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## REWRITING *BEOWULF*: THE TASK OF TRANSLATION

John D. Niles

**W**hen we read *Beowulf* in translation, we are confronted by a paradox. During the past fifty years, at the same time as the study of Old English has shifted to the margins of the graduate curriculum of most departments of English, *Beowulf* has entered the mainstream of literary studies. The more the poem is read, the less it is read except in translation. Readers of the poem are therefore increasingly at the mercy of translators, just as their critical understanding is dependent on the work of the distinguished scholar-critics who have helped to establish the Old English text and define its likelihoods of meaning.

The problems faced by readers who approach *Beowulf* in translation are made more acute by the special nature of its verse. The poem is composed in an artful language that was set apart from ordinary speech even during the Anglo-Saxon period. This language within the language had its own diction, syntax, rhythm, and style distinct from the norms of prose. Thanks to the accidents of manuscript transmission, *Beowulf* happens to be unique in its sustained display of the resources of the Old English art of heroic poetry. Even more than the language of other Old English poetry that has come down to us, the ornate language of *Beowulf* renders translations inadequate.

These problems are mitigated somewhat by the fact that many translations of the poem are available. Although, as Fred C. Robinson has remarked, perhaps these are "less often versions than perversions" (v), by taking a comparative view among them one can make educated guesses as to what new character a translator has put on the text. Nothing is easier than to attack such changes of character. Still, some stamp of the translator's own mind and style upon the text is bound to

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be part of the process of rewriting a literary work into a language other than its native one, and a firm stamp is sometimes preferable to a timid one. My purpose here is not to call for some utopian ideal of fidelity, but rather to celebrate and evaluate the artistry that translators have brought to the task of rendering a powerful work of the literary imagination into terms that, far different from the original poet's, may still be compelling for readers in our own time.

#### PUTTING A SPIN ON THE TEXT

"Bias," in pool, is the spin that a player can put on balls by striking them slightly off-center with the cue. It is not necessarily a bad thing but is rather a technique that helps make the game interesting. Much the same is true of translations of *Beowulf*. Like any interpretive work, a translation is the result of a volatile hermeneutic process. Its readers should be wary of accepting it as a record of "what the text says," for the text says many things, some of them enigmatically. A translation from a work composed in a dead language only makes sense as one part of a total vision of the culture to which that work pertains. One of the most accomplished translators of *Beowulf* and other medieval poems, Burton Raffel, has made this point with emphasis:

The literary translator is necessarily engaged with far more than words, far more than techniques, far more than stories or characters or scenes. He is—and the literary translator of medieval works is even more so—engaged with worldviews and with the passionately held convictions of men and women long dead and vanished from the earth. (53)

Readers of any translation are advised to take it as an imaginative reconstruction, just as readers of any critical book on *Beowulf* are wise to take its statements as provisional parts of a hermeneutic process that builds and continually rebuilds a web of interwoven observations, hypotheses, and educated guesses. This process extends well beyond the prejudices or judgments of any one person, and it necessarily involves controversy. The controversy is a healthy one that will continue if Old English literary studies are to remain of any importance.

Drawing on the work of Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida has used the term *transmutation* to refer to intersemiotic translation, or "the transference of a message from one kind of symbolic system to another" (4). The transference of audible speech into visible sign language is an example. With a forgivable spin of this term, we can say that any translation of *Beowulf* is the product of not just one but a series of transmutations. The work that is read in current English represents an interpretation of an interpretation, and this interpretation rests in turn on a text that may reflect a prior literary act. Since this is a complex claim, let me briefly justify it.

THE VOICE. Very possibly, a poem resembling our *Beowulf*—or, perhaps, a cluster of poems somewhat like it in plot and setting—once existed in an oral context, in the symbolic system of words spoken and words heard. The performance of such a work before an audience of listeners would have been a privileged event serving to knit the members of a community together. Through the poet's words, the participants in this event would have been made aware of their ties to one another, as well as to prior generations, by virtue of their language, their ancestry, their values, and their inside knowledge of stories that encoded their sense of the past and thereby helped fashion a sense of identity and common purpose.

THE SCRIPT. At an unknown time and place and for unknown immediate purposes, someone familiar with the technology of script wrote out a text of *Beowulf* by hand. Once the text was converted into book form, the codex in which it was preserved would have represented a commodity of value, suitable for the gift-exchanges that were a normal part of power relations among the aristocracy in either church or state. The codex was copied, perhaps several times and perhaps with changes, in what can be assumed to have been a monastic setting, and one copy of *Beowulf* in the handwriting of two scribes working about the year 1000 A.D. comes down to us as folios 129–198 of British Library MS Cotton Vitellius A.XV. In 1786–1787, after long neglect, this text was again copied at the British Library by a scribe working at the behest of the Iclander Grímur Thorkelin, who made his own transcript as well.

THE PRINTED EDITION. Thorkelin's transcripts formed the basis of the *editio princeps* that he published in Denmark in 1815. In subsequent years, far more reliable and ambitious editions have been published in Germany and England for the benefit of an international community of scholars who maintain far higher standards of accuracy than their medieval counterparts seem to have done. At the same time, this unintended audience is cut off irrevocably from certain information that Anglo-Saxon readers may have taken for granted. Any modern printing of *Beowulf* differs from the Anglo-Saxon manuscript in striking ways, all of which are designed to counteract the effects of ignorance or uncertainty concerning such essential matters as word boundaries, the rhythm of oral delivery, the phrasing of the text into grammatically coherent units, the distinction of proper names from ordinary ones, the presence or absence of lacunae, and the accuracy of the scribal reading. By normalizing the shapes of letters that are not always clearly distinguished from one another, as well as by effacing signs of scribal hesitation, erasure, and correction (together with such other elements as bleedthroughs, fire damage, and worn surfaces), the edition creates an abstract entity, "*the text*," that has little relation to the durative temporal process through which the handwritten copy was formed. By presenting *Beowulf* in isolation from

other texts that were copied and bound with it, printed editions present the poem as a literary monument, timeless and self-sufficient. Leaving aside all its pages of commentary, a printed edition can almost be said to represent an intersemiotic translation of *Beowulf* into a different medium. As Doane has remarked, “the text has been shifted radically from one productive basis to another, totally different and unknown to the first” (100).

THE TRANSLATION. Ever since Thorkelin first rendered the Anglo-Saxon text into a somewhat garbled Latin paraphrase, translators in various parts of the world have used modern editions as the basis of renderings of *Beowulf* into one or another variety of the contemporary idiom of poetry or prose. As rewritings of the poem and sometimes as popularizations of it, these translations tend to remain somewhat beneath the notice of specialist scholars, who still must rely on them in their undergraduate courses. The practical value of a translation for teachers is often measured in terms of readability and price—factors that were far from the dominant ones in the poem’s earlier modes of existence as an oral performance, as a handwritten material text, and as a tool for dedicated scholarship.

It is easy to forget that not just the last stage of this process of transmission, but each of the two prior stages as well, represents an act of literary shaping that transforms the character of what we mean by “the poem.” To begin with, as Elizabeth Fine has stressed, there is no way that a visual record can exactly reflect the character of an oral performance. In a manuscript culture, such factors as the presence of the scribe as primary audience, the aims of the patron, and the slow conditions of dictation will inevitably affect the character of what is being taken down in writing. Even if one person combines the roles of poet and scribe, that author cannot be expected to write down exactly what he might sing in the heat of performance before a live audience. Literary shaping is even more evident in the production of a printed edition. An edition presents a hypothetical text that the editor believes to be an accurate record of the “real” or “true” work that underlies faulty or derivative manuscript copies. The text that results from this reconstructive process is the result of myriad choices on the part of a fallible human being who acts as mediator between a distant culture and our own. Since the hermeneutic process that underlies these choices is provisional, any edition will be obsolescent not long after it appears.

If scholarly editions represent provisional acts of literary shaping—even Klaeber’s, which has shown such exceptional longevity as to seem like the bedrock of modern *Beowulf* studies—then literary translations are even more subject to obsolescence. Given that any living language is in a state of flux, especially the idiom of current poetry, most translations have only a limited shelf life. Very rarely does a translation achieve status in its own right. The most that most

translators can hope to accomplish is to put a spin on the text that will help keep the poem in motion for another generation or so of readers.

Still, translation is no minor enterprise. In a sense, all acts of cultural transmission can be called varieties of translation. The rules of good translation are the rules of cultural mediation in general, and the aim of both activities is the same: to reconstitute the thoughts, the language, and the artistic impulses of people from some other time or place accurately, in terms that make sense to the members of one's own community. The act of translation means articulating a series of interrelated judgments regarding the past (or the "other"), the present (or whatever is "ours"), and the relation of these two things. The translator's task calls for the utmost knowledge and discrimination. It is for these reasons, among others, that Isaac Bashevis Singer has remarked that he considers translation to be "the greatest problem and challenge of literature" (5), while Jorge Luis Borges has similarly declared that "no problem is more essential to literature and its small mysteries than translation" (1136).

#### THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

If accuracy and delight are the two chief features people look for in a literary translation, then the two virtues do not always go together. To paraphrase Geoffrey Chaucer and Alain Renoir, the latter of whom makes due apologies to the women's movement (Renoir, "The Ugly" 161), a translation often asks of its audience the same question that the shape-changing lady in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" asks of her husband, once he has discovered that the hag to whom he has just been joined in marriage is in fact a young woman capable of assuming the most ravishing form: "Would you rather have me ugly and faithful, or beautiful and unfaithful?" As Renoir notes, some published translations of *Beowulf* seem to have the worst of both worlds, being both ugly and unfaithful. Those who would seek out a *Beowulf* to read in translation have a wide range of versions to choose from, but no single one is likely to prove satisfying in all regards or to every reader.

The art of translation is above all a process of making choices, and a person setting out to translate *Beowulf* must first make some basic decisions about style. Will the translation be in fully idiomatic current English, or will it use archaic words and constructions, like William Morris's unreadable *Beowulf*—"Then speedy at holm was the hythe-warden yare" (236), and so on—or, more arrestingly, like Ezra Pound's brilliant and quirky adaptation of "The Seafarer"? Will it follow the monosyllabic grunt school, favoring Anglo-Saxon etymological roots in an effort to sound more "Germanic" or "primitive," or will it use the full range of cosmopolitan vocabulary that is characteristic of our current hybrid language? Will it mimic the stops and starts of the original poetic syntax, or will it move

with the flow of current grammar and idiom? Will it adopt the two-, three-, and four-fold repetitions that form such an essential part of the ornamentation of the original verse, or will it dispense with this pleonastic phrasing for the sake of the economy that is prized in most writing today?

These are questions that any translator must face whether writing in prose or verse. Translators who choose to render the poetry as poetry, however, have an even more basic choice to make: "What verse-form shall I use?" Some translators have imitated the Old English alliterative verse-form either impressionistically or with exact attention to its rules. Others have tried their hand at a variety of other measures: blank verse, or a ballad-like meter, or an open form. Each choice has its implications. A rugged alliterative meter tends to go hand in hand with archaic or out-of-the-way diction. The use of accentual-syllabic meter, however, may obscure the features that distinguish Anglo-Saxon verse so emphatically from almost all poetry composed in English between the time of Chaucer and the twentieth century. The use of open form offers freedom and flexibility, and yet this same freedom may subvert the concept of meter altogether and leave us with a flaccid text that has little of the declamatory power of the Anglo-Saxon original.

Leaving aside questions of style and verse-form, translators of *Beowulf* must sometimes deal with mind-bending problems of diction. As Eliot has put the matter, "Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still" (121). No language remains stable over time, for (as Tolkien has remarked at some length) shifts in language accord with the changing social matrix in which it is embedded. An Anglo-Saxon *burb* is not a "borough" or modern English "town," but a fortified settlement. A *beag* is not simply a "ring," though it can sometimes be translated as such. It is any type of coiled metalwork or torque, and in the plural, in the society of gift-exchange that is represented in the poem, the word can mean something close to "money." A person who is *eald* is not only "old"; he is also naturally a leader (cf. *ealdor*, not "elder" but "chief, lord, or prince"). The word connotes respect, not senility, and even the young Beowulf is described as the *yldesta* of his band of men (not "eldest" but "leader"). Then there are the negative adjectives and nouns that can scarcely be rendered idiomatically without losing their force. The *unfæger* light that shines from Grendel's eyes is not exactly "horrible," but rather "un-pretty," with grim understatement. Fame that is *unlytel* is not merely "great" or "lasting," but "un-little," with a contemptuous glance at the obscurity in which ordinary people end their days. If the criteria for exact synonymy are impossible to identify within a single natural language, as contemporary theorists of language have claimed, then synonymy "is far more deeply problematical and inadequate as a defensible notion relevant across several languages" (Ross 10).



Any person who has lived with *Beowulf* intimately in the course of rendering it into modern English is familiar with the problems of semantics that derive from the special style and vocabulary of Old English poetry, from linguistic change over time, or from the hard fact that cultures themselves are complex organisms whose disjointed members are not easily translated into some other terms. Thomas Shippey has commented incisively on these problems of language and social context (8–11). What does one do with *druncen*, “drunk,” an adjective that seems to connote something other than beer-spewing excess when it is used to describe the Danish warriors who are gathered together peaceably sharing cups in Heorot? Irish scholar Hugh Magennis is surely right in seeing the liberal drinking of alcohol in Heorot as “a symbol of social cohesion” (164) among the members of the warrior elite, but such a meaning may be difficult to convey to modern readers who are familiar with the social pathology of drink in the urban landscape today. Or how does one render the term *beot*? Although the word is often translated as “boast,” the social institution to which it refers encompasses both more and less than that, as Renoir has pointed out with reference to three related cultures of early Northwest Europe (1963). Whereas a present-day “boast” is likely to be a vainglorious after-the-fact vaunt, a Germanic *beot* is a solemn public declaration of intentions. There is nothing vainglorious about it provided that the speaker lives up to the exact terms of his word; only if he fails to do so will he suffer the shame of the braggart. The terms “revenge” and “feud” are other knotty ones to render with the right period-specific connotations. Rather than calling up an image of Hatfields and McCoys pursuing a colorful and psychotic personal vendetta, the terms for the feud should be neutral ones carrying almost juridical force. Through the institutionalized code of vengeance, as William Ian Miller has discussed with reference to the Icelandic sagas, Germanic societies attempted to minimize the problem of violence by invoking the collective responsibility of the kin-group, the band of warriors, or the band of neighbors—three groups whose membership overlapped—for any wrongdoing committed either by or against its members. But how can one find the right language to express these relations when the social system that sustained them has disappeared?

In addition, translators of *Beowulf* face the problem of putting into modern English a vocabulary that relates to the special aura of heroism. There is the noun *aglæca*, which Klaeber normally glosses as “monster, demon, or fiend,” as it is used eleven times of Grendel, five times of the dragon, and twice of sea-monsters, but which he also glosses as “warrior, hero,” for the epithet is used once of the dragon-slayer Sigemund and once of Beowulf himself (or perhaps twice, at 2592 certainly and 1512 possibly). Doreen Gillam is surely correct in regarding the use of this epithet for the hero as a “bold and laconic stroke” that denotes the man’s “almost inhuman” character during his supreme fight or fights (169). “Awesome



one” is perhaps as precise a rendering of the word as one can achieve, with the understanding that to the Anglo-Saxon audience the line separating heroes and monsters may have been thinner than the line separating heroes and ordinary people.

The adjective *gebolgen* presents a similar problem. Although the word is generally glossed as “angry” or “enraged,” it denotes something more physical and muscular than that, for etymologically, it derives from the verb (*ge*)*belgan*, “to swell up” (cf. “bellows”). The adjective refers to the way that—whether voluntarily or involuntarily, as with rage—a person will expand his chest to maximum capacity at the onset of a supreme physical test, perhaps terrifying others and certainly packing in the breath that carries vital oxygen to muscles that will soon be straining. The *aglæcan* in the poem—Grendel, the dragon, and the sea-monsters whom Beowulf fought in his youth—are all described as *gebolgen*, but it is the hero himself of whom the term is used most often (in 1539, 2401, and 2550, and cf. *bolgenmod* ‘swollen with rage’, 709a). In *Beowulf*, ordinary human beings may be angry, but only the monsters and the hero are swollen in a way that may call to mind the violent battle-fury of the Scandinavian *berserkr* or, as Martin Puhvel has remarked (45–54), the still more violent warp-spasm of Celtic heroes like Cuchulain.

### THE JOURNEY HOME

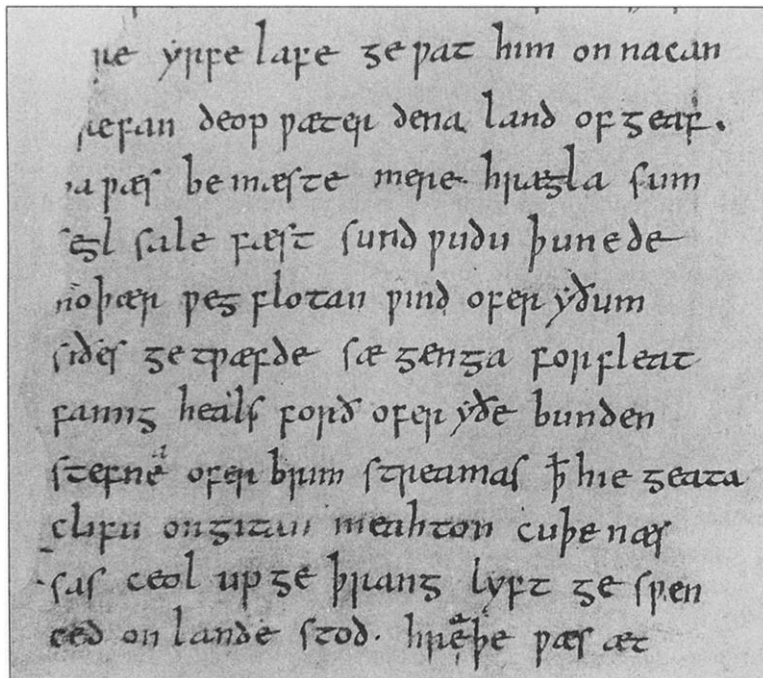
The clearest way to show that questions like these pose a genuine challenge to translators is to reproduce a sample passage from the manuscript and show how it has been handled in different ways. Rather than flogging some antiquated versions of the poem that are now passé—an exercise that Edwin Morgan has taken on with some pleasure—I will single out for attention four readily available current rewritings of *Beowulf*, one of them in prose and three in verse, each one of which may have different merits for different users. As I do so, I will be as explicit as I can in outlining the nature of the manuscript source on which these translations are based. Through such a test of translation, I mean to show that there is nothing inevitable about the text of *Beowulf* as most people read it today. By its nature, translation is an intense and minutely-focused act of interpretation. As one expert in the craft, Gregory Rabassa, has remarked, “I have always maintained that translation is essentially the closest reading one can possibly give a text” (6).

The passage that I have chosen out for exhibit presents the sea journey of Beowulf and his Geatish companions back to their homeland once they have concluded their mission in Denmark (lines 1903b–1913, in the usual lineation). It is a descriptive piece that offers no pressing interpretive issues, and it has

the virtue of having been singled out for praise as a passage that “illustrates nearly every feature and quality of Anglo-Saxon poetry” (Wyld 198). Hrothgar and Beowulf have said their farewells, the last gifts have been given, and the men go to the boat. The next lines are rendered as follows by E. Talbot Donaldson, whose literal prose translation, canonized in the Norton Critical Edition of the poem, is accepted by great numbers of readers as an account of “what the text says”:

The boat moved out to furrow the deep water, left the land of the Danes. Then on the mast a sea-cloth, a sail, was made fast by a rope. The boat's beams creaked: wind did not keep the sea-floater from its way over the waves. The sea-goer moved, foamy-necked floated forth over the swell, the ship with bound prow over the sea-currents until they might see the cliffs of the Geats, the well-known headlands. The ship pressed ahead, borne by the wind, stood still at the land. (33)

Readers who consult the corresponding part of the medieval text, whether in the British Library manuscript or in one of its two photographic facsimiles (Zupitza, Malone), will find something that looks very different from this:



Facsimile of the *Beowulf* manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.XV, in Zupitza, opposite p. 87. Reproduced by permission of the Early English Text Society.

What is reproduced here is one scribe's version of the script that was in standard use during the later Old English period. As an insular variant of carolingian miniscule, this script differs from modern orthography in many ways, particularly in the shapes of the letters *d*, *f*, *g*, *r*, *s*, and *w*. It incorporates the symbols *þ* and *ð* ("thorn" and "eth") interchangeably to represent either the voiceless fricative *th* (as in "thin") or its voiced equivalent (as in "although"), and it employs a digraph, *æ*, to represent the low front vowel *a* (as in "hat"). The crossed thorn is used once as an abbreviation for the conjunction *þæt* (1910). On two occasions a mark of punctuation, a raised punctus, represents a moment of rhythmic and syntactic closure (in 1904 and 1913), and twice a punctus marks the vowel *y* as long (in 1907 and 1909). In addition, there is a correction in line 1911 where a scribe has deleted the letter *e* and has inserted above it the standard genitive plural inflection *a*, rendering the noun as *stefna*.

Editors of Old English texts usually replace the original letter forms with their modern equivalents except for the symbols *þ*, *ð*, and *æ*, which by convention are kept. In addition, they customarily space the text into lines and half-lines, or verses, in accord with a metrical theory of Old English poetry that almost everyone accepts in its general features, however sharply specialists may quarrel about its details. Editors add capitalization and punctuation in accord with modern practice and their understanding of the text, and they silently expand abbreviations. They decide what constitutes a word, sometimes in defiance of scribal practice. The result, in Klaeber's standard edition, is a passage that is far more accessible to modern readers:

	Gewat him on naca
	drefan deop wæter,    Dena land ofgeaf.
1905	Ða wæs be mæste merehrægla sum,
	segl sale fæst;    sundwudu þunede;
	no þær wegflotan    wind ofer yðum
	siðes getwæfde;    sægenga for,
	fleat famigheals    forð ofer yðe,
1910	bundenstefna    ofer brimstreamas,
	þæt hie Geata clifu    ongitan meahton,
	cupe næssas;    ceol up geþrang
	lyftgeswenced,    on lande stod.

Forgoing Klaeber's lineation but still using asterisks to mark verse breaks and triple asterisks to mark line breaks, I offer the following word-for-word translation, a deliberately hyperliteral one:

Set forth / himself or itself [reflexive] / in, on, or onwards / [the] boat  
 [subject case] \*\*\* to stir up / deep / water, \* of [the] Danes / land / he or

it gave up. \*\*\* Then / was / by [the] mast \* of sea-garments / a certain one \*\*\* [a] sail / by means of a rope / [made] fast; \* [the] sea-wood or sea-trees / resounded; \*\*\* not at all / there / [the] wave-floater [object case] \* wind / over / [the] waves \*\*\* [from the] journey / hindered; \* [the] sea-strider / advanced, \*\*\* floated / [the] foamy-necked [one] [subject case] \* forth / over / [the] wave, \*\*\* [the] bound-prowed [thing] [subject case] \* over / [the] sea-streams, \*\*\* until / they / of the Geats / [the] cliffs \* to perceive / were able, \*\*\* known / headlands; \* [the] keel / up / pressed forward \*\*\* air- [or sky- or wind-] impelled, \* in or on / land / it stood.

In one instance Klaeber departs from the manuscript reading and prints *naca*, subject case (1903b), where the scribe wrote *nacan*, object case. The verse thus edited can be translated, in clumsy fashion, “Then the boat set forth onwards to stir up the deep water.” *On* here must be taken adverbially, as in “to move on.” Klaeber’s emendation is not necessary, however. The manuscript reading *on nacan* also makes sense as a prepositional phrase, “in [the] boat.” The line can thus mean “He”—that is, Beowulf, of whom the narrator has just been speaking—“departed in the boat to stir up the deep water.” The textual question is a minor one, and I do not mean to resolve it; I only bring it to attention to illustrate the point that anyone using an edition should use it with discrimination.

Faced with a passage like this, a translator must make many choices. How many definite articles or indefinite articles should be added, and where should they go? To what extent should the inverted syntax be straightened out into the subject/verb/object order that is the norm in current English? Should clauses be joined smoothly, or should the disjunctive, paratactic style of the original verse be imitated? How can general verbs like *drefan* ‘to agitate’ best be rendered to express their meaning in context? Should ornamental alliterative compounds like *sundwudu* ‘sea-wood’, *wegflota* ‘wave floater’, and *sægenga* ‘sea-strider’ be rendered literally, or by equivalent prosaic nouns like ‘ship’ or ‘vessel’? How can the half-buried metaphors of the Old English passage, such as *naca* ‘the necked one’, i.e. ‘boat’, be sustained in graceful English? How can a translator express the emotive force that a simple adjective like *cup* ‘known’ had for Old English speakers, who seem to have viewed the unknown as something terrifying and who placed exceptional value on the comforts of familiar surroundings?

Despite his superb sensitivity to the nuances of good style (as is shown in his own critical prose), Donaldson steadfastly declines to resolve these questions creatively. His method is so literal as to seem artless, and for this reason E. G. Stanley has singled out his translation for praise for its “avoidance of error by tact” (114)—a quality of restraint which Stanley hunts for in vain among other versions. While Donaldson renders *drefan* with the metaphorical word “furrow”

and translates *sægenga þunede* as “the boat’s beams creaked,” elsewhere he resists the temptation to turn the text into anything but a very plain paraphrase of its meaning. His sober prose never goes far astray, so that readers who do not know Old English can use it with some confidence as a trot. Praise of Donaldson’s accuracy can go too far, however. *Ongitan meah-ton* (1911b) does not mean conditionally “they might see,” for example, but is a statement of fact: “they were able to see.” *Lyftgeswenced* (1913a) could be better rendered as “driven by the wind” than “borne by the wind”—phrasing that might call to mind a curious airborne vessel. A *merebrægl* is a sea-garment, not just a sea-cloth.

These are relatively minor points. More serious is the general tendency of minimalist translation of this kind to convert poetic gold into lead. To praise a prose trot of an extravagantly poetic work by claiming that it is “faithful” adds a wry twist to the concept of keeping faith.

What can one make of the syntax of such a passage as “The sea-goer moved, foamy-necked floated forth over the swell, the ship with bound prow over the sea-currents,” for example? Readers with no training in Old English are likely to conclude that the poem’s phrasing is simply inept. They will find here one more confirmation that Old English poetry is graceless or primitive. More knowledgeable readers will recognize that the poet is making deft use of the linked devices of metaphor and apposition. The bold metaphorical noun “sea-strider,” the compound adjective “foamy-necked,” and the compound noun “bound-prowed one” (here translated by the phrase “ship with bound prow”), all in the nominative case, denote the subject of the sentence, the ship. But the poet has us perceive this ship piecemeal, as it were. First we see it as a personified agent of motion. Then we see its neck (or, literally, its high prow) enveloped by surf. Only then, with more precise and realistic detail, do we see the lashings that bind its timbers into a vehicle of tensile strength. The poet varies the main verb—“it advanced, it floated forth”—as well as the prepositional phrase that specifies where the ship progresses: “over the surge, the sea-streams.” The deep structure of this two-and-a-half line passage could be paraphrased in six words: “The ship moved over the waves.” Characteristically, the *Beowulf* poet makes this simple idea the occasion for a lavish display of decorative vocabulary. Adding to the aural appeal of the passage is alliteration that is both structural (*s* in 1908, *f* in 1909, and *b* in 1910) and ornamental (*st* in 1910). The ship moves in poetry, not just in water.

More challenging than prose versions as artistic creations in their own right are those rewritings of *Beowulf* that represent the poem in a form of contemporary verse. Here, as a way of sketching out some of the possibilities of this enterprise, I will single out three examples for discussion. The first is a free translation by the British writer Michael Alexander, a devotee of Ezra Pound; the second is a close translation by the American scholar Stanley B. Greenfield, one of the giants of twentieth-century Old English scholarship; and the third, more difficult to

classify, is an imaginative reworking of the poem by Raymond Oliver, a scholar-poet and translator who favors traditional verse forms.

If Alexander were to seek out an appropriate epigraph for his translation, he could do worse than to settle on 2 Corinthians 3:6: "The letter kills but the spirit gives life." His version of the same eleven-and-a-half-line passage reads as follows:

Out moved the boat then  
to divide the deep water, left Denmark behind.  
A special sea-dress, a sail, was hoisted  
and belayed to the mast. The beams spoke.  
The wind did not hinder the wave-skimming ship  
as it ran through the seas, but the sea-going craft  
with foam at its throat, furred back the waves,  
her ring-bound prow planing the waters  
till they caught sight of the cliffs of the Geats  
and the headlands they knew. The hull drove ahead,  
urged by the breeze, and beached on the shore.

(111)

I am no unqualified admirer of the whole of Alexander's *Beowulf*. While his work claims to be a translation, occasional departures from the text and frequent stylistic mannerisms make his version less than ideal for the classroom, for few undergraduates have the linguistic training to trace out the nature of his freedoms. Still, here is a change from Donaldson's functionalist prose. As a former Classics professor of mine once said of Pope's *Iliad*, at least the translator has rendered the poem into *something*. The four-beat pulse of Alexander's lines calls to mind, without reproducing, the rhythmic surge of Anglo-Saxon meter. A caesura divides each line into two halves linked by alliteration. One may tire of Alexander's dactylic/anapestic rhythm, which departs somewhat from the measures of Old English verse in the direction of Homer and Sappho, but rhythm there is. Likewise his syntax flows. Only occasional departures from current English usage (such as the inversion "Out moved the boat then," or the brusque acephalic construction "left Denmark behind" in the next line) serve as a reminder that this is indeed a foreign language that is being translated.

The diction is inventive, with results that are often arresting. The odd compound "sea-dress" suggests a woman's garment and thus works to personify the ship in an aptly understated way. The verbs "hoisted" and "belayed" thrust us at once into the particulars of a sea journey; one can almost hear the sailors shout. To the uninitiated reader, the phrase "the beams spoke" offers a simple play on the idea of a ship's timbers creaking. To the knowledgeable one, it also calls to mind several memorable passages in Old English poetry (notably in *The Dream of*



*the Rood*) when an inanimate piece of wood is imagined to speak in a human voice. Similarly, Alexander's phrase "ring-bound prow" does not come out of nowhere but echoes a compound noun (*bringedstefna* 'the ring-prowed [vessel]') that occurs several times in *Beowulf*, including once a few lines previously. The phrase "foam at its throat" neatly picks up the motif of personification. While the action words in the two phrases "furled back the waves" and "planing the waters" are pure invention, they carry the alliteration of the line and increase its energy. Alexander invites us to see the journey not just as a journey, but as an example of beauty in motion. Three additional strong verbal constructions—"drove ahead," "urged by the wind," and "beached on the shore"—bring the Geats to their homeland and the passage to a successful conclusion.

Not so light-fingered as Alexander's, but closer to the verbal contours of the original, is the version that Stanley Greenfield published in 1982 under the title *A Readable Beowulf*, with a gentle dig at the oddities of syntax and vocabulary that mar prior translations. Greenfield refers to his work as "a labor of love," one that is "simultaneously a poem and, by virtue of the nature of translation, an act of criticism" (ix). In a separate article, "Esthetics and Meaning and the Translation of Old English Poetry," he has discussed the principles underlying his work and has commented more generally on problems of translating Old English verse. His version of the passage reads as follows:

The ship moved outward  
to plow the deep, leaving Danish land.  
Then a sea-cloth, a sail, was made fast  
by rope to the mast; the sea-planks creaked.  
No wind there kept the ship from its way  
over the waves: seaworthy, it went forth  
with tight-bound and foamy prow, floating  
from wave to wave across the currents,  
till they caught sight of the Geatish cliffs,  
well-known headlands; impelled by the wind,  
the keel pressed up and stood on the shore.

(101)

With ingenuity, Greenfield has chosen to render *Beowulf* not into alliterative verse, nor yet into some familiar metrical form, but into nine-count syllabic meter. The choice is an odd one but it works, partly because the tight poetic line that is observed throughout most of *Beowulf* does often contain only nine or ten syllables, with accents distributed freely among them.

The trick in writing syllabic verse is to maintain an abstract intellectual order in the midst of a deliberately fashioned metrical chaos. At the same time as one avoids any kind of patterning that would be apparent to the ear—a regular iambic

beat, for example, or end-stopped lines—one makes sure that the syllable-count adds up to the exact same total in each line (or almost always does so; Greenfield grants himself an occasional syllable of latitude). The virtues of a syllabic meter are largely the virtues of good prose. At the same time, syllabic verse tends to be marked by a certain taut quality, for the discipline of finding the right mathematics can lead to artful avoidance of the easy phrase.

Greenfield's great achievement is to render the exact sense of the original verse in phrases and clauses whose syntax is his own device. Participles ("leaving," "floating") do the work of main verbs or nouns. Nouns in the genitive plural (*Dena*, *Geata*) are rendered with rhythmic accuracy as adjectives: "Danish," "Geatish." A complex, stop-and-go Old English clause that incorporates four compound nouns or adjectives, each one of which could be awkward if rendered literally (lines 1908b–1910), is disentangled into a single statement, flowing yet precise: "seaworthy, it went forth / with tight-bound and foamy prow, floating / from wave to wave across the currents." Individual word choices reinforce the grace that comes from hard-won simplicity. A negative—*no . . . wind*—is a negative: "no wind." A *ceol* is a keel, its synecdoche intact. *Deop . . . wæter* is "the deep." A vague metaphorical compound noun that could be taken as singular or plural, *sæwudu* 'sea-wood' or 'sea-trees', is rendered with a carpenter's eye: "sea-planks." Even the rhythm of individual verses, including their syllable-count, is either mirrored or varied according to the accepted metrics of Old English verse: *cuþe næssas* are "well-known headlands"; with slightly greater latitude, *lyftgeswenced* becomes "impelled by the wind." While Greenfield does not use alliteration as a structural principle, he introduces it generously enough to suggest the aural richness of Old English verse.

Not all translators of *Beowulf* strive for the kind of philological precision that Greenfield achieves. There is also the art of *imitation*, where, in John Dryden's words, "the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty, not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion" (237). With an eye to the Pindaric imitations of several of his contemporaries, Dryden speaks scathingly of the imitator's art as "the most advantageous way for a translator to show himself, but the greatest wrong which can be done to the memory and reputation of the dead" (240). Vladimir Nabokov has echoed his opinion in blunt terms: "A tortured author and a deceived reader, this is the inevitable outcome of arty paraphrase" (qtd. in Robinson v, n. 1). Such strictures have not deterred good poets from turning to *Beowulf* with the intent neither to torture the dead nor to deceive the living, but rather to engage in the play of words that remains the prime motive and reward for most acts of literary composition.

The best of the free versions of *Beowulf* that I have seen—the author declines the title of "translation," speaking more accurately of his work as "an interpreta-

tion in verse" (8)—is a work by Raymond Oliver with the engaging title *Beowulf: A Likeness*. Although readers whose happiness is in slavish fidelity are likely to regard Oliver's text as one of the more outrageous of the modern perversions of *Beowulf*, other readers, whether novices or experts in Old English, may find themselves admiring and enjoying it far more than they do the latest bloodless paraphrase. Oliver's version is meant less for the classroom than for an easy chair of a midwinter night. In reading it I find myself provoked to remark, as Peter Quince did upon seeing Bottom in his enchanted state, "Bless thee, bless thee! Thou art translated!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.1.19, slightly adapted).

Oliver approaches *Beowulf* in terms of his own choosing that modulate now towards the wording of the original poem, now away from it. While always keeping to traditional accentual-syllabic meter, he changes his verse-form frequently. His verse-form in this particular part of the poem consists of six-line iambic tetrameter stanzas rhyming *ababcc*. The relevant passage begins in the second line of one stanza and ends in the middle of the last line of the next.

Deep water now. They left the land of Danes.—  
 Only one bailed, none rowed; the winds aloft  
 Hollowed the sail as thick ropes coped with strains;  
 The sea-wood creaked. A cloud will scud on the sky  
 No swifter than their longboat seemed to fly,  
  
 Their foamy-throated beauty, on the blue.  
 Beowulf stayed amidships by the mast—  
 And treasure—till the seacliffs came in view,  
 Familiar Geatish headlands: home at last.  
 The bow-taut stem, urged by the wind, struck sand  
 suddenly.

(78)

Anyone who knows the passage from *Beowulf* will find much here that is familiar. We see the same deep water, the same mast, sail, ropes, and wind; the ship is the same sea-wood, foamy-necked and wind-impelled; it traverses the same sea extending from Denmark to the cliffs of the Geatish headlands.

What may occasion surprise is some of the detail with which Oliver graces the scene. Whereas the Anglo-Saxon poet invites us to see only the ship itself in what seems to be autonomous motion, Oliver does not let us lose sight of the warriors whose job it is to man it. One image adds a domestic wrinkle: a single man keeps bailing while the others sit back with idle oars. The central presence in the scene is the hero himself, who remains in command, by the mast; and the treasures that had been conspicuously mentioned in the previous scene remain on display, in the hero's keeping.

These latter additions are not gratuitous. At work here is more than a imitator's license for free play, for with his references to the hero, the mast, and the treasure, Oliver echoes details of an earlier scene in the poem: the ship burial of Scyld Scefing, whose body, the poet tells us, is set down by the mast, alongside handsome treasures (lines 32–42). Those two sea-voyages frame the whole Danish episode, which encompasses a dynastic action that leads progressively from Scyld the founder to Beowulf the savior. There is even a mythic resonance to the rounded structure that Oliver enhances here. According to the initiatory pattern that underlies the whole first part of the poem, the hero has undergone a symbolic death in Denmark, and he returns to Geatland to begin a new life with fully adult status. The hero's sea-voyage home corresponds structurally to the scene that concludes many a *rite de passage* in both primitive and sophisticated cultures: the magical return of the initiate from the "other" world of danger and enlightenment to the world of ordinary reality. Vestigially, the aura of death hangs about the hero, as it does in the ninth book of the *Odyssey*, when the aged Odysseus, now supremely potent, returns by sea from the shadowy realm of his wanderings to his homeland of Ithaca, his longboat manned by magical Phaiakian sailors, he himself asleep by the mast with splendid gifts heaped about him.

"Home at last." The brief summary phrase, Oliver's invention, breathes out the relief of men who had ventured their lives in an uncanny realm. In this and in other ways, Oliver adds to the poem's human, affective dimension as well as its imagistic texture. Oliver's longship, unlike the *Beowulf* poet's, skims the water in a rhyming couplet, as breezy as Pope might have it fly; and when its journey across the open sea is done, it beaches with a lurch, "suddenly." As a suggestion of the aural richness of the Old English text, with its structural alliteration, Oliver gives us occasional alliterative pairs ("left the land," "scud on the sky," "beauty, on the blue," "amidships by the mast," "headlands: home"). One densely consonantal phrase mimics the creaky sound of the moving vessel: "thick ropes coped with strains." Even to the detail of an internal rhyme falling on adjacent stressed syllables—"ropes coped," with an aural effect analogous to *sundwudu þunede* in the original—Oliver shows a Poundian interest in imitating not only the sense of the Old English verse, but its sound as well.

Elsewhere in his work Oliver makes a brave attempt at historical reconstruction. He evokes the material culture of the hero's world with far more specificity and grit than a strict translator could do. His account of Scyld's ship burial, for example, incorporates a short inventory of the treasures of Sutton Hoo, an archaeological site that has provided artefacts similar to those referred to in *Beowulf*. Oliver sees that the dead king's ship is laden with not just the vaguely evoked *madma mænigo* 'many treasures' of the original poem, but with specific funerary gifts that include a jeweled sword, a byrnie, bronze-paneled helmets, a bag of coins, a chest of silken garments, and "Brooches in cloisonné where every

piece / Of millefiori glass or garnet had been set / in thick red gold." In a still more extended excursus, Oliver describes an imagined scene in Hart Hall (or Heorot) before Grendel makes his first bloody call. Outside the hall, pigs and sheep are penned in yards within a palisade. Within it, men cluster about a twelve-foot-long trestle table made of oak planks polished by spills and sweat. The Danes, stinking like livestock, wear sheepskin mittens against the cold, chew mutton and barley-bread, and slosh down "grainy, essence-of-a-hayfield" beer as they sink deeper into a bellicose stupor. This is Heorot as it ought to be, I hear my rowdier students saying; yet Oliver's elegant phrasing keeps the passage from degenerating into an undergraduate's dream of the ancient North.

These are four recent versions of *Beowulf*. There are enough others on the market to suit almost any taste. In 1970 John Crane reviewed twelve versions published between 1940 and 1968 with a fourfold classification of them depending on their intended audience of general readers, non-specialist students, specialists, and poets or lovers of poetry. A number of other versions, not reviewed by Crane, are currently available. Constance Hieatt, S. J. Bradley, and Barry Tharaud have produced serviceable prose translations. For those who prefer the adventure of verse, Marijane Osborn's spirited open-form version is accompanied by sumptuous photographs of Germanic antiquities. Howard Chickering's unpretentious verse translation has the advantage of being printed face-to-face with the Old English text. Kevin Crossley-Holland's alliterative version, available since 1968, will appeal to readers who want graceful and reliable access to the gist of the original, and the 1987 Boydell Press reissue of this work includes a useful apparatus and evocative visual designs. Like Crossley-Holland, Bernard Huppé has used a verse form that loosely imitates the Old English alliterative measure, and Frederick Rebsamen has imitated Anglo-Saxon metrics more strictly while departing more liberally from the exact sense of the original. Ruth Lehmann has succeeded in the daunting task of rendering the Old English text faithfully while replicating not only the alliteration but the exact system of metrics of the original, though at the occasional sacrifice of idiomatic English.

Critical scrutiny of the art of translating *Beowulf* continues as well. In a short essay designed for university or college teachers, Douglas D. Short evaluates nine prose translations and eight poetic translations of *Beowulf* published before 1984, with notes on some additional versions that are not designed primarily for classroom use. Accompanying Marc Hudson's recent translation of the poem into open-form verse is an ambitious introduction, as full of art as it is of insight, in which Hudson reviews the task and theory of translation and addresses the specific challenges faced by the translator of *Beowulf*, whom he finds by personal experience to be "an apologist for inevitable loss" (48).

In reading any rewriting of *Beowulf*, one should ask, "Who is translating, and what power is he or she trying to assert over the text?" For power of some kind

is always at issue. If there is no such thing as a disinterested record or reading of literature, there is surely no dispassionate translation either, whether the translator's passion is directed more toward the language of contemporary poetry, the Germanic heroic ethos, Christian values, nationalism, pedagogy, antiquarianism, or something as specific as metrics. I see no reason to lament the publication of new translations of *Beowulf*, for as long as the poem is being rewritten by translators who are also strong poets in their own right, the process of misprision or "strong misreading" that is the driving force in literary tradition, in the terms of Harold Bloom (84–105), is at work. Even when the poem is rendered into a modern language with only the most respectful literalist decorum, then someone, somewhere, is wanting to raise *Beowulf* from the dead and set it into motion again before a new generation of readers. The poem, in short, is becoming news again. Some witnesses to this resurrection may even be inspired to learn Old English well enough to throw their translations away. Whenever this happens, not only *Beowulf* but a panoply of other texts gains a new lease on life, and the cultural heritage of the human race is correspondingly enriched.

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