**Directions: *Read and annotate the mentor text below…***

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**What the Hell**

**Dante in translation and in Dan Brown’s new novel.**

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***[](http://www.newyorker.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/130527_r23568_g2048-1074-1200-08152404.jpg)Why is a fourteenth-century allegorical poem about sin and redemption still such a draw?***

People can’t seem to let go of the Divine Comedy. You’d think that a fourteenth-century allegorical poem on sin and redemption, written in a medieval Italian vernacular and in accord with the Scholastic theology of that period, would have been turned over, long ago, to the scholars in the back carrels. But no. By my count there have been something like a hundred English-language translations, and not just by scholars but by blue-chip poets: in the past half century, John Ciardi, Allen Mandelbaum, Robert Pinsky, W. S. Merwin. Liszt and Tchaikovsky have composed music about the poem; Chaucer, Balzac, and Borges have written about it. In other words, the Divine Comedy is more than a text that professors feel has to be brushed up periodically for students. It’s one of the reasons there *are* professors and students.

In some periods devoted to order and decorum in literature—notably the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—many sophisticated readers scorned the Divine Comedy as a grotesque, impenetrable thing. But not in our time. T. S. Eliot, the lawgiver of early-twentieth-century poetics, placed Dante on the highest possible rung of European poetry. “Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them,” he wrote. “There is no third.” A lot of literary people then ran out to learn some Italian, a language for which, previously, many had had scant respect, and a great surge of Dante translations began. In some—Laurence Binyon’s (1933-43), Dorothy Sayers’s (1949-62)—the translator even tried to use Dante’s rhyme scheme, terza rima (aba bcb cdc, etc.), a device almost impossible to manage in English, because our language, compared with Italian, has so few rhymes. Since then, we have had many kinds of Divine Comedy—lowbrow, highbrow, muscly, refined. The more fastidious ones, the ones that actually try to give equivalents for Dante’s words, are in prose, because in prose the translator doesn’t have to sacrifice accuracy to such considerations as rhyme and rhythm. As for verse translations, they may be less accurate, but it can be argued that they are more faithful than prose versions. The Divine Comedy, after all, is a poem, and its meanings are contained as much in sound as in “sense.” Verse translations require more courage, and more thinking, because they are generally more interpretive. Within the past year, two more have been published, one by the American poet Mary Jo Bang, the other by the Australian essayist and poet Clive James.

In his translation of the complete Divine Comedy (Liveright), James made the crucial decision to rhyme, in quatrains (in his case, abab). But, as he tells us in the introduction, end rhymes were no more important to him than rhymes or chimes within the lines: alliteration, assonance, repetition. He says that his wife, Prue Shaw, now a celebrated Dante scholar (her book “Reading Dante” will be out next year), pushed him in this direction, by teaching him, years ago, that the Divine Comedy had to be read phonetically. The great thing about it was its richness of sound, as word after word, line after line, beckoned the next and thus kept the reader moving forward. James says this is what he was intent on, above all.

All is a lot. James gave himself permission to add lines to Dante’s text and to incorporate background material. He didn’t want footnotes—nothing should stop the reader. Many things do, though. Here are Dante’s famous opening lines:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

ché 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!

And here is James’s rendering:

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found

Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way

Ahead was blotted out. The keening sound

I still make shows how hard it is to say

How harsh and bitter that place felt to me—

Merely to think of it renews the fear.

“Keening sound”? If ever there was a forced rhyme, this is it. Also, Dante didn’t say anything about wailing, only about fear, and the two are different matters.

Soon the pilgrim (as the protagonist of the poem is usually called) and his guide, Virgil, arrive at the gates of Hell, with its dread inscription:

Per me si va ne la città dolente,

per me si va ne l’etterno dolore,

per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;

fecemi la divina podestate,

la somma sapïenza e ’l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create

se non etterne, e io etterno duro.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate.

James translates this as:

To enter the lost city, go through me.

Through me you go to meet a suffering

unceasing and eternal. You will be

with people who, through me, lost everything.

My maker, moved by justice, lives above.

Through him, the holy power, I was made—

made by the height of wisdom and first love,

whose laws all those in here once disobeyed.

From now on, every day feels like your last

Forever. Let that be your greatest fear.

Your future now is to regret the past.

Forget your hopes. They were what brought you here.

This shows a considerable drop in energy, partly because of a loss of compression. James has lengthened the passage by a third. But, also, he has added some confusion about what the gate is telling us. At least in the first line, it seems to think that we have a choice about whether or not to enter. We don’t, and that is what makes going to Hell a serious business.

From what I can tell, these two problems, awkwardness and inaccuracy, are due to exactly the thing that sounded so nice when James told us about it in the introduction, his intention to capture the phonetic richness of Dante’s lines. Worse are the demands made by the internal echoes. In the Hell-gate inscription, there’s almost no word that isn’t singing a duet, or more. We have “through me” / “through me”; “suffering” / “unceasing” / “everything”; “me” / “me” / “meet” / “be” / “people”; “maker” / “moved” / “made”; “him” / “holy.” And that’s just in the first six lines. The technique asks a great deal: that the translator obey, simultaneously, the summons both of English-language sounds and of Dante’s meaning.

Still, the freedoms James takes allow him to get off some beautiful phrases. When the pilgrim realizes that his guide is Virgil, his idol, he says to him, “Or se’ tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume?” James turns this into “Are you Virgil? Are you the spring, the well, / The fountain and the river in full flow / Of eloquence that sings like a seashell / Remembering the sea and the rainbow?” I love that seashell, and the rainbow. Neither is in Dante. James is a poet, doing a poet’s work. Also, however interested he is in being fancy, he can be plain as well, sometimes poignantly so.

See the last line of the Hell-gate inscription: “Forget your hopes. They are what brought you here.” The second sentence is not in the original poem, but it is wonderful, both sarcastic and sad. James is also a premier practitioner of the high-low style that became so popular in the nineteen-twenties, notably via Eliot and Pound, which is to say, in part, via Dante. He can be colloquial. Of the she-wolf that blocks the pilgrim’s path, Virgil says, “In a bad mood it can kill, / And it’s never in a good mood.” (This could be from “The Sopranos.”) James likes, iconoclastically, to do this sort of thing with the grandees, like Francesca da Rimini, who says to the pilgrim, “What you would have us say / Let’s hear about.” It’s all rich and strange.

Mary Jo Bang, a poet and a professor of English at Washington University, in St. Louis, has much the same purpose: to convey Dante’s internal music. Unlike James, she has made some major sacrifices to this end. In her Inferno (Graywolf), the only canticle she has taken on so far, she does not use end rhyme, and she does not hold herself to any regular metre. (James used iambic pentameter.) But, having cast off those restraints, she adopts another one. James was trying, he said, to be true to Dante. Bang is trying to be true to contemporary life, to the “post-9/11, Internet-ubiquitous present.” As this implies, she aims to be faithful to something else as well: undergraduates. She writes, “I will be most happy if this postmodern, intertextual, slightly slant translation lures readers to a poetic text that might seem otherwise archaic and off-putting”—especially, I presume, to nineteen-year-olds. On the surface, this appears to be a laudable purpose, but whenever you hear those words “true to contemporary life,” run for cover.

The trouble starts on the first page. The pilgrim speaks of his relief upon issuing from the dark wood. He says that he felt like a person who, almost drowned at sea, arrives, panting, on the shore. Bang places him, instead, at the edge of a swimming pool. But these two things—the ocean and the neighborhood pool—are nowhere near the same, and every nineteen-year-old knows what the ocean is…

But, if readers get into the swing of these, what are they going to do when they encounter the Roman Catholic theology that is the spine of the Divine Comedy?

Translators are not the only ones drawn to Dante. Since 2006, Roberto Benigni has been touring a solo show about the Divine Comedy. In 2010, Seymour Chwast rendered the poem as a graphic novel. There are Inferno movies and iPad apps and video games. As of last week, their company has been joined by a Dan Brown thriller, “Inferno” (Doubleday).

Wisely, Brown does not let himself get hog-tied by the sequence of events in Dante’s poem. Instead, he just inserts allusions whenever he feels that he needs them. There are screams; there is excrement. The walls of underground caverns ooze disgusting liquid. Through them run rivers of blood clogged with corpses. Bizarre figures come forward saying things like “I am life” and “I am death.” Sometimes the great poet is invoked directly. The book’s villain is a Dante fanatic and the owner of Dante’s death mask, on which he writes cryptic messages. Scolded by another character for his plans to disturb the universe, he replies, “The path to paradise passes directly through hell. Dante taught us that.”

The hellfire material makes the book colorful and creepy. It also sounds notes of conspiracy. Religion and paranoia have a lot in common: above all, the belief that something big is going on out there and also that everything means something else. Further, both religion and paranoia are short on empirical evidence, so that greater faith is required.

For all its absurdities, Brown’s book is a comfort, because it proves that the Divine Comedy is still alive in our culture. The same is true, on a higher level, of the James and the Bang translations. Thankfully, because the original text survives more faithful translations will keep coming. Indeed, they have. The edition by Jean and Robert Hollander (2000-07) is both accurate and beautiful. As long as Dante is here, and the text is available, why shouldn’t they have some fun?

**Reflection Paragraph: *Based on this reading, what are some observations and predictions you have for Dante’s Inferno? Use the space below…***