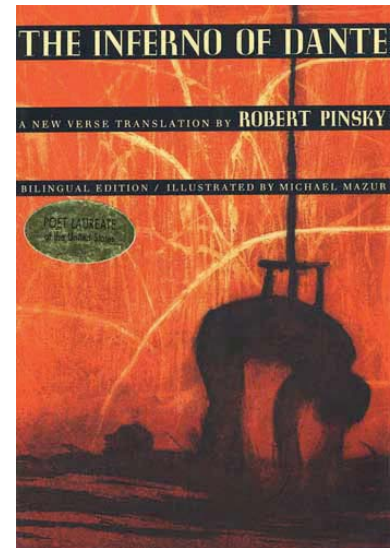




Reading Group Gold

The Inferno of Dante

by Dante; A New Verse Translation by Robert Pinsky;
Illustrated by Michael Mazur



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To the Teacher

Whether you are approaching Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* for the first time, for the first time since college, or as a teacher or scholar, you will discover in Robert Pinsky's award-winning translation not merely a fascinating work of medieval Christendom but a psychologically acute vision of sin and suffering with surprising resonance for our times. By conceiving of a fresh, unique way to maintain fidelity to Dante's poetic structure without distorting English usage or idiom, Pinsky conveys not just the literal meaning of Dante's words but their music and spirit, their subtext and emotional import. The result is a timeless, eerily recognizable Hell—and a poem that speaks to our own souls and renews our appreciation of Dante's greatness.

The *Inferno* is the first part of a three-part epic poem by Dante called the *Commedia*, or *Comedy*, and later dubbed *Commedia Divina* or *The Divine Comedy* by others. Written in the early fourteenth century, in a world poised between the theological worldview of the Middle Ages and the philosophical expanse of the Renaissance, it presents us with one of the essential human narratives: the journey of the self through the darkest side of existence toward the redemption and affirmation of the soul, from the “dark woods” of human life toward God's light.

On one level, the poem tracks the particular spiritual journey of its author. Set in the year 1300, the *Commedia* follows Dante the character on a pilgrimage from Hell to Paradise, re-creating metaphorically the course of Dante's life and the development of his ideas. Dante the poet, writing seven years after his fictional pilgrimage, depicts Dante the pilgrim as he is guided through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* by the Latin poet Virgil, and through *Paradiso* by the Lady Beatrice. Dante was renowned in Florence as a courtly love poet and was in mourning for the love of his life, Beatrice Portinari, who died in 1290. Dante had been passionately involved in Florentine politics as a member of the radical Catholic wing of the Guelph party which favored the separation of church and state. When the Guelphs lost power to another faction at the turn of the century, Dante was falsely accused of crimes against the state and exiled from his beloved Florence. In *Inferno*, he takes the opportunity to name names and assign positions in Hell to the false counselors, errant colleagues, self-interested politicians, misguided clerics, and other morally reprehensible contemporaries whose actions, he believed, led to his exile. At the same time, he revisits his own intellectual and moral life, comes to understand his sins, and in the poem's third part, *Paradiso*, emerges redeemed. With an irony that animates the poem for the contemporary reader, *Inferno* traces its author's spiritual growth even as it achieves revenge on his personal enemies—for eternity, in a sense.

The poem's vision of Hell is based on Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle's principle of retribution. This is the concept of *contrapasso*, in which the soul's suffering in Hell extends or reflects or reembodies the sin that predominated it: adulterous lovers are thrown about in a perpetual storm, murderers are boiled in blood, those who succumbed to anger tear at one another's naked bodies, etc. This vision of Hell is grounded as well in the medieval belief in a rigorous divine justice. In this endeavor Pinsky neither abandoned terza rima nor tried to reproduce the rhymes of the Italian. Instead, he sought a reasonable English equivalent, by defining rhyme loosely so as to let



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To the Teacher Continued

English approximate the richness in like sounds of Italian. But what makes the poem an enduring work of literature is not merely its manifestation of Christian doctrine and Aquinas's ideas but its astonishing, imaginative richness. Dante creates a complex tension between his poetic vision of an absolute divine justice and his pilgrim-self's actual experience of human nature and human suffering. Dante's sinners are fully and recognizably human, distinct individuals and members of society; they interest us dramatically. In the *Inferno* we recognize ourselves as we are in the world above ground and the great challenges we face in struggling to live a good life.

Dante in Translation

Dante structured his *Commedia* as an epic poem in three parts and a hundred cantos. *Inferno* contains thirty-four cantos and is set in the Lenten period of the year 1300. The action of the poem is meant to occur over the days that recall Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

In calling his poem a "comedy," Dante suggests that it ends happily and that its protagonist is not a mythologized heroic warrior but an actual contemporary person. He wrote the poem not in Latin—the standard language of the most serious literature of the period—but in the everyday Italian of his city. In this Dante resembles the authors of the Gospels, who used humble language to convey the message of Christ, and made his work generally accessible to people.

In the *Commedia*, Dante also devised *terza rima*—the pattern of interlocking rhymes (*aba bcb cdc ded*, etc.) in which the first and third lines rhyme in each tercet, or group of three lines, with the second line indicating the rhyming sound of the next tercet. This pattern, with its conclusive yet propulsive rhythm, gives the poem a muscular quality; its verses move through narrative, dialogue, cosmology, meditation, and theological musing with great conviction, carrying the reader along as the sentences cross rhymes and tercets.

These two essential elements of the poem's structure—the use of colloquial speech and *terza rima*—have always posed great challenges to those who attempt to translate the *Commedia* into English. *Terza rima* relies for its strength on the Italian language's rhythm and its richness in rhyming words. English has far fewer rhymes than Italian, but many more synonyms; because of this, translators in search of rhyming synonyms have often resorted to the use of words no English speaker would actually say, thus making the translated poem sound awkwardly formal. For centuries, translators have sacrificed meaning to music or vice versa. The resulting versions have been either literally accurate, but not effective as poems in their own right, or stilted and archaic in their use of English and thus incapable of conveying the power and momentum of the original.

Robert Pinsky's approach to these challenges was based in an effort to recreate Dante's poem in plain English while also conveying some of Dante's verbal music. Poetry, in Pinsky's view, is a technology of language's sounds, and since one language's sounds cannot be those of another, poetry is in this sense essentially untranslatable. "I wanted to make it as accurate as I could," Pinsky says of the beginning of his undertaking. "After working on a very little of it, I got a strong notion that I could also make it sound like a poem in English."

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Dante in Translation Continued

in like sounds of Italian. He defines rhyme by like terminal consonants, no matter how much the vowel may vary. Thus there are such “rhymed” triads as *both/forth/mouth* and *neck/snake/alack*. Pinsky’s translation runs the sentences freely across the ends of lines and tercets; the reader’s voice also should run freely, not treating the end of a line as a stop. Within the idiomatic flow of Pinsky’s English are sentences that can be read with pleasure.

Praise

“Splendid . . . Pinsky succeeds in creating a supple American equivalent for Dante’s vernacular music where many others have failed. This translator is first and foremost a poet.”—Edward Hirsch, *The New Yorker*

“Robert Pinsky’s gifts as a poet, a wild imagination disciplined by an informed commitment to technical mastery, are superbly well suited to the *Inferno*’s immense demands. Pinsky has managed to capture the poem’s intense individuality, passion, and visionary imagery. This translation is wonderfully alert to Dante’s strange blend of fierceness and sympathy, clear-eyed lucidity and heart-stopping wonder. It is now the premier modern text for English-language readers to experience Dante’s power.”—Stephen Greenblatt

“A brilliant success . . . Alive with forward motion . . . His stylistic fusion of the realistic and the sublime comes close to reproducing in English not only Dante’s lyric grace and grave eloquence but also what Goethe called his ‘repulsive and often disgusting greatness.’ ”—Bernard Knox, *The New York Review of Books*

A Conversation with Robert Pinsky

What is the primary meaning of the Inferno for you?

I think of the *Inferno* as a work about depression: that is, about the defects souls create in themselves. It begins with Dante the pilgrim feeling dispirited in Canto I about the defects in his own soul. When the *Inferno* proper begins in Canto II, the first thing we see Dante the pilgrim do is become discouraged: he despairs as a pilgrim at the magnitude of the journey he has just agreed to undertake. I take that despair to represent also Dante’s fear as an author, his possible discouragement at the magnitude of the ambitious poem he has decided to write.

What was it about this medieval Christian poem that so obsessed you?

The first thing that obsessed me was the sheer technical pleasure of devising an English *terza rima*. It may be that in some way I was responding to the profound themes of the work, but consciously I was completely absorbed by the puzzle-solving challenge, and I had the delicious love of difficulty that one can get from a really excellent game or puzzle.

As I understand the classic Thomist or Augustinian doctrine of sin, sin, like Hell itself, is a negation, an absence—the way cold is the absence of heat energy and darkness the absence of light energy. Evil is the absence of moral energy. And this vacuum, or privation, hurts. In keeping with this idea, the punishment or suffering doesn’t merely fit the crime, it is the crime. The soul tears a little hole in itself, creating a dead space or miniature hell, a terrible absence. Dante had an astonishing imagination for concrete, convincing, sensitive depictions of the many different ways we souls can wound ourselves.



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A Conversation with Robert Pinsky Continued

Why are the tercets separated by spaces in your translation, though they aren't in the Italian?

Each language has its own characteristic sounds and syntax and vocabulary. Italian for example uses more syllables than English does for many phrases. *Via diritta* and *selva obscura* have five syllables each. Respectively translated, *right road* and *dark wood* have two syllables each. Such difference suggests that the form of translation must be an equivalent, not a replica. The English sentences running across the lines and tercets seem to me to require that much more of a visual hint about the form, something suggesting that it is related to the partial rather than the full rhyme. It's also a typographical convenience for a book with the Italian and English on facing pages. With its fewer syllables, English requires fewer lines. The spaces help the two languages to stay roughly parallel on facing printed pages.

How did you arrive at your unique solution to the challenge of Dante's terza rima? Did you try any other approaches?

No, I didn't try any other approaches. I began the first canto I worked on, Canto XXVIII, using exactly the method I used for the whole poem. It was an intuitive, almost casual choice, barely noticed, very much the way one begins a poem.

Then you went back to the beginning?

I did Cantos XXVIII and XX, and I was hooked. I didn't know how to stop working on it. I worked on airplanes, I started thinking about rhymes in the middle of conversations, I was like a kid with an enticing new video game. I fell asleep in bed at night telling myself, "Just one more tercet." Sometimes I drifted off with the pen in my hand and a photocopy of the Italian on my chest.

Is there a correspondence between the pattern of terza rima and the elaborate moral patterning of Dante's Hell?

Clearly, part of Dante's imagination was moved to make vast, branching patterns like the corridors and tunnels of a computer game. The individual souls and geometrical structures of the *Commedia* seem to stretch out in countless directions.

Do you plan to translate the rest of Dante's Commedia—the Purgatorio and/or Paradiso?

Maybe someday, but not right away.

Has the Inferno—both the poem and the act of translating it—affected your own poetry?

It certainly has—the way such a thorough reading of any great work has to affect one. For a while I thought its effect on me was indirect and hard to define. Then I noticed that one of my recent poems, "The Ice Storm," in memory of my poker friend Bernie Fields, was written in three-line stanzas and is spoken by a dead person who addresses me.



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Questions for Discussion

1. Robert Pinsky has described the process of translation as “always a compromise,” as “never complete,” as “an activity in which you know you’re going to fail.” What do you think he means by this? Do you agree with his own assessment that his completed translation is “above all a poem” and “a work of metrical engineering?” Is the *Inferno* in English essentially a different poem from what it is in its original language? What aspects of the poem seem to you to be most “translatable?” Which least?
2. On its face, the *Inferno* dramatizes the medieval Christian belief in a literal Hell, where sinners are punished eternally for disobeying the moral law as understood by the Church, however sympathetically human they might otherwise be. Why, in spite of this stark vision, do you think the *Inferno* has remained compelling and vital—and even beloved—to so many twentieth-century readers? Do you think we respond to the poem differently than fourteenth-century readers did? How do the very different circumstances of contemporary Western culture influence our reading of the poem?
3. The pilgrim Dante’s first meeting in Hell is with Francesca, whose moving account of how she is seduced, in part by literature, into an act of adultery has caused many readers to question why the poet renders her so compassionately. To what extent is Dante, then renowned in Florence for his courtly love poetry, implicating himself in her fall? Why might Francesca be the first to speak in Hell? Is there a difference between the way the pilgrim Dante responds to her tale and what the poet Dante intends? Why do you think this meeting comes first in the poem?
4. Though Dante is commonly thought of as a medieval poet, thirteenth-century Florence was a democracy and Dante’s own political views stemmed from his allegiance to a faction of the Guelph party that advocated steadfast independence from both king and pope. In what ways might democratic ideals be said to manifest themselves in Dante’s vision? How does the poet reconcile them with his belief in a rigorous and hierarchical Christian moral system? By having Brutus, Cassius, and Judas share the deepest pit in Hell, does Dante imply that crimes against the state are morally equivalent to the betrayal of Christ?
5. Do you see ways in which Dante’s writing anticipates the Renaissance? What is Dante’s attitude toward human reason (see especially Canto XXVI)? How do his ideas about art as embodied in the *Commedia* differ from predominant medieval and/or Renaissance attitudes?
6. The scholar John Freccero says in the Foreword, “There is no sign of Christian forgiveness in the *Inferno*. The dominant theorem is not mercy but justice, dispensed with the severity of the ancient law of retribution.” In this view, whatever empathy the pilgrim (and the reader) feels for the sinners represents incomprehension of the Divine. In contrast, Alan Williamson has proposed in *The American Poetry Review* that “Dante [is] often at his strongest as a poet when his feelings seem to strain against the limits of his system.” In Canto XXXIII, for example, he chooses to dramatize not the sin that landed Count Ugolino in hell, but the tragic suffering of Ugolino’s innocent children. What might account for this choice? If the poem was meant to illustrate an inflexible moral theology, why might Dante have chosen to tell Ugolino’s story from a point of view that encourages empathy, when he could have chosen to have Ugolino speak instead of his own odious acts of betrayal? Do you agree that Dante’s “feelings seem to strain against the limits of his system?” How do we know what the poet feels?



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Questions for Discussion

7. Dante seems to have written the *Inferno* in part to take revenge on his own enemies. What, in his own moral cosmology, are the implications of taking justice into his own hands in this way? Is there an appropriate Circle of Hell for such a sin? Why or why not?

8. Many twentieth-century readers have been interested almost exclusively in Hell—in the *Inferno*, the first section of the poem. What are some possible implications of reading the *Inferno* in contextual isolation from *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*?

9. T.S. Eliot, among others, has asserted that the encounter with Satan in the last canto is anticlimactic. Do you think this is so? What might account for this? Do you think the poet was cognizant of it?

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