PERFORMATIVE TRANSLATIONS, INTIMATE DIALOGUES AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS: CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTS ON TRANSLATING THE CLASSICS

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Performative Translations, Intimate Dialogues and Political Transformations: Contemporary Experiments on Translating the Classics

Jèssica Pujol Duran[1]

ABSTRACT

In this article I bring together three different textual practices that set up intimate dialogues with the works of variously canonical authors (Dante, Petrarch and César Vallejo). William Rowe and Helen Dimos present a new bilingual version of Vallejo's *Trilce* with glosses, Tim Atkins answers *Il Canzionere* with 366 'sonnets' that not only enter into a dialogue with Petrarch but also with previous translations of his work, and Caroline Bergvall performs an experimental engagement with translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. These exercises in translation challenge notions of fidelity and break phantasmagorical hierarchies built by the canon. Instead of fidelity, there is intimacy in their dialogues, since they each open up particular, personal approaches to the oeuvre, its author, its translators, its history, and the audience or reader. I argue that these works understand translation as an intimate performative and political action, and their reading provokes a reconfiguration of both the source text and its previous translations.

KEY WORDS: Experimental translation, classic authors, contemporary British poetry, performance, intimacy

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In recent years there have been a number of poetic translations published in English that experimentally recover classic texts written in languages that are not English.[1] This growth can be read to be answering a need to reach beyond the supremacy of the anglophone literary world;[2] nevertheless, there is an element of intimacy present in many of these publications that discloses a more complex set of worries. The works I will bring into contention are William Rowe' and Helen Dimos's experimental glosses to *Trilce* (2022); the free translation of Petrarch in Tim Atkins's *Petrarch Collected Atkins* (2014), and the archivist exercise in the translation of *The Divine Comedy* by Caroline Bergvall, *Via. 48 Dante Variations* (2000).

What these works have in common is that the translators perform the role of author themselves through an intimate performance of and with the source text. These author-translators mount the stage not only to give voice to the source texts, but also to hold a discussion with their authors and previous translators around content, linguistic effects, historical and present receptions, and future possibilities. I will argue that they engage in an intimate dialogue that destabilises both earlier renderings of the source texts by overriding the notion of fidelity for one of intimacy, and our own reading —as audience, but also as actants in the dialogue— of them.

As noted by Sophie Collins, drawing from Lawrence Venuti's translation hermeneutics, "while fidelity implied the presence of a primary source of power, a notional adjudicator that both determines and polices the translation, intimacy indicates a mutual, consensual, and willing exchange between author and translator," or, as Tim Atkins puts it in a review of contemporary British poetry edited by Amy De'Ath and Sarah Dowling, "[p]oetry is a conversation among equals, be they 2,600 or twenty-six years old" (338; De'Ath and Dowling). There are two concepts that need to be distinguished: one the one hand, fidelity or faithfulness, which, despite being understood broadly, have been a guiding principle for the translator since the ancient times as Cicero already outlined that translation was not a word-for-word enterprise, but a way of preserving "the general style and

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1   Some examples include Peter Hughes *Quite Frankly – After Petrarch's Sonnets* (2013); Sean Bonney's *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* and *Baudelaire in English* (2011); Philip Terry's *Dante's Inferno* (2014); Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* (2011) and *Drift* (2014); Harry Gilonis' *unHealed* in *Rough Breathing* (2018), etc.

2   Translated literature in English-language markets has become more popular in recent years but is still rather low compared to other countries. See "Nielsen Reports Translated Literature in the UK Grew 5.5 Percent in 2018." *Publishing Perspectives*, 6 March 2019, publishingperspectives.com/2019/03/nielsen-reports-translated-literature-in-uk-grows-5-percent-in-2018-booker/. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

force of language" despite the losses (Cicero 46 BCE). And, on the other hand, intimacy as a way of approaching translation. As revolutionary as Cicero's thinking was, it is interesting to step back and think translation as a way of establishing an intimate dialogue with the source text, one that does not only entail fidelity, or that does not place fidelity at its core because the focus of the translator has moved: from a subjugating relationship to the primary text or 'source of power,' to a relationship that focuses on the exchange that is taking place between author and translator, culture of origin and culture of reception; a relationship that involves closeness and intimacy and that can be expressed or materialised as variously as we can imagine. The writers I address here all translate canonical authors with this focus at heart: Rowe and Dimos perform a dialogue with Peruvian poet César Vallejo while Atkins and Bergvall approach the Italian Renaissance poets Francesco Petrarch and Dante Alighieri respectively. They all *do* something to their texts, in the sense that they do not offer a literal translation but *perform* an intimate dialogue with the author and their previous translators that, at the same time, *does* something to us, the readers or contemporary audience of the performance. In the reading of these works and in their listening, two movements can be identified: one centripetal, as the text guides the reading inwards, towards the source work, its context, language and preceding translations; and a centrifugal one that happens simultaneously, with an awareness that it will take place in front of a determinate reader/listener who will experience a reconfiguration of the source text through their participation in the performance. Sandra Bermann stresses the performative nature of these sorts of translations and their "potential for literary *action*, presenting a text from elsewhere to a new audience, while creating a new language that will, in some sense, belong to (and disrupt) them both" (290). It is in this disruption that I argue that Berman's sense of literary *action* is found, as she reminds us that "[t]ranslation is not merely the interpretation that a translator performs on a literary or social script. Rather, translation itself —and particularly its encounter with otherness— becomes a model for ethical and political action" (293). Thus, thinking of the following performances as encounters with otherness can also help us to approach a model of translation for ethical and political action.

WILLIAM ROWE AND HELEN DIMOS'S GLOSSES ON *TRILCE*

There are multiple English translations of *Trilce*, but none is presented in the format followed by Rowe and Dimos: a bilingual edition with extensive 'glosses.' Gloss, from the Greek *glossa*, refers to the organ of the 'tongue' and to 'language' itself, and it can also refer to an obsolete or foreign word. Historically, glosses were written on the margins of a book and used to explain to a foreign audience the meaning of a word or passage in its original language, in an effort to bring that foreign vocabulary closer to the audience of reception. Nevertheless, in this instance, the glosses take a poetic turn, adopt a life of their own, as it were, because not only their reading, but also their position on the page —aligned-left, alone on the page, leaving a space in blank on the right, facing the original poem and a more literal translation on the left-hand page (see fig. 1)— imply that we are not reading marginalia but a work in and of itself, a text that is central to the book.
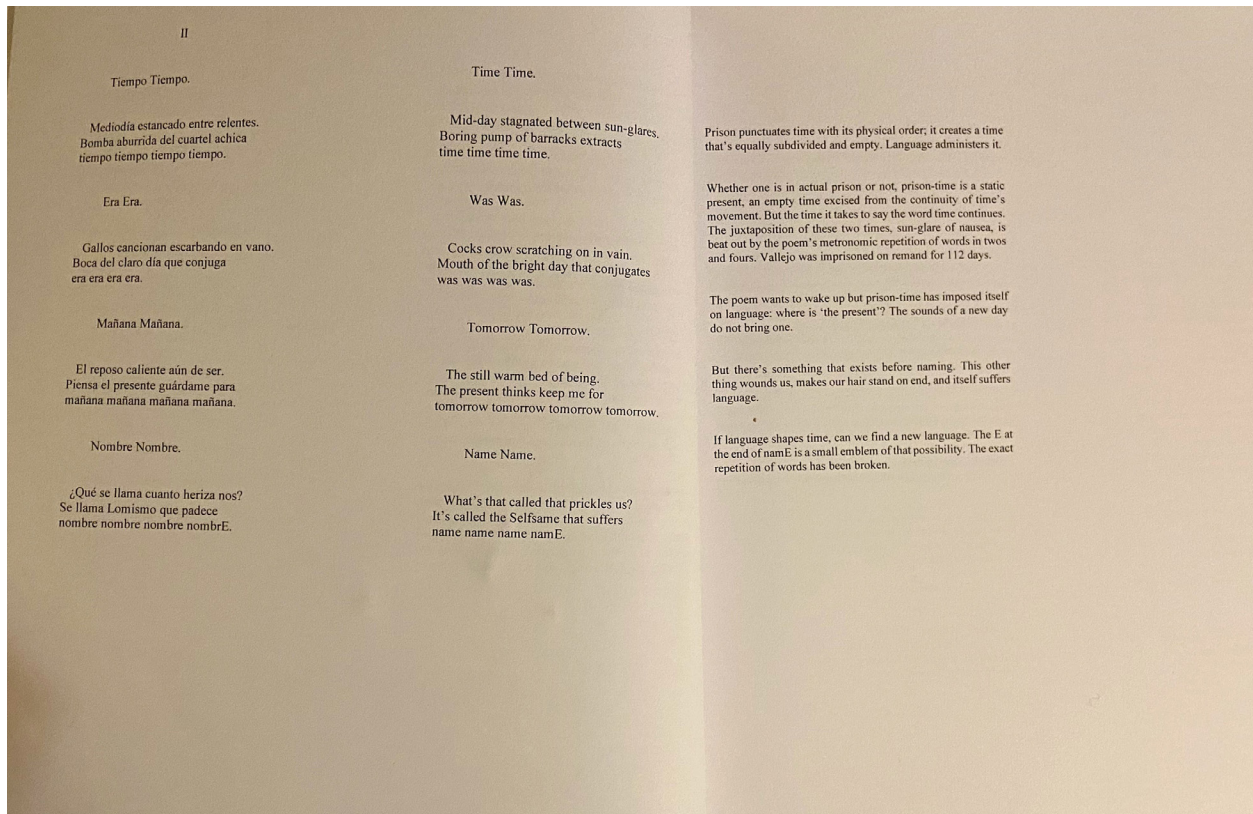
Fig. 1. Poem II with translation and gloss from César Vallejo's *Trilce (Translated with glosses by William Rowe and Helen Dimos)*. Crater/Veer, 2022, pp. 12-13.

This turn creates a quite different reading experience from other versions of *Trilce*.[3] In this case, we read the more-or-less 'literal' translation across from the original version, entering into a dialogue with the translators by spotting differences or similarities with other translations; poetic ambiguities; neologisms made from neologisms, and, in addition, we read Rowe' and Dimos's own dialogue with Vallejo:

> In our experience, when one sits with a *Trilce* poem long enough, asking it questions, it's extraordinary to find how the poem contains what one needs for apprehending its thinking.
>
> … Our translations seek to preserve and convey how the poems reveal themselves alongside how they do not (Vallejo, Afterword to *Trilce*).

We not only witness their questioning but become active questioners ourselves. It is a dynamic reading: we read glimpses of their translation process in their glosses that make us move back to the source poem and its translation as many times as necessary. The reading becomes a visual and kinetic experience, as well as a verbal one, because of this constant movement through the page, while the glosses also address readers by providing: information about Vallejo's life at the moment of writing the poems; insight into the linguistic and syntactic complexity of some of his verses; comment on possible interpretations; clues to access some obscure words, remote places, particular Peruvian customs, etc. and the source poem and their own translation. Thus, the reader enters a multivalent performance in an exercise open to infinite possibilities and dialogues, which becomes, at the same time, a performance of what it is like to read Vallejo.

Rowe is a scholar of Vallejo and has studied the representation of time in *Trilce* in much of his academic work. In the article, "El tiempo de Trilce," he points out that a reading of *Trilce* "nos exige pasar por la crítica al tiempo" (22). I think poem II and its gloss illustrate this well:

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3   Other, more literal versions, include *César Vallejo - Trilce*, edited, and translated from Spanish by Michael Smith & Valentino Gianuzzi (2022); *Trilce*, translated by Clayton Eshelman (1992), and *Trilce*, translated by Rebecca Seiferle (1993).

II

Time Time.

   Mid-day stagnated between sun-glares.

Boring pump of barracks extracts

time time time time.

      Was Was.

   Cocks crow scratching on in vain.

Mouth of the bright day that conjugates

was was was was.

      Tomorrow Tomorrow.

   The still warm bed of being.

The present thinks keep me for

tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow.

      Name Name.

   What's that called that prickles us?

It's called the Selfsame that suffers

name name name namE.

The gloss follows:

Prison punctuates time with its physical order; it creates a time that's equally subdivided and empty. Language administers it.

   Whether one is in actual prison or not, prison-time is a static present, an empty time excised from the continuity of time's movement. But the time it takes to say the word time continues. The juxtaposition of these two times, sun-glare of nausea, is beat out by the poem's metronomic repetition of words in twos and fours. Vallejo was imprisoned on remand for 112 days.

   The poem wants to wake up but prison-time has imposed itself on language: where is 'the present'? The sounds of a new day do not bring one.

But there's something that exists before naming. This other thing wounds us, makes our hair stand on end, and itself suffers language.

If language shapes time, can we find a new language. The 'E' at the end of namE is a small emblem of that possibility. The exact repetition of words has been broken. (Vallejo, 12-13)

Rowe and Dimos read, in Vallejo's poem II, and in *Trilce* in general, a struggle between the time of order, which has become the time of the word, and the time of 'the present' that does not arrive. The time of order, imposed by capitalist production, creates an illusion of stability in the quasi-oneiric repetition of daily labor that empties our capacity to experience 'the present.' This repetition resonates in the word 'time,' emptying itself further of meaning with each repetition: time time time time. On the other hand, the time of the word has also become a 'prison-time' because the system is in the same language that 'administers it'; thus, we are captured in a linguistic net that impoverishes our senses, and Rowe' and Dimos' resolution —'If language shapes time, can we find a new language'— is written as a question but it lacks a question mark, a question and a statement at the same time. One cannot help to wonder, then, is the time it takes to read *Trilce*, or even to translate it —by creating an intimate relationship with its words and significances— the time of this new language?

Much of *Trilce* was written while Vallejo was in prison, his time and space violated, and his existence reduced to a barracks room. Against this time, Rowe and Dimos read the possibility of another time, not future or past (not the 'Was' or the 'Tomorrow' conjured by the poet), but the time of 'Name,' the time that the word 'Name' takes, which is the same that wounds us, 'prickles us,' and which language also suffers. The final 'E,' in upper case, represents a small sign of change, when/where the poem breaks with the exact repetition of words; this is, when/where that sense of a suffocating temporality is disrupted through the introduction of a typographical variation. Vallejo's 'namE' is also an intimate word, individual, that changes from person to person, and takes a certain amount of time to say. This 'namE' provokes in the reader, in Rowe's words, "una perturbación, un estremecimiento. Porque este tiempo ocupado por la palabra, este pedazo de duración, salta fuera del tiempo sucesivo" (Rowe 27). A window opens into a possible outside.

Vallejo's poems reveal a struggle against a certain conception of time/language, and that window that opens can take us to the possibility of transgression in a present, real time, that "[c]omo relámpago, como corriente eléctrica, … pasa por el poema" (Rowe 27). According to Rowe, "este tiempo no engaña porque precisamente es lo que estaba fuera (de la ecuación)" (27). The glosses also give us a conscience of an outside, of a dialogical intimacy that offers an invitation for the reader to take part. Rowe' and Dimos's glosses are a part of the act of translation that is normally occluded, but in this instance, in the gesture of giving over some portion of the performance space of the physical book itself, the gloss becomes a part of the shared experience of translation and a revelatory symbol of translation's performative function.

TIM ATKINS'S *PETRARCH COLLECTED ATKINS*

Petrarch Collected Atkins brings together some 400 poems, though the numbering finishes at 366, recalling the collected 366 "Rerum vulgarium fragmenta" (Fragments in the vulgar tongue), known as *Il Canzionere* (Song-book), completed by Petrarch a year before his death in 1373. Atkins's poems are not literal translations (and challenge the idea that there could be such a thing); instead, he uses a range of broadly OuLiPian translation techniques to approach the source poems and their earlier translations. He employs a language and register that contrast with Petrarch's and situates his versions firmly within the ungainly frame of the quotidian: passports, PMS, a dancing Jesus, medicines, euro-disco, ginger ale, a SMEG fridge, a copy of *Hello Magazine* and wasabi chicken wings are just a few of the 'everyday' things in his poems. However, Petrarch uses the vernacular, rather than Latin, and Atkins's *vernacular* objects and English feel like a version –a rather contrasted one– of that revolution. *Il Canzionere* was also known as *Rime Sparse* (Scattered Rhymes), "in rime sparse il suono / di quei sospiri ond'io nudriva'l core" (*Canzionere* 1) —a description that could readily be applied to Atkins's poetry, not because his poems contain 'scattered rhyme,' but because they are simply scattered. And maybe, in their own apparently cheerful but profoundly sombre way, they are also lyrically and emotionally 'sparse.' In this sense, and differences aside, Atkins has his way of taking Petrarch's poems and performing his own linguistic revolution in which he voices Petrarch but also his distance from that lyric tradition.

In his vernacular sonnets Petrarch brought together the sonnet-structure developed by the Sicilian School, medieval courtly love poetry and the intellectuality of the *stilnovisti* —an epochal innovation. Among his derivations from the *stilnovisti*, Petrarch's embrace of introspection, metaphorical language, symbolism and religious meditation are characteristics that Atkins both abhors and embraces. We find that his poems do not dwell on self-observation, but insist on subjectifying the other and forcing it into articulation:

> Here in South London
>
> The I-Speak-Your-Weight machine talks like
>
> This-is-the-world's-biggest-crime
>
> & if it all comes back to the body
>
> As a space with total sonority laurels & robes (49)

This is the voice of the body rather than the metaphor, which it is "absolutely essential to abandon … / In order to save time" (169). It is, then, a writing experience that places the body and material at its centre, inviting the reader to undertake a similar process with their body and senses, as if Atkins was responding to Petrarch's abstraction with the concrete world of things.

Atkins also holds conversations with Petrarch's translators —among them Robert M. Durling, J. G. Nichols, Mark Musa and Nicholas Kilmer—, as in poem 357, in which he alternates italicised lines from the Japanese Zen teacher, Eihei Dōgen (largely from his book of lectures, sermons and poetry, *Eihei Koroku*) with lines from translations of Petrarch by Musa, Durling and himself, provoking a confrontation between Eastern and Western understandings of life-time and religious experience:

> Every day seems like 1000 years to me
>
> *The years of a lifetime are a flash of lightning; who clings to objects? They are empty through and*
>
> *through.* (357)

Other conjunctions explore the different subjectivities of these traditions:

> May now reach the end of me
>
> *Without turning away from the multitudes of people, body and mind drop off* (357)

Atkins's poems are revealed as more than just modernised versions of Petrarch. Instead, they establish a relationship with Petrarch and his translators that makes us rethink the lyric tradition as well as our modern approach to it. Atkins's relation to the sonnet is casual —"We come with fourteen lines & a haircut   we / Leave with too much information" (23)— though the work implies a more serious reflection on the meaning of poetic form throughout; it becomes a nutshell that concentrates space in simultaneity: a time and space that unfolds in our bodily reading. In another poem, Atkins writes: "Speaking the entire truth / Is being / Simultaneously masked and unmasked" (165). Poetry might speak the entire truth, but it requires signs to communicate, and signs are concrete yet ambiguous, especially when they are concentrated in such a small space. At the same time, translation is also an encounter with otherness, with a different culture/identity, and it traditionally relies on the ethical value of fidelity to express its own culture and self, but how can we maintain this fidelity in such an ambiguous context? Perhaps, as Collins remarks, it is more adequate to talk of intimacy than fidelity in order to indicate that translation is more of "a mutual, consensual, and willing exchange between author and translator," which indicates a shift in the traditional model of translation: from having to reproduce a never-conclusive but always 'faithful' translation of the source text, to a model in which the author/translator can engage in an intimate conversation with the source text and its preceding translators, be they dead or alive, present or absent (338). In this case, as in Rowe' and Dimos's glosses, the book is the result of that intimate dialogue, offered to the reader to make them part of the creative-thought process, instead of presenting just another rendering of the classic.

Despite the obvious differences between Petrach and Atkins, they both place the themes of love and death at the centre of their poetics. Love for Petrarch is unobtainable, subjective, desired yet painful, bodily, allegorical and spiritual, while for Atkins it is not something that can be possessed, but affects all, runs through all and is painful because it always embodies a profound absence:

In this world I do not love

What I imagined to be real

Placing my faith on the breath of a woman

…

All the love that I had

Amounts to the same volume of water

In a late summer cloud—which looked so enormous

Better for all who live under it (34)

Laura is the very reason for the existence of Petrarch's *Scattered Rhymes*. In April 1327 Petrarch meets Laura for the first time and falls in love with her. The encounter happens in church and Petrarch, wanting to link his love to a religious experience, dates it to Good Friday, the liturgical day of the Passion and death of Christ. In the third sonnet the poet relates his subjective experience of falling in love to a symbolic and religious event that is doomed from the beginning since Cupid only strikes the poet (he catches him naked) but does not get Laura who is 'armed' (Petrarch 20). If we move to Atkins's sonnet 3, while we still have fourteen lines, this doesn't seem to be a sonnet and the subject matter seems alien to the original. If this is supposed to be Petrarch's poem 3 we would say that it has been transformed nearly beyond recognition, but that 'nearly,' according to Robert Sheppard, is important because "[t]he poem is still a 'love' poem; at least it can be read as one if it opens on that word: 'Love of the welfare state / Did not prepare me for its or my own extinction'" (Sheppard). Thus, the dialogue emerges. Sheppard links the church at Easter in the Petrarch poem to the welfare state in Atkins's, but he soon wonders whether he is trying to explicate the poem by "unravelling its analogies, or making them because I know that this is poem 3" (Sheppard). And that points to the reader: are we reading an individual poem, a translation, or that intimate dialogue that Atkins is holding with Petrarch? If poetic language is ambiguous, so is the performance that is taking place. Indeed, when we read Atkins's sonnet, we are not reading a modernised Petrarch; we are not looking for the differences between the old and the new versions, but Atkins's poems create questions regarding our expectations as readers and receivers of the established tradition, questions

that we cannot ignore. Sheppard wonders: "am I reading the poem, reading the tradition, or reading the *distance* between Atkins's poem and Petrarch" (Sheppard). Sheppard ascertains that the following passage uses two images from Petrarch: the arrow and the passage 'through the eyes':

> A cowboy's life does not extend much
>
> Beyond rimming & riding
>
> Like an arrow does   through the eyes
>
> To the millions of past lives
>
> It must have taken   to commute
>
> Body fat into amorousness (5)

Although, as he emphasises, "the peripatetic cowboy suggests the 'arrows' here belong to the Red Indians of the Western film genre" (Sheppard). Towards the end of the poem, Atkins writes the word 'amorousness' and brings us back to 'Love,' the opening word, but this time "emphatically embodied in bodily process" (Sheppard):

> One day on a rock at Lerici
>
> I saw a woman   etc   her passport & her chair
>
> 3 fingers' width away   from the stars
>
> Light   their fierce scrutiny & Italian cars (5)

Atkins's sonnet ends in the abrupt change of tone of the volta, as Lerici takes us to Italy and the site of the death of the Romantic poet P. B. Shelley, who had been working on *The Triumph of Life* at his death, a poem partly based on Petrarch's allegorical poem *Trionfi*. Despite love's centrality, or its opening out through allegory into further, grander questions in Petrarch's project and in Shelley's, in Atkins's poem the climax is abruptly curtailed with an 'etc,' as if the transformative power of the allegory or the crescendo of sublimity is too expected and too conventional to be worth reproduction. The poem ends with a couplet like a Shakespearean sonnet, although, again, the celestial stars are ironically equated with Italian cars.

We find another example of this in poem 63: "Ready to set sail with every wind" can be traced to sonnet 63 of *Il Canzionere*, in which Petrarch voices his readiness to take action in

response to any small gesture generated by his beloved Laura's pity. Atkins's poem, however, starts: "*On The Road* begins in Worcestershire   if you start up with nothing / Then everything's ready to go," for the poet is not gifted with the 'frail life' that saved Petrarch, that little love engine that kept the Italian poet alive (63; *The Complete Canzionere* 111); instead what saves the subject of Atkins's poem are books, as he insists that he was born to culminate in this book, and that no wind will take him from his seat, where he is

> still
>
> Tied to this art
>
> With everything
>
> Breathing   (63)

There is no outside with a Laura giving false hope to the poet and a private inside in which to write poetry; there is merely reversibility, words that are things which, in turn, are also the poet: "A poem is a machine made of words / The poet is indistinguishable from the poem / Whirring in the top left corner" (34). We needn't really read Petrarch for the differences between Petrarch and Atkins, or, indeed, their similarities —such concerns seem inessential for the British poet, in fact. At the same time, the performance here between the Italian 'original' and the English 'version' forms a dialogue at the point of our reception. Thus, we read Sheppard's 'distance' aware that that measure is hallucinatory; that most of the time Atkins seems to be having a conversation with a neighbour, with a Zen master, or with "fucking-Jeffrey-fucking-Hilson," rather than with Petrarch (Atkins 11).

The reader may suspect that the dethroning of Petrarch is perhaps his only function in the text, for, like a flickering thaumatrope, he is and he is not in all of the poems:

> Morning and reverend
>
> President of the James Brown hair club
>
> A gangster called Freddie Nostrils
>
> From the Ars Poetica
>
> & no Petrarch in these sonnets
>
> = A dazzling array of tartans
>
> All the matter that exists in the universe (21)

Atkins has written that his "original poems (as they said about Pound) are often translations —and my translations are often original poems" (De'Ath and Dowling). The same OuLiPian potentiality is at stake when he mistranslates Petrarch, or perhaps Dante:

> When I awoke I discovered that it wasn't all a dream
>
> *Succhi me cazzo* (sic) Dante
>
> The face that I am sitting on is my own
>
> But you can't
>
> Translate that (5)

All his creations derive from transfiguration, a transposition from one place into another, from one language into another, from one nation into another, from one form into another. And, generated by all these transpositions, the collage technique is a cornerstone of Atkins's poetics. In *Atkins Collected Petrarch* we find comic strips, dramaturgy, sonnets and drawings in addition to those other personalities and voices. Why, then, does Atkins choose Petrarch and not Dante, Shakespeare or Sappho to hold that intimate dialogue? Indeed, every universe has a Big Bang, and Petrarch is Atkins's, one which leads him to pen lines that aim to include the entire universe; his poems becoming epistemological apparatuses with love and death in their core, that function not to celebrate life, or not only to celebrate life, but to scrutinise its multiple manifestations and absences: "in the emptiness of things / I was able to find only emptiness" (Atkins 9). All the same, there is also a non-translatable idiosyncrasy that keeps coming up when reading his poems, something that is distinctively British and contemporary. The Petrarch-thaumatrope that we find in this twenty-first-century reinvention embraces just this form that is, and is not, in sight. Atkins, therefore, transforms the Italian poems so completely that there is little left of the originals, but they leave just enough for identification, and from this identification arises that intimate dialogue between ancient and modern that depicts not a vertical relationship but a horizontal poetic recovery and re-contextualisation.

CAROLINE BERGVALL'S VIA

Caroline Bergvall's piece *Via. 48 Dante Variations* was published in 2004 in her book *Fig*, but was written and performed earlier, in the summer of 2000, 700 years after the beginning

of Dante's journey in the *Divine Comedy*, before the dawn of Good Friday in 1300 (Bergvall 64). It consists of forty-seven English translations of the opening canto of Dante's Inferno —"Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smarrita" (9)— that Bergvall recites in alphabetical order, including the name of the translator and year of publication. I began this article talking about the supremacy of the anglophone literary world in the publishing industry, but *La Commedia*'s classic status –as well as *Il Canzionere*– makes it an exception to this hegemony: there are over two hundred published translations of Dante's Inferno in English.[4] While most 'foreign' books do not make it to English audiences, others accumulate versions, readings, interpretations that build up the canonicity of the work. This is one of the accomplishments of this piece, that by revealing forty-seven of those translations, read in a list, Bergvall lays bare the scaffolding of that cultural and political apparatus.

Bergvall explains that the piece was first performed with the Irish composer Ciarán Maher, who, using his software, "unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice's fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation" (64). Much has been said about *VIA* and its performativity, but this 48th variation has gone largely unmentioned. This addition is not Bergvall's attempt at translating Dante: she is not adding a version in the same sense as her male counterparts. Rather, one of the few woman writers involved in *VIA* —the actor/performer of all the male voices— uses her own voice not as a pillar to build up the cannon, but as a grain, a murmur that destabilises its monolithic status.[5] Tradition is dominated by men, thus, by deciding to add her voice fractalized, hardly noticeable in the background, Bergvall is also telling us, the audience, that the female voice has always been there, emerging, as a secret, something left untold, intimate, of which we can only hear its murmur made up from the left-over fragments of the male voice, reminding us of the sound of the dark woods Dante is about to enter.

Bergvall's piece "presents translation as an ongoing act, a performing that engages reader or audience as much as translators themselves" (Bermann 286). Bergvall's monotone reading voice

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4 Among the two hundred translations she chose to focus on the ones archived by the British Library up until May 2000 (Bergvall 64), giving her forty-seven examples.
5 The only woman translator that I could identify is Dorothy Sayers.

preserves that feeling of repetition and accumulation, and also emphasises the slight variants or differences between translations. With this she also gestures towards the intimate colloquy between Dante and his translators, challenging the idea of his epic as a single and original work. Bermann writes: "In the wake of these insistent variations, the sense of a single meaning in Dante's 'original,' as well as its hierarchical priority, quickly recedes" (286). These variants stand out from the sameness of the performance, giving us the sense of being "lost in translation," but also invite us "to interpret the theatrical situation, and perhaps our own, more closely" (Bermann 287).

Thinking of Derrida's reflections on iteration, Bermann concludes that "translation's ostentatious iterability," which Bergvall's piece pushes to the fore, "reveals a quite uncanny potential for literary *action*, presenting a text from elsewhere to a new audience, while creating a new language that will, in some sense, belong to (and disrupt) them both" (290). This disruption is attained through multiple processes: "la diritta via era smarrita" (Dante 9) —the straight way has been blurred. The female gesture and her role in tradition, the dethroning of an original/authorial voice, the mechanisms that operate in the building of the canon, are a few things that Bergvall lays bare in this performance, leading to a transformation of translation and the canon.

These texts are more alive than ever. Rowe' and Dimos's glosses are already being translated into Spanish —as I write this article they are yet to be collected in an English publication; Atkins's sonnets have been translated into various languages, I have translated some into Catalan; and Bergvall's experiment has also been variously experimentally translated.[6] Each of the works examined in this article stages an intimate dialogue between the source author and other translators or translations and us, the audience. The acts of translation that Rowe, Dimos, Atkins and Bergvall undertake dramatize in their own ways their encounters with the other and with their own translator's minds (Bermann 289-290). They all take different routes: while Rowe and Dimos maintain an intimate dialogue with Vallejo's work, taking in his biography, academic readings and other translations in their own 'poetic' glosses; Atkins turns to OuLiPian constraints to translate

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6   An interesting translation is that of Polish poet and scholar Katarzyna Szymanska. John Cayley explains that to make her translation, Szymanzka took "the next conceptual step" by gathering the twenty existing versions of Dante's opening lines in Polish and then adding her own translation at the end, "constraining her version to begin with the last letter of the Polish alphabet so as to set this verse at the conclusion of her translation as a kind of signature." (49)

Petrarch and translations of Petrarch's *Canzionere* just to get rid of those constraints whenever he pleases, creating poems that free themselves from any control; and Bergvall 'limits' herself in order to showcase the multiplicity of translation strategies connected to a classic like Dante, revealing the power structures of the canon. Their processes are different, but they all exercise strong formal control over their texts, only to liberate them from tradition, giving the reader the sense of a serendipitous encounter that reduces monolithic understandings of text and authorship. These texts are exercises in thinking that prompt significant dialogues with the authors of their source texts, their translations and their tradition, our reception of them and our own contexts, the conjunction of these elements revealing nets of meaning that are not static. In fact, these performances if anything stress the dynamic understanding of a text that translator Carol Maier was considering when acknowledging the "performance element of translation," which, according to her, involves "repetition and representation as well as continuity," inasmuch as the translator produces a new representation of a text that has been already translated, creating a dialogue in continuity (5).

These texts invite us to read creatively and respond critically. Creativity and critical thinking become entangled in these exercises, inspiring new revisions, and thus more general change. In these cases the performance of an intimate dialogue with a classic becomes a transformative experience. The translations include play, re-contextualisation, rethinking and other displacements of the centre, as Borges, quoted by Sergio Waisman, points out: "To innovate from the margins — to reread, to rewrite, to mistranslate— is to challenge centre-periphery dichotomies by remapping accepted cultural and political relationships" (Waisman 154). These texts emphasise writing as an act of translation and translating as an act of writing, destabilising the concept of a 'definitive text,' challenging the primacy of tradition and the canon, and also that of fidelity, which here is replaced by performative intimacy, bringing those authorial voices closer to, and intermingling them with, those of their audiences.

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