ON TRANSLATING *BEOWULF*

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TRANSLATING *Beowulf* continues to be a rather popular scholarly recreation. Two new translations have recently appeared, bringing the number of versions available in modern English verse to seventeen. Ian Serraillier's (1954) is not strictly speaking a translation, but a retelling. Although certain suggestions in the original have been expanded, in general the plan followed has been to eliminate the historical and mythological references (the Finn Episode is omitted) and to condense the narrative. The result is that Serraillier's version has only 856 lines contrasted to the 3182 of the original. *Beowulf* in this condensed version reads somewhat like a "classic comic," a very fast-moving, quite unbelievable folktale. The illustrations, though interesting in themselves, contribute to the impression that one has in hand something closely related to a comic book.

Serraillier's verse is generally in four-beat lines with some alliteration. The following is a fair sample:

> Now there lived overseas
> In the land of the Geats a youth of valiance abounding,
> Mightiest yet mildest of men, his name Beowulf,
> Who, hearing of Grendel and minded to destroy him,
> Built a boat of the stoutest timber and chose him
> Warriors, fourteen of the best.

The original of this passage is twenty-one significant lines.

The translation of Edwin Morgan (1952), Lecturer in English at Glasgow University, is a very different kind of performance. It is preceded by a lengthy and learned introduction, which discusses "The Translator's Task in *Beowulf*" and "The Art of the Poem."

Morgan writes that "the present version of *Beowulf* . . . is offered as a step in the direction of 'full translation'; that is to say, it aims to interest and at times to excite the reader of poetry without misleading anyone who has no access to the original." Archaisms he finds especially objectionable: "the reaction against 'rhetoric' has been so strong that present-day readers of poetry will not now accept as 'poetic' anything that is 'archaic,' as 'literary' anything that is 'obsolete.'" Morgan's defense of modern diction is on first reading quite convincing, and one is inclined to agree that "the twentieth-century reader will find enough [in *Beowulf*] that is remote from his own experience without any superadded linguistic crinkum-crankum and mock epopeanism."

Although Morgan's translation is not notably successful as a modern English poem, it will perhaps do what he hopes: "interest either the practicing poet or the cultivated reader of poetry." The main objection that can be lodged against it is not its failure as poem; it fails rather as translation, and fails because of Morgan's principles. The modernity of his style is objectionable both because it in no way suggests the style of the original and because it strikes one as so out of harmony with the subject matter as to make the poem much less believable.

> I am sure that he if he has the power
> Will feast unfearing in the warrior's hall
> On the Geatish folk as he often has done
> On the host of the Danes. (442-445)

> Resolute again was Hygelac's kinsman,
> Not backward in bravery, mindful of all audacity.
> The warrior now infuriated threw down on the ground
> The wave-marked sword steel-edged and stubborn
> With its bands of rare handiwork; he put faith in strength,
> In the hand grip of power. (1529-1534)

> Now for a third time the firedrake in its fierceness,
> The persecutor of the people paid heed to hostilities,
> Rushed the great warrior when his chance lay open,
> Scorching and war-cruel crushed all his neck
> With the savagery of his tusks . . . . (2688-2692)

Linguistic crinkum-crankum is no doubt more censurable than

these passages, but that the latter have any real virtue is questionable. It is worth noting that the phrases here which seem closest to the original—"feast unfearing," "he put faith in strength"—do not impress one as modern.

All of this is not to say that Morgan's version does not have virtues. It is more faithful to the sense of the original than most translations, though not faithful to its style. It demonstrates the validity of Morgan's contention that "a translation of *Beowulf* for the present period may and perhaps should employ a stress metre and not a syllabic one"; its four-beat line provides a good substitute for the rhythm of *Beowulf*.

Morgan's provocative discussion and translation perhaps make pertinent at this time a re-examination of the whole problem of translating *Beowulf*. The problem is a peculiarly important one, for the poem has a very limited number of readers despite its admitted greatness and significance. C. M. Bowra depends on the Scott Moncrief translation in his recent study, *Heroic Poetry* (1952), although he uses the poem as a primary document and deplores the necessity of such dependence. We cannot very well complain that Mr. Bowra is lazy, since he reads German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Latin, classical and modern Greek, Russian, and several other Slavonic languages. Admitting then the necessity for translation, a considerable number of translations are available, many of them by Old English scholars of considerable repute: F. B. Gummere, J. R. Clark Hall, William Ellery Leonard, and C. W. Kennedy; yet no existing translation has been found especially successful.

Any discussion of translation should begin with a consideration of the purposes of translation. The translator may seek primarily to give enjoyment, while giving the gist of the original; he may perhaps remake the poem as it would be if written by a poet of our time; he may present in good English the nearest possible equivalent of what the poet said in his own language; or he may have other aims. Versions such as Leonard's, Strong's, and Morgan's may appeal to some lovers of poetry; there are versions enough, both verse and prose, for those who want the story accurately translated. But perhaps the most important audience for a translation of *Beowulf* consists of those people who, unable to read Old English, want the best possible substitute for reading the original.

One point of view is that of Matthew Arnold in his classic essay, *On Translating Homer*. Arnold suggested that we cannot know the habits of thought of the audience for whom the poem was intended; we can only know the effect that the poem has on competent scholars who know the language and can also appreciate poetry. What is needed, then, is a translation of *Beowulf* which gives an effect similar to that which the original poem has on the sensitive modern reader. Existing translations can be judged on this basis: do they provide adequate substitutes for the original?

The first problem is whether the translation is to be verse or prose. One advantage of a prose translation is that it is easier to be literal when using prose. But there are justifications for the use of verse in addition to the evident one that the verse is part of the original, and the use of another form to that degree falsifies the original. These arguments were set forth admirably by W. E. Leonard in the preface to his translations of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (1921):

> (1) Verse permits a wider and more apposite choice of syntactical constructions than the more conventional idioms of prose; (2) verse gives to the many repetitions of ideas, words, phrases, and clauses, which in a prose translation often seem jejune verbosity, their proper relevancy and copiousness; (3) verse, by its very cadences, by its metrical emphases, possesses for driving home the central meanings and for distinguishing the nicer contrasts and other relations of the ideas, an instrument scarcely available in the pedestrian rhythms of prose.

These points apply more exactly to the translating of the Latin philosophical poem than to *Beowulf*, yet they are pertinent to any consideration of verse translation. If these are valid points, they would justify a translation of *Beowulf* into, for example, blank verse.

But this brings us to problems more complex than the question of prose or verse. If we grant the value of verse, we come face to face with Arnold's thesis. What effect does the poem in its original form have on the qualified reader? Perhaps we can best answer this by considering separately certain elements of the poem: the fable, the tone, the "music," the language, and the style. Each of these elements—and perhaps others—help to make the poem what

it is. At the risk of laboring a point, let us note that we would not have the same poem if it were written in blank verse, or in verse primarily quantitative, or in a less serious tone, or in a less leisurely style. To translate *Beowulf* adequately into any language, one must attempt to communicate each of the elements. These are considerations not always observed by translators of the poem.

First is the problem of fable. *Beowulf* is a poem, and since poetry is usually more precise than prose, this should suggest the importance of literalness. Most translations manage to achieve it. But let us look at the version, often used in textbooks, of J. Duncan Spaeth (first published in *Old English Poetry*, 1927). Lines 217-221a may be literally translated thus.

> The foamy-necked ship, most like a bird, departed
> then over the sea, impelled by the wind, until in due
> time on the following day the ship had advanced so that
> the seafarers saw the land, the sea cliffs shining.

Spaeth renders the passage:

> Swift o'er the waves with a wind that favored,
> Foam on her breast, like a bird she flew.
> A day and a night they drove to seaward,
> Cut the waves with the curving prow,
> Till the seamen that sailed her sighted the land,
> Shining sea cliffs . . . .

Surely greater accuracy is desirable than this, or than the recent version of Gavin Bone (1945), which condenses this passage from the four and a half lines of the original to three and a half:

> She went like a bird afloat with a foamy neck
> Pressed by the wind—till the due hour next day
> When they saw from the bent prow the brim cliffs break
> Out of the sea . . . .

It is not clear that we gain something of the original by this departure from the literal meaning of the original, and only such a gain would justify this procedure.

To capture the tone of the original is a much more difficult matter, one so complex that only a superficial treatment can be

given here. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" *(Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1936), emphasizes a point that has been disregarded too often. "We must dismiss from mind," says Tolkien, "that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative poem,' " for "judgment of the theme goes astray through considering it as the narrative handling of a plot." It is rather an elegy. Yet such a reputable scholar as Charles W. Kennedy, whose translation has been recommended by Professors Kemp Malone and George Anderson, maintains in a preface to his version (1940) that he has attempted to preserve the "spontaneity of spirit and flow of narrative" which translators often fail to achieve. Nevertheless, the tone of Kennedy's version is not so defective in fidelity as are many other translations. In Leonard's version (1923), for example, we find that Beowulf, attacking Grendel's mother,

> And, of his life all hopeless, in fury smote so true
> That it gripped her sorely unto the neck oho!

and that when Beowulf attacked the body of Grendel

> The corse did spring asunder; it dreed a blow, though dead,
> Oho, a swinging war stroke,— and off was carved the head!

To paraphrase Richard Bentley: This may be a pretty poem, but we should not call it *Beowulf*.

The version of Mary Waterhouse (1949) does not err in the jaunty manner of Leonard's Niebelungen couplets, but substitutes a blank verse of light touch, which is equally unfaithful to the tone of the original:

> Then from the moor beneath the misty hills
> Grendel striding came, God's curse he bore;
> The miscreant intended to ensnare
> Many a man within the lofty hall.

This, according to Miss Waterhouse, is in "the modern heroic line and therefore the equivalent of the older one." Such reasoning and such a translation suggest that while Miss Waterhouse may be a careful scholar, she does not appreciate the tone of the original.

Faithfulness to tone means presenting in a translation poetry which reflects the tone of the original: in the case of *Beowulf*, heavy and meditative, slow yet sure-paced, somber yet rich.

In his essay "Beowulf and the Neibelungen Couplet" (*University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*, 1918), Leonard has argued not only that the Niebelungen couplet creates the mood of the original but that it is essentially the verse of *Beowulf*. Much of his discussion is effective and rather convincing. But when we turn to the translation itself we discover that instead of the short line of the original—which has on the average five words and about nine syllables—we have a longer, rhyming line, with an average of twice as many words (shorter ones) and about thirteen syllables. One of the most noticeable results of the change is that one reads Leonard's translation much faster than the original; the tempo, a basic element in verse music, has been changed from *andante* to *allegro*. Compare the tempo of this passage:

byreth blodig wael, byrgean thenceth
eteth angenga unmurnlice
mearcath morhopu; no thu ymb mines ne thearft
lices feorme leng sorgian (448-451)

with Leonard's brisk, almost hasty

He'll bear his bloody quarry, he'll think to taste
his prey;
He'll eat—this lonely Stalker— unmournfully away;
He'll track with me his fen-lair: the need will ne'er
be thine
In death to have the care of the body which was mine.

Some scholars have argued that the modern reader cannot enjoy the original form of the poem. They would throw out altogether the music of *Beowulf;* apparently it has no connection with what is being said. But surely a translation must be true to the music of the original if the music is at all important. As A. Blyth Webster has said (in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 1944), what is needed is "to translate the measures of Old English poetry so as to be scrupulously true in our version to what was essential or beautiful in their [the Anglo-Saxons']art."

Many students of *Beowulf* have objected to the use in a translation of the alliterative verse of the original. Two criticisms in particular have been made. First, in modern English poetry the only customary use of alliteration is as an occasional ornament, and since any poetical translation should at least aim at being an English poem, alliteration clearly cannot be used in a modern translation as it is used in the original poem. No one would object to a translation which manages to be what its original plainly is, a poem. Yet to an audience interested in *Beowulf* itself this argument would be a secondary consideration, pertinent only if the primary criteria had been met: Is the translation faithful to the fable, tone, music, language, and style of the original?

Perhaps more important is the criticism that the alliterative verse of the original cannot be imitated, because modern English constructed on the principles of Old English versification does not sound at all like the original. This is in the end a matter of individual judgment. But while one may readily admit that a modern imitation does not have the exact effect of the original, such a version surely renders something of the original, and translation is justified on the principle that something is better than nothing.

From the time of William Morris, translators of *Beowulf* have been troubled over the problem of language. Morris, who had a fondness for archaisms and employed them in much of his poetry, seems to have found translating from Old English an excuse for using them in abundance. Other translators—Scott Moncrief, Gummere, Leonard, and Strong, for examples—have considered occasional use of archaisms helpful in catching the flavor of the original. But too often the wrong response is a result; Leonard's translation often calls to mind Spenser because of his use of "bedight," "eftsoons," "whilom," "hight," and the like. A delicate balance is necessary, such a balance as was achieved by Gummere (1909) in the following passage from Hrothgar's first speech to Beowulf:

> Sore is my soul to say to any
> of the race of man what ruth for me
> in Heorot Grendel with hate hath wrought,
> what sudden harryings. Hall folk fail me,
> my warriors wane; for Wyrd hath swept them
> into Grendel's grasp.

A third course has been followed by several translators, notably by Margaret Williams in her selections *(Word Hoard,* 1940). This is a combination of the plain language of prose with the typography of verse. Needless to say, the result is much nearer prose than verse. Miss Williams renders lines 194-201 as follows:

> Beowulf heard that, Higelac's thane,
> the noble Geat heard the deeds of Grendel.
> He of all mankind was the most in might
> throughout the days of this passing life,
> princely and strong.

We have here a translation of the surface meaning in something like the rhythm of the original (although with little of its music), but this is not the way the original sounds; it is flat, quite without the dignity, power, and emphasis of the poem. It misrepresents what Tolkien in his preface to the Clark Hall–Wrenn translation (1940) calls "the first and most salient characteristic of the style and flavour of the author," that is, the traditional poetic diction of the original. This may well be suggested in a modern version, as the Clark Hall–Wrenn prose translation clearly demonstrates:

> The brave-souled prince undid from off his neck the gold collar, gave it to the thane, the young spear warrior, and his gold-mounted helmet, ring and corslet,—bade him use them well.

We face a very difficult problem when we consider the style of the poem. Can this be suggested at all? That it is a vital aspect of the poem no one will deny. Adeline Bartlett has put it in much stronger terms. "I do not see how it is possible," she says, "except as a *tour de force,* to paraphase or to imitate in one language the poetry of another language without following to some extent the technique of the original" *(The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* 1940). If we are to have a version which gives to the reader something of the feeling which reading the original gives, we must consider the way in which a reader of the original, even a very proficient one, goes about reading the poem. The freedom of word order and what F. B. Gummere calls *(Modern Language Notes,* 1910) the "forward-and-back of the style due to repetition and parallelism" in *Beowulf* are such that the

modern reader cannot read the poem straight forward, but must follow the original forward and back. To present in a translation the full complexity of the original is not practical, although this did not keep Scott Moncrief from attempting it. However, a compromise is possible, and may indeed be quite effective.

Gummere has suggested that "the virtue of oldest English verse was not artistic smoothness and lucidity, but artistic roughness, a kind of ordered violence." If so, it is clear that the effect of the style is not presented when variations are treated as compounds, and noun variations are presented as consecutive appositives. This is what we often find in Kennedy's translation. Lines 426b-432 may be translated literally as follows:

> I of thee now then, chief of the Bright-Danes, wish
> to entreat, protector of Scyldings, one request
> that you not refuse me, shelter of warriors, friendly
> lord of peoples, now I thus from afar have come;
> that I be permitted alone and my troop of warriors,
> the band of strong ones, to cleanse Heorot.

Kennedy renders the lines thus:

> Prince of the Danes, protector of Scyldings,
> Lord of nations, and leader of men,
> I beg one favor—refuse me not,
> Since I come thus faring from far-off lands—
> That I may alone with my loyal earls,
> With this hardy company, cleanse Hart-Hall.

The literal prose version clearly will not do—it is not English. But must the original be modernized so completely, as in Kennedy's version? Here is a third alternative, Gummere's "compromise version":

> So, from thee,
> thou sovran of the Shining-Danes,
> Scyldings' bulwark, a boon I seek,—
> and, Friend-of-the-folk, refuse it not,
> O Warriors' shield, now I've wandered far,—
> that I alone with my liegemen here,
> this hardly band, may Heorot purge!

While Gummere is not always as successful as he is here, he succeeds often enough to show the possibilities of a translation which is a compromise with the style of the original.

Much more might be said. The difficult problem of the "kennings," for instance, has not been approached here. But we have perhaps seen enough to show that many translations are at best versions of only one or two of the important aspects of the poem. No modern version passes the tests proposed, though perhaps Gummere's comes closest, despite its many awkwardnesses. But most translations fail because they were not made to do what seems to be highly desirable and quite attainable: to capture something of every element in the poem. Let us hope that such a version will soon appear.