

The first American translation of the *Divine Comedy* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the literary event of 1867. Since then, there have been countless others. Some emphasize the formal accuracy of the original rhyming *terza rima*, some sacrifice formal elements for the idiomatic syntax of prose. Some elevate equivalence over a strict adherence to the narrative images and word choices of the original. Every decision is made in the service of trying to approximate the emotional eloquence of the original Italian, where language travels up and down the poetry thermometer from the elevated to the crude. Each translator of *The Inferno* hopes to capture the essence of Dante's imagined journey through hell, a journey at times harrowing, at times exquisitely poignant. Each translation is both an homage, and a thieving betrayal. What I am proposing to do is to create a translation that is a compromise between conversational prose and strict *terza rima*: non-rhyming triplets where internal and slight-rhyme interact with alliteration to create a sense of sonic momentum that convinces the reader of the inevitability of each subsequent line. A translation that strives to be thoroughly contemporary, in that it captures a sense of the postmodern 21st C, while remaining true to Dante's vision. To that end, I will take liberties with language but only in the hope that such liberties will make the text even more persuasive to the casual and jaded iPod, MTV, and Comedy Central contemporary ear. To take such liberties feels audacious but the audacity grows out of the desire to refresh the translation of a masterpiece that is needed as much now as ever before. Such a translation will ultimately be, at least in part, an interpretation. However, I hope not to veer so far astray that I compromise the power of the original but only to satisfy what I perceive as a need to reawaken the public's appetite for the serious consideration of what it means to be an individual. What it means to think allegorically. What it means to transform the past in a manner that doesn't domesticate it but instead converts it into a work that feels pressing and necessary. I've relied for comparison on multiple translations: Longfellow (1867); Melville Best Anderson (1921); Lawrence Binyon (1933); John Aitken Carlyle (1933); Charles Singleton (1970); John Ciardi (1977); and Mark Musa (1984). I've superimposed on those — with the aid of a shabby familiarity with Italian and an excellent Italian dictionary — my own compositional strategies.

I have recently begun the translation and will shortly have completed Canto I. By the time of the residency I hope to have completed the first ten cantos and would use the residency to translate Canto XI through XXXIV. My publisher, Grove Press, has already expressed interest in publishing the finished work. I include here lines 37 - 105 of Canto I to demonstrate the tone of the translation:

It was daybreak, the sun in the sign of Aries, the same
 As it was when the first clock started, the spring
 Set by the hand of a love supreme 39

That simultaneously set all things beautiful-starry in motion.
 Daybreak, spring set, all disarmed my fear
 Of the furry freckled beast 42

By holding out the promise that I could skirt it.
 A promise that hollowed
 When I caught sight of nothing less than a lion. 45

He seemed to be dead-set against me, head high
 And gluttonous hungry. It made not only me
 But the very air around him seem nervous. 48

And after him, a she-wolf whose emaciated frame spoke
 Of countless unappeased hungers and having
 Brought unhappiness to many already. 51

Seeing her bitch-kitty ogress aspect,
 My pitty-pat heart went weak and I
 Lost sight of the hope of climbing any higher. 54

Like one who at a casino wheel whispers nothings
 To his winnings and when he looses whimpers,
 "How did we come to this?" and wrings his hands, 57

So was I, just like that sad sack, as the truculent beast
 Inch by inch, drove me back to the edge of the place
 Where the sun's tongue now served as a stopper for its mouth. 60

While I was falling backward into ruin
 I dimly made out someone approaching
 Who when he spoke made the faint sound of someone 63

Unused to speaking. There on the arid plain, I said, "Buddy,
 Can you spare a dime? Whichever you are,
 Ghostie or tangible man." 66

I was once a man, he said, but now I'm not.
 My mother, of Lombardy blood, was born in Mantua;
 Ditto my daddy. I was born late in the day 69

Of Julio Caesar and lived in Rome under the sword
 Of good Augustus, back then when the gods were false

And lying in wait to ensnare us.	72
I was a poet, singing songs of Aeneus, son Of righteous Anchises, who found his way back by boat From Troy after vain Ilium had been burned black to soot.	75
But you, why do you persist in taking the trouble track? Why not climb the happy-scene rock-candy mountain Ahead of you. It's the ultimate end and means of all pleasure.	78
I said, You're Virgil, aren't you? You're that rainmaker Who creates a torrent of speech that turns into a riptide. And then I went all bashful.	81
The best and the brightest in the class Of poets, a far-famed bell, I read you and loved you and hope That what I learned then from you will now serve me well.	84
First of all the authors and Master of me, I borrowed from you And to you I owe any inkling of the little success I've been lucky to accrue.	87
Can you see the beast I had to flee? Can you save me From her? You, Mr. Superman, you Mr. Ubermesch, you Mr. Man Of the World. She makes me shake, within and without.	90
In that case, you must leave this rock And no water and the sandy road. I was by now like Niobe, all tears.	93
This Cat Girl cat that drove you back and made you cry Doesn't let anyone pet her; she'll put an end to any who try To pass her on their way through the park.	96
She's insane and insatiable, eating more just makes her more Malignant with craving. She kills all she comes in contact with. All with whom she comes.	99
She takes many to her bed and many more are coming Until the day the big dog comes And tracks her down and dastardly does her in.	102
The dog doesn't need property nor money but lives on Wisdom, love, and truthiness. He'll come When Castor and Pollux arrive dressed in matching felt caps.	105