

TRANSLATING THE CANON: THE CHALLENGE OF POETIC FORM

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The literary translator taking on the task of rendering a major work of European poetry into contemporary English verse faces several challenges in regard to poetic form, including the problem of finding forms in English-language poetry today for conventions derived from foreign literary traditions and the need to engage the historical context of the work without sounding archaic. If a translation is to transmit the essence of a canonical text from a century or more ago, including its formal dimension, it must both convey what is distinct about the original, moving the reader toward the fundamental foreignness of the text, as Schleiermacher advised, and speak to the reader in the language of our time, because a translation that is not recognizable as good poetry in contemporary terms will not be read. This essay will compare the particular strategies of three successful but quite different contemporary translations of canonical works: Richard Howard's version of Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, Robert Pinsky's translation of *The Inferno*, and Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*.

I would like to begin with some etymological juggling, conflating two abstract terms in English that are at the heart of the translation of poetry. One is the word 'translation' itself, the other 'metaphor'. Interestingly enough, the origins of both terms refer to 'carrying across': 'translation' from the Latin, and 'metaphor' from the Greek. In the case of 'metaphor', the concept is normally divided into two parts: 'vehicle', from the Latin for 'carriage', and 'tenor', as in the 'tenor' of an argument, from the Latin for what is 'held'. In a metaphor, then, the poetic image is the 'vehicle' that 'carries' the 'tenor' of the concept across to us. When I explain these terms to beginning writing students, I like to reinforce the point by drawing an open-mouthed Pavarotti-like figure looking heavenward as he stands in an oxcart. If we apply this same 'tenor'-and-'vehicle' paradigm to literary translation, we get the basic idea that the act involves conveying the meaning of the work by removing the 'tenor' from the source language and putting it in the new 'vehicle' of the target language.

Obviously the process of swapping languages while keeping the meaning intact is not that easy—particularly in the case of poetry that is more than a hundred years old.

Here the tenor of the work is inextricably bound up with the vehicle of its original language and poetic traditions. A mere carrying across of the original ‘meaning’—even if such an essence could be defined—might result in something like those prose ‘literals’ you sometimes see at the bottom of the page in poetry anthologies for language students. They save you a trip to the dictionary, but they make no pretense of capturing the poem itself. If I may jump from classical etymologies to slang for a moment, it is interesting to note that two negative terms in English for this kind of literal, ‘pony’ and ‘trot’, both suggest the movement of a vehicle. Ponies and trots (despite their lifesaving abilities for generations of language students) are poor means of conveyance. Presumably the strong translation is pulled along by a noble steed; it carries more and it goes faster.

Among other things that a prose literal cannot convey from the original work is its music—in poetry, the tenor actually *sings*. T. S. Eliot emphasizes the fact that this lyric element of poetry is at its heart in one of his more extreme pronouncements: that a piece of writing could be immediately moving as poetry on the basis of its sound alone, even for a listener who did not know the language (Eliot 1961). I love the boldness of Eliot’s remark. Its focus is on the vehicle of language, its sound and the poetic traditions embodied within that. For literary translators, it implies that some response to the musical patterns in the original must be rendered in the target language. Given differences in language and literary traditions, that music, of course, will never be equivalent, not even an echo really—hence Robert Frost’s rather discouraging comment that poetry is what is *lost* in translation (Frost 1973). But strong poet / translators, like Eliot himself and Richard Howard, Robert Pinsky and Seamus Heaney in our time, have met the challenge by developing forms of poetic music in English that respond effectively to those in original texts.

The translation of classic European works from the past presents special difficulties. While we in the West share something of a common literary and linguistic heritage, the differences in sound qualities and hence the range of musical effects among them are significant. Formal traditions in the verse of different countries vary tremendously, and the further back in time the translator reaches, the more foreign to contemporary readers of English these are likely to seem. Since free verse has been the dominant mode in American poetry (and, to a lesser extent, in British and Irish poetry) for close to a century now, any attempt to reproduce the underlying forms of a classic European poem runs the risk of making the work sound stiff or archaic. A rigid application of formal principles from the original—strict meter, full rhyme—would necessitate serious distortions of meaning and syntax. Moreover, by assuming forms can be simply carried over into the target language, it would deny fundamental differences between modern English conventions and those of the source language at the time the work was written and the effect of those differences on contemporary readers. On

the opposite pole, a translator could render formal texts into contemporary free verse, with the goal of making classic poems seem as if they were written in English today. But this would tend to negate both the music of the originals and something of their structures, by replacing patterns of sound that are repeated throughout the work with the occasionally felicitous but more random moments of lyric beauty that free verse encourages. The result might read as good poetry—or at least as better poetry than that produced by a slavish imitation of the original’s form—but it would lack unity and a sense of historical context.

If an English translation of a canonical text from a century or more ago is to succeed, it must accomplish two seemingly contradictory tasks. It needs to be recognizable as strong poetry in our own time, or, no matter how accurately it conveys meaning or formal conventions, it will not communicate the basic fact that the original is a great work of poetry. But, as Friedrich Schleiermacher observed some two hundred years ago, a translation must also preserve the distinct foreignness of the original, so that the reader is always aware that ‘the author has lived in another world and written in another language’ (Schleiermacher 1992). This ‘foreign’ element is even more important when a translator is dealing with work from a different era. To create the illusion, say, that Molière’s drawing rooms are the same as our own parlors or that Achilles is a modern soldier short-changes the reader by denying temporal and cultural differences. In Schleiermacher’s terms, it moves the original toward the reader and thus denatures it, instead of moving the reader toward the original. Preservation of a certain ‘foreign’ element as the reader approaches the original, on the other hand, broadens engagement with the text; it approximates the translator’s own situation of reading the original fluently, but as someone from a different place and time. According to Schleiermacher, the translator ‘is bound only by the admittedly difficult art of supplying the awareness of this foreign world in the shortest and most suitable way, and of letting the greater ease and naturalness of the original shine through everywhere’ (Schleiermacher 1992).

One key area where a proper response to the ‘foreign world’ of the original can allow its ‘ease’ and poetic beauty to come across is verse form. Because form embodies the consistent poetic music in the vehicle of the source language, the translator must find a parallel music in the target language. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. As Douglas Hofstadter remarked recently, ‘To pour the semantics into various vessels and get a music is a marvellous thing’ (Hofstadter 2011). Good translations make the most of the interaction between the time-and-language-bound ‘semantics’ of the tenor and the ‘vessel’, or vehicle, of the new language in which they are conveyed; the verse form of the translation carries both music and meaning. I would like to look now at three different strategies for rendering this aspect in recent English translations of canonical texts. My concern here is not with surface accuracy, the ‘meaning’ a trot might convey, or single aural effects, but the work as a whole and the particular verse forms in English

that give unity to the translation and let it ‘sing’ in our time. The three versions I will consider—Richard Howard’s *Flowers of Evil*, Robert Pinsky’s *The Inferno*, and Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf*—all succeed in retaining the unity of their originals, and they speak to our time while preserving the essential foreignness of the works. To label them with the standard encomium ‘definitive’ (besides implying that a single defining translation is possible or even desirable) would, I think, underplay the individuality of their approaches, their genius, if you will. As Hofstadter notes, we are dealing here not with ‘*the music*’ but with ‘*a music*’. Like all translations, these works are interpretations: in this case, fine poets reading their forebears in the art. In the discussion that follows, I hope to bring out some of the distinctiveness of their approaches.

I will start with the most recent original text, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* from the mid-nineteenth century, and move back in time. Richard Howard’s brilliant version of this seminal work of modern European poetry was first published in 1982. Perhaps the most striking formal element of Howard’s translation is the lack of rhyme. As Howard notes in his introduction, ‘Baudelaire *always* rhymes when he writes in verse’, but the American poet has given up this element to concentrate on other forms of unity, including thematic motifs, a certain Baudelairean ‘mythology’ embodied in the work, and a particular intimacy of voice (Howard 1982). But Howard has not disregarded formal concerns in his translation. What unifies his version on the aural level is not rhyme but meter: the consistent use of iambic rhythms in line lengths parallel to those in Baudelaire’s originals. Howard also generally maintains Baudelaire’s stanza breaks, so the pauses and turns in a sonnet like ‘Correspondances’, for example, occur at the same places in both original and translation; in this particular instance, Howard successfully reproduces the single sentence that makes up the entire two-stanza sestet:

There are odors succulent as young flesh,
sweet as flutes, and green as any grass,
while others—rich, corrupt and masterful—

possess the power of such infinite things
as incense, amber, benjamin and musk,
to praise the senses’ raptures and the mind’s.

(Baudelaire 1982, 15)

Baudelaire’s dramatic stanza break just before the verb about those more corrupt smells—central to his argument in the poem and the book as a whole about the transcendent power of supposedly ‘evil’ things—is preserved in Howard’s translation.

The fluid but clearly formal music of Howard's unrhymed iambic meter is even more noticeable in his translation of shorter-lined forms like the ballad, as in the closing quatrains from his translation of 'Le Chat', 'Cat':

One night his brindled fur gave off
a perfume so intense
I seemed to be embalmed because
(just once!) I fondled him . . .

Familiar spirit, genius, judge,
the cat presides—inspires
events that he appears to spurn,
half goblin and half god!

and when my spellbound eyes at last
relinquish worship of
this cat they love to contemplate
and look inside myself,

I find to my astonishment
like living opals there
his fiery pupils, embers which
observe me fixedly.

(Baudelaire 1982, 56)

Because English ballad meter—alternating four and three-beat lines—is so deeply engrained in everything from nursery rhymes, to hymns, to Emily Dickinson, our poetic ears today retain an effect of both closure and forward progress stanza by stanza even without rhyme, so the lyric movement of Baudelaire's nineteenth-century original is well echoed in this translation. Rhyme, even if it didn't distort syntax and meaning, would actually *overlay* the music in the original because the rhythm of ballad measure already sounds so insistent to modern ears. It would also, of course, remove a good portion of what Schleiermacher calls the 'ease and naturalness' of the original.

Baudelaire's distinctive tonal control—his ability to move effortlessly from the sensual to the imaginative, emotional and intellectual without changes of register—is central to the unity of his achievement. Howard's unrhymed but metered interpretation renders it boldly—not as a mere imitation or what Lawrence Venuti calls 'an illusion of transparency' (Venuti 2008), but as an interaction between two poetic presences. Like all strong translations, Howard's version is colored by his own poetic proclivities: his

Baudelaire is a bit more erudite, subtle and indirect than the original. This ‘coloration’ occurs in Pinsky’s and Heaney’s translations as well. These poets do not aim for self-effacement in translation, even if such were possible, but rather active engagement. Each maintains his unique contemporary perspective as he deals with the past, and that dynamic interaction both reminds us of our distance from the original and helps preserve its vitality.

In his translation of Dante’s *Inferno*, first published in 1994, Robert Pinsky’s engagement with verse form is focused less on tone than on narrative energy: specifically, the combination of unity, flexibility and swiftness with which Dante’s *terza rima* infuses the work. As he explains in his translator’s note, the sonically linked three-line stanzas of *terza rima*, rhyming *aba bcb cdc* and so forth, allow for movement that is ‘propulsive and epigrammatic’ at the same time (Pinsky 1994). The relative dearth of full rhymes in English compared with Dante’s Italian makes direct imitation of the form nearly impossible in the long haul, and, though Pinsky admires the way prose translations can capture the narrative movement (which makes sense, given that prose has been the dominant way to develop narrative in English since the rise of the novel), he is committed to retaining the work’s character as epic poetry. His solution is not to surrender rhyme and rely largely on meter, as Howard does, but to work with a broader sense of rhyme, developing a particular kind of slant rhyme that allows him to retain the formal unity of the original without the distortions of phrasing and syntax or the heavy thud that full rhyme would create if used in *terza rima* today. The anchor of his slant rhymes is the repetition of closing consonants; their flexibility comes from his openness to wide variation in the interior vowels. The speed and fluidity Pinsky develops with this approach come through most strikingly in the openings of cantos, as here in Canto IV, when the speaker is suddenly awakened from a swoon:

Breaking the deep sleep that filled my head,
 A heavy slap of thunder startled me up
 As though by force; with rested eyes I stood

Peering to find where I was—in truth, the lip
 Above the chasm of pain, which holds the din
 Of infinite grief: a gulf so dark and deep

And murky that though I gazed intently down
 Into the canyon, I could see nothing below.

(Dante 1994)

The rhymes here—‘head’ and ‘stood’; ‘up’, ‘lip’ and ‘deep’; ‘din’ and ‘down’—are close enough to provide a version of the original music that works for contemporary

readers but not so close that their echoes might impede the energy of the loose iambic pentameter or turn the linked structure into shackles. The fact that the rhymes are on strong monosyllabic words augments the swiftness here. A fully rhymed version of this passage from a translation in 1949, in contrast, offers these ponderous, mostly multisyllabic rhymes: ‘waken me’ and ‘shaken me’; ‘bound me’, ‘around me’ and ‘found me’; and ‘wonder’ and ‘whereunder’ (Dante 1949).

In his drive for fluidity and narrative energy, Pinsky takes two steps that depart from the original in a way that Howard’s Baudelaire does not. First, he makes extensive use of enjambment to run sentences rapidly over breaks between the tercets—‘I stood // Peering’; ‘dark and deep // And murky’—while Dante’s tercets, as in the passage here, tend more toward syntactic closure. And second, he exploits the relative concision of English (where a syllable or two might do the work of three or four in Italian) to convey Dante’s narrative in a shorter space, translating not line by line or tercet by tercet but more sentence by sentence. The eight lines of Canto IV cited above, for example, are four closed tercets, or twelve lines, in the original. While these two choices might seem like real liberties, they give Pinsky an English vehicle that is comparable in speed and flexibility to Dante’s own. That vehicle has Pinsky’s name on it—he showed himself to be a master of swift, enjambed iambic pentameter from his first book on—but the tenor is as clear and vigorous a Dante as we are likely to see in our time.

If Howard’s major achievement is in rendering tone and Pinsky’s in bringing across narrative drive, Seamus Heaney concentrates on communicating the voice of the original, what he calls the ‘enabling note’ that ‘establishes the translator’s [and, consequently, the reader’s] right-of-way into and through a text’ (Heaney 2000). Voice, of course, is related to words not just as we read them, but as we *hear* them. Given the differences in languages, such a focus on the sound of the original would be impossible for the other two translators, but the fact that the Anglo Saxon of *Beowulf* is a direct, if much removed, ancestor of Heaney’s own tongue lends a kind of archaeological validity to his enterprise. The ‘archaeology’ here is not merely etymological, though the poet delights in Anglo Saxon words that survived a millennium of evolution of English to turn up in the speech of his relatives in Ulster. The ‘enabling note’ that drives his translation is a largely aural phenomenon, having to do with particular ‘cadences’ of speech, a ‘weighty distinctness’ to separate phonetic units that results in what Heaney calls ‘solemnity of utterance’ (Heaney 2000). This attention to words as they are *spoken* makes sense in translating a poem that is written but considerably closer to the oral tradition than either Dante or Baudelaire. The ‘weightiness’ of separated phrases here leads Heaney toward a largely line-by-line approach, where the rhythms and alliterative form of the original build up a chant-like gravity, as in this description of Beowulf preparing to fight the monster Grendel underwater:

Beowulf got ready,
 donned his war-gear, indifferent to death;
 his mighty, hand-forged, fine-webbed mail
 would soon meet with the menace underwater.
 It would keep the bone-cage of his body safe:
 no enemy's clasp could crush him in it,
 no vicious armlock choke his life out.

While the vocabulary of *Beowulf* offers some links to modern English, the verse form itself is considerably more foreign to contemporary ears than either Dante's *terza rima* or Baudelaire's rhymed devices. Heaney's strategy in dealing with this ancient vehicle is to retain the underlying patterns—the four-beat line with a *caesura* or pause in the middle, alliteration on both sides of that caesura—but follow these 'rules' less rigidly than the Beowulf poet, allowing the caesura to be muted and reducing the amount of alliteration. The result gives us the historical 'foreignness' of the text—no one could mistake this passage for something originally written in the present—while maintaining what Heaney calls a 'directness of utterance' (Heaney 2000) in contemporary English. On a more specific level, his strong reliance on trochaic compounds—'war-gear', 'hand-forged', 'fine-webbed', 'bone-cage', and 'armlock' in this passage—reminds us of a world well before iambic rhythms took hold in English prosody and exploits the blunt power these compounds have in contemporary poetic usage. In an autobiographical essay, Heaney noted that he became a poet when his 'roots' crossed with his 'reading' (Heaney 1980), and the particularly consonant-and-trochee laden 'coloration' he gives to *Beowulf* is itself tinted by his own early passion for the work of Theodore Roethke and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Many factors beyond responses to verse form go into translations of classic texts, of course. But effective engagement with the aural patterns of canonical poems is a starting point for any successful translation. As Heaney put it, a translator must find the 'tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work' (Heaney 2000). Developing that fundamental music in translation involves neither a surrender of contemporary poetic practices to those of the past nor a replacement of past strategies with current ones, but rather a dynamic interaction between poets across linguistic boundaries and centuries.

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KANONINIŲ TEKSTŲ VERTIMAS: KAIP IŠVERSTI POETINĘ FORMĄ

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Santrauka

Kanoninių poetinių tekstų vertėjai poetai Richardas Howardas, Robertas Pinsky ir Seamusas Heaney savo vertimuose išplėtojo efektyvias strategijas, leidžiančias senąsias poetines formas perteikti šiuolaikine anglų kalba. Jų pasiūlytos *Piktybės gėlių* (į angl. k. vertė Richard Howard), *Pragaro* (į angl. k. vertė Robert Pinsky) ir *Beovulfo* (į angl. k. vertė Seamus Heaney) versijos pasižymi aiškia, visą kūrinį vienijančia poetine melodika. Atmetę perregimumo iliuziją, vertėjai pasiūlė kruopščiai apgalvotas kanoninių tekstų interpretacijas: šių poezijos tekstų vertimai „nuspelvinti“ tomis spalvomis, kurios vertėjui atrodė svarbiausios tekste originalo kalba. Kiekvienas jų išryškina esminį teksto originalo kalba aspektą: nuotaiką Baudelaire'o poezijoje, įtraukiantį Dante'ės pasakojimą, *Beovulfo* eilių skambesį. Aptariamuose vertimuose yra išlikęs esminis originalo teksto kitoniškumas, rodantis šio teksto priklausymą kitai kultūrai ir kitam laikui, bet jie prabyla šiandieniam skaitytojui suprantama kalba.