I want to argue for a translation of Job xlii 6 that differs substantially from standard ones. The verse runs:

‘al-ken ‘em’as wen ihamti ‘al-‘apar wa‘eper

The RSV offers the following translation:

Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

I would render it:

Therefore I repudiate and repent of dust and ashes.

I have employed “repent of” to render nhm ‘l because it is conventional. Something like “forswear” would be preferable.

The verse has two enigmas. First, ‘m’s has no object. The RSV translators interpreted the verb reflexively, but this is without support. Elsewhere the verb takes an accusative naming the person, act or thing rejected or despised. A quasi-reflexive meaning is formed by adding by, nps or the like. BDB, to be sure, lists four other instances of this verb without an object (Job vii 16, xxxiv 33, xxxvi 5, Ezek. xxi 18 (dub.)), but none of these are genuinely reflexive. The RSV translators found it necessary to supply an object in every case.

In our sentence “dust and ashes” might be its implicit object. Grammatically the prepositional phrase is attached to the second verb (nhm’t). Perhaps the listener and reader, feeling the lack of a direct object for ‘m’s, made the nouns of the prepositional phrase its object as well, as we would in English. However that may be, the listener or reader has to suspend judgment as to the meaning of ‘m’s until he determines the meaning of the second verb and its object.

The meaning of nhm’t ‘l is the other enigma of the verse. In the history of translation it has apparently not been experienced as a difficulty. ‘l-‘pr w’pr has been understood as the place where Job will enact his repentence. Why this has seemed so obvious is difficult to fathom, for it is without parallel in Biblical usage.
The pointing of *nhmt* fits both Piel and Niphal stems, but the meaning of the Piel does not suit the context, so we must construe our case as a Niphal. The majority of the instances of *nhm* in the Niphal mean “change one’s mind” or “reverse a decision,” as in Exod. xiii 17, 1 Sam. xv 29, Jer. iv 28, xv 6, xx 16, Ezek. xxiv 14, Joel ii 14, Jonah iii 9, Zech. viii 14, Pss. cxi 45, cx 4. Since God is the subject of most of these, there is no suggestion of guilt or remorse. When *nhm* is followed by the preposition ‘l (or occasionally ‘r), the meaning is to change one’s mind about something one had planned to do: Exod. xxxii 12, 14, Jer. xviii 8, 10, Amos vii 3, 6, Joel ii 13, Jonah iii 10, iv 2; with ‘r: 2 Sam xxiv 16 (with ‘l in 1 Chron. xxi 15), Jer. xxvi 3, 13, 19, xlii 10. In most of these examples God will or will not change his mind about evil (judgment) that he plans to do to his people. In Jer. viii 6, the combination refers to human repentence of a moral-religious character, and the object is “evil,” that which is repented of.

The rendering of *nihamti ‘al-‘apar wa‘eper* as “repent upon dust and ashes” does not correspond to the pattern of usage found elsewhere 2). On the analogy to the meaning of *nhm* ‘l elsewhere, our passage should be translated “I repent of dust and ashes,” that is, cease wallowing in dust and ashes.

The only serious problem with this proposal is the difference between “dust and ashes” and the other objects of the verb. Perhaps “dust and ashes” can be taken as a concrete image standing for an action, lamenting or mourning. ’pr is almost always spoken of in connection with sorrow and mourning, and ’pr often is. When Job says that he forswears dust and ashes, he means that he will remove himself from the physical setting associated with mourning and lamentation and cease what he has been doing from ii 8.

One final question needs to be addressed: the import of Job xlii 2-6 as a whole. The standard contemporary interpretation of this final utterance of Job is that he recants and shows remorse for what he said prior to God’s answer. God’s interrogation is thought to have overwhelmed him and perhaps even convinced him that he had spoken in pride. This interpretation needs to be challenged because the final speech can be better understood as praise.

Verses 2 and 5 are clearly praise, the former of God’s power and the latter of his wonderful revelation. Verses 3a and 4 are probably intrusions, for they are appropriate to God, not Job, but they are not introduced as citations. If they are not original, the only utterance