

The problem with translating Dante's Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* has been touched by hundreds of translators, both human and artificial intelligence, but Dr Simon West believes there is no best translation.

Instead, the poet and Italianist encourages students to learn Italian if they truly wish to understand the beauty and depth of *La Commedia*.

"Of course that's not practical for everyone. A lot of people want a first introduction or step before they go on to learn Italian so translation is certainly important in that role," Dr West said.

This month Dr West will touch on some of the challenges for translators of Dante at a keynote for Australian Catholic University's annual *Il Sommo Poeta: Dante Alighieri Symposium*.

Dr West said it wasn't just the Italian language that gets lost in translation.

The *Divine Comedy* is written in *terza rima*, a rhyming verse form invented by Dante specifically for the *Divine Comedy* which is hard to replicate in English. Maintaining both the *terza rima* and the linguistic essence of the *Divine Comedy* is a major challenge.

"When you translate into English, you have to make a choice - do you keep the rhyme scheme, or is it more important to focus on the sense of what he is saying?" Dr West said.

Translators also face questions about how to give a sense of the Christian concepts and traditions that infuse the cultural context of a poem written 700 years ago.

"Dante is very much steeped in early modern and medieval Christianity, and the classical tradition, and these for our world today often seem like very foreign lands," Dr West said.

"What you often find is translators or even scholars who are writing about Dante, they spend a lot of time trying to elucidate a lot of those references and those ideas because they're ideas that are not so familiar for audiences today."

Dr West said translations of any poems or literature were necessary for the dissemination of new ideas and cultures, but there were always going to be limitations.

"Today in a global world we tend to take translation for granted. We even have artificial intelligence that's very good at translating now so we don't give it a lot of thought," Dr West said.

"Because of that we start to make assumptions that things are very similar in very different cultures and different works of literature, whereas when you really stop and look at things in detail, you notice that a lot gets left out in translation, particularly in works of literature, particularly in poetry."

ACU Vice-President, Fr Anthony Casamento csma, said the university was delighted to welcome Dr Simon West to the 2023 Dante Symposium and explore Dante's influence across the world.

"ACU looks forward to welcoming Dr Simon West to campus to deliver our keynote for this year," Fr Casamento said.

Speaking of the Symposium itself, Fr Casamento said: "In his 2021 Apostolic Letter *Candor Lucis Aeternae* Pope Francis asked: 'What can Dante communicate to us in this day and age? Does he still have anything to say to us or offer us? Is his message relevant or useful to us? Can it still challenge us?'

"In posing these questions, Pope Francis invites us to read, hear and imitate Dante, 'to become his companions.' Through our annual Dante symposium, we hope to in-part, answer these questions here at ACU."

Dr Simon West will give the keynote at *Il Sommo Poeta: Dante Alighieri Symposium 2023*:

Friday 24th March 2023, 1.30pm – 5.00pm

The Peter Cosgrove Centre, Tenison Woods House

Level 18, 8-20 Napier Street, North Sydney 2060

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RSVP by March 10 [here](#).

Dr Simon West is available for interviews.

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