Comparing translations of a passage from Dante

On my blog (“The Face of the Other”— http://faceofother.blogspot.com) I’ve asked what translations of Dante (especially of his Commedia) people prefer. I suggested that as part of our discussion we might compare particular passages. Here’s a passage we could start with, from the end of 27 of the Purgatorio:

Dante’s Italian:

Come la scala tutta sotto noi
fu corsa e fummo in su ‘l grado superno,
in me ficcò Virgilio li occhi suoi,
e disse: “Il temporal foco e l’etterno
veduto hai, figlio; e se’ venuto in parte
dov’ io per me più oltre non discerno.

Tratto t’ho qui con ingegno e con arte;
lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce;
fuor se’ de l’erte vie, fuor se’ de l’arte.

Vedi lo sol che ’n fronte ti riluce;
vedi l’erbette, i fiori e li arbuscelli
che qui la terra sol da sé produce.

Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli
che, lagrimando, a te venir mi fenno,
seder ti puoi e puoi andar tra elli.

Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per ch’io te sovra te corono e mitrio.”

John Ciardi translates it as follows:

When we had climbed the stairway to the rise
of the topmost step, there with a father’s love
Virgil turned and fixed me with his eyes.

"My son," he said, "you now have seen the torment
of the temporal and the eternal fires;
here, now, is the limit of my discernment.

I have led you here by grace of mind and art;
now let your own good pleasure be your guide;
you are past the steep ways, past the narrow part.

See there the sun that shines upon your brow,
the sweet new grass, the flowers, the fruited vines
which spring up without need of seed or plow.

Until those eyes come gladdened which in pain
moved me to come to you and lead your way,
sit there at ease or wander through the plain.

Expect no more of me in word or deed:
here your will is upright, free, and whole,
and you would be in error not to heed
whatever your own impulse prompts you to:

lord of yourself I crown and mitre you.”

Laurence Binyon give this:

When under us the whole high stair was sped
And we unto the topmost step had won,

Virgil, fixing his eyes upon me, said:

"The temporal and the eternal fire, my son,
Thou hast beheld: thou art come now to a part
Where of myself I see no farther on.

I have brought thee hither both by wit and art.
Take for thy guide thine own heart’s pleasure now.
Forth from the narrows, from the steeps, thou art.

See there the sun that shines upon thy brow;
See the young grass, the flowers and coppices
Which this soil, of itself alone, makes grow.

While the fair eyes are coming, full of bliss,
Which weeping made me come to thee before,
Amongst them thou canst go or sit at ease.

Expect from me no word or signal more.
Thy will is upright, sound of tissue, free:
To disobey it were a fault; wherefore

Over thyself I crown thee and mitre thee.”

I’d be interested in seeing other translations of this passage—by Mandelbaum, Hollander, or anyone else worth looking at. To go directly to the post, click here: http://faceofother.blogspot.com/2007/03/comparing-translations-of-passage-from.html