

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 have emphasized formal accuracy by adhering to the original terza rima rhyme scheme; others have sacrificed that formal device, because of the relative paucity of rhymes in English, for non-rhyming verse. Some, convinced that no English verse, neither rhymed nor non-rhymed can adequately substitute for Dante's, have opted for the more pliable syntax of prose. Some translators have taken liberties with word choice and image in an attempt to elevate the idea of equivalence over an exacting loyalty to the archaic original. Regardless of these choices, each translator has hoped to capture the essence of Dante's imagined journey through hell, a journey at times harrowing and often exquisitely poignant. The allegory of Dante's journey from the confusion of a dark wood to the hopeful edge of purgatory, where he and Virgil exit the netherworld to once again catch sight of the stars, seems as pressing and necessary today as it did in the 1300's.

I am choosing to translate the *Inferno* because of all of the existing translations—and there have been over 700 in English—I've not been able to find one that feels contemporary in its language and yet poetic in its music. I hope to create a text that will capture a sense of the present day, the post-modern 21st century, just as Dante captured the language and mindset of his day. To this end, I've opted to substitute the dominant music of contemporary American poetry—alliteration, assonance and internal rhyme—for Dante's terza rima. And in order to better engage those who are most persuaded by the language of their own era, I've substituted, here and there, contemporary references for archaic ones. The *Inferno* continues to be a relevant poem because it addresses the most elemental question of personal and public responsibility. I'm hoping by using this

more modern music and more contemporary language, I can reawaken readers to a work that is needed as much as ever.

Walter Benjamin claimed in "The Task of the Translator" that "a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife . . . a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language." Translation is both homage and theft; each serves the purpose of keeping alive a work of world literature. The *Inferno* is a dramatic, harrowing, and often extremely witty, demonstration of the pernicious effects of corruption, of malice, of selfishness, and nefariousness. The philosophical climate of Dante's age, and geography, was Catholicism; but the issues are larger than those of a single religious belief system, and more urgent today.

I am relying for comparison on multiple translations: Longfellow (1867, Modern Library Ed, 2003); Charles Eliot Norton (1891); John D. Sinclair (Oxford U Press, 1939); Charles S. Singleton (Princeton U Press, 1970); Mark Musa (Penguin Classics, 1971); Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam Classics, 1980); Robert Hollander & Jean Hollander (2000); Ciaran Carson (New York Review of Books, 2002); Robin Kirkpatrick (Penguin Classics, 2006). I'm also using the two-volume, line-by-line translation and commentary by William Warren Vernon, *Readings of the Inferno of Dante Chiefly Based on the Commentary of Benvenuto de Imola*, written in 1864 and revised in 1906, and the separate volume *Commentary* (Princeton U Press, 1970) by Charles S. Singleton, written as a companion to his translation of the text of the *Inferno*. I'm also consulting with the Renaissance scholar Professor Joseph Loewenstein at Washington University and am reading multiple volumes of Dante criticism, and translations of Dante's critical writings.