

ON TRANSLATING BEOWULF

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ON TRANSLATION AND WORDS

No defence is usually offered for translating *Beowulf*. Yet the making, or at any rate the publishing, of a modern English rendering needs defence: especially the presentation of a translation into plain prose of what is in fact a poem, a work of skilled and close-wrought metre (to say no more). The process has its dangers. Too many people are willing to form, and even to print, opinions of this greatest of the surviving works of ancient English poetic art after reading only such a translation, or indeed after reading only a bare 'argument', such as appears in the present book. On the strength of a nodding acquaintance of this sort (it may be supposed), one famous critic informed his public that *Beowulf* was 'only small beer'. Yet if beer at all, it is a drink dark and bitter: a solemn funeral-ale with the taste of death. But this is an age of potted criticism and pre-digested literary opinion; and in the making of these cheap substitutes for food translations unfortunately are too often used.

To use a prose translation for this purpose is, none the less, an abuse. *Beowulf* is not merely in verse, it is a great poem; and the plain fact that no attempt can be made to represent its metre, while little of its other specially poetic qualities can be caught in such a medium, should be enough to show that 'Clark Hall', revised or unrevised, is not offered as a means of judging the original, or as a substitute for reading the poem itself. The proper purpose of a prose translation is to provide an aid to study.

If you are not concerned with poetry, but with other matters, such as references to heroic names now nearly faded into oblivion, or the mention of ancient customs and beliefs, you may find in this competent translation all that you require for comparison with other sources. Or nearly all - for the use of 'Anglo-Saxon' evidence is never, of course, entirely safe without a knowledge of the language. No translation that aims at being readable in itself can, without elaborate annotation, proper to an edition of the original, indicate all the possibilities or hints afforded by the text. It is not possible, for instance, in translation always to represent a recurring word in the original by one given modern word. Yet the recurrence may be important.

Thus 'stalwart' in 198, 'broad' in 1621, 'huge' in 1663, 'mighty' in 2140 are renderings of the one word *eacen*; while the related *eacencraeftig*, applied to the dragon's hoard, is in 2280 and 3051 rendered 'mighty'. These equivalents fit the contexts and the modern English sentences in which they stand, and are generally recognized as correct. But an enquirer into ancient beliefs, with the loss of *eacen* will lose the hint that in poetry this word preserved a special connotation. Originally it means not 'large' but 'enlarged', and in all instances may imply not merely size and strength, but an *addition* of power, beyond the natural, whether it is applied to the superhuman thirtyfold strength possessed by Beowulf (in this Christian poem it is his special gift from God), or to the mysterious magical powers of the giant's sword and the dragon's hoard imposed by runes and curses. Even the *eacne eardas* (1621) where the monsters dwelt may have been regarded as possessing, while these lived, an added power beyond the natural peril. This is only a casual example of the kind of difficulty and interest revealed by the language of Old English verse (and of *Beowulf* in particular), to which no literary translation can be expected to provide a complete index. For many Old English poetical words there are (naturally) no precise modern equivalents of the same scope and tone: they come down to us bearing echoes of ancient days beyond the shadowy borders of Northern history. Yet the compactness of the original idiom, inevitably weakened even in prose by transference to our looser modern language, does not tolerate long explanatory phrases. For no study of the fragmentary Anglo-Saxon documents is translation a complete substitute.

But you may be engaged in the more laudable labour of trying actually to read the original poem. In that case the use of this translation need not be disdained. It need not become a 'crib'. For a good

translation is a good companion of honest labour, while a 'crib' is a (vain) substitute for the essential work with grammar and glossary, by which alone can be won genuine appreciation of a noble idiom and a lofty art.

Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) is not a very difficult language, though it is neglected by many of those concerned with the long period of our history during which it was spoken and written. But the idiom and diction of Old English verse is not easy. Its manner and conventions, and its metre, are unlike those of modern English verse. Also it is preserved fragmentarily and by chance, and has only in recent times been reduplicated and interpreted, without the aid of any tradition or gloss: for in England, unlike Iceland, the old Northern poetic tradition was at length completely broken and buried. As a result many words and phrases are met rarely or only once. There are many words only found in *Beowulf*. An example is *eoten* 'giant' 112, etc. This word, we may believe on other evidence, was well known, though actually it is only recorded in its Anglo-Saxon form in *Beowulf*, because this poem alone has survived of the oral and written matter dealing with such legends. But the word rendered 'retinue' in 924 is *hose*, and though philologists may with confidence define this as the dative of a feminine noun *hōs* (the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Old High German and Gothic *hansa*), it is in fact found in this line of *Beowulf* alone; and how far it was not only 'poetical', but already archaic and rare in the time of the poet, we do not know. Yet we need to know, if a translation strictly true in verbal effect is to be devised. Such lexical niceties may not trouble many students, but none can help finding that the learning of new words that will seldom or never again be useful is one of the (accidental) difficulties presented by Old English verse. Another is presented by the poetical devices, especially the descriptive compounds, which, if they are seldom in fact 'unnatural', are generally foreign to our present literary and linguistic habits. Their precise meaning and full significance (for a contemporary) is not always easy to define, and their translation is a problem for the translator over which he often must hesitate. A simple example is *sundwudu*, literally 'flood-timber' or 'swimming-timber'. This is 'ship' in 208 (the riddle's bare solution, and often the best available, though quite an inadequate rendering), and 'wave-borne timbers' in 1906 (an attempt to unfold, at the risk of dissipating it, the briefly flashed picture). Similar is *swan-rad*, rendered 'swan's-road' in 200: the bare solution 'sea' would lose too much. On the other hand, a full elucidation would take far too long. Literally it means 'swan-riding': that is, the region which is to the swimming swan as the plain is to the running horse or wain. Old English *rad* is as a rule used for the act of riding or sailing, not as its modern descendant 'road', for a beaten track. More difficult are such cases as *onband beadurune* in 502, used of the sinister counsellor, Unferth, and rendered 'gave vent to secret thoughts of strife'. Literally it means 'unbound a battle-rune (or battle-runes)'. What exactly is implied is not clear. The expression has an antique air, as if it had descended from an older time to our poet: a suggestion lingers of the spells by which men of wizardry could stir up storms in a clear sky.

These compounds, especially when they are used not with but instead of such ordinary words as *scip* 'ship', or *sæ* 'sea' (already twelve hundred years ago the terms of daily life), give to Old English verse, while it is still unfamiliar, something of the air of a conundrum. So the early scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries thought: to them, even when they understood Ælfred or Ælfric well enough, 'Saxon poetry' often seemed a tissue of riddles and hard words woven deliberately by lovers of enigma. This view is not, of course, just: it is a beginner's misapprehension. The riddle element is present, but Old English verse was not generally dark or difficult, and was not meant to be. Even among the actual verse-riddles extant in Anglo-Saxon, many are to be found of which the object is a cameo of recognizable description rather than a puzzle. The primary poetic object of the use of compounds was compression, the force of brevity, the packing of the pictorial and emotional colour tight within a slow sonorous metre made of short balanced word-groups. But familiarity with this manner does not come all at once. In the early stages - as some to whom this old verse now seems natural enough can doubtless well remember - one's nose is ground close to the text: both story and poetry may be hard to see for the words. The grinding process is good for the noses of scholars, of any age or degree; but the aid of a translation may be a welcome relief. As a general guide, not only in those hard places which remain the cruces of the expert, this translation can be

recommended. The older version of Dr Clark Hall did good service; but it must be admitted that it was often a faulty guide in diction - not only as representing the original (which is difficult or impossible fully to achieve), but as offering an harmonious choice of modern English words. It did not often rival the once famous oddities of Earle's *Deeds of Beowulf*,¹ though the 'ten timorous trothbreakers together' in 2846 (reminiscent of the 'two tired toads that tried to trot to Tutbury'), and the 'song of non-success' in 787 (for *sigeleasne sang* - 'a song void of triumph') are of a similar vintage. But it fell too often into unnecessary colloquialisms, such as 'lots of feuds' 2028 (now 'many'), quite alien to the tone of the original in its own day. Too often notables, visitors and subalterns appeared instead of the more fitting, and indeed more literally accurate, counsellors, strangers, and young knights. The fire-dragon appeared as a reptile and a salamander (2689); the jewels of his hoard were called 'bright artistic gems'.

The revision has as far as possible emended these things. Though hampered naturally by the fact that it is a revision, not a translation afresh, it is now a better guide in these respects. But no translation, whatever its objects - a student's companion (the main purpose of this book), or a verse-rendering that seeks to transplant what can be transplanted of the old poetry - should be used or followed slavishly, in detail or general principle, by those who have access to the original text. Perhaps the most important function of any translation used by a student is to provide not a model for imitation, but an exercise for correction. The publisher of a translation cannot often hedge, or show all the variations that have occurred to him; but the presentation of one solution should suggest other and (perhaps) better ones. The effort to translate, or to improve a translation, is valuable, not so much for the version it produces, as for the understanding of the original which it awakes. If writing in (one's own) books is ever proper or useful, the emendation or refinement of a translation used in close comparison with a well-studied text is a good case for the use of a careful pencil. The making of notes of this sort is at any rate more profitable than the process more popular (especially with those reading for examinations): the inter-linear glosses in the text itself, which as a rule only disfigure the page without aiding the diffident memory.

A warning against colloquialism and false modernity has already been given by implication above. Personally you may not like an archaic vocabulary, and word-order, artificially maintained as an elevated and literary language. You may prefer the brand new, the lively and the snappy. But whatever may be the case with other poets of past ages (with Homer, for instance) the author of *Beowulf* did not share this preference. If you wish to translate, not re-write, *Beowulf*, your language must be literary and traditional : not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day that the poem was made. Many words used by the ancient English poets had, even in the eighth century, already passed out of colloquial use for anything from a lifetime to hundreds of years.² They were familiar to those who were taught to use and hear the language of verse, as familiar as *thou* or *thy* are to-day; but they were literary, elevated, recognized as old (and esteemed on that account). Some words had never, in the senses given to them by the poets, been used in ordinary language at all. This does not apply solely to poetic devices such as *swan-rad*; it is true also of some simple and much used words, such as *beorn* 211, etc., and *freca* 1563. Both meant 'warrior', or in heroic poetry 'man'. Or rather both were used for 'warrior' by poets, while *beorn* was still a form of the word 'bear'³ and *freca* a name of the wolf,⁴ and they were still used in verse when the original senses were forgotten. To use *beorn* and *freca*

¹ Several are to be found on p. 25 of that book: notably the renowned 'boss of horrors' for *fyrena hyrde* 750, here rendered 'master of crimes'; and 'genial saloon' for *winsele* 771, here rendered 'winehall'. The suggestion of Grand Guignol and less reputable 'pubs' is wholly false to the original.

² Those who have access to texts and editions will easily find many examples. Nouns, such as *guma* 'man', are the largest class, but other words of other kind are also frequent, such as *ongeador* 1595 'together'; *gamol* 58, etc. 'old'; *sin* 1336, etc. 'his'. In these four cases the ancestors of the normal modern words *mann*, *togædere*, *ald*, *his* were already the current words in the poet's day.

³ O.E. *bera*; O.N. *biðrn* 'bear'.

⁴ Literally 'greedy one'; O.N. *freki*, wolf.

became a sign that your language was 'poetical", and these words survived, when much else of the ancient diction had perished, as the special property of the writers of alliterative verse in the Middle Ages. As *bern* and *freik* they survived indeed in Northern English (especially in Scotland) down to modern times; and yet never in their long history of use in this sense, over a thousand years, were they ever part of the colloquial speech.

This sort of thing - the building up of a poetic language out of words and forms archaic and dialectal or used in special senses -may be regretted or disliked. There is nonetheless a case for it: the development of a form of language familiar in meaning and yet freed from trivial associations, and filled with the memory of good and evil, is an achievement, and its possessors are richer than those who have no such tradition. It is an achievement possible to people of relatively small material wealth and power (such as the ancient English as compared with their descendants); but it is not necessarily to be despised on that account. But, whether you regret it or not, you will misrepresent the first and most salient characteristic of the style and flavour of the author, if in translating *Beowulf*, you deliberately eschew the traditional literary and poetic diction which we now possess in favour of the current and trivial. In any case a self-conscious, and often silly, laughter comes too easily to us to be tempted in this way. The things we are here dealing with are serious, moving, and full of 'high sentence' -if we have the patience and solidity to endure them for a while. We are being at once wisely aware of our own frivolity and just to the solemn temper of the original, if we avoid *hitting* and *whacking* and prefer 'striking' and 'smiting'; *talk* and *chat* and prefer 'speech' and 'discourse'; *exquisite* and *artistic* and prefer the 'cunning craft' and 'skill' of ancient smiths; *visitors* (suggesting umbrellas, afternoon tea, and all too familiar faces) and prefer 'guests' with a truer note of real hospitality, long and arduous travel, and strange voices bearing unfamiliar news; *well-bred, brilliant, or polite noblemen* (visions of snobbery columns in the press, and fat men on the Riviera) and prefer the 'worthy brave and courteous men' of long ago.

But the opposite fault, once more common, should be equally avoided. Words should not be used merely because they are 'old' or obsolete. The words chosen, however remote they may be from colloquial speech or ephemeral suggestions, must be words that remain in literary use, especially in the use of verse, among educated people. (To such *Beowulf* was addressed, into whatever hands it may since have fallen.) They must need no gloss. The fact that a word was still used by Chaucer, or by Shakespeare, or even later, gives it no claim, if it has in our time perished from literary use. Still less is translation of *Beowulf* a fitting occasion for the exhumation of dead words from Saxon or Norse graves. Antiquarian sentiment and philological knowingness are wholly out of place. To render *leode* 'freemen, people' by *leeds* (favoured by William Morris) fails both to translate the Old English and to recall *leeds* to life. The words used by the Old English poets, however honoured by long use and weighted with the associations of old verse, were emphatically those which had survived, not those which might have survived, or in antiquarian sentiment ought to have survived.

Different, though related, is the etymological fallacy. A large number of words used in *Beowulf* have descended to our own day. But etymological descent is of all guides to a fit choice of words the most untrustworthy: *wann* is not 'wan' but 'dark'; *mod* is not 'mood' but 'spirit' or 'pride'; *burg* is not a 'borough' but a 'strong place'; an *ealdor* is not an 'alderman' but a 'prince'. The vocabulary of Old English verse may have philological interests but it had no philological objects.⁵

The difficulties of translators are not, however, ended with the choice of a general style of diction. They have still to find word for word: to deal with the so-called 'synonyms' of Old English verse and with the compounds. Translation of the individual simple words means, or should mean,

⁵ It is a habit of many glossaries to Old English texts to record, in addition to a genuine translation, also that modern word which is (or is supposed to be) derived from the Old English word, and even to print this etymological intruder in special type so that it is impressed on the eye to the disadvantage of the correct rendering. The habit is pernicious. It may amuse the glossators, but it wastes space upon what is in the circumstances an irrelevance. It certainly does not assist the memory of students, who too often have to learn that the etymological gloss is worse than useless. Students should handle such glossaries with suspicion. The reading of *Beowulf* is an opportunity for learning the Old English language and mastering a form of poetic expression. Lessons in the later history of English were better reserved for other occasions.

more than just indicating the general scope of their sense: for instance, contenting oneself with 'shield' alone to render Old English *bord*, *lind*, *rand* and *scyld*. The variation, the *sound* of different words, is a feature of the style that should to some degree be represented, even if the differences of original meaning are neglected by the poet or no longer remembered-events which in early Old English poetry probably occurred far less often than is sometimes supposed. But in cases where Old English has built up a long list of synonyms, or partial equivalents, to denote things with which Northern heroic verse was specially concerned - such as the sea, and ships, and swords, and especially men (warriors and sailors), it will sometimes be found impossible to match its richness of variation even with the most indiscriminate collection of words. For *man* in *Beowulf* there appear at least ten virtual synonyms: *beorn*, *ceorl*, *freca*, *guma*, *hæleð* and *hæle*, *leod*, *mann* and *manna*, *rinc*, *secg*, and *wer*.⁶ This list can be extended to at least twenty-five items by the inclusion of words whose sense remained in varying degrees more specific, though in heroic verse they could as a rule replace the simple *mann*: words implying noble birth such as *ædeling* and *eorl*; meaning youths or young men, such as *cniht*, *hyse*, *maga*, *mecg*; or denoting the various companions, followers, and servants of lords and kings, such as *gædeling*, *geneat*, *gesið*, *scealc*, *ðegn*, or explicitly signifying 'warrior', such as *cempa*, *oretta*, *wiga*, *wigend*. With this list not even a hotch-potch series such as *man*, *warrior*, *soldier*, *mortal*, *brave*, *noble*, *boy*, *lad*, *bachelor*, *knight*, *esquire*, *fighter*, *churl*, *hero*, *fellow*, *cove*, *wight*, *champion*, *guy*, *individual*, *bloke*, will compete: not even in length, certainly not in fitness. In such a case (the most extreme) we have to be content with less variation - the total effect is probably not much changed: our ears, unaccustomed to this kind of thing, may be as much impressed by less. There is, however, no need to increase our poverty by avoiding words of chivalry. In the matter of armour and weapons we cannot avoid them, since our only terms for such things, now vanished, have come down through the Middle Ages, or have survived from them. There is no reason for avoiding *knight*, *esquires*, *courts*, and *princes*. The men of these legends were conceived as kings of chivalrous courts, and members of societies of noble knights, real Round Tables. If there be any danger of calling up inappropriate pictures of the Arthurian world, it is a less one than the danger of too many warriors and chiefs begetting the far more inept picture of Zulus or Red Indians. The imagination of the author of *Beowulf* moved upon the threshold of Christian chivalry, if indeed it had not already passed within.

The translation of the compounds sets a different problem, already glanced at above. A satisfactory solution will seldom be arrived at by translation of the elements separately and sticking them together again: for instance, by rendering the 'kenning' or descriptive compound *gleo-beam* 2263, denoting the harp, as 'glee-beam', or (avoiding the etymological fallacy) as 'mirth-wood'. Of *brimclifu* 222 an accurate and acceptable translation may be 'seacliffs', but this is a rare good fortune. A literal rendering of 815 *sele hlifade heah ond homgeap, headowylma bad laðan liges; ne was hit lenge ða gen ðæt se ecghete aðumsweoran æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde* would be like this: 'hall towered high and *horn-spacious*; war-surges awaited of hostile flame; it was not at hand yet that the *blade-hate* of *son-father-in-law* after *slaughter-malice* should awake'. But this is certainly not modern English, even if it is intelligible.

It is plain that the translator dealing with these compounded words must hesitate between simply naming the thing denoted (so 'harp' 1065, for *gomen-wudu* 'play-wood'), and resolving the combination into a phrase. The former method retains the compactness of the original but loses its colour; the latter retains the colour, but even if it does not falsify or exaggerate it, it loosens and weakens the texture. Choice between the evils will vary with occasions. One may differ in detail from the present translation, but hardly (if one respects modern as well as ancient English) in general principle: a preference for resolution.

The compounds found in Old English verse are not, however, all of the same kind, and resolution is not in all cases equally desirable. Some are quite prosaic: made for the expression of ideas without poetic intention. Such words are found both in verse and prose, and their translation

⁶ Not all of these are strictly synonymous. *Ceorl*, *mann*, *wer*, were also current words with proper senses (freeman, human being, adult male or husband).

depends simply on their meaning as a whole. It is not necessary to 'resolve' *mundbora*,⁷ since the simple words 'protector' or 'patron' get as near as we can to the meaning of this word.

A larger, intermediate, class is formed by those words in which composition is used as a natural and living device of the contemporary English language. The distinction between verse and prose or colloquial use here lies mainly in the fact that these compounds are more frequent in verse, and coined with greater freedom. In themselves - even those which are only used, or at least are only recorded, in verse - they would sound as natural in contemporary ears as would *tobacco-stall* or *teadrinker* in ours. Of this class are *heals-beag* 'neck-ring', *bat-weard* 'boat-guard', and *hord-wela* 'hoard(ed) wealth' - three examples which (probably by mere chance) only occur in *Beowulf*. No 'Anglo-Saxon' who heard or read them would have been conscious that they were combinations never before used, even if he had in fact never met them before. Our language has not lost, though it has much limited, the compounding habit. Neither 'neck-ring' nor 'boat-guard' are recorded in the *Oxford Dictionary*,⁸ but they are inoffensive, although 'hoard-wealth' is now unnatural. This class of compound is in general the one for which compound equivalents in modern English can with discretion most often be found or made.

But it shades off, as the intention becomes more fanciful or pictorial, and the object less to denote and more to describe or recall the vision of things, into the 'poetic class': the principal means by which colour was given to Old English verse. In this class, sometimes called by the Icelandic name 'kenning' (description), the compound offers a partial and often imaginative or fanciful description of a thing, and the poets may use it instead of the normal 'name'. In these cases, even where the 'kenning' is far from fresh and has become the common property of verse-makers, the substitution of the mere name in translation is obviously as a rule unjust. For the kenning flashes a picture before us, often the more clear and bright for its brevity, instead of unrolling it in a simile.

I have called this the poetic class, because there is a poetic intention in their making. But compounds of this kind are not confined to verse: not even those which are poetic and fanciful. We find 'kennings' in ordinary language, though they have then as a rule become trite in the process of becoming familiar. They may be no longer analysed, even when their form has not actually become obscured by wear. We need not be led astray in our valuation of the living compounds of poetry by such current 'kennings' as the prose *lichama* == body, or *hlafweard* = master. It is true that *lichama* the 'raiment of flesh', discardable, distinct from the *sawol* or 'soul' to which it was intricately fitted, became an ordinary word for 'body', and in its later form *licuma* revealed the evaporation of feeling for its analysis and full meaning. It is true that *hlaf-weard* 'bread-keeper' is seldom found in this clear form, and usually appeared as *hlaford* (whence our wholly obscured *lord*), having become among the English the ordinary word for 'lord' or 'master', often with no reference to the bounty of the patriarch. But this emptying of significance is not true even of the most hackneyed of the 'kennings' of the poets. It is not true of *swanrad* 200, *beadoleoma* 1523, *woruldandel* 1965, *goldwine* 1171, *banhus* 2508, and the host of similar devices in Old English verse.⁹ If not fresh, in the sense of being struck out then and there where we first meet them, they are fresh and alive in preserving a significance and feeling as full, or nearly as full, as when they were first devised. Though *lic-hama* had faded into *licuma*, though there is now 'nothing new under the sun', we need not think that *ban-hus* meant merely 'body', or such a stock phrase as *hæleð under heofenum* 52 merely 'men'.

He who in those days said and who heard *flæschama* 'flesh-raiment', *ban-hus* 'bone-house', *hreðer-loca* 'heart-prison', thought of the soul shut in the body, as the frail body itself is trammelled in armour, or as a bird in a narrow cage, or steam pent in a cauldron. There it seethed and struggled in the *wylmas*, the boiling surges beloved of the old poets, until its passion was released and it fled

⁷ The 'bearer of *mund*', that is, one who has taken an inferior or friendless man under his *mund* or 'tutela'.

⁸ *Boat-ward*, in the northern form *batward*, is recorded from Wyntoun's Chronicle of the fifteenth century - probably made afresh and not descended from Old English.

⁹ On *swanrad* see above. *Beado-leoma* 'ray of light in battle' is a sword (drawn and glinting); *woruld-candel* 'candle of the world' is the sun; *goldwine* 'goldfriend', is a lord or king (generous in gifts of treasure to his kin and loyal knights); *ban-hus* 'the house whose timbers are bones' is the body.

away on *ellor-sið*, a journey to other places 'which none can report with truth, not lords in their halls nor mighty men beneath the sky' (50-52). The poet who spoke these words saw in his thought the brave men of old walking under the vault of heaven upon the island earth¹⁰ beleaguered by the Shoreless Seas¹¹ and the outer darkness, enduring with stern courage the brief days of life,¹² until the hour of fate¹³ when all things should perish, *leoht and lif samod*. But he did not say all this fully or explicitly. And therein lies the unrecapturable magic of ancient English verse for those who have ears to hear: profound feeling, and poignant vision, filled with the beauty and mortality of the world, are aroused by brief phrases, light touches, short words resounding like harp-strings sharply plucked.

¹⁰ *middangeard*.

¹¹ *garsecg*.

¹² *læne lif* 2845.

¹³ *metodsceaft* 1180, 2815.