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Translating the Canon: The Challenge of Poetic Form

While each generation of poets and readers demands a fresh translation of canonical foreign works, 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. These include the difficulty of developing and maintaining consistent sonic parallels to formal devices such as rhyme, meter, and alliteration through the length of the work; the problem of finding forms in contemporary English-language poetry for conventions derived from foreign literary traditions; and the need to engage the historical context of the work without sounding archaic. The pitfalls in this struggle are apparent. On the one hand, a literalism that slavishly maintains form and surface accuracy will not come across as poetry; on the other, a more "free" approach may result in something that reads as contemporary poetry but leaves out key elements of the original. If a translation is to transmit the essence of a canonical European 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--somewhat paradoxically-- bring the text itself closer to the world of the reader in our time, because a translation that is not recognizable as good poetry in contemporary terms will not be read. Given the vast differences in sounds and literary conventions, and the passage of time, between the canonical original and the translation, it is clear that translators can only succeed in developing works that are strong and unified if they consistently give up certain elements of the originals while retaining others. What specifically is held and what surrendered in translation may vary from line to line, but in the course of a long work, patterns and underlying principles come to light. This paper will analyze and 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*.