured Hours

In the green of the mountain lake
the drowned echo
of your silence;
on the bank
their cracking oars
and my look hardening
on the rock face.

IV Colwall. Malvern Hills, September
for Nigel and Minou Reeves

On the old salt route the unexpected ripens:
figs, quince, even rose seeds
from Shiraz. In the moon-pale house
black timber breathes. Who might find the stone-

old word at whose behest these ruins
originated? People believe they still
smell mash in the trough. Wilting never blossomed
like here. Over there, an owl's flight

away, granite rises like a mole
from time's sea, buffeted
by wind and forgetting. Someone calls

no one's name, looks for a hand
and sees how the path uphill
defiles the direction.

V Southwold, Suffolk

W.G. Sebald in memoriam

The horizon drifts
inland. Sea means
without origin,
shimmering corrugations,
never and forever.
A nest of seagull eggs
on the canvas. I shall remain
till my shadow is
fully fledged.

4 June 1995

VI Irish Song

Green rain driving to the reef.
Maureen crosses stones
and sings *faith,*
guardian of death,
disown me.

VII Jerusalem

for Oliver Kohler

Place of origins
where one visits, does not
dwell; where nobody
asks after rivers
in this urban moraine of time;

where lamentation believes
and pilgrims become nameless.

Through the labyrinth of streets
odours wander, epochs flicker,
stones call out.
I lifted one up,

basalt, half-angled,
half-smooth, good
for stoning and collecting,

took it back to you
in the room.

You asked: *why?*
As though a fiery look
your word fell

onto the suddenly cold stone.

VIII Faroff and near

Oceanic night—
like a wood made of
columns of rain
motionless and deep
washed over by drowned time
I would recount
what saying has concealed
I would tell of
the wind lifting
after the morning grays
until you rediscover me
in dreams.