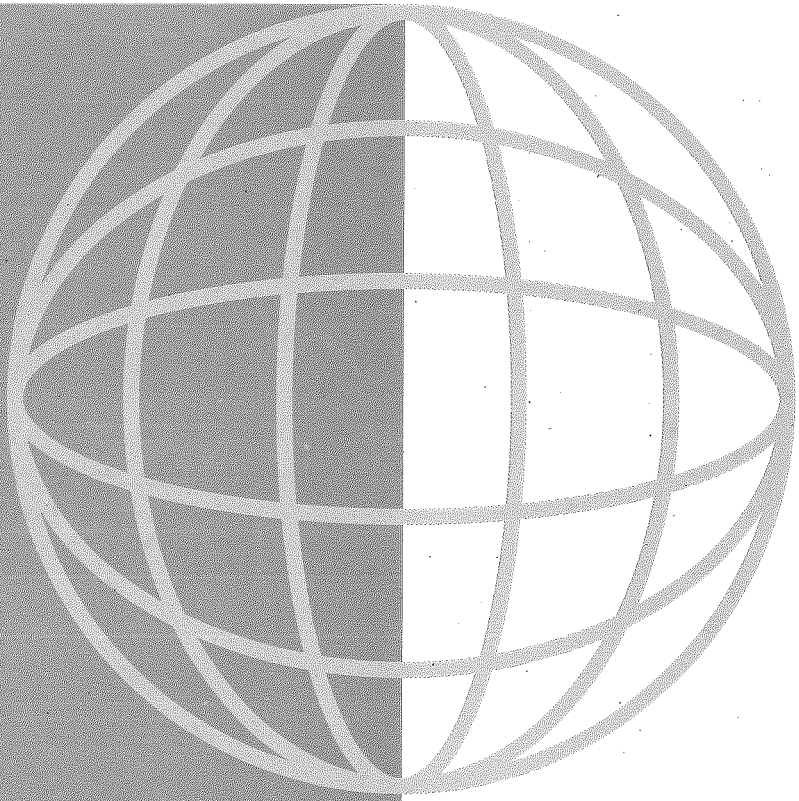
TRADUTTOLOGIA

rivista quadrimestrale di traduzione e interpretariato

diretta da Francesco Marroni



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Which Dante are you reading? A comparative Analysis of Two Translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*

di Renzo D'Agnillo

For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the power of poetry resides in its untranslatableness in «words of the same language», which, otherwise, would only lead to «the diminution of their significance [...]»[1]. It is, admittedly, difficult to disagree with this monist position. As Leech and Short observe « [...] dualism is happier with prose, and monism with poetry»[2], precisely because it is a truism that the message contained in a poem is intrinsic to the language in which it is expressed, whereas with prose this is so to a lesser extent. If translating a poem with other words in «the same language» distorts the poem's significance, what is one to conclude with regard to the translation of poetry into another language? This predicament is certainly not encouraged by the fact that a poetic text is a particular 'segment' of a given language operating in a particular time and acting deviously in terms of the synchronic dimension of that language system, as well as exploiting prosodical and rhetorical conventions, all of which may be pertinent to one language but not necessarily to another.

The three major traditional approaches of poetry translation are a) metaphrase – that is a 'literal' translation, b) imitation – a completely free version or variation of the original text and c) a blend of the two that reflects both fidelity to the original intentions of the text and creativity in its 'new' version, of which Pound (particularly with his translations from Old English) is considered the 20th century master. Of the three approaches, the third supplies the healthy balance between 're-writing' and re-creating' that is necessary if the poetic text is to find a new life in the second language and not appear as a completely autonomous text with no discernible relationship to the original or, in the opposite case, a text that relies so heavily on the

original that it has no space in which to 'exist' as poetry in the translated language. To say that the translation of poetry can, at best, be considered a successful form of failure is not to belittle the translator's task but to grant him/her the merit of creating as approximately as possible the spirit and intentions of the original text. As Burton Raffel comments, «The primary linguistic facts, for good translation of poetry, are the linguistic facts of the language into which one is translating, not those of the language from which one is translating [...]» Indeed, it goes without saying that «the translation comes into being only when the translator re-creates the original work in the new (sometimes referred to as the 'target') language»[3]. Of course, «The impossibility of exact re-creation does not preclude the very real possibility of approximation- and it is precisely on approximation that good translation of poetry must be built»[4]. It is no small matter if the translation of a poetic text acquires a new poetic life of its own in the second language. When, for example, James Green produced his translations of Mandelstam for the English public, he felt obliged to take special liberties:

> Where I sometimes add 'from' to the number in brackets at the bottom of each poem, this is to indicate that, in these versions, lines (and sometimes whole stanzas) have been omitted, in an attempt to produce poems that work in English[5].

Although Green's attempt was, as he himself insists, to make his English audience aware of the power of the original poetry, his blatant re-working of the poems in terms of the second approach exposes the fact that a translation is also a 're-writing' of the original and therefore, inevitably, 'another' work[6].

Although on the one hand it is both a diachronically and synchronically remote text, on the other Dante's Divine Comedy is an intrinsic and ever-present poetic «work of a culture», to use Lotman's phrase, and one that has been continually translated and studied through time. The countless translations of the Divine Comedy which exist, of course, cannot impair the uniqueness of Dante's poem. As Francesco Marroni points out, there are many versions of Dante (the Dante of the Romantics, the Dante of Carlyle, the Dante of T.S. Eliot, the Dante of the post-structuralists etc.) but every interpretation is merely provisional and denies the ultimate truth that constitutes Dante's work[7]. The

Divine Comedy, of course, constitutes objective linguistic and semantic barriers, particularly in an ever secularised European civilisation. Nevertheless, the semantic content of Dante's poem is familiar territory to a European reader with any knowledge of traditional culture, since that culture is grounded on commonplace myths and symbols that pertain to a homogeneous Christian religion. However, my concern here is not so much with the cultural/semantic aspect as with the linguistic one and will therefore limit itself to a consideration of two translations of the incipit of Dante's poem, one a prose translation by John D. Sinclair, and the other a verse translation by Dorothy L. Sayers. As shall be seen, the textual transformations at work in each (verse → prose / verse → verse) yield significant differences with regard to the original poem.

Dante's choice of the terza rima form (also known as a tercet in English) was one he derived from the Serventese school[8], though, of course, his use of it is unique to the poem and has found no real imitator. Its three-line inter-linking verses, with its aba bcb cdc rhyme scheme combined with an iambic hendecasyllabic metre where each five foot line contains an extra syllable, allows for a continuous forward movement that is consonant to the poem's narrative structure and particularly effective in sustaining the length of Dante's poem without the risk of creating monotony. Although the terza rima form, has been adapted by some English poets (the most notable examples of which being Browning's «The Statue and the Bust» and Shelley's «Ode to The West Wind»), it has failed to establish a tradition in English. Paul Fussell has offered the suggestion that «stanzas of even rather than odd-numbered lines are those that appeal most naturally to the Anglo Saxon sensibility[9]», but it may also be explained by the English poet's objective difficulty in finding sufficient rhymes to sustain the poem for any real length in comparison with the Italian poet, as well as the fact that English poetry has a stress based prosody[10]. However, this did not discourage Dorothy Sayers from attempting a verse translation of Dante's work in the terza rima form: «I have stuck to the terza rima, despite the alleged impossibility of finding sufficient rhymes in English.» Indeed, she goes as far as to say that «we are fortunate in having a metrical unit which almost exactly corresponds to that of the 'Commedia'»[11]. Whilst conceding the fact that «the poetry is uncommunicable in any other language than Dante's own»[12] she believes that the English equivalent of the iambic pentameter allows a sufficient variation for the play upon

stress-shift and elision that is characteristic of the Italian form. Sayers' option for a verse translation belies a concern to create a poetic 'equivalence' whose aim is to sensitise the English reader to Dante's poetry as much as its thematic content. Her attempt may be considered a brave, though foolhardy one, « [...] sometimes ingenius but seldom great poetry [...] » and often producing « [...] an unintentional comic effect [...] »[13]. John D. Sinclair voices his own misgivings regarding his prose translation: «The translation of 'The Divine Comedy' into English prose seems, on the face of it, a singularly gratuitious form of failure [...]» [14]. Certainly, a prose translation achieves a lexical and structural 'fidelity' to the original text but at the cost of sacrificing the prosodical features of the actual poetry. Such factors as metre and rhyme, together with all the other rhetorical features of verse, must be inevitably eschewed as impossible/unnecessary in order to maintain its main purpose; to cater for readers who having «little or no knowledge of Italian» will be given the opportunity at least «to know the matter of Dante's poem»[15].

Below follows the incipit of Dante's text with the two translations, For the sake of clarity of reference, Sinclair's translation is in normal type and Sayers' is in italics:

In the middle of the journey of our life[16] (Sinclair)
Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita[17]
Midway this way of life, we're bound upon[18] (Sayers)

I came to myself within a dark wood
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

Where the straight way was lost.
ché la diritta via era smarrita.
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone

Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell
Ahi quant'a dir qual era e cosa dura
Ay me! How hard to speak of it (that rude)

That wood, savage and harsh and dense
esta selva, selvaggia e aspra e forte
that rude/And rough and stubborn forest! (the mere breath)

The thought of which renews my fear!
che nel pensier rinova la paura!
The mere breath/Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood:

So bitter it is that death is hardly more
Tant'è amara che poco è più morte;
It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death:

But to give account of the good which I found there
Ma per trattar del ben ch'i vi trovai,
Yet there I gained such good, that to convey

I will tell of the other things I noted there
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

Dante's incipit functions in medias res. In the beginning is his middle, to parody T.S. Eliot's *East Coker* and it is crucial for a translator to capture this moment effectively as well as the immediacy and «clear limpidity» of his language and «deceptively simple gracefulness» of the movement of his verse[19]. Sinclair's translation of the first line is essentially linear and syntactically faithful to the original text – it repeats its adverbial + subject + complement structure. Since 'Cammino' simultaneously suggests 'walk' and 'path', his translation of it as 'journey', immediately evokes the traditional religious metaphor of 'life'. However, the question of a metaphorical connection between the two concepts is problematic since Dante does not only intend a one-to-one association JOURNEY = LIFE, rather to define the fundamental 'state' of man's existence[20]. Dante's incipit already establishes the inter-penetration between the physical and the spiritual world that characterises his vision in the poem. Thus «mi trovai» has an ambivalence which Sinclair's translation («I came to myself») reduces to a psychological state, though, at the same time, one may concede that Sinclair's phrase implicitly alludes to Dante's moral realisation of his condition, as the English reflexive pronoun does emphasise his 'finding' himself at the same time as realising his surroundings. In the third line, Sinclair translates 'diritta' as 'straight'. This lacks the duple connotations that are present in the Italian word, where 'dritto' means

both 'straight' and 'right'. The fourth verse poses problems of a syntactic nature, for the sentence construction quanto + verb + noun + adjective in a linear translation would produce «How it is to tell a thing hard» (sic) which is, of course, unacceptable in English (even in terms of poetic hyperbaton). Sinclair is obliged to operate a correct grammatical translation here in accord with the grammar rules of English, which in this case produces the syntactic sequence How + adjective + noun + verb. Yet one feels that even «How hard a thing» is too literal an echo of the Italian and somewhat 'un-English'. Considering the prose nature of the translation, alternatives such as «how hard it is to tell» or «what a hard thing it is to tell» would surely have been more acceptable. Furthermore, the verb choice of «tell» seems inappropriate since English requires a pronoun or a noun after this verb (ironically, it is the poetry translation which produces a 'correct' version of this in «speak of it»). Sinclair's translation of 'dir' as 'tell' seems merely an attempt to avoid translating it as 'say', but the demonstrative pronoun in «that wood» is incongruously placed and requires a preposition such as 'of' or 'about' in order to make it comprehensible in English. In the fifth line Dante juxtaposes three adjectives that forcefully convey the incumbent sense of doom that characterises his wood: «selvaggia» (which also contains 'selva' with which it is dramatically reiterated), «aspra» and «forte». These adjectives work in terms of semantic transference since they do not, of course, refer to the wood alone, but to the state of sin in which Dante has fallen and which surrounds him. Sinclair's choices of «savage», «harsh» and «dense» are also not as unproblematic as they initially appear. The fact is that in translating these adjectives special care must be taken to conserve the duple semantic associations that are present in Dante's words; that is, they must all co-refer to the wood as well as the world. In this respect, only «savage» and 'harsh' are semantically co-referable to both, whilst «dense» can be only applicable to «wood». «Dense» is, however, an unusual translation of «forte» and contains none of the human connotations that Dante alludes to. The transformation of «che nel pensier» to «the thought of which» is a means of avoiding the repetition of the possessive pronoun 'my' in English (thus: «which in my mind renews my fear»). Not only, but the adverbial phrase in English is, unnecessarily tautological. The definite article «la» in Italian here needs, of course, to correspond to the possessive adjective «my» in English, though, as shall be seen later, the verse translation

deals with this phrase in another way. The next linguistic item that poses difficulties for translation is Dante's verb «trattare» («deal with»). Evidently, Sinclair senses that the English phrasal verb may be too impersonal; you deal with something objectively, not with your own personal experiences. Sinclair's «to give account of» is an attempt to render the nuances of the Italian, but its spiritual associations refer explicitly to an act of confession (as in 'to account for one's sins') whereas Dante says «Ma per trattare del ben». The Italian is also conveniently ambiguous because Dante is also 'dealing with' universal experiences, not only his own. Another problem is posed in Sinclair's translation of «scorte», which has a whole array of associations in Italian; 'perceive', 'glimpse' 'make out' 'espy' and 'notice' etc and which «I noted» cannot render. But lexical ambiguity in one language rarely elicits the same sort of ambiguity in another and Sinclair's prose translation can only really aim, as he himself says, to make Dante accessible to a wider reading public and to do this he has had to inevitably forfeit the qualities of his verse. But at the same time, his translation performs a series of semantic deviations with regard to lexical choice thereby distancing the reader from the original spirit and intention of Dante's text.

Sayers begins her translation by reducing the adverbial clause «nel mezzo del» to a single word «midway», thereby giving an admirable immediacy to the opening line of Dante's incipit. Nevertheless, her translation of 'cammin' as «way» produces an awkward, inelegant repetition («Midway this way [...] ») creating a tripping rhythm very different to the slow cadences of Dante's metre. If we compare the metrical pattern of Sayers' first line with Dante's we shall note important consequences. The brackets are used for purposes of analogy:

(X) (/ X) (/) (X /) (X) (/ X) (/ X) Dante

(X /) (X) (/) (X) (/) (X) (/) (X /) Sayers

Although Sayers' metre follows Dante's in its iambic beat it has one syllable less, ten syllables to Dante's eleven. Dante's extra syllable creates an unneveness that counteracts the rhythmic cadence of the terza rima and avoids monotony since the extra beat can constitute a stressed or unstressed syllable. Also, if we compare the above lines (see brackets) it will be noticed that there are three monosyllabic

words in Dante's poem to Sayers' five (a natural enough consequence since English is dominated by monosyllabic words, but nevertheless significant). Sayers' choice of «way» for «cammin» also seems reductive since it is a directional noun, whereas «cammin» alludes not only to direction, but also to the physical act of walking ('camminare'). Sayers' choice of 'way' illicits 'only' a religious connotation ('the right way'), but one feels she also had the noun 'path' at her disposal which carries religious significance as well as being suggestive of the physical act of walking. Also, Sayers does not translate the Italian possessive adjective in «nostra vita», instead she adds a phrase that is not in Dante's original, «we're bound upon». This is the first example of a free-element created for the sake of the metre and the rhyme. Sayers' problem in using Dante's metre is that there can be no one-to-one correspondence in terms of the Italian and English metre. We have already noted how her first line is made up of more monosyllabic words than Dante's, so that to reach the total number of ten requires more syllables, and therefore more words, in this case four syllables are needed, which produce «we're bound upon». In the second line Sayers translates «mi ritrovai» as «I woke» which is less psychological than Sinclair's «I came to myself» but still reductive in that, although Dante is referring to a spiritual awakening, he does not himself use the verb 'svegliare' but 'ritrovare' which in English could quite easily be translated as 'I found myself'[21], with the same physical/spiritual connotations as in the Italian. Sinclair himself is aware that «per» does not have the same meaning as 'in', thus he translates it as 'within', which does underline the idea of enclosure and imprisonment. Sayers, considering the prosodical problems she is faced with, would have been unable to do this had she wanted, since «within» consitutes two syllables and this would have made her line an endecasyllable (like Dante's!). In the first two lines of her translation Sayers shows an attempt to make up for the non-transportability of phonological characteristics through alliterative patterning, with the phoneme |w| occurring chiasmatically five times «MidWay this Way [...] We're/I Woke [...] Wood» (capitals mine). This conscious alliterative patterning is also sustained in the next line together with the alliteration of |r| in: «Where the Right Road Was» (capitals mine). The expression «right road» seems a more satisfactory translation of «via» than Sinclair's «straight way» for the very fact that «via» is qualified by the adjective «diritta» which alludes to a 'right' direction

in both a physical and spiritual sense and the adjective «right» carries the same connotations in English. Sinclair's «straight», on the other hand, relies exclusively on a spiritual interpretation (but a road does not necessarily have to be actually 'straight' for it to be in the right direction!). Sayers is forced to produce a redundant phrase in this line in order to respect the needs of the metrical pattern, thus she adds «was wholly lost and gone». The extra words (which are not what Dante writes) «wholly» and «gone» are superfluous elements whose function is obviously that of taking up four syllable slots in a line that would otherwise have to stop short at six syllables («Where the right road was lost»). Dante's exclamation «Ahi» is indicative of a cry of pain. Obviously the equivalent in English («ouch» or 'ow') would be totally unsatisfactory since these are usually uttered in direct response to a sudden infliction of pain and are, indirectly at least, referable to the object that has caused the pain. The Italian «Ahi», made up, as it is, entirely of vowels, carries all the force of a poetic interjection that 'ouch' and 'ow' just do not convey. It is not only phonologically suggestive of a cry of physical pain, but also of a cry of despair, a spiritual anguish. That both Sinclair and Sayers are aware of this is obvious from their translations of this exclamation. But Sinclair's «Ah» either evokes the sadness of a sigh, or a cry of surprise (even of a teasing aside to the reader – 'ah, if you only knew [...]'!) and Sayers' «Ay me!» not only sounds archaic[22] but «ay» also has the meaning of 'yes' for a good percentage of the British population! Sayers' translation of «quant'a dir» as «how hard to speak of it» is an improvement on Sinclair's «tell that wood», if only from a grammatical point of view. But in translating this phrase 'correctly' in terms of English grammar construction and avoidance of the pitfalls produced by the transitive verb 'tell' she is forced to break up Dante's line into two lines creating enjambements that are not present in the original:

Ahi quant'a dir qual era e cosa dura
Ay me! How hard to speak of it -(that rude)
Esta selva, selvaggia e aspra e forte [...]
And rough and stubborn forest! (The mere breath [...])

The fact that the verse lines do not correspond is not necessarily a weakness. Indeed, Sayers' adoption of a hyphen at the end of the first line above is a common poetical convention and poses no problems in

terms of the syntactic sequence itself. What she has done is to transform the subject qualifying «cosa dura» (ie. The wood) and to merge the adjective hard in qualifying the poet's account of it («How hard to speak of it [...]»). Also her adjectives «rude», «rough» and «stubborn» seem to be dictated once more by metrical exigencies as well as a concern to maintain alliterative echoes: (ru:d [...] rʌf [...]). From the point of view of their choice as lexemes the problem once more regards, as has been seen with Sinclair, the fact that these adjectives function in Dante's poem in terms of their co-referability. Here «rude» and «stubborn» only have human connotations and cannot be simultaneously applicable to a wood. Also, Sayers' use of the synonym «forest» suggests an embellishment that belies Dante's own repetition of «selva», a repetition which reinforces the definite sense of the wood as a prison. The sixth line sees another example of Sayers' use of cliché poeticisms in «(breath) of memory» and «the old fear in the blood» which embellish on the original and weaken the force of its message. Also, she translates the definite article of «la paura» into a definite article in English «the old fear in the blood (my underlinings). The effect is ambivalent. On the one hand, this is a rather archaic-melodramatic means in English of referring to the first person, but at the same time it expresses an impersonality that lies behind Dante's own vision in the poem, since the fear is «la paura» which is both personal and impersonal. Whereas Sinclair opts for an inversion in line seven, Sayers respects the syntax then adds «it goes nigh to death», the meaning of which in English is different to what Dante is evoking. «Nigh» is an archaic poetic word for 'near' which is not the idea of approximation Dante intends. He says «poco è più morte» («death is hardly/little more»). Not only, but in translating this line Sayers operates a grammatical transformation from adverbial + subject to subject + adverbial + object. The main subject of her phrase is the 'wood', whereas Dante's is 'morte'. The last two lines are another example of enjambement in Sayers' version where her translation of «trattare» as «to convey» enjambs with «The tale [...].» Convey seems a vague verb in English. One usually conveys a meaning, but convey can also mean to give an impression. This is not what Dante says. Indeed, «Convey» contains none of the implications inherent in «trattare» («to treat, deal or to talk about something»). Sinclair's «to give account» at least contains the idea of confession, whereas Sayers' «convey» contains no such spiritual nuances. Also her translation of «trovai» as «gained» can only be explained in terms of its alliteration

with «good» and her use of the superlative «such» is also an element that is not present in Dante's poem and inappropriately intensifies the tone. For Dante is discrete at this point of his narration. He first informs his reader of the goodness he is eventually witness of, but the effects of this goodness are not felt until much later in his poem. There is no such note of triumph or joy in Dante's text here; indeed, he still has seven circles of hell to go through before even glimpsing the first signs of goodness in purgatory. Sayers' choice of the noun «tale» is also reductive of the magnitude of Dante's narrative. The word 'tale' is usually applied to a relatively short or frivolous fantasy, and while it is true that Dante's poem is a work of fantasy, it is at the same time characterised by a poignant realism and has a very serious intention– it is no fairy story. Finally, as with Sinclair, Sayers' translation of Dante's verb «scorte» needs comment. She translates: «I'll write what else I found therewith.» Her translation of «scorte» as «found» is psychologically more penetrating than Sinclair's detached «I noted», but still fails to capture the array of associations contained in the Italian verb, as noted above, and her choice of «therewith» is another example of an archaic poeticism that is used merely for the sake of the metre, the only other alternatives 'there' or 'in that place' being unacceptable in terms of a syllabic count.

Whilst both translations can be considered examples of the third of the three traditional approaches outlined at the beginning, there is the sense that Sinclair, in deliberately discarding the metrical and phonological aspects of Dante's poetry in the attempt to render a 'linear' version, is, ironically, more 'faithful' (at least on the surface textual level) to Dante's poem than Sayers who, precisely because she is conditioned by such considerations, operates a higher frequency of textual transformations to create what is essentially a different poetical text.

[1]S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, London, Everyman 1965, p. 12.

[2]G. N. Leech and Michael Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, London, Longman, 1981, p. 27.

[3]B. Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry,* Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, p. 11.

[4]*Ibididem*, p. 13.

[5]O. Mandeshtam, *Selected Poems*, Selected and Translated by James Green, Middlesex, Penguin, 1989, p. XIX.

[6]This ambivalence is made all the more poignant in Green's case where Nadezhda Mandelshtam commends his translations as «[...] the best I ever saw [...]» . p. XIII.

[7]F. Marroni, in *Traduttologia*, n.1, gennaio/aprile 1999, p. 8: «[...] ogni interpretazione [...] vive di una provvisorietà che è anche apertura antidogmatica, un non darsi a una verità ultima rispetto alla 'wahrheit di cui ogni capolavoro si alimenta».

[8]F. Sarri, *Dizionario di metrica e stilistica*, Milano, Avallardi, 1996, p. 250: «C'è chi sostiene [...] che la *Divina Commedia* di Dante sarebbe, almeno metricalmente, un grande S. incatenato».

[9]P. Fussell, *Poetic Metre and Poetic Form* (revised. edition), New York, Mcgraw-Hill, 1979, p. 132.

[10]This does not suggest that all poetical forms are necessarily 'nontransportable'. The sonnet is a good example of how literary forms are developed by one language and, through time, adapted by others.

[11]D. Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* – Translated by Dorothy L. Sayers, Hammondsworth, Penguin, 1949, pp. 56-7.

[12]*Ibididem*, p. 65.

[13]D. Livingstone, *Poetry Handbook: For Readers and Writers*, Basingstoke, MacMillan, 1993, pp. 57-8.

[14]D. Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Italian Text with Translation and Comment by John D. Sinclair, London, Oxford University Press, revised edition 1948, p. 9.

[15]*Ibididem*, p. 9.

[16]J. Sinclair, op. cit., p. 9.

[17]D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, introduzione di Italo Borzi, commento e cura di Giovanni Fallani e Silvio Zennaro, Roma, Newton Compton, 1993, pp. 31-2.

[18]D. L. Sayers, op. cit., p. 6.

[19]B. Raffel, op. cit., p. 62.

[20]D. Alighieri, *Divina Commedia*, op cit., p. 31. «Dante non intende istituire nel primo verso una similitudine (la vita umana paragonata a un cammino), ma vuole definire la nostra esistenza nella sua fondamentale condizione [...] la metà del viaggio in cui egli si soprendeva senza direzione e senza luce e senza ideali, tagliava in due la vita di ogni mortale [...]»

[21]The fact that various other verse translations translate 'ritrovare' as 'found myself' is confirmation of the fact.

[22]It also interestingly echoes the Italian lament «ahimé».