

## 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).

#### 1

The first stage in encouraging students to translate 'I Pastori' is to have them hear it in Italian. In a class learning Italian, the teacher should first read the whole poem aloud. Then, taking perhaps a stanza apiece, the students also could read it once or twice, in chorus in their groups or with a partner or individually – or all three ways in succession. In this way they will become familiar with the poem's rhythms, its stanzaic and rhyming structures, and perhaps even its tone – before they may know what it means.

In other contexts, an English or German class for instance, if the teacher has little or no Italian, he or she might nonetheless convey much of the 'music' of the poem by 'de-coding' the text aloud. That would be

preferable to going straight to a literal translation and working only from that.

It's worth emphasising at this point that many translators are not familiar with the languages they 'translate' from, and that many translators work with a collaborator who helps them with the literal meaning. In other words, translation is creative. Instead of considering their translating a tiresome or pointless re-working of the original they should think of the activity as an attempt to write a fine new poem in English.

### **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.  
Isciacquio, calpestio, dolci romori.*

*Ah perché non son io cò miei pastori?*

## 2

Your students will need – or at least find helpful – the support of a word-for-word, literal translation, sometimes called a ‘trot’. Below is my word-for-word translation. It might be pointed out to the students that though such a version will have none of the rhythm or music of the original, it does give the reader an idea of the poem’s meaning, and can be very useful.

### **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?*

## 3

In the Students’ Notes I describe my own experiments translating the first line – in the belief that students may pick up the idea of deploying trial and error methods to find a satisfying version.

I offer them a version of the poem’s first line. Where the trot reads *Let us go; It is time to migrate* – lumpy and abrupt, with 12 syllables to the original’s 14 – I now have my first three attempts:

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

And:

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

*Migrare* is problematic. The word here refers to a seasonal movement within one geographical region or country, from mountain to seashore, what geography books call 'transhumance'. One attempt included 'migrating':

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

The lesson here perhaps is, if students aren't happy with their version of a line, they can come back to it later.

#### 4

In other words, as your students will see, each group's or couple's or individual's version of these two half-lines will be different. Each is part of a new poem in English. Experimenting is essentially what it's all about.

This applies to the translator's other decisions: about line-lengths, stanzaic structure (or lack of it), and the use or non-use of rhyme. Is a free verse poem waiting here, or a sonnet, or a poem in rhyming couplets? 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.

I suggest at the end of the Students' Notes that certain sounds seem integral to the poem's music – particularly a group of three, four and even five syllable words: *d'avellano*, *primamente*, *profondamente*. I point out how D'Annunzio brilliantly integrates lines musically by vowel sounds – *E vanno pel tratturo antico al piano – scendono all'Adriatico selvaggio – che quasi dalla sabbia non divaria*. Such musical lines tell me my own version would need to try to be in some ways 'musical' too.

**Robert Hull, 2015**

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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://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>