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“I was back in a dark wood”: Don Paterson’s “The Forest of the Suicides”

The only pure suicide is self-strangulation; everything else requires the world as an accomplice. (Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* 76)

In hell even the trees are not blameless. *Particularly* the trees.
(Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* 133)

Don Paterson’s “The Forest of the Suicides” was published in 2003 in *Landing Light*, a collection of 38 poems that, besides this version of Dante’s *Inferno* xiii, includes 5 more re-writings after classics by Cavafy and Rilke. The poem has been hailed as an example of creative translation, “a process which opens up classic texts and reveals new meanings for contemporary readers” (Stafford 234) and, as such, includes several variations. The most startling of these is the substitution of the 13th century Pier della Vigna with the 20th century poet Sylvia Plath: starting from this consideration, this article illustrates how “The Forest of the Suicides” functions simultaneously as an interpretation of Dante’s canto and as a means to retell Plath’s suicide through the lens provided by Dante. I will argue that re-writing Dante’s text while imitating Plath’s style allows Paterson to comment on an event—Plath’s suicide—that is usually regarded as gossip and sensationalism. My claim is that creative translation sheds light on the specificities of the source and creates new meanings in the context of the target language.

In what follows, I will therefore summarize Paterson’s reflections on translation and re-writing, and point out how this poetics is reflected in “the Forest of the Suicides.” The poem reproduces the plot line and subject matter of Dante’s text, translating its

images and rhetorical devices; these deviations, on the one level, alter the meaning of the source, while on another they are instrumental in reproducing the interdependence of sound and content, as well as the intertextuality at the core of Dante's text and the ambivalent attitude of author and pilgrim. The adoption of Plath's poetic voice allows Paterson to challenge traditional notions of authorships within and beyond the source text.

Paterson's Conception of the "Poetic Version"

In the essay "The Lyric Principle," Paterson reflects on a recurrent feeling shared by poets, the suspicion that "our best lines [have] already been written by someone else" (8). Elaborating on a statement by Renato Poggioli, who comments on how poets choose to translate mainly because of "elective affinities" with other artists, Paterson adds that poets do so because the process opens "a path to a new way of writing a poem." He continues by stating that "somehow, by assuming this voice in the target language, you'll lose or modify the voice you've mistakenly come to think as your own" (Interview with Marco Fazzini 8). These thoughts are important for contextualizing a poem like "The Forest of the Suicides" in which Paterson adopts not one, but two poetic voices— since he is simultaneously translating Dante and imitating Plath's style. In a public reading of the poem at an event organized by the *Edinburgh University Literature Society* (2012), Paterson in fact emphasized his poetic affinity with Plath and expressed his admiration for her art, going as far as calling her a "genius," a "far superior poet" to her husband Ted Hughes.¹

¹ Paterson gave the lecture on May 3rd, 2012. *Youtube*. <http://www.firstpost.com/topic/person/don-paterson-don-paterson-the-forest-of-suicides-video-nGKXn8OyuRU-20808-1.html>. [Accessed on October

However, Paterson's does not see himself as a "translator" and declares himself to be skeptical about the possibility of translating poetry. In an interview with Atilla Dosa, he points out that "[t]he surface is the one that is impossible to translate, because those things of which you're most proud as poets depend wholly on idiomatic circumstances, tiny acoustic resonances, tiny shades of meaning and associations, that can have no direct equivalent in the host language" (1).² He refers to "The Forest of the Suicides," just as he does to his re-writing of other classics, as a "poetic version," and distinguishes this version from translation by arguing that the latter "tries to remain true to the original words and their relations [...]. It glosses the original, but does not try to replace it. Versions, however, are trying to be poems in their own right; while they have the original to serve as detailed ground-plan and elevation, they are trying to build themselves a robust home in a new country, in its vernacular architecture, with local words for its brick and local music for its mortar" ("Fourteen Notes on the Version" 84).³ In tune with authors/translators such as Umberto Eco, Octavio Paz, and Haroldo de Campos, Paterson considers translation a form of interpretation. But while these authors regard a translation of a poem as a new original in the target language, Paterson insists on the distinction between translating and re-writing and argues that only "versions" can be considered "poems in their own right."⁴ In addition, while the tendency of scholarship in the last

9th 2014]. Those more acquainted with Plath's biography will also recognize the symbolic appearance of the poem in 2003, 40 years after Plath's suicide.

² He adds that "a word in a poem is a unique nexus of different linguistic and acoustic and etymological and semantic strands, and it exists as sort of culture-specific node, and not as a set of co-ordinates that can be imported into another tongue" (3).

³ Similarly, in the afterword to *The Eyes*, he notes that "literal translation can be useful in providing us with a black-and-white snapshot of the original, but a version— however subjectively— seeks to restore a light and colour and perspective" (58).

⁴ Using Julie Sander's terminology, we could define a poem such as "The Forest of the Suicides" as an adaptation; in her view, adaptations are "reinterpretations of established texts in new generic contexts [...] with relocations of [...] a source text's cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a

twenty years has been to move away from the discourse of fidelity,⁵ Paterson frequently resorts to images of faithfulness and betrayal. In “Fourteen Notes on the Version” he notes that “the only possible fidelity is to the entirely subjective quality of ‘spirit’ or ‘vision,’ rather than to literal meaning” (56).⁶ Curiously, in the re-writing of Dante’s *Inferno* xiii, he inverts the terms and makes Sylvia Plath assert it a “far lesser crime” to be unfaithful to the spirit, rather than to betray the letter. Plath’s spirit, as we will see, also talks about poetry as a “dark trade,” the same words that Paterson uses in his T. S. Eliot lecture (“The Dark Art of Poetry”), in which he defines poetry as an art that takes the form of “the spell, the riddle, the curse, the blessing, the prayer” and whose function is “to change the way we perceive the world” (1). From all these statements, we can infer that “The Forest of the Suicides” functions on two levels. The main narrative addresses an aesthetic and a moral concern: the relation between poetry and suffering, and the question of whether suicide is an acceptable act. A second strand revolves around the problem of fidelity: this concerns Plath’s faithfulness to her “oath,” but also the way in which this particular version by Paterson at once betrays and remains faithful to its source.

generic shift” (19). However, recent scholarship has challenged the clear-cut distinction between translation and adaptation, pointing out that there are many cases that could be defined as borderline (Krebs, Bassnett). In her recent book on translation, Susan Bassnett includes, for instance, the poems of Michael Longley, who translates Homer transposing his characters to Northern Ireland (159). According to these views, Paterson’s version could be considered one of these borderline cases: they are not literal translations, but they would not exist without the source text.

⁵ In *Translation*, Bassnett offers an overview of the evolution of Translation Studies in the last twenty years.

⁶ He also warns of the danger of reading a version as a translation: “Translations fail when they misinterpret the language of the original, or fail to honour the rules of syntax. Versions fail when they misinterpret the *spirit* of the original, or fail in any one of the thousand other ways poems fail” (“Fourteen Notes on the Version” 81).

“The Forest of the Suicides”: Dante’s “detailed ground-plan and elevation”

The epigraph of “The Forest of the Suicides” warns us that, while the poem is a version of Dante’s text, there will be an intrusion, a different poetic voice; it also helps us to recognize the suicide soul with whom Paterson replaces della Vigna in the forest.

“Who are these pietàs?
The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing.”
(Sylvia Plath, “Winter Trees”)

The Christian allusion “pietàs” foreshadows the emotional atmosphere of the passage from Dante, which is one of pity (*pieta/pietade* are recurrent words in Dante’s canto). But “pietàs” also metonymically indicates the singers for the song, the poets for the poem, and thus anticipates the relationship between poetry and suffering, summarized by the “words and blood” that is a central image in both Paterson’s and Dante’s texts. The second line, with its interplay of ear and eye half-rhymes, exemplifies Plath’s technical skill, her ability to weave the verbal texture that for Paterson constitutes the meaning of a poem: the fourfold repetition of the “ing” in “ring . . .,” “chanting,” “easing,” “nothing” echoes the dove’s repeated call, while the “dows” in “shadows” is juxtaposed with the “doves” of “ringdoves.” It is in the music, as well as the words, that the possibility is felt that song may not necessarily ease suffering.

Paterson adds “Inferno xiii” as a subtitle for “The Forest of the Suicides”. However, by choosing not to present the original in a parallel version, he asserts that his poem— in line with his conception of the poetic version— is a “poem in its own right”; and by omitting the second section of the canto, which deals with the squanderers (those

who are violent against their own goods), he signals from the outset that his poem is focused on a fragment. This choice allows him to reproduce specific formal and symbolic features of Dante's text while taking the liberty of deviating from its meaning.

If we use Paterson's simile and compare the making of a poem to the building of a house, we can say that he structures the poem by using Dante's "detailed ground-plan and elevation" ("Fourteen Notes on the Version" 84). At the very core of both passages from Dante and Paterson's texts is the witness borne by a great poet, in the company of his guide, another poet, to the suffering of a suicide soul who is also a writer. Paterson tells his story by attentively reproducing Dante's plot line, retaining the same images and transposing Dante's rhetorical devices. As in Dante's text, the pilgrim and his guide, who remain unnamed throughout the text, enter a dark wood with no path, see the monstrous harpies and hear strange moaning coming from the trees. The pilgrim tries to second-guess his guide as to what these cries may be, and the guide instructs him to break off a twig from a thorn bush. When the pilgrim does so, he is surprised by a cry of reproach and sees dark blood issuing from the twig: words and blood are compared to the hissing drip at one end of a sapling log when set on fire at the other. Virgil apologizes, explains that the pilgrim could only be brought to believe the incredible phenomenon through direct experience, and, with the promise that the pilgrim will vindicate the soul by renewing its fame on earth, invites the thorn tree to tell its story. The injured plant recalls having committed suicide after having been abandoned by an "Emperor," a person to whom it was utterly devoted, and reaffirms its loyalty. At Virgil's request, it explains how, immediately after death, Minos hurls the souls of the suicides as seeds into the wood, where they sprout into wild plants continually attacked and torn by the harpies. At

the last judgment, the souls will seek their bodies, with which they will never be reunited but which they will have to hang on their trees, because of the contempt that, in committing suicide, they showed for their bodies in life.

While faithfully reproducing Dante's plot Paterson uses "local music for mortar" ("Fourteen Notes on the Version" 84), substituting Dante's stanzas in *terza rima* with four-line stanzas *abab*; these rhymes, as we will see, are a mixture of full and slant. He also eschews quantitative equivalence: Paterson's text is five stanzas longer than Dante's. Employing "local words for bricks," he uses modern English to render Dante's medieval Italian. For example, he translates "Harpy" with the Anglo-Saxon "Snatcher"⁷ and renders the mannered hesitancy with which the pilgrim guesses the thoughts of his guide "Cred'io ch'ei credette ch'io credesse" (Dante 25) with the straightforward question: "Master, why do they hide from us? [...] Are they afraid?" (Paterson 23-24). He also chooses to translate features that do not have equivalents, such as "particular images, etymological histories," with "something else that might have the same effect on the reader in the host tongue, which might be a very different thing" (Interview with Atilla Dosa 1). These substitutions entail important shifts of meaning.

Deviations

Like the *selva oscura* at the beginning of the journey, the forest of canto xiii is dark and has no path. To describe it, Dante uses antithesis. In the first half of each line, he sketches the features of the *locus amoenus*, the delightful place that constitutes a *topos* of classical literature (see Curtius 192). In the second half, he conjures the very opposite:

Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco,

⁷ 'Harpy' is based the Greek ἀρπαξίω, to snatch.

non rami schietti ma nodosi e'nvolti,
non pomi v'eran, ma stecchi con tòsco. (Inferno XIII, 3-6)⁸

Scholars have interpreted the underlying meaning of this stanza as a reference to the fact that souls who could have chosen good, for which they are destined, have instead chosen evil, which has twisted and poisoned them.⁹ Paterson makes no attempt at translating the stanza, and introduces a strange simile unrelated to Dante's text:

Each barren, blood-back tree was like a plate
from a sailor's book of knots, its branches bent
and pleached and coiled as if to demonstrate
some novel and ingenious form of torment. (Paterson 5-8)

By substituting plates from "a sailor's book of knots" for Dante's evocation of the wild, desolate stretch of land between Cecina and Corneto, Paterson replaces a reference that demands geographical knowledge of the source culture with an image that conveys a general sense of twistedness and torment. By not following Dante in describing the dark, gnarled, poisonous trees as the antithesis of those that are green, smooth, and covered with fruit, he omits any implicit premise that evil is not a positive force or presence but rather the absence of a loving God, thus also questioning the wood as a place where sinners receive the punishment they deserve.

As in Dante's text, the pilgrim follows Virgil's injunction to tear a twig from the tree, but, since the inhabitant of Paterson's poetic structure is Plath, not della Vigna, with striking variations:

⁸ No green leaves in that forest, only black:
no branches straight and smooth, but knotted, gnarled;
no fruits were there, but briars bearing poison.
(I am using the translation by Allen Mandelbaum)

⁹ See Leo Spitzer "... this negative pattern, with its insistent note of schism, suggests the *στέρησις* or *privation* by which, in ancient as in medieval philosophy, the evil is clearly defined as the absence of good; Dante would make us see this as a 'wicked' forest" (97). "The Forest of the Suicides" is the contrary of the *divina foresta spessa e viva*, the *locus amoenus* that the pilgrim, after purgation, will explore when he reaches the Earthly Paradise (see *Purgatorio XXVIII 2*).

Allor porsi la mano un poco avante
e colsi un ramicel da un gran pruno;
e'l tronco suo gridò: 'perché mi schiante?'

Da che fatto fu poi di sangue bruno,
ricominciò a dir: 'Perché mi scempi?
non hai tu spirito di pietade alcuno?

Uomini fummo, e or siam fatti sterpi:
ben dovebb'esser la tua man più pia
se state fossimo anime di serpi'
(Dante 31-39)¹⁰

[...] I snapped away
a twig from the bush that stood closer to me.

In the trunk, a red mouth opened like a cut.
Then a voice screamed out "Why are you tearing me?"
it was a woman's voice. Blood began to spurt
from the broken tip "you, are you hearing me?"

When exactly did I earn your scorn?
Supposing I'd a heart black as a snake's,
I was a woman once, that now am thorn.
What would a little pity have set you back?"
(Paterson 27-36)

In Dante's text, the pilgrim picks a twig from a "gran pruno," with the *gran* according the plant-man a certain stature. In Paterson's version, we read "I snapped away / a twig from the bush that stood closest to me" (27-28). The simile in the next line, "In the trunk, a red mouth opened like a cut," leaves the reader in no doubt as to the connotation of "bush": it

¹⁰ The I stretched out my hand a little way
and from a great thornbush snapped off a branch,
at which its trunk cried out: "Why do you tear me?"

And then, when it had grown more dark blood,
It asked again: "Why do you break me off?
Are you without all sentiment of pity?"

We once were men and now are arid stumps:
Your hand might well have shown us greater mercy
Had we been nothing more than souls of serpents."

is a line deliberately phrased in order to startle, beginning as it does with “red mouth” and ending with the monosyllabic pun “cut” for “cunt.” A pun is used again when, as “blood began to spurt / from the broken tip” (31-32), the voice cries out “I was a woman once, that now am thorn” (35) – with “thorn” echoing “torn.”¹¹ Unlike della Vigna, the hybrid plant-man, in whose vegetable body are trapped “the anguished workings of a human heart and mind” and whose *contrappasso* is to have all “connection between body and soul [...] broken” (Spitzer 84-5), Plath’s vegetable body retains a link with its human body. These changes give a sexual tone to the violence inflicted on the spirit, who experiences physical and psychological laceration by the two men who enter the wood.

In Dante’s text, when Virgil apologizes and says that the offender can make amends by reviving the soul’s fame in the upper world, the chancellor poet replies with exquisite courtesy in language filled with conceits.¹² In Paterson’s version, Virgil’s apology and offer to the soul are almost literally translated. But the suicide spirit’s angry, sarcastic response is very different:

E ’l tronco: “Sì col dolce dir m’adeschi
 ch’ i’ non posso tacere; e voi non gravi
 perch’io un poco a ragionar m’inveschi.”
 (Dante 54- 57)¹³

And the tree laughed. “Bravo sir!” Well said.
 You’d spend a life time trying to put it worse.
 In my design, that scalded beach ahead
 would be reserved for the biographers.

¹¹ The generic “serpi” of Dante’s text is also rendered by a snake with a black heart.

¹² The first conceit is so complex that most translators are content with paraphrase. See Singleton for a discussion of the verbs *adescare*, to lure, and *invescare*, to belime (212). It is as though della Vigna is a bird and Virgil a sweet-talking branch to which the bird is being lured. Some commentators think Dante has satirically portrayed della Vigna as a pompous bureaucrat flaunting an affected style of rhetoric (see Spitzer on Vossler, 94-95). It is possible that Dante’s portrayal combined some humorous teasing with admiration for the chancellor’s articulate rhetoric.

¹³ To which the trunk: “Your sweet speech draws me so
 that I cannot be still; and may it not
 oppress you, if I linger now in talk

And if it's self-improvement your friend seeks
perhaps it's courtesy you need to teach...
Ah. But you can see that I am weak,
and lured into a little human speech.
(Paterson 49-56)

Paterson replaces della Vigna's mannered courtesy with sardonic, skeptical arrogance.

Claiming "In my design, that scalded beach ahead / would be reserved for the biographers," the soul boldly places herself in the role of the omnipotent.¹⁴ Far from accepting her punishment, she implicitly accuses the pilgrim (who, in promising to tell her story, *de facto* becomes one of the biographers) of participating in the violence that is carried out against her. In her view, the pilgrim is not Dante's sensitive, enquiring seeker in quest of salvation but a curious, invasive person bent on "self-improvement" who needs to be taught some manners.

Plath's account of her life, the reasons for her suicide, and the message she would like to be conveyed to the world above follow della Vigna's plea of defence and also feature many of della Vigna's images. The right-hand man of the Emperor Frederick II, della Vigna committed suicide after having been (in Dante's rendition) unjustly accused of treason by those who were envious of his privileged role at the Emperor's court. Like della Vigna, Plath tells the story of how she was bound to an "office" (63), disgraced by a

¹⁴ Biographers often draw attention to how, at seventeen, Plath confided to her diary: "I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be god'" (*The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 40.) The anthology that Paterson co-edited with Clare Brown in 2003, the same year in which "The Forest of the Suicides" was published, includes a description of Plath by Hughes that stresses her obsession with perfection: "She grew up in an atmosphere of tense intellectual competition and Germanic rigour. Her mother, a first-generation American of Austrian stock, and her father, who was German-Polish, were both university teachers. Her father, whom she worshipped, died when she was nine, and thereafter her mother raised Sylvia and her brother single-handed. Whatever teaching methods were used, Sylvia was the perfect pupil; she did every lesson double. Her whole tremendous will was bent on excelling. Finally, she emerged like the survivor of an evolutionary ordeal: at no point could she let herself be negligent or inadequate" (*Don't ask me what I mean* 220).

“courtesan” (70) and abandoned by a “Caesar” (74). Paterson translates Dante’s signifiers and gives priority to literal meaning. While Dante is speaking literally, Paterson uses the images metaphorically to refer to Plath’s life. Readers familiar with Plath’s poetry and biography, for example, will immediately recognize that “Caesar” is used as a metaphor to refer to the role of Plath’s father. In translating Dante’s tropes, Paterson keeps the literal image but modifies its allegorical sense (the “meritrice” is faithfully translated as “courtesan,” but she stands for jealousy, rather than envy). He also expands Dante’s images (there is not one, but two “Caesars”) and therefore creates a longer monologue:

Io sono colui che tenni ambo le chiavi
del cor di Federigo, e che le volsi,
serrando e disserrando, sì soavi,

che dal segreto suo quasi ogn’uom tolsi;
fede portai al glorioso officio,
tanto ch’i’ ne perdè li sonni e’ polsi.

La meritrice che mai dall’ospizio
di Cesare non torse li occhi putti,
morte commune e delle corti vizio,

infiammò contra me li animi tutti;
E li ’nfiammati infiammar sì Augusto,
che’ lieti onor tornaro in tristi lutti.

L’animo mio, per disdegnoso gusto,
credendo col morir fuggir disdegno,
ingiusto fece me contra me giusto.
(Dante 58-73)¹⁵

¹⁵ I am the one who guarded both the keys
of Frederick’s heart and turned them, locking and
unlocking them with such dexterity

that none but I could share his confidence;
and I was faithful to my splendid office,
so faithful that I lost both sleep and strength.

The whore who never turned her harlot’s eyes
Away from Caesar’s dwelling, she who is

...When I was small, I held both keys
that fitted my father's heart; which I unlocked
and locked again with such a delicate ease
he felt no turning, and he heard no click.

He desired no other confidence but mine;
nor would I permit one. I was so bound
to my splendid office that, when he resigned,
I followed. They had to dig me from the ground.

So the post remained, and I remained as true;
and, in time, I came to interview
for his successor. None of them would do
until a black shape cut the light in two

and at once I knew my ideal candidate.
But that green-eyed courtesan, that vice of courts
who had always stalked his halls and kept his gate-
the years had steeped me in her sullen arts

and my tongue grew hot with her abysmal need.
Slowly, I turned it on my second Caesar
until it seemed to me his every deed
did nothing but disgrace his predecessor.

So he left me too; but the tongue still burned away
till I sung the bright world only to estrange it,
and prophesied my end so nakedly
mere decency insisted I arrange it.

My mind, then, in its voice of reasoned harm
told me Death would broker my release
from every shame, and back into his arms;
so I made my date. It was bad advice.
(Paterson 57-84)

Equating della Vigna's emperor with Sylvia Plath's father, Paterson alludes to the strong
hold that this man, who died when she was a child, had on her imagination. The trope is

The death of all and vice of every court,
Inflamed the minds of everyone against me;
And those inflamed, then so inflamed Augustus
That my delighted honors turned to sadness.

then extended to include the appointment of a “second Caesar” – a variation that addresses the frequent comparisons Plath, in her poetry and diaries, made between her father and husband, whom she considered her male poetic muses.¹⁶ Keeping the image of the flame, Paterson associates it with Plath’s tongue, a synecdoche for angry words that Plath turned against Ted Hughes in poems such as “Event” and “Burning the Letters.”¹⁷ Most importantly for what concerns the retelling of Plath’s suicide, della Vigna’s acknowledgement of having committed a sin against God’s justice (“ingiusto fece me contra me giusto”) is replaced by a neutral “it was bad advice.”

There are innumerable biographies of Sylvia Plath on which Paterson could be drawing for the interpretation of the events that led Plath to suicide. Among them, the account of Alvarez in *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1971) appears particularly relevant.¹⁸ Alvarez’s account is, in fact very similar to the one given by the soul in the monologue; in addition, his study includes a chapter on Dante’s Canto XIII, thereby providing an antecedent for bringing together Plath’s poetry and Dante’s passage. In this text, Alvarez claims that Plath was drawn to suicide by a “quasi literary force” (31). This idea is echoed in Paterson’s poem by the lines “I prophesied my end so nakedly / Mere decency insisted I arrange it.”¹⁹ The litotes in Paterson’s poem “it was bad advice,” similarly echoes the interpretation (also in Alvarez text) that Sylvia did not intend to

¹⁶ In her journals, Plath writes of her father as “the buried male muse and god-creator that rises to be my mate in Ted” (381). In a letter written on November 29, 1959, she describes Ted Hughes as a father figure and a muse, somebody that could fill “that huge, sad hole I felt in having no father” (*Letters Home* 289).

¹⁷ In her journal, Plath records her jealousy and establishes a comparison between her feelings towards her father and towards her husband: “Images of his [Hughes’s] faithlessness with other women echo my fear of my father’s relation with my mother and Lady death” (447).

¹⁸ Paterson could, of course, have drawn on a very large list of biographical material on Plath. However, Alvarez’s version remains one of the most frequently cited. A list of biographies written before and after 2003 is available at the following website: <http://www.sylviaplath.de/>

¹⁹ “For the artist himself,” writes Alvarez, “art is not necessarily therapeutic. He is not automatically relieved of his fantasies by expressing them. Instead, by some perverse logic of creation, the act of formal expression may simply make the dredged-up material more readily available for him. The result of handling it in his work may well be that he finds himself living it out” (31).

commit suicide, that she took a risk, hoping that her attempt would call attention to her suffering, but that “her calculations went wrong” (Alvarez 32).²⁰ If, in Dante’s text, suicide is represented as a sin that by far surpasses the Envy that has caused it, in Paterson’s version it is a mistaken decision, a consequence of a chain of events and conflicting emotions.

In Dante’s canto, della Vigna denies the charge of treason with simple, direct dignity and then asks the pilgrim to restore his reputation, which has been ruined by Envy. In Paterson’s version, Plath admits to turning her fury and hatred on her “second Caesar” in such a way as to implicate the original (“it seemed to me his every deed / did nothing but disgrace his predecessor”). Her request for vindication has an oracular formulation:

Per le nove radici d’esto legno
vi giuro che già mai non ruppi fede
al mio signor, che fu d’onor sì degno.

E se di voi alcun nel mondo riede,
conforti la memoria mia, che giace
ancor del colpo che ’nvidia le diede.
(Dante 73-78)²¹

But if your friend should somehow cut a path
back to the light, then tell them I betrayed
the spirit, not the letter of the oath—
by far the lesser crime in our dark trade.
(Paterson 85-88).

²⁰ “Sylvia took a risk. She gambled for the last time, having worked out that the odds were in her favour, but perhaps in her depression, not caring whether she won or lost. Her calculation went wrong and she lost” (Alvarez 32).

²¹ I swear to you by the peculiar roots
of this thornbush, I never broke my faith
with him who was so worthy-with my lord.

If one of you returns into the world,
then let him help my memory, which still
lies prone beneath the battering of envy

This reference to the letter and the spirit is found nowhere in Dante's Canto XIII.

Paterson alludes to a passage of the New Testament in which Paul contrasts the life-giving "new testament" of Christ's spirit of love, "written not with ink, but [...] in the fleshy tablets of the heart" with the commandments written "in tables of stone." (2 Corinthians 3: 6). In this passage, the Christian spirit is associated with the interpretation of an ideal meaning, Jewish reading practices with loyalty to literalness. In Paterson's poem, the soul claims that she "betrayed the spirit not the letter of the oath," regarding it as "far the lesser crime" in a trade that she describes as dark.

As noted, in the T. S. Eliot lecture, Paterson defines poetry as a "dark art" and stresses its invocatory function, its closeness to the riddle and the prayer ("The Dark Art of Poetry" 1). But in the context of this version, the poetry of Virgil, Dante, and Plath is dark also insofar as it bears witness to suffering. Dante and Virgil wrote of the torments of an afterlife in the underworld, Plath, as non-believer, of the torments of life on earth, or, as she puts it in *The Bell Jar*, of hell as a place of intense earthly suffering.²² By writing out the anger and hatred her Caesars, her male muses, have come to inspire, crafting words fashioned to endure, the suicide spirit has honored the *letter* of her oath even as, by reviling them, she has betrayed its *spirit*. Moreover, since she prophesied her death "so nakedly," in committing suicide, she has been literally faithful to the words she wrote. Ironically, her faithfulness to the letter can be summarized by Paul's statement that 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life' (2 Corinthians 3: 6). Unlike della Vigna, Plath cannot claim complete fidelity to her oath. But she boldly claims kinship to her

²² Plath's unorthodox take on hell is described in the autobiographical *Bell Jar*: "[...] certain people, like me, had to live in hell before they died, to make up for missing out on it after death, since they didn't believe in life after death, and what each person believed happened to him when he died" (166).

interlocutors, whom she recognizes as fellow writers renowned for descriptions of an underworld.

In the last part of his monologue, Della Vigna delivers his account of the transformation of suicide souls when sent to the underworld in a straightforward way that contrasts his earlier mannerism. Plath gives the same basic account, but in a tone of pain and contempt, charging the speech with alliterations: “[...] furious soul [...] tears itself from the flesh [...]” (105-06), “ from the **bed** or **bath** or **floor**” (108) “where it spins down to this starless nursery/ to seed wherever fortune tosses it” (110-11). If in her first response, addressing Virgil, she has reduced the pilgrim’s mission to an inquiry into the suffering of others (“if it’s self-improvement your friend seeks/ Perhaps it’s courtesy you need to teach” 53-54), she now refers to God’s justice as an “inverse power.” Finally, in the last stanza, which describes what will happen at the final clarion, the souls strangely will inhabit a “dark street” in a wood that in the first stanza is pathless, a line of bare, lifeless bodies hung like “white coat(s)” in the travesty of a celebration (“miserable parade”), forever separated from their souls imprisoned in thorn bushes.²³

All these variations shift the focus away from Christian eschatology and lead us back to the soul’s enigmatic statement about the letter and the spirit. Paterson’s poem is filled with references to imitations: the Snatcher is characterized by a “gift of mimicry,” Plath’s “second Caesar” is a version, a replacement, of his “predecessor.” As noted, Plath’s soul cannot claim authorial fidelity: the promise of being faithful to the letter and

²³ See Alvarez: “the worse things got and the more directly she wrote about them, the more fertile her imagination became [...] turning anger, implacability, and her roused, needle-sharp sense of trouble into a kind of celebration” (22). The white coat, which does not appear in Dante, features in Plath’s work as a synecdoche for “doctor,” which Jacqueline Rose, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, interprets as “the worst of male institutional and sexual power” (134). In *contrappasso* fashion, Plath’s body, often subjected to this power in life, becomes one with it in death.

the spirit is an impossible one. In reproducing plot and imagery when re-writing Dante's passage, Paterson remains faithful to the original and prioritizes the letter. At the same time, as he reconceptualises the canto from a framework of medieval faith to one of secular disbelief, he challenges the view that considered suicide "[...] a mortal sin, a horror, the object of total moral revulsion" (Alvarez 125). In doing so, Paterson's poem ignores the idea of sin that is so central to Dante's vision.²⁴ Paterson conjures up a Plath situated in the same circumstances as della Vigna, condemned for eternity for having committed suicide, but makes her protest at a design by an "inverse power" while at the same time affirming the reality (the *truth*) of her suffering.

Fidelity

In what way, then, can this poem still be considered to be a version, or, in other words and according to Paterson's own terminology, a re-writing faithful to the spirit of Dante's text? Fidelity to a source text can be traced beyond literal or metaphorical meaning, in the rendering of the intertextual weaving of Dante's poem. Most importantly, it can be identified in the surface of the language, in the way in which Paterson renders specific features of Dante's text, such as the interplay between acoustic and semantic elements.

In the first stanza, the pilgrim is "back" in a dark wood. On the one hand, the addition of the word "back" makes explicit what Dante is only suggesting—namely, the similarities between the suicides' forest and the *selva oscura* in which the journey begins. On the other hand, we are reminded that the poem is a re-writing of a different text. This intertextual reference is already characteristic of the original. As Sinclair pointed out,

²⁴ "I don't think our lives need redeeming" declares Paterson in the interview with Fazzini. "It's a Christian word, and we have no need for it. We weren't sinful in the first place. Nothing was broken, and nothing needs fixing – at least nothing except religion, and the daft ideas it bequeathed us" (9).

Virgil's apology to the wounded plant (*s'elli avesse potuto creder prima [...] anima lesa*, / *ciò c'ha veduto pur con la mia rima*' ; 46-59) refers to an incident described in the *Aeneid* 3. 3-65. (174). In this episode, Aeneas tears green shoots from a myrtle bush to decorate an altar, sees blood dripping from the roots and, terrified, hears a cry that reproaches him. He discovers that his cousin Polydorus has been murdered and buried underneath the mound, and he is overwhelmed by pity. Dante follows Virgil's plotline, but, in substituting della Vigna for Polydorus, he updates Virgil's references with allusions closer to his own time. He reproduces the transition from fear to pity and the affinity between the interlocutors (both della Vigna and Dante are men of letters). But he complicates the feeling of pity through the introduction of the theme of suicide, and by doing so also introduces the theme of doubt.²⁵ Paterson echoes the complex texture of Dante's text by reproducing the sense of *déjà vu*. He changes the background from the Middle Ages to the present and, selecting a suicide soul who is also a poet, creates a kinship between the pilgrim and the injured soul (whom Virgil addresses as "sister"). He reduces the focus on pity, but elaborates and enlarges on doubt.

As we have seen, Paterson's substitution of Plath for della Vigna entails major differences. However, it also involves important parallels. Della Vigna was a famous rhetorician and a poet associated with the Sicilian school, a precursor of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. He took his own life in 1247—roughly fifty years before the time in which Dante sets the symbolic date for the *Commedia*. His story was well-known and, half a century later, Dante could still count on his readers to recognize him without explicitly naming

²⁵ "If [the pilgrim's] belief had been without doubts," writes Clive James, "there would never have been a journey" (*The Divine Comedy*: XX).

him.²⁶ In Dante's rendition, della Vigna's most prominent characteristic is his eloquence.²⁷ Just as, in canto xiii, della Vigna describes the suffering of hell, so in his own poetry he often dwelled on the feeling of loss and desperation.²⁸ Scholars also stress the contradictions inherent in della Vigna's monologue: on the one hand, he demonstrates courtesy, loyalty, skilful rhetoric, all qualities that arouse the pilgrim's pity. On the other hand, he presents suicide as a direct consequence of others' envy of him, fails to acknowledge responsibility and, like all Dante's damned characters, is unrepentant (Musa 148).

If della Vigna belonged to an earlier generation than Dante, so does Plath in respect to Paterson: Plath took her own life in 1963, while Paterson is writing the poem in 2003, forty years after the event. Her life and works are sufficiently well known that Paterson can afford not to name her, and much ink has been spilt on the relationship between her last poems and her decision to take her own life.²⁹ Like della Vigna, Plath, in Paterson's version, is presented as a torn, divided spirit who blames her "tongue" ("but the tongue still burned away" 76) and "mind" ("My mind, then, in its voice of reasoned harm / told me Death would broker my release" 81-82) for her actions and for the decision of taking her own life. Like him, she is unrepentant.³⁰

²⁶ Instead, commentators point out how Dante plays with the meaning of his name (*Vigna*, in Italian, means "vine") by literally transforming him into another tree, more specifically a thorn tree (in Italian, "pruno"). As commentators point out, the this choice symbolically recalls the crown of thorns and Christ's own suffering and, by implication, the contrast between martyrdom and suicide.

²⁷ "Even in pain" comments Mark Musa, "he [della Vigna] expresses himself with a certain elegance and rhetorical forcefulness" (148).

²⁸ Robin Kirkpatrick goes so far as to claim that della Vigna's poetry "painfully anticipated his suicide" ("Commentaries and Notes": 364)

²⁹ See Alvarez and Rose, among numerous biographies.

³⁰ The fact that Plath's name is Sylvia, related to the Latin "silva" (wood), also contributes to making her an apt candidate for the forest. Ted Hughes, in "Red" writes of "Salvia, that your father named you after, / Like blood lobbing from a gash" *Birthday Letters* (197-98).

As a poet of the Sicilian school, della Vigna wrote in a style characterized by elaborate syntax, the frequent use of conceits, repetition, and wordplay. Scholars have stressed the pains that Dante takes to echo della Vigna's rhetoric not only in the tree's speech but also elsewhere in the canto, as if he was preparing readers for this encounter by appropriating his contrived style. In a similar manner, Paterson imitates Plath's voice not only in the monologue, but throughout the poem. A main feature of Plath's poetry, as exemplified in the epigraph, is her use of half-rhyme, of both ear and eye. In Paterson's poem, more than half of the sets of rhyme in "Forest" are half-rhymes. Just as della Vigna's mannered style pervade Dante's text, so half-rhymes pervades Paterson's. In a manner similar to Plath, Paterson alternates these half-rhymes with full rhymes to underscore contrasts and to suggest resolution. A study of his interweaving of rhyme and half-rhyme throughout the poem in a balanced but irregular pattern would warrant an essay in itself; consideration of a few will illustrate some of the effects he achieves.

In the very first stanza, the line "I was back in a dark wood, this time unmarked" expresses a sense of uneasiness and disorientation, described through a leading half-rhyme ("back" with "unmarked"). In the next stanza, two full rhymes, "plate" / "demonstrate," "bent" / "torment" convey instead a sense of certainty and nail the suffering that the image of the wood evokes. Plath's style is also echoed in the stanzas in which both sets of rhymes are half-rhymes. The first of these is the one where Plath's suicide spirit, like della Vigna, screams in protest when the pilgrim tears its branch (stanza 8). Here the punning "cut" is paired (logically) with spurt, while the eye-rhyme "tearing me" and "hearing me" (30-32) underlines the contrast that shows pilgrim and guide to be, paradoxically, both violent and attentive. In the last stanzas, the pairings of

partial consonances such as “crop” with “escape” and of slant rhymes such as “ground” with “down,” “pain” and “pains” contributes to a sense of fracture and dislocation. So while full rhymes are used when something assertive is being expressed, to convey a sense of certainty, the irregularity of half-rhymes and partial consonances conveys all that is unsettled, skewed, and fractured. This interweaving reflects the way in which Paterson, deploying a technical skill that echoes Plath’s, captures her assuredness, the voice that she herself described as “fresh, brazen, colloquial” (*The Unabridged Journals*: 275), along with her sense of unease, displacement, fracture.

As if to underline Paterson’s endeavour in echoing Plath’s voice, the monologue of the suicide soul is filled with references to Plath’s poems: “At once I knew my ideal candidate” echoes “I knew you at once” in “Love Letter,” “a black shape cut the line in two” recalls Hughes’s physical presence in Plath’s “Man in Black”³¹; a ritual death that occurs every ten years haunts the background of “Lady Lazarus.” In particular, Paterson’s only all-rhyming stanza (stanza 17), in which Plath’s spirit speaks of looking for a “successor” to her father, echoes the subject of the famous poem “Daddy” both semantically (in the conflation of a father figure and a husband) and acoustically, repeating the angry, accusing “u” sound that prevails in the poem by constructing rhymes such as “true,” “interview,” “do,” “two” (65-68).³²

³¹ “...in your dead / black coat / black hair till there you stood [...]” (119-120). In “Black Coat,” Hughes pictures himself unaware that, as Plath looks at him, he appears to her as coming into “single focus” with “the body of the ghost,” her dead father who “had just crawled” from “the freezing sea” (*Birthday Letters* 102-03) Alvarez stresses the same features when he describes Hughes in “The Savage God.”

³²

“ [...] I was ten when they buried **you**
At twenty I tried to get **back, back, back** to **you**.
I thought even the **bones would do**
But they pulled me out of the **sack**,
And they stuck me together with **glue**.”

Paradoxically, adopting Plath's voice also enables Paterson to be faithful to specific stylistic features of Dante's text. For example, if Paterson's description of the wood, in the second stanza, entails semantic deviation ("Each barren, blood-black tree was like a plate / from a sailor's book on knots, its branches bent / and pleached and coiled" 5-7) it also provides, in a manner similar to the source text, "a sort of linguistic, of onomatopoeic rendition of the ideas of torture, schism, estrangement which dominate the canto" (Spitzer 95). Therefore, while altering the meaning of the text, Paterson remains faithful to the original in deploying assonance and alliteration to reproduce the acoustic background of the wood.

Lastly, something remains to be said about the issue of pity in the two passages. Dante's pilgrim, in the course of his quest, seems sometimes to experience doubt about the decrees of divine justice because of the pity he feels for certain sinners: he faints with pity for Paolo and Francesca, admires Farinata. In Canto XIII, the pilgrim is particularly moved by the suffering of the suicides. In *A Study of Suicide* Alvarez reflects that Dante must have "at least understood something of their [the suicides'] anguish, and had probably shared it in its own time" (128). Dante depicts della Vigna as a an honorable and loyal man. The pilgrim is overwhelmed by pity and mortified at having hurt a fellow soul, a statesman, an orator, and a poet. On the other hand, by placing della Vigna in Hell, Dante emphasizes the gravity of his sin. "So Dante is at once clearing Pier's reputation and, at the same time, damning him to an eternity of pain," writes Alvarez. "It

And then I knew what **to do**.
I made a model of **you**.
A man in **black** with a Meinkampf **look**,
And a love of the **rack** and the **screw**
And I said **I do, I do**'

(Sylvia Plath, "Daddy", *The Collected Poems* 221-223)

is an oddly ambivalent performance, as though the artist and the Christian were pulling in opposite directions” (128).

As in Dante’s text, in Paterson’s version author and pilgrim display contrasting attitudes, only that here the terms are inverted. As author, Paterson shares Plath’s regard for craftsmanship and attention to consonance of sounds and meaning; in his very neutral reading of the poem, he emphasizes the “our” in “our dark trade.” But while Dante’s pilgrim is overwhelmed by pity to the point that he loses the ability to speak (“tanta pietà m’accora” 84), Paterson’s pilgrim, sickened, has “no stomach” (94) for the conversation with a suicide soul that comes across as jealous, angry and vindictive.

Conclusion

A reading of “The Forest of the Suicides” that takes into account Paterson’s concern with fidelity has shown that the poem is faithful to its source in repeating Canto xiii’s engagement with other texts, in replacing Della Vigna’s characteristic rhetoric with Plath’s distinctive use of half-rhymes, and in reproducing the contrasting attitudes of author and pilgrim. Transposing Dante’s carefully wrought play of sound into English, the version reproduces Dante’s narrative flow by channelling Plath’s poetic voice, its individual timbre and style.

At this point, we can ask ourselves what kind of readership Paterson addresses with this poem. In “Fourteen Notes on the Version” Paterson emphasizes how, in another collection of poetic versions (*Orpheus*), he deliberately added new titles and avoided parallel texts to prevent the reader from the temptation of comparison: “Travesty, alas, is in the eyes of the beholder, and the more familiar readers are with the original, the greater

the likelihood that travesty will be their diagnosis” (78). Similarly “The Forest of the Suicides” is not accompanied by Dante’s text nor by an introduction. This format encourages the reader to consider the poem as an independent, autonomous work.³³ If, according to Paterson’s definition, the poetic version can be considered a means to allow “a poet to disown their own voice and try on another” (“Afterword” 78), by re-writing Dante while adopting Plath’s voice, Paterson confirms the role of the poet-translator as a master of forgery who may “legislate against travesty” (78) but is skilled in camouflage and disguise. Moreover, we could say that by appropriating Plath’s voice and placing it in an allegorical context, Paterson not only challenges Dante’s spiritual vision, but also the view of scholars that considers Plath’s poetry a direct witness, a direct outpouring of her personal experiences. In tune with Paterson’s conception of the poetic version, the “Forest of the Suicides” can be read as an “open ended inquiry” that goes as far as challenging the idea that a poet has an autonomous voice at all beyond the adoption of a poetic persona (Interview with Marco Fazzini 8). The only unquestionable voice, as Paterson reminds us, is that of the poem.

Elisa Segnini, University of British Columbia, and Elizabeth Jones, independent scholar.

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³³ As Emily Apter notes, all translators are “to some extent counterfeit artists, experts at forgeries of voice and style” (146).

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