

Translator's Notes: *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*

by John Ciardi

When the violin repeats what the piano has just played, it cannot make the same sounds and it can only approximate the same chords. It can, however, make recognizably the same “music,” the same air. But it can do so only when it is as faithful to the self-logic of the violin as it is to the self-logic of the piano.

Language too is an instrument, and each language has its own logic. I believe that the process of rendering from language to language is better conceived as a “transposition” than as a “translation,” for “translation” implies a series of word-for-word equivalents that do not exist across language boundaries any more than piano sounds exist in the violin.

The notion of word-for-word equivalents also strikes me as false to the nature of poetry. Poetry is not made of words but of word-complexes, elaborate structures involving, among other things, denotations, connotations, rhythms, puns, juxtapositions, and echoes of the tradition in which the poet is writing. It is difficult in prose and impossible in poetry to juggle such a complex intact across the barrier of language. What must be saved, even at the expense of making four strings do for eighty-eight keys, is the total feeling of the complex, its *gestalt*.

The only way I could see of trying to preserve that *gestalt* was to try for a language as close as possible to Dante's, which is in essence a sparse, direct, and idiomatic language, distinguishable from prose only in that it transcends every known notion of prose. I do not imply that Dante's is the language of common speech. It is a much better thing than that: it is what common speech would be if it were made perfect.

One of the main sources of the tone of Dante's speech is his revolt from the Sicilian School of Elegance. Nothing would be more misleading than to say that Dante's language is simple. Overwhelmingly, however, it seeks to avoid elegance simply for the state of elegance. And overwhelmingly it is a spoken tongue.

I have labored therefore for something like idiomatic English in the present rendering. And I have foregone the use of Dante's triple rhyme because it seemed clear that one rendering into English might save the rhyme or save the tone of the language, but not both. It requires approximately 1,500 triple rhymes to render *The Inferno* and even granted that many of these combinations can be used and re-used, English has no such resources of rhyme. Inevitably the language must be inverted, distorted, padded, and made unspeakable in order to force the line to come out on that third all-consuming rhyme. In Italian, where it is only a slight exaggeration to say that everything rhymes with everything else or a variant form of it, the rhyme is no problem; in English it is disaster.

At the same time some rhyme is necessary, I think, to approximate Dante's way of going, and the three-line stanzas seem absolutely indispensable because the fact that Dante's thought tends to conclude at the end of each tercet (granted a very large number of run-on tercets) clearly determines the “pace” of the writing, *i.e.*, the rate at which it reveals itself to the reader. These were my reasons for deciding on the present form. Moreover, I have not hesitated to use a deficient rhyme when the choice seemed to lie between forcing an exact rhyme and keeping the language more natural.

Any theoretical remarks offered by a translator are bound to be an apology for his failures. Obviously no sane translator can allow himself to dream of success. He asks only for the best possible failure.

Translation is, in fact, the wrong word for the process of rendering from one language to another. The idea of “translation” seems to suggest that there exists in Language A some word that will equal any given word in Language B, and that the translator need only find that equivalent word and put it in place, allowing of course for something called “idiom.”

But such an assumption ignores the nature of words. The American word “daisy,” for example, labels the same flower the French intend by *la marguerite* and the Italians by *la margherita* – or at least approximately so: a botanist might be quick to say that the varieties of the European daisy are distinct from those of the American daisy. Nevertheless, those are the words one would naturally use in these three tongues for labeling any particular daisy. Semantically, that is to say, the denotations are reasonably firm.

But words consist of much more than denotation. Every word has a certain muscularity. That is to say, it involves certain speech muscles. Certainly any man who is word-sensitive is likely to linger over the difference between the long-drawn Italian *carina* and the common, though imprecise, American usage “cute” when applied to an attractive child. The physical gestures the two invite are at least as different as the Italian child’s good-bye wave (“*Fa ciao, carina*”) with the palm of the hand up, and the American child’s (“Wave bye-bye”) with the back of the hand up. The very difference in ethnic concept between different peoples moves the words about in their mouths. As I once wrote in a poem I am not moved to cherish particularly but whose point remains:

My mother facing a day in Avellino
Tasted it: *una dolce giornata*.

My wife’s mother in Protestant Missouri
Judges it: *it is a good day*.

These are two distinct kinds of muscularity. Other kinds could certainly be adduced. And all must function in the effort one must make to find truly equivalent language.

Every word, moreover, has a history. Sometimes the history changes out from under the word very rapidly. English “broadcast” once meant specifically “a way of sowing” and was borrowed by radio as an analogy. Meanwhile new machines all but eliminated the old methods of broadcast-sowing, and the word has just about lost all farm-connotation. What to do then when, to shift examples, one language uses a word denoting anxiety whose essential meaning is based on the history of medieval torture, when the only word in another language that will render that denotation is based on the history of, say, the internal-combustion engine? Pure hypotheticals, to be sure, but how does one find equivalents in any language for such English words as “billingsgate,” or “to burke,” or “boycott”? – words whose meanings are inseparable from the local scene and local history in which the English language evolved?

Every word has an image locked into its roots. The English word “daisy” is a contraction of the earlier “day’s eye,” which is to say, “the eye of day” – a lovely root image. *Marguerite* and *margherita* also have a root connotation of all girls named Margaret/Marguerite/Margherita – and

bless them all as lovely images. Behind that first suggestion, too, lies the true root of the Greek *margaron*, meaning “pearl” – another fine image. But what happened to “day’s eye”? Not that there is any point here in arguing which is the more attractive root image. The point is simply that they are different. And what then does one do for equivalent words?

And to point out only one more of many possibilities within the nature of words, every word connotes a certain level of usage. Italian *antipatico*, for example, is so common a usage that it falls readily from the lips of even very small children, whereas English “antipathetic” is a relatively learned word, and certainly not one for the normal nursery. What weight does one give this element of word usage in seeking equivalents?

We tend to use only the top slice of a word in speech usage. But once the other levels of a word are allowed into consideration, no word is a simple thing. It becomes a complex. But if a single word is a complex, then a phrase is a complex of complexes, and a line is a complex of complexes of complexes, and a stanza, and a poem are...and so forth and so on.

I don’t honestly know how one makes a theory of translation out of these musings and bewilderments. All I can truthfully say is that such equivalence as I have managed has happened by feel, and that I am more comfortable within specifications than I am in trying to defend theories that distort under every effort to state them.

I began to peck away at Dante because I could find no translation that satisfied my sense of the original. Let nothing in that statement imply that I have now satisfied my sense. When I read the original with my rendering in mind I have no choice but to feel sad. When I read any other translation with my rendering in mind, I feel relatively happy. No one, of course, should trust my sense of it, but I must. Whose sense can I trust else?

In looking at other translations I was distressed by the fact that none of them seemed to be using what I understood to be Dante’s vulgate. They seemed rather to fall into literary language, the very sort of thing Dante took such pains to avoid. And none of them, above all else, gave me a satisfying sense of Dante’s pace, which is to say, “the rate at which the writing reveals itself to the reader.”

I began to experiment out of curiosity. I rendered a number of Cantos in *terza rima* and satisfied myself that it could not do. English is a rhyme-poor language. It was obvious to me that the price of forcing that third rhyme into place in English was ruinous to the language. There are approximately 4,500 lines in each third of *The Divine Comedy*. One must find 1,500 triple-rhymes to render each third into *terza rima*, and English has no such rhyme resources. Mechanically, it can be done, but not in anything approximating spoken American-English. I could see through what wrestling agonies I had put my own efforts in order to force the language around to that third rhyme, and the same agonies are immediately visible in every extant version in *terza rima*.

Abandoning all thought of *terza rima*, I tried blank verse. But there the language and its movement went askew on another characteristic of English verse. The blank-verse paragraph in English, as nearly as I can determine, runs to an average of about fourteen lines. (Interestingly, the paragraph of Pope’s couplets runs to about the same average.) If one thinks of the structure of pauses in a poem as subtotaling points, I take that fact of **English** poetry to mean that blank verse pauses to complete its sub-thoughts about once every fourteen lines. But Dante sets his pauses

(which is to say, his periods, or more usually his semicolons, or sometimes his commas) every three lines, and I take that fact to be, above all else, what determines the pace and sparseness of Dante's writing. If the fundamental unit runs from ten to twenty lines, there is room for all sorts of digression or even self-indulgence. An extra line or two, an extra image or two, an extra flourish or two, are easily possible. But if one is forcing his lines to some sort of summary every three lines, that fact must work to squeeze out all flab. Dante does, to be sure, write any number of run-on tercets, but the three-line unit remains firm as the rigorous basic measure of his way of writing. This writing is of bone and sinew.

I went on to experiment with all sorts of other possibilities. In another effort at *terza rima* I tried assonantal rhyming. Assonance may yet be a possibility for someone else. I can only report that I do not favor it as an English rhyme-method. For a time I tried English couplets, thinking they might be made to render an Italian tercet: they cannot, at least as a sustained measure. I tried various sorts of ballad stanzas: they had no hope of being for anything but the wastebasket. Then I hit on what I may as well call dummy *terza rima*, which is to say, I kept the three-line unit but rhymed only the first and third lines. And with that it began to happen, at least for me. I could persuade myself that what came was reasonably English, reasonably poetry, and reasonably faithful to Dante's pace and to his special way of using language. What is reasonable can, of course, include an awareness of failure, but I could begin to believe this was a good enough failure to be worth investing in.

I had no theory at that point – only a feeling. And I still have no theory I can securely defend. The rest was trial and error: something like learning to walk a tightrope: if one can only manage to grab the rope when he fails, and if he can then manage to get back up, and if he falls only forward, there is always the possibility that he will make it to the other side. To let a single example do for all, the process can be illustrated in the following passage from Canto VIII of *The Purgatorio* which reads, in the original:

*Ben discerneva in lor la testa bionda;
Ma nella faccia l'occhio si smarria
Come virtù ch'a troppo si confonda.*

The passage is part of a description of two angels that descend to Dante and his companions in the Valley of the Negligent Rulers. It is a simple enough passage as Dante goes, and almost any man with a sense of Latin roots can puzzle out most of the meaning. *Virtù* (virtue) in the Latin sense of “faculty/power/ability/generative force” (cf. “by virtue of the power invested in me”) is perhaps the one word that might trip the unwary. How is one to render such a passage?

In Pidgin-Literal it might read:

Well was I discerning in them the head blond
But in the face the eye dazed itself
Like a virtue that at too much confounds itself.

Obviously no rendering into any known language has taken place. A more idiomatic literal rendering might read:

Well did I discern the blondness of their heads
but in their faces my eye was dazed
like a faculty which is overcome by excess.

But though such a rendering is idiomatic enough, phrase by phrase, the sequence of phrases is not really intelligible as a communication in English. The passage is still in no spoken tongue but, rather, in an unspeakable hodgepodge neither Italian nor English. So one might work toward a more speakable, which is to say, communicable equivalent:

I saw clearly that their heads were blond,
but looking into their faces my eyes grew dazed
like an overstimulated faculty of the senses.

That begins to be closer, but now one runs into a peculiarity of the way Dante describes the workings of his senses. If one has been reading from the beginning of *The Divine Comedy* he is used to this way Dante has of describing such matters. By this point in my rendering I have had occasion to supply a number of footnotes on this usage. It is, in fact, a small stylistic formality: Dante often describes the workings of his eyes as if he could focus on, say, the forehead of a distant figure, seeing nothing else, and as if he then had deliberately to move his eyes downward in order to focus on the figure's nose. It is some such thing he is saying here: staring at the angels he can see that their hair is blond, but when he looks down from their hair to their faces, his eyes grow dazzled, overstimulated by the light that shines from them. Obviously, it would be impossible, at any distance, not to be blinded by such light, and the literalist has firm grounds for arguing that Dante could not have seen the hair of the angels. Such a device must be accepted as a well-established mannerism.

With that much understood, then, the passage may be simplified. Were one simply communicating Dante's thought in an English prose paraphrase it might be stated: "I could make out clearly that their hair was blond, but when I focused on their faces, my eyes were dazzled by the excess of light they gave forth."

Let the rendering remain ragged: it contains the essential intent. But the passage is written as poetry and it must be rendered within meter, rhyme, and in a language sufficient to its emotional intent. And after much scratching and scrambling for a rhyme (and it sometimes happens that the very rhyme you want has been used in the preceding tercet and may not, therefore, be repeated so soon) I came up with the following:

I could distinctly see their golden hair,
but my eyes drew back defeated from their faces
like a sense perceiving more than it can bear.

Such a rendering covers the law perhaps, and at times I have been forced to leave some of Dante in no better state than that, but certainly it is nothing to be satisfied with. I especially do not like the feel of that last line in English. As nearly as I can say it, the English word choice is being forced from Dante's Italian rather than being developed in sequence by the normal flow of English.

Whereupon, after more floundering, I came to rest on:

I could see clearly that their hair was gold,
but my eyes drew back bedazzled from their faces,
defeated by more light than they could hold.

It is simple enough that there are all sorts of things literally wrong with such a passage. The original says “the head” and the passage says “hair.” There is nothing, at least explicitly, in the original that says the eye “drew back.” *Virtú* has disappeared, and “defeated” is certainly not the same thing as “confounded.”

And when the charge is put in those terms I have no defense and very little, if any, theory on which to base a defense, nor any hope of arguing that I have achieved a perfect rendering. All I can really argue, as lamely as need be, is that within the essential failure, this final version *feels* enough like the original, and *feels* enough like English poetry (or at least verse) to allow me to conclude that I have probably caught it as well as I shall be able to. There must be some theory of translation implicit in these feelings, but in practice I suspect any translation turns out to be a long series of such individual cases, each met on its own grounds, and that each is finally settled by *feel*. What has any poet to trust more than that *feel* of the thing? Theory concerns him only until he picks up his pen, and it begins to concern him again as soon as he lays it down, but when the pen is in his hand he has to write by itch and twitch, though certain his itch and twitch are intimately conditioned by all his past itching and twitching, and by all his past theorizing about them.