

Which English Translation of the Divine Comedy?

By Nora Hamerman

There are at least four and maybe five different ways that translators have tackled the 14,000 line poem. New versions are coming out every year. If this is your first foray into Dante, I recommend the **Musa** or **Mandelbaum** versions, but here is a sketch of the issues involved:

- A) A prose translation that attempts to literally render into English the words of the original. The latest and best attempt at this is the Durling-Martinez edition in three volumes with copious notes. The original Italian is on the facing page—if you know some Italian or another Romance language this is a good choice. Published by Oxford University Press and not cheap! I like the large readable type in this edition. Also, better than the prose versions I read in college, the English is laid out in lines like poetry even though it is not poetry.
- B) A blank verse translation that follows the three-line “terza rima” scheme of the original but does not attempt to rhyme and also does not attempt to follow the metric pattern of the original. The latest example of this is the version by Robert and Jean Hollander (he was a noted Dante scholar and she is a poet). It came out in the early 2000s in a three-volume edition with the Italian on the facing page.
- C) A blank version translation that does not rhyme but keeps the meter of Dante’s poem (11 syllable lines in Dante, 10 syllable lines in English). Mark Musa’s Penguin Classics version is a good example. It does not have the Italian. The advantage is that it keeps the musical flow of Dante’s lines, while the disadvantage is that you have to add extra words in English to fill out the meter.
- D) Another very good translation of this kind is by Allen Mandelbaum. **It is available online in Columbia University’s Digital Dante website, along with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s version that follows the same principles and it has the Italian on a facing page.** If you don’t mind reading it online, this way you don’t have to buy anything! This translation is also used by the University of Virginia for their **WorldofDante** website, which has the Mandelbaum text side by side with the Italian and also includes pictures from Renaissance era manuscripts. The Longfellow translation is very beautiful but may not be the place to start reading the Comedy because you become aware that you are not just reading Dante but reading a great nineteenth century American poet.
- E) Hybrid verse translations that try to imitate some features of Dante’s rhyme scheme. The American poet John Ciardi tried rhyming the first and third lines of each stanza while not rhyming the middle line. Robert Pinsky, another American poet, translated the Inferno by using “half rhymes” or words that sort of sound similar but do not strictly rhyme. “Neither fish nor fowl” I don’t think these work very well, but there are some great moments because, after all, these translators are poets.
- F) Fully translated into Dante’s meter and rhyme scheme in English. These versions do sound beautiful but are often hard to understand (because they use rare words and twisted syntax) and occasionally distort the original meaning. The most famous of these are the one by Dorothy Sayers, a great Dante scholar, which available in a Penguin Classics paperback, and Laurence Binyon, whose version appeared in The Portable

Dante, a paperback that includes all of Dante's major writings. (Penguin has substituted the Musa translation for Binyon's so you cannot buy it anymore, though I see that one can download the PDF on the internet.) If you don't mind the sometimes archaic language, Binyon's is a wonderfully readable version by a good poet.

- G) New versions that depart from the literal original but capture its flavor and are fun to read! I love the poet Mary Jo Bang's version of Inferno and Purgatorio (still waiting for her Paradiso). She has no qualms about replacing Dante's imagery with images that relate more to our own time and world. This is not what you want to read if you are trying to literally know what Dante said, but what a great way to introduce folks who are not into medieval culture to the Divine Comedy.

Sample from Bang's version of Inferno XV:

"And like the Paduans who erect embankments /Along the Brenta to protect their towns and mansions/From the summer snow-melt runoff,

So some Frank Lloyd Wright designed these banks,/Except whoever he was, he didn't build them/As thick or as high as those. "

- H) Another 21st Century version is by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders and this one includes images drawn from modern urban life. You can find this on the Digital Dante website. It translates the poem into the modern vernacular. An example from Paradiso XXXI: "Standing there in Paradise I let my eyes wander over that stadium of souls, from row to row, up to the highest seats and back down to the lowest, trying to drink it all in."
- I) Robin Kirkpatrick's verse translation which tries to capture the music of the original. I could not find a sample on line but this video clip will show you a little of his approach and you can see why the composer Robert Kyr chose Kirkpatrick's version to set to music in his oratorio Paradiso. Kirkpatrick has a wonderful sense of sound which is so important to the poet and of course is always lost in the translations.

<https://youtu.be/SrhHir8SUac>