

Translating a poem from Italian

'I Pastori' by Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938)

The war hero and general 'superman' Gabriele D'Annunzio was also a famous writer who published, in profusion, plays, novels, poetry, journalism and political pamphlets. The poetry is at times beautiful, and some of it, like the poem below, is thought of as especially 'musical'.

His 'superman' life, though little to do with his poetry, is interesting. (Not all poets are boring.) During the war he flew a 700-mile pamphlet sortie to Vienna and back. After the 1918 Peace Conference he led troops to re-claim the once-Italian port of Fiume, which he briefly ruled, calling himself *Il Duce*, with a retinue of black-shirted followers – before Mussolini.

As if that weren't enough, he was also a Prince (of Montenevoso), and widely known as *Il Vate* (The Poet) or *Il Profeta* (The Prophet).

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You may know Italian, or be learning it. Whether or not that's the case, you can often work out some of the meaning of a new poem from other languages that you know: French, Spanish, Latin and so on. What's more, even when you don't know what a poem means, when it is read aloud you can hear its 'music', and pick up its rhythms and the general feel of its language.

So the first step in translating the poem is to hear it as your teacher reads it aloud.

Remember too, that many translators are not fluent in the language they translate from, and rely on someone else to do a 'word-for-word' version before they write their poem-in-English version.

I Pastori

*Settembre, andiamo. È tempo di migrare.
Ora in terra d'Abruzzi i miei pastori
lascian gli stazzi e vanno verso il mare:
scendono all'Adriatico selvaggio
che verde è come i pascoli dei monti.*

*Han bevuto profondamente ai fonti
alpestri, che sapor d'acqua natia
rimanga né cuori esuli a conforto,
che lungo illuda la lor sete in via.
Rinnovato hanno verga d'avellano.*

*E vanno pel tratturo antico al piano,
quasi per un erbal fiume silente,
su le vestigia degli antichi padri.
O voce di colui che primamente
conosce il tremolar della marina!*

*Ora lung'h'esso il litoral cammina
La greggia. Senza mutamento è l'aria.
Il sole imbionda sì la viva lana
che quasi dalla sabbia non divaria.
Isciacquo, calpestio, dolci romori.*

Ah perché non son io cò miei pastori?

Now read the poem aloud in your group, either together in chorus or with your partner or by yourself. Or you could try all three ways, to get used to how it sounds, its music and rhythms and sounds.

You may begin to sense what the poem is about. The language itself and the way in which the poem is read aloud by your teacher may suggest something about what is happening.

To help you begin to translate the poem, you will find very helpful the kind of word-for-word rough translation that translators sometimes call a 'trot'. This is a plain, literal English version of the poem, which attempts only to be accurate, not to evoke the mood or suggest the rhythm or shape of the original. The English of such a version, translated as it is from another language 'direct', will sound – like my version here – stilted and slightly unreal.

The Shepherds

September, let us go. It is time to migrate. Now in the land of the Abruzzi my shepherds leave the folds and journey towards the sea; they descend to the wild Adriatic, which is green like the mountain pastures.

They have drunk deeply at the Alpine springs, so that the taste of that native water remains in their exiled hearts for comfort, to delude (charm) their thirst for long on the way.

And they go along the old drove-paths to the plain, as if along a silent grassy river, in the footsteps of their forebears. Ah the voice of him who first recognises the trembling of the sea!

Now along the shore moves the flock. The air is motionless. The sun gilds so the living wool that it hardly appears different from the sand. Sea-washing, treading, sweet sounds.

Ah why am I not with my shepherds?

In your group, try to re-trace the 'story' of the poem and to describe its general mood. Notice the question in the last line. Is it puzzling that he says 'Let us go' at the beginning, but at the end seems to wonder why he's not with them?

It would be a good moment to go back and read the original poem again. With the English version in front of you, read it in Italian to your partner or your group, trying to speak the language as meaningfully as you can. You will find the poem begins to mean more and more.

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To move now to the actual business of translating the poem, why not try experimenting in your group with your own versions of just the first line? You may like to consider my attempt first.

Here is the original poem's first line, and then the plain English of the 'trot': *Settembre, andiamo* = *Let us go*; *E tempo di migrare* = *It is time to migrate*. The trot sounds oddly lumpy and abrupt. Can I – or you – make the English first line less abrupt, longer, more musical?

Here are some possible versions – mine – of the first phrase:

September, time to leave / let us leave / we should be leaving.

And the second:

It is / It's time / the moment to migrate / the season of / the hour of migration

So here is my suggestion for the opening lines:

September, time to leave – the hour of (our) migrating.

Does this feel right, sound right? If it does, you or your group could use it. If it doesn't, try to find something else that appeals to you. Or if you're stuck, press on and come back to it later.

Each group's or each individual's version of these two half-lines will be different. But remember, each group is making its own new poem – or poems – in English; you should feel free to experiment.

Working like this – it may be slow! – will help you find a version of the first stanza that satisfies you. You could then read your provisional version or versions to the other groups and briefly discuss what seems good or less good about them.

4

You should now be ready to try translating the rest of the poem.

Before you do though, or perhaps *as* you do, you will need to decide on matters to do with the ‘structure’ of the poem. The original is in five stanzas – plus a ‘spare’ line at the end. Do you want to keep that shape? Do you want to keep to the original line-lengths – of five stresses?

There may be too much constraint involved in trying to imitate the formal structures of the original. Rhyme may prove difficult to run throughout. You must feel free to make your own decisions (individual or group decisions) as to whether to try for a flowing free verse poem or some other form different from the original: rhyming couplets, for example, or a sonnet.

My own ear is haunted by the three, four and even five syllable words – *d’avellano, primamente, profondamente* – and by certain lines integrated musically by vowel sounds: *E vanno pel tratturo antico al piano – scendono all’Adriatico selvaggio – che quasi dalla sabbia non divaria*. So my version would have to try to be ‘musical’. But that’s not easy!

What matters is the true ring of the poem in English, and whether it catches something of the feel, tone and atmosphere of the original. Experiment, be brave, take risks – and enjoy the stimulating challenge.

Robert Hull, 2015

If you want to read more about D’Annunzio and the poem, information can be found at various sites, including:

<http://www.pensieriparole.it/poesie/poesie-d-autore/poesia-27837>>

<http://blogs.transparent.com/italian/i-pastori-di-gabriele-dannunzio/>

<http://literaryjoint.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/gabriele-dannunzio-i-pastori-shepards.html>