

Inspiring Dante: The Reasons of Rhyme in *Ulysses*

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This essay is part of a wider study of the poetic forms in *Ulysses*. Not surprisingly, Dante is the first important figure in this perspective, one that goes on to consider the particular Italian legacy at work in the Irish novel. Several aspects of the relationship between Joyce and Dante have been highlighted. Concentrating on *Finnegans Wake*, Lucia Boldrini has recently offered us her *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in "Finnegans Wake"*.¹ Two decades before in 1981, Mary Reynolds had explicated various aspects of this interaction in her *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination*,² and back in the 1960's Umberto Eco³ had investigated the medieval background in Joyce and established the *Divine Comedy* as one of the backbones of *Ulysses*. The following short contribution is meant to illuminate the modes and ways of this cross-reading between poetic Dante and the prose of Joyce.

1. The Dantesque intrusion in "Aeolus"

The starting point is of course the "RHYMES AND REASONS" section in "Aeolus":

RHYMES AND REASONS

Mouth, south. Is the mouth south someway? Or the south
a mouth? Must be some. South, pout, out, shout, drouth.
Rhymes: two men dressed the same, looking the same, two by
two.

..... *la tua pace*
..... *che parlar ti piace*
..... *mentre che il vento, come fa, si tace.*

He saw them three by three, approaching girls, in green,
in rose, in russet, entwining, *per l'aere perso*, in mauve, in

purple, *quella pacifica oriafiamma*, gold of oriflamme, *di rimirar fe' più ardenti*. But I old men, penitent, leadenfooted, underdarkneath the night: mouth south: tomb womb.
—Speak up for yourself, Mr O'Madden Burke said.⁴

The section springs directly from *Inferno V*, although in a fragmentary form:

*Noi pregheremo lui della tua pace,
poi c'hai pietà del nostro mal perverso.
Di quel che udire e che parlar ti piace,
noi udiremo e parleremo a vui,
mentre che'l vento, come fa, si tace.*⁵

[We would pray unto him to give thee peace,
Since thou hast pity on our woe perverse.
Of what it pleases thee to hear and speak,
That will we hear, and we will speak to you,
While silent is the wind, as it is now.]⁶

Pondering on this truncated quotation, Reynolds maintains that Joyce transfers the metrical effect to prose and argues that Dante's intrusion reveals Joyce's interest in prosody and specifically the rhythmical factor: "In the novel, only the last of these three verses is quoted in full; thus the reader is made aware of the cumulative rhythm by Stephen's silent recall of the complete phrase rather than just the rhyme word".⁷ The striking elements, however, about Joyce's quotation are the omissions: Joyce repeatedly omits the verb to hear (It. "udire"), which in the Italian text may be read in relation with the presence of two verbs dealing with the sphere of verbal articulation, whether positive or negative ("parleremo"—we shall talk; "tace"—make silence). This is particularly relevant in a piece of poetry in which the only element endowed with a voice is the wind.

2. The wind and its voices

The wind turns out to be the common ground between "Aeolus" and *Inferno V*. Notoriously, in "Aeolus" the wind finds its first and major expression in the noise of slamming doors or windows, or papers rustling in the draughts. More intriguingly, perhaps, the many windy moments are connected to the process of inflation/deflation, considered in its rhetorical version as, for instance, in the following interjection: "Enough of the inflated windbag" (*U* 121). But the wind, secondly, is also linked to the

more basic and crucial process of inspiration/expiration; “Want to get some wind off my chest first” (*U* 117), reads one of Bloom’s thoughts. The way in and way out of the draughts is thus corresponded by the *way in* and *way out* of the breath being inhaled and exhaled. Richard Ellmann actually alludes to this twin presence of inspiration/expiration in the chapter:

The breathing can be felt in paired phrases and words as well, such as ‘Scissors and paste’, ‘Way in. Way out’. . . . Almost everything is coupled. . . . When others try to fill their sails, Bloom and Stephen take the wind out of them.⁸

In the light of these considerations, the wind of the chapter establishes a binary rhythm of inspiration/expiration, silence/speech, a binary pattern that reflects precisely what the double movement present in the Dantesque lines already suggests. But, more importantly, through the *Inferno* lines, however mutilated, the wind appears in its crucial form of *flatus* and *breath*. In other words, “Aeolus” is not only a matter of slamming doors and summer draughts, but it also draws attention, thanks to Dante, to the question of voice, or *flatus vocis*.

3. Rhymes

Not surprisingly, the section dedicated to the *flatus vocis* is introduced by the word “mouth”. An attempt at reading the quotation clearly shows that Joyce was pondering on phonetic problems: “Mouth, south. Is the mouth south someway?” These words clearly do not make immediate sense, but they draw attention to several crucial aspects of poetry: alliteration, anaphora, and last but not least, rhyme. It is important to consider that the mouth motif is recurrent in the chapter, almost always connected to breath, as in the following examples:

The noise of two shrill voices, a mouthorgan . . . (*U* 124);
Mouth to my mouth . . . (*U* 127, 133);
His mouth continued to twitch unspeaking. . . . (*U* 133)

The redundancy of the word “mouth”, its connection to the section entitled “RHYMES AND REASONS” and to Dante’s imperfect quotation, as well as the poetic experiment on rhymes: all this leads to the questions of verse making and more specifically rhyme making; paradoxically, in the middle of a chapter dedicated to prose writing, press writing, its forms and modes, the nature of poetic experiment is being both interrogated and practised.

That the word “mouth” should indeed be connected to the question of rhyming finds further confirmation in a retrospective reading of a passage from the third chapter:

Mouth to her kiss. No. Must be two of 'em. Glue 'em well.
Mouth to her mouth's kiss. His lips lipped and mouthed
fleshless lips of air: mouth to her womb. Oomb, allwombing
tomb. His mouth moulded issuing breath, unspeched. . . . (*U*
47)

This short passage noticeably displays all the elements considered so far, that is, breath, mouth and rhyme. It is no coincidence that a similar association between mouth and kiss should crop up in “Aeolus” in the following sentence: “Would anyone wish her mouth for her kiss?” (*U* 133). A lexical explanation is necessary at this point. An Italian reader of *Ulysses* can't help noticing that these apparently random rhyming words contain a revealing bilingual pun. The word “kiss” in Italian, “bacio”, when associated with poetry, immediately reminds one of “rima baciata”, a form of rhyme very common in Italian poetry that follows the *aabb* pattern. And this is not too daring an interpretation, since we know that Joyce was not deaf to puns, even, or especially, if translinguistic. So many allusions to kisses, in a context of successive rhyming words and in the proximity of Dante's presence, altogether suggest a very elaborate articulation between “rima baciata” and “terza rima”. To those not familiar with Italian medieval literature, it is worth remembering that Dante eschews the “rima baciata” in favour of the “terza rima”, which is much more flexible than “rima baciata”, and perhaps even more narrative oriented.

The quoted “RHYMES AND REASONS” passage, moreover, provides a striking iconic representation of this switch from “rima baciata” to “terza rima”. Before the quotation of Dante, the text reads: “Rhymes: two men dressed the same, looking the same, two by two”. After the “Paolo and Francesca” interlude, the vision has moved to quite another image: “He saw them three by three approaching girls”. The tension between binary rhythm and its ternary alternative is thus visualised in the former walking characters. There is a movement here from the static and even photographic image of the two men, whose motionlessness is emphasized by their identity, to the much more dynamic and even movie-like apparition of the walking girls. Having thus achieved his transition from the closed patterns of “rima baciata” to the freedom of

“terza rima”, Joyce at the same time introduces the third element of his meditation on poetic craftsmanship, namely “pace”.

4. Pace

The factor of pace is thus incorporated, through the steps of the approaching girls, in the poetical context outlined in “Proteus”, and taken up again explicitly in “Aeolus”. Connected as it is with the poetic foot and with rhythm, pace is a fundamental element of prosody. A confirmation of the structural function of rhythm comes from Joyce’s “Paris Notebook”: “Rhythm seems to be the first or formal relation of part to part in any whole or of a whole to its part or parts. . . . Parts constitute a whole as far as they have a common end” (*CW* 145). Reynolds also highlights the rhythmical factor in Joyce’s prose, evident in the writer’s interest in cadence. Addressing the same *Inferno V* verses quoted above, she writes:

In the novel, only the last of these three verses is quoted in full; thus the reader is made aware of the cumulative rhythm by Stephen’s silent recall of the complete phrase rather than just the rhyme word. The manner of recall suggests an interest in Dante’s use of terza rima in the control and ordering of cadence, which is a notable feature of *Inferno V*. . . . Joyce . . . transferred this metrical effect to prose, using repetitive sound patterns to perform the function of rhyme in placing and interweaving the stresses.⁹

The scholar also mentions a conversation between Joyce and Mercanton in which rhythm is indicated as a support in descriptive passages. Joyce actually speaks of “transposition from sight to sound”¹⁰ and concludes by saying that, after all, “interior monologue is just that”¹¹, that is, once more, rhythm. The many moving steps of *Ulysses*, the endless strolling and walking and rambling, are thus discovered to have a close connection to the rhythm of the novel itself, which is thus established as a permanent element of the textual fabric. The mention of rhythm is further reinforced by the all too frequent allusions to feet and shoes: in the multi-layered linguistic reality of *Ulysses*, feet are therefore made for walking, but they also measure the pace of verbal expression, of elocution, and in their wake a strong poetic principle takes root in the prose work. It may even not be too far-fetched to distinguish in the filigree of the foot-and-mouth disease so stubbornly denounced by Deasy in “Nestor” (*U* 32-33) an embedded allusion to the question of poetry, where mouth reminds us of inspiration, and foot is once again connected to pace and rhythm.

5. Leaden voices

Clearly, such refinements and sustained attentions to the oralities of poetry, breath and rhythm are no small paradox in a chapter mostly dedicated to print and to the technicalities of printing, and full of printed and printing characters: the ones on the newspaper pages on one hand, and the leaden types of typographic letters on the other.¹² One can only think that Dante's presence in a deliberately modernist chapter dedicated to print may well be an invitation to reflect on the tensions between the language of the voice and the language of the page. Perhaps the strange adjective that appears near the end of "RHYMES AND REASONS", "leadenfooted", points precisely at this tension as the locus of textual productivity. In the compound "leadenfooted", *leaden* are obviously the typographical characters; as to the feet, their poetic relevance is now hopefully obvious. The final utterance of the section runs: "mouth south: tomb womb". Through the adjective "leadenfooted" Joyce compacts his investigation of rhythmical language and oralities with the parallel attention to the very contemporary world of typography and industrial printing. It is probably not coincidental that, in the rhymed utterances mentioned above, the letter "O" should be so relevant: presumably a way to focus the reader's attention on the double value of the "O", exclusively oral in the exclamation "O!" and intensely visual in its many occurrences as a circle on the page.

6. The *Conversation on Dante* between Joyce and Mandel'stam

The reasons of rhyme in "Aeolus" establish poetry not only as a theme constantly touched upon by the novel, but also as a mode of writing prose. In his intimacy with Dante, Joyce proves a close companion to an important poet and fellow reader of Dante, Ossip Mandel'stam, author of the fascinating *Conversation on Dante*, written in 1933 but published only in 1967, because of the poet's hostility to the Soviet regime.

Exile is indeed a common biographical destiny for Dante, Mandel'stam and Joyce, which accounts for the deep interest both the Russian poet and the Irish novelist showed for the medieval Tuscan writer. What, however, constitutes the most striking resemblance between these two authors, who were never able to meet nor to read each other's work, is their passion for language, and in particular for the Italian tongue. Both Mandel'stam and Joyce acquired a great part of their knowledge of Italian by reading Dante in the original.¹³ The cadences of the Italian's verse thus

merge into Mandel'stam's and Joyce's language, respectively in poetry and prose.

The two writers' readings of Dante show at least three main points of striking resemblance. First of all, the importance attributed to walking and its rhythms: at the beginning of the *Conversation* Mandel'stam wonders "how many leather soles, how many pairs of sandals, Dante consumed during his poetic activity, beating the ovine paths of Italy".¹⁴ This consideration is followed by a statement which resonates strangely with Joyce's uses of the *Divine Comedy* in "Aeolus":

Inferno and even more *Purgatorio* celebrate human walking, measure and pace, the foot and its shape. . . . To Dante the step, conjoint with breath and saturated with thought, is a prosodic criterion. The metric foot is inspiration, and pace is expiration.¹⁵

To Mandel'stam as to Joyce, steps are the walking expression of poetic orality and lead directly to the reasons of rhythm and rhyme, a strikingly apt quality for two writers whose lives were determined by endless moving, more or less willingly, through Eastern and Western Europe, respectively.

The second common element in Mandel'stam's and Joyce's readings concerns the relationship between master and disciple, seen by the Russian poet as depending again on walking and its pace:

Culture is a school of very rapid associations. You are able to catch in a flash, you are ready to receive allusions: here's Dante's favourite praise. From the Dantesque point of view the master is younger than the disciple because "he runs faster". . . . A quotation is not an extract. A quotation is a cicada. Its main feature is never to remain silent. Once it has grasped the air, it will no more let it go. Erudition is far from coinciding with the reminding keyboard which makes up the substance culture is made of.¹⁶

The relationship between Stephen and Bloom can be easily read along these lines; the two can be considered as master and disciple at the same time, according to the context. As far as poetry is concerned, Stephen is the master because he is faster than the latter in editing glimpses of culture that can help him in his search for a poetic identity and for a language suiting his aesthetic purposes.

Much more indeed than the other readers of Dante in the 1920's and 30's, namely T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Joyce and Mandel'stam

celebrate the materiality of Dante's poetic language, his relation with the body and movement, and they promote a conception of poetry as directly springing first from the most elementary form of life, that is breath, and second from the most elementary form of movement, walking.

Last but not least, Dante turns out to be for both writers the first great artificer of synaesthesia. Mandel'stam has no doubt about Dante's preminence in this regard as well: "Well before Rimbaud's colour alphabet, Dante has indissolubly linked chromatism with the phonetic fullness of articulated discourse".¹⁷ Rimbaud with his *Voyelles*, and in general the synaesthetic sensibility of symbolism, are crucial in Joyce's relation with poetic language and have lasting and deeply rooted consequences on the prose of *Ulysses*, a novel in constant dialogue with poetry in general and Dante in particular. In the Dantesque quotation in "Aeolus", coloured images are central to convey the metatextual discourse on rhyme. The three girls are dressed in colours—"in green, in rose, in russet, *per l'aere perso* in mauve, in purple"—as opposed to the darkness of the "leadenfooted" character "underdarkneath the night".

In "Lestrygonians" Bloom dwells again on the subject of rhyme and actually casts himself in the part of the poet when the flight of two gulls inspires in him the following rhyming lines:

*The hungry famished gull.
Fly over the water dull.*

That is how poets write. The similar sounds. But then
Shakespeare has no rhymes: blank verse. The flow of language
it is. (*U* 145-146)

A confirmation, were it needed, that poetry is indeed the stuff of *Ulysses*.

Notes

¹ Lucia Boldrini, *Joyce, Dante and the Poetics of Literary Relations: Language and Meaning in "Finnegans Wake"* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

² Mary Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981).

³ Umberto Eco, *The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (Tulsa: Tulsa UP, 1982) and *Talking of Joyce* (Dublin: University College Dublin, 1998).

⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922 edition), ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 133; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia. Inferno*, ed. Natalino Sapegno, 3 vols. (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1955) 61, ll. 92-96.

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in *The Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, vol. 9, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886) 46.

⁷ Reynolds 95.

⁸ Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey* (London: Faber, 1972) 72.

⁹ Reynolds 95.

¹⁰ James Mercanton, "The Hours of James Joyce", *Kenyon Review* 24 (1962) 715.

¹¹ Mercanton 715.

¹² In this regard, see Giovanni Cianci, "Typography Underrated: A Note on 'Aeolus'", in *Assessing the 1984 "Ulysses"*, eds. C. George Sandulescu and Clive Hart (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1986) 16-21.

¹³ Joyce is quoted as saying "I learned my Italian from Dante and Dino" (*JJII* 187). See Alessandro Francini Bruni, *Joyce intimo spogliato in piazza: un'indiviolata caricatura dello scrittore irlandese: detta, sotto gli auspici dell'Associazione della stampa della Venezia Giulia, nella sala della Società filarmonico-drammatica, la sera del 22 febbraio 1922* (Trieste: La editoriale libreria, 1922).

¹⁴ Ossip Mandel'stam, *Conversazione su Dante* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 2003) 51, my translation.

¹⁵ Mandel'stam 51, my translation.

¹⁶ Mandel'stam 51, my translation.

¹⁷ Mandel'stam 138, my translation.