

How I make expository translations of Latin hymns

John Rose, 2021

A. When translating Latin hymns, keep these:

1. individual word meanings
2. word order, when rhetorically significant (as it often is)
3. imagery, “mental pictures” (the substance of the best poetry)
4. syllable count (for music)
5. stress pattern (for music)
6. ambiguities and difficulties (when originally present)

B. Try to preserve these, though it’s difficult:

1. parallelism, assonance, internal correspondences
2. word-play, puns, allusions, rhymes (when recognizable)
3. cognate English words (when meaning carries across)

C. Toss these:

1. accidental (Latinize, un-English) word order
2. highly complex (Latinize, un-English) clause structure
3. other less-significant grammatical structure

D. Add as necessary:

1. English helper words (“the”, “as”, etc.)
2. English meter (unless it harms the music)
3. richer English words (if they convey the imagery)
4. flattened English grammar (fewer dependent clauses)
5. repeated words to link dependent clauses
6. amplifier words to fill up syllables

E. Avoid these:

1. paraphrase
2. resolution of ambiguity
3. spiritualizing English vocabulary
4. false friend words, Latin words with lost meanings
5. obsolete or extremely cryptic English words
6. forced English rhymes (keep volunteer rhymes)

F. When presenting an expository translation, perhaps also present:

1. the original Latin for comparison (subtitles or separate column)
2. italics when an English word has been added
3. arrows where English word order has been rearranged
4. another English translation for comparison