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BEOWULF AND 'HEANEYWULF'

Review

"Beowulf," translated by Seamus Heaney. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edition, eds. M. H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt, et al., Vol. I, pp. 29-99. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. lxi, 2973 pp. $53.25 hardcover.

Beowulf. Translated by Seamus Heaney. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. xxx, 106 pp. £14.99 hardcover.

Beowulf: A New Verse Translation. By Seamus Heaney. Bilingual edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. xxxi, 213 pp. $25.00 hardcover.

Over the last two years Seamus Heaney's long-awaited translation of *Beowulf* has been issued by three separate publishing houses to overwhelming critical acclaim. It won the 1999 Whitbread Book of the Year Award and reached the best-seller lists in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Its reception was quite a phenomenon.

Heaney was initially commissioned by Norton to represent the Old English poem to undergraduates in a free-standing and relatively faithful translation, to appear in their anthology. When the translation was

published separately, with a couple of notable exceptions (Tom Shippey in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Nicholas Howe in *New Republic*), the reviewers had little or no knowledge of Old English and responded to it as a new poem by the 1995 Nobel Prize winner. Some even praised his translation for the strength of its narrative design, as if he had invented the final conflict between the hero and the dragon. Heaney's own assessment, as reported by Mel Gussow in an interview in the *New York Times*, is that the translation is "about one-third Heaney, two-thirds 'duty to the text.' " (B4). On the other hand, professional Anglo-Saxonists early on derogated it with the name "Heaneywulf" since to them it was "just not *Beowulf*." It isn't, of course. No translation follows its exemplar exactly, no matter how "faithful." The nickname stuck, in academic circles anyway, but has now lost its pejorative sense and instead signals Heaney's efforts to mark the translation as his own poem.

Someone is always translating *Beowulf*, it seems. Since 1900, amazingly enough, there has been one new translation every two years on average. In the short time since Heaney's first appeared, three more have been published or promised.[1] This is in marked contrast to English translations of Homer or Dante, where one poetic translation will hold the field for decades before a new attempt appears. Why this steady stream? Perhaps one answer is that many university students on both sides of the Atlantic learn Old English, often painfully, and they wish to turn their pain into pleasure. Another reason is that the poem is mercifully short (3,182 lines) in comparison to Homer, and hence apparently less daunting. A more important factor is the persistent genetic fallacy that mistakes the remote historical continuity between Old English and Modern English as an indication of their essential identity, when in reality a whole millennium separates the two culturally and linguistically.

Yet even if conscientious translators treat Old and Modern English as separate source and target languages, they don't seem to "get it right" in others' eyes. Disagreement over what constitutes fidelity to the original has prevented general acceptance of a standard Modern English *Beowulf*. This is as it should be, whether we mean fidelity to the letter or to the literary qualities of the original. It's not only that it is impossible to bring *any* poem's full literary effect across in translation. There also is a special problem in going from Old to Modern English because we cannot help but see prominent features of Old English poetry—alliteration, parataxis, and

nominal compounding—as properties of Modern English poetry, when they actually create very different literary effects in Old English. The unavoidable temptation for the poetic translator is to try to transpose these literary effects by using the same linguistic features in Modern English. The results never satisfy everyone, and so translations continue to appear.

Twentieth-century poetic versions of *Beowulf* have mainly been paraphrases, to use Dryden's term, translating sense for sense rather than word for word. Since the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan's 1952 rendition, based on his eloquent plea for a chastened modern diction instead of archaisms and literal compounds, a kind of stylistic consensus can be seen in the more successful poetic paraphrases. They tend to be literal rather than to introduce new metaphors, and they try to mute the effect of the features shared by Old and Modern English poetry. Thus they use a four- or five-stress poetic line, only light alliteration, and what the translator considers a restrained modern diction. (Dictional equivalents in Modern English for the kenning-heavy compounding of *Beowulf* have remained an area of disagreement.) Those versions that also reproduce the syntactical and rhetorical designs of the original come closest to representing at least a faint ghost of their grand exemplar. They remain honorable failures, since Modern English poetry simply cannot match the clangorous magnificence of the Old English, but they show how the poem's thoughts and images develop. Among them I count Kevin Crossley-Holland's 1968 version, my own in 1977, Marc Hudson's in 1990, and Roy Michael Liuzza's 2000 translation. The successful aspects of Heaney's translation place it in this group of poetic paraphrases, although he frequently departs from the Old English syntax and often mixes dictional registers so as to mar his own literary decorum. For fidelity to both the letter and spirit of the original, it is a resounding but mixed success, with some awkward missteps amid many fine poetic achievements.

The very finest passages in Heaney's rendering are the dramatic speeches, which make up about forty percent of the poem. The speeches are freshly faithful to the point of ventriloquism (Nicholas Howe's term). To a reader who knows the original well, passage after passage delivers the sense and tone of the Old English with effortless grace. It doesn't matter which character is speaking, nor whether with enthusiasm or stoic irony: Heaney captures their verbal gestures just about perfectly. When Unferth,

Hrothgar's sour-minded retainer, challenges Beowulf upon his arrival at Heorot, Heaney makes his voice modulate from a sneering reproach into a stately catalogue of verbs implicitly acknowledging heroic action. The original moves exactly this way. Similarly, in the close of Beowulf's thoroughly devastating reply to Unferth, Heaney gets the pulse of feeling exactly right:

> "The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly
> as keen or courageous as you claim to be
> Grendel would never have got away with
> such unchecked atrocity, attacks on your king,
> havoc in Heorot and horrors everywhere.
> But he knows he need never be in dread
> of your blade making a mizzle of his blood
> or of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter—
> from the Victory-Shieldings, the shoulderers of the spear.
> He knows he can trample down you Danes
> to his heart's content, humiliate and murder
> without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.
> I will show him how Geats shape to kill
> in the heat of battle. Then whoever wants to
> may go bravely to mead, when morning light,
> scarfed in sun-dazzle, shines forth from the south
> and brings another daybreak to the world." (590-606)

This passage also shows the translator as tactful interpreter. Here "you Danes" are more sharply contrasted with the Geats than in the Old English text, but most critics read Beowulf's boast as thinly veiled aggression and Heaney simply makes it overt. The brilliant image of the morning light "scarfed in sun-dazzle" is Heaney's own, resting on good textual warrant, and lends subtle symbolic force to what gives "another daybreak to the world," namely Beowulf's proposed salvation of the Danes.

Heaney's final verbs here mirror the confident future indicative of the original. However, there are uncertain touches of diction in the passage as well. "Heart's content" and "fear of reprisal" are shopworn phrases. "[S]uch unchecked atrocity" smacks of journalese, and "need never be in dread . . . of vengeance arriving ever from this quarter" sounds like a backbencher in Parliament. American readers are unlikely to know, even from context, that "mizzle" is dialectal for "drizzle." In fact it seems selected not only as a countryman's word but also to alliterate with "making," and therefore feels slightly forced.

That line—"of your blade making a mizzle of his blood"—exhibits

one of Heaney's favorite rhetorical enrichments, chiasmus, here played out across the *bl-m-m-bl* alliteration. Generally his poetic form is more lightly alliterated, sometimes on unstressed syllables, sometimes only twice in a line, and on rare occasions not at all. Sometimes we hear a strong medial caesura, sometimes only the lightest pause. He has tried, as he says in his Introduction, for "the sound of sense" (xxix) in Frost's famous phrase, and this flexible form allows him to stay focused on it. His translation can thus keep pace with the original nearly line by line.

Heaney says that he sought to recreate "a kind of foursquareness about the utterance" (xxviii) which he encountered when he first read the Old English poem. He acknowledges that his own prejudice in favor of "forthright delivery" has led him to scant, to some degree, the extended appositions of the poem's syntactical variations and some of its ornate compound-making. This is true: we sorely miss the craggy, bejeweled difficulty of the original in Heaney's flattened-out "directness of utterance." I myself certainly wouldn't call the style of the original Old English "foursquare." It is both restrained and exuberant, often ironic, oblique, ceremonial, sometimes sententious.

Nonetheless, Heaney's mode of translation often works exceptionally well in narrative passages. Here, for instance, is a famous description of nonheroic action, when Beowulf and his men first cross the ocean to Denmark:

> Time went by, the boat was on water,
> in close under the cliffs.
> Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
> sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
> a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear
> in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
> away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship.
> Over the waves, with the wind behind her
> and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird
> until her curved prow had covered the distance
> and on the following day, at the due hours
> those seafarers sighted land,
> sunlit cliffs, sheer crags
> and looming headlands, the landfall they sought.
> It was the end of their voyage and the Geats vaulted
> over the side, out on to the sand,
> and moored their ship. There was a clash of mail
> and a thresh of gear. They thanked God
> for that easy crossing on a calm sea. (210-28)

This is a brilliant rendering of what is already a brilliant passage in the original. Heaney has successfully spread out the ship-as-bird simile over more lines than it takes in the Old English and he has resegmented some of the sentences, but everything works to create an effect equivalent to the Old English. This kind of clear vigor is typical of his best narrative passages. So is his arrival at the translation "It was the end of their voyage," an adroit negotiation of the crux at line 224a, *ēoletes æt ende*, discussion of which takes up nearly seven inches of small print in Dobbie's variorum edition. To my mind, Heaney has made sensible, or at least defensible, decisions about translating all the major cruces in the poem.

In other passages Heaney is less responsive to the text. When he comes upon the most surprising periodic delay in the entire poem, he does not preserve it in his translation. After Grendel's Dam attacks, the Danes and the Geats track her to the mere, and the sentence at 1417b-21 reads literally (to use Roy Liuzza's very exact translation):

> To all of the Danes
> the men of the Scyldings, many a thane,
> it was a sore pain at heart to suffer,
> a grief to every earl, when on the seacliff
> they came upon the head of Æschere.

In the Old English the "when" clause delays the discovery of the head (*hafelan*) of Hrothgar's beloved counselor until the last half-line: "syðþan Æscheres / on þam holm-clife hafelan melton." This delivers a real narrative shock to the reader as well as to the Danes. However, in Heaney's version Æschere's head is displaced from emphatic final position to the "foot" of the cliff, which isn't even in the original:

> It was a sore blow
> to all of the Danes, friends of the Shieldings,
> a hurt to each and every one
> of that noble company when they came upon
> Æschere's head at the foot of the cliff.

"[A] sore blow" and "a hurt to each and every one" are flaccid phrases compared to the pained literal sense of the Old English. It's notable, too, that Heaney doesn't seek the emphasis of alliteration when he reaches this climax.

Heaney's fidelity to "the sound of sense" may also be tested by his treatment of Grendel's approach to Heorot, much admired by generations of readers. I will cite only lines 710-11, which have a horrifying sound in

Old English, like a tolling bell:

> Dā cōm of mōre under mist-hleoþum
> Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær.

The double *g*'s of "gongan" extend the growl in "Grendel" and then become more portentous as they contrast with the even heavier weight of the *g* sound that he must bear, "Godes yrre," God's wrath. In my dual-language edition, with this astonishing texture of sounds on view across the page, I could afford to render the lines quite literally:

> Then up from the marsh, under misty cliffs,
> Grendel came walking; he bore God's wrath.

Roy Liuzza, with different nuances in his diction, is also literal:

> Then from the moor, in a blanket of mist,
> Grendel came stalking—he bore God's anger.

Both of us are careful to mimic the grammar and rhythm of the Old English, and hope against hope that the effect will speak for itself. Heaney, on the other hand, has:

> In off the moors, down through the mist-bands
> God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.

By changing the verbal construction, Heaney loses the sound of slow-marching menace and turns Grendel into a sort of hyena. The *gr* alliteration of his second line no longer sets the monster against his Maker but instead links him to animal appetite. That Grendel has aplenty, and he soon gobbles up a sleeping Geat, but the eerie ritual dignity of his horrid visit has vanished. Of course it is also true that neither my nor Liuzza's version recreates the *sound* of that eerieness. In that sense, none of us "gets it right." Whether or not a young reader of "Heaneywulf" will like Grendel as a greedy loper is another matter.

The most daunting literary task facing every translator of *Beowulf* is to find an equivalent for the dominant voice of the poem, which moves back and forth between pell-mell narrative and lingering reflection even at the most exciting moments. The Old English achieves this duality of mode in part through its ornate diction and elaborated syntax, aspects that Heaney means to eschew. His solution is, as he says, to establish a firm, level tone with his "foursquare" line and language. This tone has its gains and its costs. Usually it has clarity and force. It helps Heaney to avoid an

overblown and compound-clogged Modern English, but not always. Sometimes it merely leaves us with dull stretches. Furthermore, in his attempt to keep on an even keel, he frequently recasts the shape of sentences in startling and distracting ways. On the whole, the chief virtue of his style—apart from the clarity and force of the dramatic speeches—is that it establishes a *decorum* of language that accords well with the heroic dignity of the Old English.

Such decorum is no mean poetic achievement. I therefore find it ironic that he often unintentionally breaks his own decorum. This happens in three ways: by overwrought images derived from already strong metaphors in the Old English; by clunky over-alliterations not required by his form; and by wildly varying dictional choices. At such moments he becomes so enthusiastic about the sense and sound of the original, and about his command over it, that he has to exercise the full range of his poetic talents. He breaks into florid song, as it were, and it clashes with his own levelness.

For instance, when Beowulf tells Hrothgar he has vanquished Grendel, Heaney has him conclude by saying:

> And now he won't be long for this world.
> He has done his worst but the wound will end him.
> He is hasped and trooped and hirpling with pain,
> limping and looped in it. Like a man outlawed
> for wickedness, he must await
> the mighty judgement of God in majesty. (974-79)

The first line is colloquial to the point of flipness. The *h* alliteration of the "hirpling" line is showy overkill, which is carried over into the internal rhyming of "limping and looped." "Hirpling" is a recondite dialectal word for "hobbling" and was not known to several British friends when I tried it out on them. It might as well be a word from "Jabberwocky." Heaney's exuberant performance is more in evidence here than the subject of the passage itself, Grendel's death-wound.

An example of both over-alliteration and overwrought imagery is Heaney's identification of Yrse, the queen of Swedish king Onela, in an early lineage. In line 64 she is literally called "the neck [hence 'close, dear'] bed-companion of the Battle-Scylfing [i.e., Battle-Swede]," a compound name which suggests both the stately and the intimate, but Heaney renders her as "A balm in bed for the battle-scarred Swede." This seems a

thumpingly gratuitous foregrounding of the erotic, even though one can admire it as interpretive translation.

Alliteration by itself, especially on *b* sounds, often distracts the reader from the sense. Lines 81b-84a:

> The hall towered,
> its gables wide and high and awaiting
> a barbarous burning. That doom abided,
> but in time it would come: the killer instinct
> unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

"Barbarous burning"—is there any other kind? "Abided" might have come from any one of a dozen earlier translations. The over-connection of "and . . . and" (not in the original) also flattens out the sense. When Grendel first attacks Heorot, he rushes back to his lair in lines 124-25,

> flushed up and inflamed from the raid,
> blundering back with the butchered corpses.

That second line itself seems to blunder. There are a number of other instances of verbal overkill that break decorum, and do not create the "forthright delivery" the poet says he sought. It is worth noting that they are mainly confined, for whatever reason, to the Grendel's Dam episode and the early part of the dragon fight.

One could argue, I suppose, that the overcooked imagery and the bumping alliteration are deliberate adornments that extend, rather than break, Heaney's basic decorum of style. Certainly such imagery has been cited admiringly in various reviews. However, the more serious problem is his extravagant use of disparate registers of diction, since the disparities cause his normally level tone to dip or knot up. I see three different kinds of dictional shifts that break his own decorum. First, part of Heaney's "foursquareness" is a man-to-man informality with flourishes of emphasis of the sort we love to hear in oral storytelling. The gain is a conversational "readable" quality in the translation. But his sudden drops into the chummily colloquial can be unsettling when the rest of the sentence is not informal. Second, there are what I can only call clichés of speech, which you simply don't expect in a poet of Heaney's stature. Third, there are the deliberate Ulsterisms.

All of these can be seen in the opening lines of "Heaneywulf," which is far and away the most frequently cited passage in the sheaf of reviews I've collected.

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,
a cub in the yard, a comfort sent
by God to that nation. He knew what they had tholed,
the long times and troubles they'd come through
without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned.
Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow's name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that,
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts
steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behaviour that's admired
is the path to power among people everywhere. (1-25)

In the first three lines Heaney alters the syntax unnecessarily, losing the original shape of the sentence, and ends up with a subdued, rather flat tone. Here are the lines in Old English and a literal gloss:

Hwæt! Wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum
þēodcyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hūd ā æpelingas ellen fremedon.

What! We of the Spear-Danes in the old days
of the tribal kings the strength have heard tell,
how those noblemen courage performed.

The grammatical relationships can be sorted out thus:

Listen! We have heard tell of the strength of the tribal kings
of the Spear-Danes in the old days,
[of] how those noblemen performed [deeds of] courage!

The first verb in the poem, *gefrignan*, is an epic formula of poetic

authority that means "to hear tell of," and its first object is the "þrym" of the ancient Danish kings, a word that means "power" or "military troop," and by extension "glory." I punctuate the sentence with an exclamation point because the verb's second object, the "how" clause expanding upon "þrym," is uttered with great warmth of feeling, with the heavy nouns *æpelingas* ("noblemen") and *ellen* ("courage") receiving full metrical emphasis. Despite his announced commitment to the living voices of tellers, Heaney suppresses the initial indication of oral reception and recitation in "wē . . . gefrūnon" and dilutes the syntactic force of line 2 by introducing the two "ands." Then he makes line 3 a separate sentence, which cools its warmth considerably, as does its oddly high-toned propaganda-like diction: "those princes' heroic campaigns." These are uncertain first steps into the poem.

The last sentence of this opening passage is also askew. Literally it reads "in every tribe a man must prosper by deeds of praise," a maxim of conduct that clinches not only the Anglo-Saxon value of a lord's generosity to his men but also their reciprocal loyalty under duress. Heaney's version suggests nothing so much as a modern political climber's recipe for success: "Behaviour that is admired / is the path to power among people everywhere." Perhaps the excesses of the last American presidential election have given me a tin ear. But consider a different tone, in line 11b: "That was one good king." By simply adding "one" for colloquial emphasis to an otherwise exact translation of "þæt wæs gōd cyning, " he has deflected our attention from the object of praise to the sound of the praising voice. Perhaps this deflection is always part of the project of a modern poet, but in this case it trivializes when it should emphasize. The colloquial note in line 20, "And a young prince must be prudent like that," doesn't work either; it loses the dignity and decorum of the Old English in head-wagging sententiousness.

Then there are the clichés, some of which I have already cited. "Hold the line" at the end of this passage was originally "bear the brunt" in a version that circulated prior to publication, so I know it's intended as an improvement. A few lines past this quotation we get "laid down the law" for when Scyld literally "ruled by words." These phrases are legitimate interpretive translations. The problem lies in their jazzy tone, as though the words were too easily found. The sense that they are *ad hoc* affects my response to the choice of "boy-child" (for *eafera*, 'son, offspring') and also

"cub" (for the adjective *geong* 'young'); those words seem chosen mainly for alliteration.

But the most controversial single word in this opening passage is its first: "So." The Old English opens with the interjection "Hwæt!" which is literally "What!" but can be translated as "Listen" or "Hear me!" or, as some wags have recently suggested on the Anglo-Saxon electronic network, "Hey!" or "Yo!" Older translations had "Hark!" and one even had "What ho!" While there is some controversy over whether "Hwæt" is part of the first complete sentence or a free-standing call for attention, what really matters, as these modern alternatives suggest, is that the Modern English choice for this first word will boldly declare the tonal landscape of any translation. Probably "Hwæt" functioned the same way in the Old English, but we don't know its precise tone or social occasion.

Heaney slices through this Gordian knot by the confident substitution of his own sensibility as a modern Irish poet. To my ear, "So." sounds either tight-lipped and almost grim, or else like a buddy-to-buddy acknowledgment. To other American ears (Nicholas Howe, the members of ANSAXNET) it has implied a continuation of some prior speech, or has sounded like a Yiddish greeting, or like urban guy talk ("So. What's up with the Danes of yore?") To Heaney, however, it comes out of his rural family history. "So." is the first declaration of his desire to appropriate the act of translation to his own complicated cultural heritage. The second indication in this passage is his use of the Ulsterism "tholed" for "suffered," which derives from the Old English verb *þolian.*

In his Introduction he sketches a history of his personal relationship to the Old English. After the translation was first commissioned in the mid-1980s, Heaney says he bogged down after getting part way through.

> Even so, I had an instinct that it should not be let go. An understanding I had worked out for myself concerning my own linguistic and literary origins made me reluctant to abandon the task. I had noticed, for example, that without any conscious intent on my part certain lines in the first poem in my first book conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics. These lines were made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables—"The spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging. I look down . . ."—and in the case of the second line there was alliteration linking "digging" and "down" across the caesura. Part of me, in other words, had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start. . . . I suppose all I am saying is that I consider *Beowulf* to be part of my voice-right. (*New Verse* xxiii)

This goes down very smoothly, and one needs to stop and reflect on how

metaphorical it is to say "Part of me . . . had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start." This claim and the slippery coinage of "voice-right," playing off "birth-right," show his desire to appropriate *Beowulf* for his own poetic voice. Of course Heaney also knew Irish and "For a long time . . . I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather than both/and." He had inklings of "the possibility of release from this kind of cultural determination early on" during his first year at Queen's University, Belfast, where through a lecture on the Irish etymology of the English word "whiskey" he glimpsed "some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one's language would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language" (xxv). Then he discovered *þolian* in the Glossary to Wrenn's edition of *Beowulf* and realized it was

> the word that older and less educated people would have used in the country where I grew up. "They'll just have to learn to thole," my aunt would say about some family who had suffered an unforeseen bereavement. And now suddenly here was "thole" in the official textual world, mediated through the apparatus of a a scholarly edition, a little bleeper to remind me that my aunt's language was not just a self-enclosed family possession but an historical heritage. . . . (xxv)

But if "þolian had opened my right of way," he still had to find "the note and pitch for the overall music of the work." And that he found close to home:

> a familiar local voice, one that had belonged to relatives of my father, people whom I had once described (punning on their surname) as "big-voiced Scullions" [in the poem "The Strand at Lough Beg"].
>
> I called them "big-voiced" because when the men of the family spoke, the words they uttered came across with a weighty distinctness, phonetic units as separate and defined as delph platters displayed on a dresser shelf. A simple sentence such as "We cut the corn today" took on immense dignity when one of the Scullions spoke it. . . . when I came to ask myself how I wanted *Beowulf* to sound in my version, I realized I wanted it to be speakable by one of those relatives. I therefore tried to frame the famous opening lines in cadences that would have suited their voices, but that still echoed with the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon. . . . in Hiberno-English Scullionspeak, the particle "so" came naturally to the rescue, because in that idiom "so" operated as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention. So, "so" it was. (xxvii)

The way I read this account, Heaney's reasoning for arriving at this choice is emphatically not "a release from cultural determination" but instead a reinstatement of it. He says he used his Ulsterisms sparingly and only when one "presented itself uncontradictably" (the case in point was

"keshes" for *frēcne fen-gelād* 1359a). It is true that there are only about a dozen Ulsterisms in "Heaneywulf." In addition to "hirpling," "keshes," and "tholed," they include "wean" (as a noun), "hoked," "stook," "brehon," "session" (from Irish *seissiún*), "reavers," "bothies," "graith," and "bawn" (a word I will return to). To readers who are not speakers of Irish English, which must be the overwhelming majority of Heaney's audience, these Ulsterisms, occurring as they do throughout the translation, are a signal of cultural difference. They act as little bleepers, to use his own term, reminding you that you are not part of the Ulster English-language community. That's if you have read his writing explaining his intentions for "Heaneywulf." Most readers of the *Norton Anthology* will not have done so, since his Introduction is not printed there. For them, these are incomprehensible words that need to be translated into standard English to be understood, and in fact Heaney has had to gloss most of them in explanatory notes in the anthology.

In his 1999 Saint Jerome Lecture, "The Drag of the Golden Chain," he goes out of his way to approve of that peculiar procedure, giving an intensely personal reason:

> What keeps the translator in a state of near (but never quite complete) fulfilment is this tension betweeen the impulse to use the work in its first language as a stimulus and the obligations to give it a fair hearing in the second. . . . there could be no better illustration of the fact of the tension itself than the footnotes in the new volume. At certain points, it is the very translation that has to be translated for the benefit of the worldwide audience of English-speakers to whom the anthology is directed. (16)

One can only sympathize with the poet's desire to be at once original and faithful, but this is also a self-serving apologia that makes no concessions to the target audience of the translation. It seems that once he decided to push on with his translation he found that he was really writing for himself, and not for the audience of the *Norton Anthology*. A poet *should* write for himself, without a doubt, and to do so may make "Heaneywulf" more his own work. But this strange dictional coloration does not accurately represent the language of *Beowulf*. There are no Irish words in the Old English poem, and it does a disservice to students to make it look like there is an amalgam of Irish and English in the original poem.

There is yet a deeper difficulty in Heaney's deliberate blending of these different Englishes: it is bad cultural and linguistic history. It does not acknowledge that the varieties of English are shaped by social forces.

In his other writings Heaney knows this quite well, and has even noted how the name "Seamus" immediately identified him as a Catholic in Ulster. But in the Saint Jerome Lecture, he would like his posited connections between Old English and the Ulster dialect to work so that when successful "the flash of the right word choice should create a tremor that makes readers feel they exist as 'full strength' members of the language-group" (16). The problem for the majority of his audience is, which language-group is it, Irish or English? It can't be both, given the history of Northern Ireland.

Which brings me back to "bawn." At the end of his Introduction, Heaney says

> . . . for reasons of historical suggestiveness, I have in several instances used the word "bawn" to refer to Hrothgar's hall. In Elizabethan English, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings that the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay, so it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches. Indeed, every time I read the lovely interlude that tells of the minstrel singing in Heorot just before the first attacks of Grendel, I cannot help thinking of Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Faerie Queene* to Sir Walter Raleigh, just before the Irish would burn the castle and drive Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court. Putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more "willable forward / again and again and again." (xxx)

(The last lines are from his own poem "The Settle Bed," which he uses as the epigraph to his translation.) This pleasantly fanciful picture of Spenser in his bawn is deeply confused as an analogy to Hrothgar in Heorot. It makes the historical equation read: the oppressed Irish = Grendel, and the colonizing English = Hrothgar. Surely Heaney can't mean that he takes his Elizabethan Irish forebears to have been monsters from the race of Cain, nor the exploitative English planters to have been wise rulers like Hrothgar. Yet that's the way the analogy works. Putting a "bawn" into his translation is *not* a way "to come to terms" with Irish-English history. Ulsterisms like "bawn" operate polemically in "Heaneywulf." They drive home a sense of difference, if not conflict, between Irish English and other varieties of English. Although he doesn't *mean* them to subvert the Englishness of the poem, that is what they must do, as terms coming from a particular history and geography. Heaney can't avoid history, as much as he might wish, in his Christian pacificism, to "will it forward." To use

"bawn" in this context is like using the word "intifada" when translating the Old Testament.

How could a poet whose other work is so alive to political and linguistic tensions in the United Kingdom so badly mistake the effect of using his own local dialect in a different cultural context? How, to ask a related question, can his translation often be quite faithful to the sense, and yet at points be so quirky and overheated? I couldn't find an answer to these questions until I realized that before and since publication he has been working hard to induce readers to accept "Heaneywulf" as actually having realized his own personal intentions. He wants it to be seen as a poem by Seamus Heaney—as a poem *said* by Seamus Heaney—more than as a translation from the Old English, despite his assertions to the contrary. This seems confirmed by the availability of audio cassettes and now a CD, and by the many public readings he has given, where the audience not only hears the story of the Introduction once again but also experiences firsthand a seamless continuity of accent and intonation between his poetic art and his talk about it. When he turns to excerpts from his *Beowulf* after an hour of his other work, they sound very like his own poems.

To put it another way, he is now actively engaged in his own canon formation. He wants to be sure, or so it seems to me, that this big hit, his *Beowulf*, has a place in the already well-developed arc of his career, a place that will, with only a little more hindsight smartly applied to it, come to seem inevitable. No poet writing mainly for himself, after all, would want a new volume to be seen as a wild side step in mid-career, or merely an exercise for the left hand. Especially not after the 1995 Nobel Prize. His writing about the genesis of "Heaneywulf" is therefore an example of that kind of fictional myth-making we call autobiography.

The myth begins from a premise of fact: Norton approached him, he agreed to the project, and got started. After that, the hero of the story (the poet as translator is always a potentially doomed hero) enters the Dark Wood of Despair, gets stuck, loses interest. He is ready to abandon the project and hence, by implication, to turn his back on tawdry Academic Commercialism. But then he has an epiphany: he encounters the word *polian* and connects it with "thole," and a newly green hedgelane of opportunities and connections opens up before him, or, more accurately, within him. As he writes in the first of his "Glanmore Sonnets":

Vowels plough the other: opened ground. (*Opened Ground* 156)

Pulling the Ulsterism "thole" from his memory is like pulling the Sword from the Stone (the genre of the myth is ultimately Romance). Now he sees the analogies between Old English poetry and Ulster dialect, and, more important, between heroism and familial manners in these two violent worlds, and he is ready to go onward and upward. The final completion of the translation is the capstone of the narrative. Upon its publication and astounding success, the myth enters the realm of public discourse where it now has an active life as a sanctioned explanation of his intentions. The sanction of the myth is so strong that some readers see the intentions as actual effects.

There is one final segment of the narrative yet to come, like the prediction of Arthur's Return. It is the realization of "an entry into further language." In his Nobel lecture "Crediting Poetry," Heaney sketches out his heartfelt belief that there is a "wholeness" of language which poetry can confer upon "partition." In that essay, in contrast to his remarks about his translation, he acknowledges the pain of division in Northern Ireland, and he looks to "the local" to energize the future. His great example is Yeats's poetry, which "does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed" (*Opened Ground* 430). In his 1997 *Paris Review* interview, Heaney was asked if he was now trying "to go back to, not a Wordsworthian innocence, but a place pre-language, pre-nationalism, pre-Catholicism." He replied that he had "a definite desire to write a kind of poem that cannot immediately be ensnared in what they call the 'cultural debate.' This has become one of the binds as well as one of the bonuses for poets in Ireland. Every poem is either enlisted or unmasked for its clandestine political affiliations" (106). Thus, if we could only see his *Beowulf* as he does, it would provide a vision of the prelapsarian *Urlage*, a place where poetry tells the truth about both the harshness and the sweetness of reality, a place of wholeness beneath and beyond the brutal Irish-English political conflict and its concomitant linguistic division.

This myth of Heaney's is not new. Many elements of it are present in his earlier writing. In his essay "Feeling into Words" (1974), he approvingly connects, through a poem of W. R. Rodgers, the craggy Anglo-Saxonisms of Hopkins, his own first empowering poetic model, with the

harsh consonants of the Ulster accent. And in the 1972 essay "Belfast," he places himself symbolically between the two components of the name of his family's farm, Mossbawn. In 1999 he returned to this name in a poem in the *New Yorker* titled "Mossbawn." His affection for and idealized conceptualization of the "bawn," as we see it justified in the *Beowulf* Introduction, have been with him for a long time.

If it is his larger project to inscribe upon English literary culture a poem of his own that is newly "willable forward," I do not believe that he has achieved his intention. However, "Heaneywulf" certainly stands up as one of the better poetic paraphrases of the original, even as it calls attention to itself as his own poem. I predict that, after its day in the sun as a publishing phenomenon, future critics of contemporary poetry will treat it as part of his own corpus, just as he hopes. As a translation of *Beowulf*, it will be assigned out of the *Norton Anthology* by foot-soldiering non-specialists teaching required survey courses. At the same time, other translations of *Beowulf* will continue to appear as the 2000s roll along, and among them English teachers will find equally good translations, of mixed success, to choose from. In turn, those translations will annoy students who have learned Old English and have read the poem in the original. Some few of them will always have the chutzpah to think they have enough poetic talent to render the original into Modern English verse. And *Beowulf* will go on being newly translated for the foreseeable future.

Note

[1]Roy Michael Liuzza, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000); Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy, *Beowulf*, to be published by Story Line Press; and, still in process at this writing, Timothy Romano's online translation of *Beowulf* at members.dca.net/tim/beowulf_trans.htm.

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