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*Word Oper Findan: Seamus Heaney and the Translation of
Beowulf*

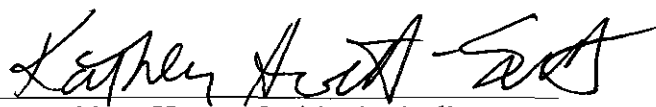
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Honors Thesis
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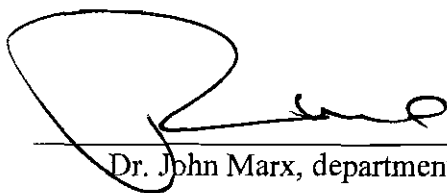
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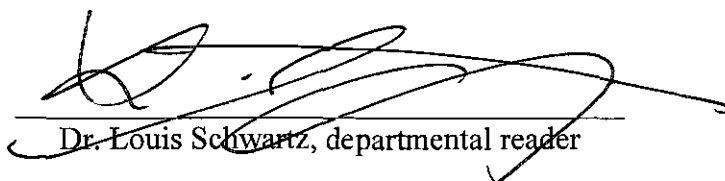
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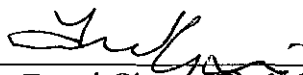
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Poems cannot be translated, they can only be rewritten –Schopenhauer

In 2000, Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney published a new translation of the early medieval epic, *Beowulf*. The work was subsequently lauded as a masterpiece. Despite this ensuing surge of interest in Heaney's translation, very few scholars have undertaken the task of a critical analysis of the translation and none have assumed the task of a comparative analysis between the original text and Heaney's version. Most, it seems, have assumed that Heaney's translation is a faithful rendition of the original, and with good reason. Heaney maintains fidelity to the structure, stylistics, and meter of the original, as well as to its length. Yet as one begins to look more closely at both the translation and the *Beowulf* text, one realizes that Heaney's translation diverges from the original in ways that seem to be unaccountable.

That Heaney's text deviates from the original in more ways than the fact that one is written in Old English and the other in modern English, however, should come as no surprise. The poetic techniques employed by the Old English poet are so inextricably woven into the nuances of the poem's cultural context and language of origin that they are inaccessible to the modern poet and translator: envelope patterns¹ rely too heavily upon the syntactical fluidity of the Old English language to be fully translatable in modern English;² the vast store of Old English myths and narratives from which the *Beowulf* poet draws numerous parallels and allusions is all but lost to the modern reader; the alliterative long line, though feasible in Modern English, cannot be rigorously

¹ Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson. *Beowulf: An Edition*. Blackwell: Oxford, UK. 1998.

² see Mitchell, Bruce. "The Dangers of Disguise: Old English Texts in Modern Punctuation," *RES*, n.s. 31 (1980), 385-413.

followed.³ Furthermore, the Old English language itself—the *Beowulf* poet draws many key themes and ideas from the dense semantic stratifications in Old English—reflects the cultural norms and ideologies that constitute the Anglo-Saxon worldview. The modern translator of *Beowulf* must seek tools that are altogether alien to the Old English language and literature for effective translation and, in so doing, must necessarily depart from a dogged fidelity to a linguistic or thematic translation of the original in its entirety and complexity. There is, therefore, a paradox at the heart of translation: only by surrendering fidelity to a text can one ultimately be faithful to it.

This project, therefore, seeks to uncover and explore the new methods and techniques Heaney employs in translating the poem's meanings and to consider the ways in which this recent translation has shaped our understanding of, and response to, *Beowulf*. I contend that Heaney employs different modes of poetic language—what Fred C. Robinson has called an “appositive style”, poetic compounds, and an Anglo-Irish dictional admixture—which stylistically evoke key themes in the narrative. Central to this argument will be the notion that these techniques rely entirely upon the reader's discernment and ultimate judgment of their meanings and that Heaney's imagined reader in this poem is a modern 20th century audience. What follows is, in effect, an original work in its own right: Heaney's *Beowulf* becomes paradigmatic as an act of cultural reconciliation in an epoch fraught with violence and conflict precipitated by ethnic difference, a novel reformulation of an ancient narrative poem that bespeaks the possibility of a “...salubrious political space” (*Crediting Poetry*, 257) for the mutual respect of cultural otherness. In so doing, Heaney self-reflexively engages the paradox of

³ To illustrate an example *vice versa*, one may very well imagine trying to write Old English poetry set to iambic pentameter. This is not to say that it will not work, but that such a project would be extremely cumbersome.

translation by finding what Walter Benjamin calls "...that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" ("Task of the Translator" 76).

Many scholars have noted the densely nominal and appositional style of Old Germanic poetry. By nature this style is paratactic, often leaving a logical openness between two or more words, phrases or clauses whose connection is to be furnished by the reader's inference. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson define "variations" as words, phrases or clauses that "... (have) a common referent and the same function within the sentence" (28) as the word, phrase or clause which they restate. It is not merely repetition, however, for they each bear "...increments of meaning" (28) that augment the overall sense of the original referent. As each increment is supplied, the reader must judge how each word, phrase or clause fit together conceptually as well as semantically. By no means is *Beowulf* an exception to this feature of Old English verse; rather, as scholar Frederick Klaeber observed, "...by far the most important rhetorical figure, in fact the very soul of the Old English poetical style, is of course the device of 'variation' (or apposition), which may be studied to perfection in the *Beowulf*" (lxv). Fred C. Robinson, in his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, has gone so far to suggest that grammatical or syntactical apposition and the juxtaposition of images or ideas in the text constitute what he calls an "appositive style," which informs the structure of *Beowulf* and develops key themes. These apposed elements often heighten the dramatic effect of the given episode and in some cases develop key themes in the poem. One of the more classic examples of variance occurs as Beowulf traverses the steep, craggy path in pursuit of Grendel's mother:

Ofereode þa aethelinga bearn
 steap stanhliðo stige nearwe
 enge anpaðas uncuð gelad
 neowle naessas nicorhusa fela;...
 (*Beowulf* 1408-11)

Then the offspring of princes passed through
 The steep, rocky cliff, the narrow ascending paths,
 The narrow, single-file paths, the unknown way,
 The precipitous cliffs, and many of the water-monsters' abodes... (my
 translation⁴)

Each half-line of variation discloses a new detail to the reader: the first set of variation describes the cliffs as at first steep (*steap*) and then dangerously high (*neowle*), as if to mimic Beowulf's perception of the terrain. The narrator also draws attention to a different image which describes the pathway as narrow (*nearwe* and *enge*), ascending (*stige*), single-file (*anpaðas*) and previously unknown (*uncuð*). This also seems to mimic a first-hand impression of the terrain; one might first note that the pathway was narrow and steeply ascending, and consequently, single-file. Furthermore, it is not to be ignored that these two instances of variation intermingle; that is, that the narrator alternates between describing the cliffs and the pathway. This seems to further obscure the clarity of the terrain. One perhaps does not know where precisely the path is, but rather follows along the sheer edge of the cliff. Beowulf's determination appears all the more

⁴ All translations of Anglo-Saxon text are my own unless marked otherwise.

insuperable as he trudges onwards to the haunted mere. Therefore, this set of variations heighten the dramatic effect of this harrowing passage by attesting to the bravery and worthiness of Beowulf's exploits and thus emphasize his heroism in the face of imminent danger which, as Kenneth Rexroth and many other scholars have noted, is a central theme of the poem.⁵

Poetic compounds function similarly in the *Beowulf* poem and are, as Fred C Robinson has it, a function of the poem's appositive style; they are themselves appositional. Among the more prominent and frequently occurring poetic compounds in *Beowulf* are: *winedrihten* ("God's friend"⁶), *freadrihten* ("king-lord" or "lord-king"), *gryrebrog*a ("a terrifying creature" or "a terrible horror"), *deaðfaege* ("death-doomed"), *wiflufu* ("affection for a wife"; lit. "wife-love"), *modlufu* ("deep affection"; lit. "mind-love"), *eardlufu* ("dear home"; lit. "home-love"), *goldgyfa* ("lord" or "gold-giver"), and *goldmaððum* ("gold-treasure"). Robinson points out that though each of the two composite parts of these compound words applies to the same referent, each tells something different about that referent. Furthermore, the syntactical relationship between these two composite parts is ambiguous. In a compound word, therefore, the description of the referent accretes as the poet relies upon the reader's intuition to determine the semantic relationship between both parts. Thus, one finds that "this feature...creates the impression of restraint and reticence in the poet's voice, a voice which seems often to supply the facts without an accompanying interpretation of them. The syntactical ambiguities of compounds, which are so often overlooked by modern readers, make a modest yet pervasive contribution to this restrained tone in the narrative"

⁵ Rexroth, Kenneth. "Classics Revisited- IV: *Beowulf*." *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Donald K. Fry. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 1968. 167-169.

⁶ All definitions here are taken from the glossary of *Beowulf: An Edition*. Blackwell: Oxford, UK. 1998.

(*Appositive Style* 18). In the same way that grammatical and stylistic apposition advances and develops key themes in the original *Beowulf*, so also do poetic compounds contribute to the tone of ambiguity and vagueness.

In his essay, “The Philologer Poet: Seamus Heaney and the Translation of *Beowulf*”, Daniel Donoghue discusses at length Heaney’s reliance on an appositive style and poetic compounds in both his translation of *Beowulf* as well as his own original poetry.⁷ Donoghue points to the following passage from the translation’s beginning which demonstrates Heaney’s tendency to reproduce the appositive style even in passages in which grammatical apposition is absent in the original passage:

Afterwards a boy-child was born to Shield,

A cub in the yard, a comfort sent

By God to that nation. (Heaney 12-4)

Donoghue thus observes: “‘Boy-child,’ ‘cub,’ and ‘comfort’ are parallel nominals, where in Old English they are part of different constructions” (244). “The strong impression throughout the poem,” Donoghue argues, “...is that Heaney preserves the rich layering of apposition in the poem without doing violence to his idiom” (244). Throughout, Heaney either reproduces the same grammatical apposition of words, phrases, and clauses found in the original or creates his own.

Poetic compounds—kennings included—function similarly in Heaney’s translation. Not only is Heorot a mead-hall but a “wallstead” (75) and a “wine-hall” (992); the court poet has a “head-clearing voice” (497). One battle is a “shield-clash” (2039); the dragon is described both as a “vile sky-winger” (2314) and “mound-keeper”

⁷ The latter, of course, is of no special concern in this essay. See pp 238-40 of Donoghue’s essay for a discussion of the use of apposition in Heaney’s original poetry.

(2580), and his lair is an “earth-vault” (2410). Elsewhere one finds “hall-session” (767), “war-king” (2678), “ring-hoard” (2370), “turn-hole” (1513), and “tarn-hag” (1519). Most of these—excepting “wine-hall,” “war-king,” and “ring-hoard”—are of Heaney’s own creation, and do not have the exact meanings of their counterparts in the original text. These compounds imbue meaning incrementally to a single referent, and each contributes to the poem’s tone of ambiguity. For instance, it is unclear in the case of “tarn-hag” what the precise semantic relationship is between these two words. Grendel’s mother could, on the one hand, be a hag born in a primeval tarn or could likewise live in a tarn. In such compounds as these, the poet relies upon the reader’s inference of the words’ meanings.

Since Heaney makes ready use of the same general syntactical structure and stylistics (if to a greater or lesser extent than in the original) of the *Beowulf* poet’s. This is an eminently logical yet ultimately unsurprising gesture, however, since these phenomena can be translated with relative ease into modern English and each plays a thematic role. It should be met with little surprise, therefore, that Heaney retains a considerably strict adherence to the alliterative long line of *Beowulf*, a mainstay of nearly all Anglo-Saxon poetry. Though Heaney’s adherence to the strictures of alliteration is not quite as stringent as that of the Anglo-Saxon poets, it is still performed quite masterfully. Often lines will connect with a single alliterative word in each half-line, such as: “Then the gold hilt was handed over/to the old lord, a relic from long ago/for the venerable ruler. That rare smithwork...” (1677-79). As Donoghue points out, however, there is one instance in which Heaney alters his cadence. In ll. 1070-1159 of Heaney’s translation—an interpolated passage commonly called the “saga of Finn”—Heaney opts

for a smoother, more streamlined, and less alliterative meter to recount the tale.

Nevertheless, Donoghue points out that in this case “the correspondence with the Old English remains close” (*Beowulf: Norton* ix). One can presume, therefore, that Heaney adopted the altered meter to highlight the performative character of the song of the court poet.

On the whole, however, these elements are not particularly striking when one considers their import. Of course, they manifest a stylistic decision on Heaney’s part, a decision to translate appositional phrases and clauses, poetic compounds, and to reproduce the metrical nuances of the original as best he could. Even in cases in which he has created poetic compounds or grammatical apposition where there is none in the original can only suggest that he is being faithful to a general style or structure. There is nothing of his own design here, therefore, which would suggest an especially interesting “infidelity” of sorts.

Instead, what is more striking is Heaney’s construction of an archaic and in some cases non-Germanic poetic word-hoard. Heaney’s diction is one which occasionally forces the reader to only guess contextually at the words’ meanings. This diction effectively distances the reader from the text both linguistically and culturally, while still retaining a powerful and distinct sense of Irish locality. Words such as “wean”⁸ (2433) and “steadings” (2462), both Gaelic in origin, would of course have no place culturally or linguistically in an Anglo-Saxon poem. Others like “bone-lappings” (817), “steel-hail” (3116), and “war-board” (438) appear to be kennings—a few of them neologistic—of Heaney’s own creation. Their usage spans from allusions to the traditional literary canon

⁸ The meaning and etymology of this and other dialecticisms in Heaney’s diction were found in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

(Heaney at one point compares Grendel's mother's fury to that of an "amazon woman" (1283)) to obscure references to ancient Irish judicial magistrates ("brehon" (1457)).

This is not to suggest, however, that such nuances of diction are absent from *Beowulf*. As Franz Klaeber observes, "...the vocabulary is far removed from that of prose like most Old English poetry...many of them being no doubt archaisms" (*Introduction* lxiii). Nevertheless, which constructs are archaisms, calques, or neologisms remains unresolved by and large. Kevin Kiernan and other scholars have entertained the possibility of a pan-dialectal poetic word-hoard which would account for what appear to be non-West-Saxon nuances in the text.⁹ Kiernan writes: "the common literary language of the early 11th century known as Late West Saxon, or better as Late Old English, was itself a mixture of forms, early and late, with numerous cross-dialectal features, determined in large measure only by the idiosyncrasies of its user and his scribes" (*Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 48). But the dating of the *Beowulf* poem still remains, on the whole, a topic of heated dispute.¹⁰ Because there is no indubitable proof for an early or late authorship, the standards for evaluating whether or not a given word is an archaism, calque, or neologism necessarily rely upon a dating of when the poem was written. Nevertheless, the case remains clear: scholars simply do not have sufficient evidence to know which words would constitute an archaism, calque, or neologism in the late Anglo-Saxon tongue.

⁹ Kiernan develops this notion in lieu of a view of the *Beowulf* manuscript as having been handled by scribes of different dialects, both geographical and chronological.

¹⁰ Despite Kiernan's compelling paleographical evidence for an early 11th century dating of the poem, many *Beowulf* scholars still espouse a more conservative estimate in or around the 7th or 8th centuries (see "Date and Place of Composition" in *Beowulf: An Edition*, edited by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson; pp 8-13).

Fred Robinson, however, has pointed to a series of grammatically ambiguous words that might have produced a similar effect on an Anglo-Saxon audience. These amphibolous constructs lend a sense of vagueness or obscurity to the original poem. For instance, *uncuðne nið* (*Beowulf* 276), as Robinson points out, is an ambiguous phrase: whether it means “unusual war,” “unknown affliction,” or “strange persecution” when it first reaches the reader’s eyes—a subsequent appositional phrase in the text will clarify its meaning—is left unclear (*Appositive Style* 62). Similarly, the word *feorcyþðu* might mean “...‘close friends who are afar’ (i.e. ‘distant allies’) as well as the usually assumed ‘far countries,’” (5). *Heofodweard*, which in the glossary to their edition of the original text Robinson and Mitchell translate as “watch over the head” (*Beowulf* 268), might just as well mean “bodyguard,” “chapter,” or “chief protector” (*Appositive Style* 15). *Geosceftgast* also is a semantically ambiguous term: it may mean “a creature doing the deeds of fate” or “a doomed creature” (16). Phrases like this are scattered throughout the poem. As has been already pointed it, these grammatically ambiguous constructs lend a tone of vagueness, a sense of uncertainty, to the poem. These are not merely for dramatic effect but contribute to the ambiguous tone that runs throughout the poem.

Heaney’s description of Grendel’s lair seems to have an analogous effect upon the reader. Heaney often calls it a “haunted mere” (Heaney 845, 1363) or a “tarn”¹¹ (1519, 1570, 2136) in favor of more familiar terms like “pond” or “lake.” These archaic synonyms are endemic to English, Scottish and Irish dialects and do not, moreover, survive in common parlance. They are not amphibolies—they have clear, specific meanings. Without knowledge of the respective dialects from which these words come,

¹¹ In Heaney’s translation, Grendel’s mother is a “tarn-hag” (1519), as mentioned previously.

they appear alien to a non-Ulster reader, sticking out from the rest of the translation. Nevertheless, they are of specific stylistic use. To a modern reader, they imbue Grendel's lair with a sense of uncertainty and mystery which further accentuates his excluded and accursed status in the world.

The use of "bawn" (523, 721, 1304, 1970) also has a similar effect. Heaney explains his use of this dialectical word in the *Introduction*: "In Elizabethan English, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings which the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay..." (xxx). Used to describe Heorot, it accentuates the symbolic stature of the mead-hall among the Anglo-Saxons as a location of stability and order and a defense against the encroaching darkness. In doing so, Heaney draws the reader's attention to a distinctive cultural norm, the status of the mead-hall, by using a foreign and yet steadfastly local word. Using "bawn," therefore, suggests that he is artificially reproducing a sense of cultural otherness, a touch of a foreign culture that is linguistically and culturally other to, or at least anachronistic with, the contemporary British language and culture.

"Bawn," however, has particularly dubious historical and political connotations. In his anecdotal piece, "Belfast," Heaney writes:

Our farm was called Mossbawn. *Moss*, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and *bawn*, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, *bán* is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss

of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster. (35)

“Bawn,” then, has enormous political undertones, and yet the word itself retains a powerful sense of locality—the locality of his family’s farm. The word, therefore, signifies both linguistic anomalousness—a term devised by English colonists yet surviving only in Irish—as well as the contentious cultural history of Ulster. Its meaning accretes even further with its usage in Gaelic as *bán*.¹² Bawn, therefore, may not be understood simply as a linguistic novelty, but as a word redolent of political and cultural violence between colonial England and Ireland:

Mossbawn was bordered by the townlands of Broagh and Anahorish, townlands that are forgotten Gaelic in the throat, *bruach and anach fhíor uisce*, the riverbank and the place of clear water. The names lead past the literary mists of a Celtic twilight into that civilization whose demise was effected by soldiers and administrators like Spenser and Davies, whose lifeline was bitten through when the squared-off walls of bawn...dropped on the country like the jaws of a man-trap. (36)

“Bawn” and other similar dialecticisms, then, are far from being linguistic novelties marshaled forth and arranged to lend a sense of the exotic to his translation, but are rather dictional choices which, more importantly, act “...as bearers of history and mystery,” (“Feeling into Words,” 45).

¹² This complicated nexus of history, culture, and nation mirrors Heaney’s own preoccupations as a poet: “I suppose the feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland, and the masculine strain is drawn from the involvement with English literature. I speak and write in English, but do not altogether share the preoccupations of an Englishman. I teach English literature, I publish in London, but the English tradition is not ultimately home. I live off another hump as well” (34).

Other words also provide a powerful and moving sense of the local in the poem. As Heaney explains in his introduction, "...at lines 324 and 2988 I use the word "graith" for "harness" and at 3026 "hoked" for "rooted about" because the local term seemed in each case to have a special body and force" (xxx). Similarly, "brehon" (1457), Irish for "judge" or "laws" and used to refer to Unferth suggests perhaps a different, more pagan value system than other possible Latinate synonyms. "Torques" (2173) and "gorgets" (2172), Gallic and Brittanian words for kinds of jewelry, also crop up. Heaney also uses the Irish "keen" extensively (787, 1119, 2446) in its Old Irish sense, which means "to wail," along with "howe" (2774; a Gaelic word meaning "hole"); "scree" (one of the few of these words which actually finds its origin in Anglo-Saxon; it comes from *scriðan* and means "detritus" or "rubble"); the compound "shadow-bourne" (a multivalent word, Gaelic in origin, meaning either "boundary," "limit," or "a small brook"). Obsolete nautical terms such as "hawser" (302) are also present. Heaney even refers to Beowulf's funeral scene as a "wake" (2909)! Even though they do not manifest a fidelity to a distinctly Anglo-Saxon diction, these words nevertheless provide a touch of the cultural alterity to the translation, an alterity which is both other to the linguistic history of the *Beowulf* poem itself as well as to the majority of Heaney's audience. Both history and mystery bring themselves to bear in the usage of these words, and it is through these that the reader senses the alterity of the translation itself.

What is startling about this strange linguistic admixture is the fact that this feature is completely of Heaney's own artifice. Ultimately, there is nothing in *Beowulf*—or scholars know of nothing—that is analogous to this dictional coloring. Furthermore, one would be hard-pressed to find such a feature in any other translations of the poem.

Daniel Donoghue, in his introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of Heaney's translation, points out that "what sets Heaney's [translation] apart from other translations...is the language" ("Introduction" ix). This fact should be met with little surprise: Heaney's diction signifies cultural and linguistic alterity, a feature which not only is absent in other translations but is most often avoided.

What is even more surprising, then, is that a great majority of these dialecticisms are used to name or describe culturally specific phenomena. Many of these words, such as "torque," "gorget," "graith," "steading," "wean," "bothy," (140; from the Gaelic *bothóg*, meaning a "hut" or "cottage"), "hall-session" (767)¹³ and "fettle" (1641; of dubious origin, but meaning "condition" or "state") crop up at instances in the text which would seem culturally anomalous—and therefore alien—to a contemporary reader. At the very least, then, these words connote linguistic alterity. At most, they suggest complete cultural otherness—albeit an indelibly Irish one.¹⁴

If translations aim at making texts in other languages accessible and clarifying those texts' meanings, then translators should aim for semantic lucidity and *not* for the deliberate obscuring of their referent. Thus Heaney's choices of diction are, when examined closely, vaguely unsettling: his signifying through peculiar diction seems irresponsible with regard to his duties as translator. Not only are these words foreign interpolations and in some cases anachronistic for a modern rendering of *Beowulf*, it also seems implausible that Heaney would expect his readers—the vast majority of which are not Irish—to be familiar with many of these choices. Why, then, would Heaney

¹³ In the Norton Critical Edition of Heaney's *Beowulf*, the editor Daniel Donoghue notes that "in Hiberno-English the word 'session' (*seisúin* in Irish) can mean a gathering where musicians and singers perform for their own enjoyment [*Translator's note*]" (Norton 21).

¹⁴ The description of Grendel's mother as an "amazon woman", however, suggests that Heaney writes to an audience familiar with canonically Western texts.

construct a pastiche of non-Germanic constructs in a contemporary rendition of a medieval poem? Or to put the question another way: why would a poet strew a *mélange* of Scotch-Irish argot in a translation of a canonically *English* poem? Surely the stylistic nuances of the individual words are not in-and-of-themselves enough to warrant their liberal use, for such use contradicts basic, intuitive assumptions about the nature of translation. Thus two distinct—yet as I shall argue later, related—problematics emerge from Heaney’s Anglo-Irish linguistic admixture: on the one hand, an aesthetic one (e.g. how might this ostensibly deliberate obfuscation of the meanings of the original *Beowulf* might make literary or conceptual sense?) and on the other, a political one (why would Heaney taint an English poem—one often seen as the font of English literature itself—with words foreign to modern English?).

Howell Chickering, scholar, critic, and translator of *Beowulf*, identifies this dictional admixture as the central fault of Heaney’s translation and ultimately castigates Heaney for misleading readers: “...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” (*Heaneywulf* 173). Moreover, Chickering’s qualms extend to Heaney’s use of modern, idiomatic Irish. In chastising Heaney’s choice of “So” for the Old English *hwaet* instead of “What!” or “Listen!”, Chickering remarks, “Heaney slices through this Gordian knot by the confident substitution of his own sensibility as a modern Irish poet” (171). This sort of substitution, along with Heaney’s other “Ulsterisms” as Chickering calls them signify “...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” (173). A faithful rendering of *Beowulf* in modern English should make concessions for idiomatic use of the English language and will therefore avoid nuances of dialectical English. To do otherwise would be to obscure the meanings of the original.

If these words are indeed a part of Heaney’s poetic voice, however, it is possible that Chickering’s criticism smacks of impertinence: it is as if he is asking Heaney, as translator, *not* to speak in his native dialect. As he puts it, the translation constitutes little more than an appropriation of a medieval text for “(Heaney’s) own poetic voice” (172). He calls the translation, summarily, “...bad cultural and linguistic history” (173), the only discernible reason on Heaney’s part for continuing to perform readings of his translation being that “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” (175).

All appearances of mudslinging aside, this criticism seems peculiar since Chickering himself opines, “a poet *should* write for himself, without a doubt, and to do so may make ‘Heaneywulf’ more his own work” (173). How else could a poet translate effectively and compellingly if not in his or her own voice? If this is indeed the case, then it seems as though Chickering is suggesting that readers should take translations written by poets as if they were not accurately translated. However, the concept of a “faithful translator” entails no particular ethical norm. What does faithfulness to the text even mean, given the grammatical, syntactical, and linguistic—not to mention literary—incommensurabilities between Old English and modern English? In other words, fidelity

to the translation *Beowulf* might mean accurately representing the thematic and metrical nuances of the poem over and above the grammatical, syntactical, linguistic, or metrical features of the poem, *vice versa*, or balancing some or all of these components of the poem against another's.

Furthermore, linguistic authenticity seems like a strange concept to invoke. What does it mean to uphold the linguistic "authenticity" of a translation of *Beowulf* into modern English—that is, to draw from a register of modern English words which have their origin in the Anglo-Saxon tongue? In what way does this make a translation "authentic," since the modern English lexicon has changed so dramatically from Old English into an unrecognizable tongue? It does not seem feasible to suggest that one idiom or another can be more or less culturally other to one or another idiom from a different language. To be sure, the modern English *king* is an etymological descendant of Old English *cyning*, but as Daniel Donoghue notes, "what a male monarch meant to the Anglo-Saxons is necessarily different from our notions, which have been colored by later developments such as primogeniture, the divine right of succession, charismatic kingship, constitutional monarchies, and the like" ("The Philologer Poet" 237). Even two languages related linguistically cannot necessarily be semantically commensurable. It seems peculiar to suggest, then, that what is called "Modern English" is a better, more authentic language for a translation of an Old English poem; modern English is itself an idiom.

To further complicate matters, the translator of a medieval Western European poem faces even greater hindrances than, say, the translator of an early modern, modern, or contemporary text. Burton Raffel points out that "...medieval texts result from

authorial inventions very different from those of our own time; medieval languages have very different linguistic features from modern ones; the context of life has changed enormously from those times to this one; and medieval literary traditions are today either dead, or poorly understood, or both” (“Translating Medieval European Poetry” 28).

Thus, the *milieu* of medieval Europe—cultural, linguistic, historical—is all but lost to the modern translator. This problem accentuates the fact that the translator, whether he or she professes to translate word-for-word or the general “spirit” (however vague this concept may be) of the original, performs far more than linguistic or literary translation: he or she engages in “...the mining out and reconstruction of...worldviews [of the original poets]” (53). If indeed the translator’s task extends beyond the linguistic/literary and if these worldviews are all but inaccessible outside of the texts to be translated, then how can a translator of a medieval text possibly translate accurately?

Many contemporary translators of *Beowulf* have, on the whole, maintained fidelity to the linguistic sense of the *Beowulf* poem over and above fidelity to what is often called the “spirit” of the text. The pedagogical utility of their translations has been emphasized over and above any claim to literary ingenuity on their part, as the proliferation of interlinear translations evinces. The number of translations that must be discussed to fully corroborate this claim far exceeds the bounds of this essay, but a selection of a few translations suffices to give one a general sense. In the preface to the 2006 reprint of his 1977 translation, Chickering writes: “This book is meant to make *Beowulf* available as poetry to readers who have not studied Old English (Anglo-Saxon) before and to those who have only a rudimentary knowledge of it. The text, translations, and commentary are designed for flexible use, from a rapid reading of the translation to a

literary study of the Old English poem” (ix). His aim for the translation is clear enough: it is primarily an introduction to the original text itself. Fidelity to the word—and consequently to the subject matter of the poem itself—is of primary importance when increasing an individual’s knowledge of the *Beowulf* poem. Thus, Chickering explains, “My translation takes a few liberties from time to time, but for the most part it gives the plain sense of the original or, when a literal translation would be unclear, the intended meaning as I see it” (x). Besides the form of his translation taking the “...four stress line with a heavy caesura” (xi), his translation “...has few other pretensions to literary form” (xi). One presumes that such pretensions would obscure the literal meanings of the original and therefore confuse and bewilder the reader. The extent of his own interpretation in his translation of the *Beowulf* text, therefore, is allegedly limited to grammatically unclear words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in the original. Then, in explaining the literalness of his translation, he opines:

The trouble is that *Beowulf* is so rich in meaning that no single translation, however excellent, can make all or even most of its poetry come across. Thus in this presentation I have chosen to keep the original text on view. The facing translation gives its gist (one man’s version) and the commentary offers background information necessary for understanding. (ix)

The translation, therefore, ultimately serves the original text: it is written so that the reader may have at least a rudimentary understanding of the poem. Its purpose is to provide the literal sense of the original so as to enhance one’s understanding of it. Chickering’s own interpretations of the text’s literary or thematic meanings are kept as

far away from the actual translation as possible—at least insofar as such a practice is possible.

E. T. Donaldson's 1966 prose translation also aims at the literal sense of the *Beowulf* verse in order to render the original *Beowulf* poet's rhetorical ingenuity and manner of speaking accessible for the modern reader. In his introduction, he identifies as the most salient characteristic of the original the "...extraordinary richness of rhetorical elaboration alternating with—often combined with—the barest simplicity of statement" (xii). This somewhat elusive manner of speech which the *Beowulf* poet employs stubbornly resists freer, more liberal translations of certain features of the original. Donaldson, therefore, opts for a relatively strict literalism in regards to the sense of the Old English lines: "in order to reproduce this effect, it has seemed best to translate as literally as possible, confining oneself to the linguistic structure of the original" (xii). As a result, then, Donaldson steers clear of polysyllabic Latinate synonyms which would, in effect, more accurately translate the given use of a multivalent Old English word (xiii-xiv). Donaldson's translation seems to be, therefore, a pedagogically motivated enterprise: Donaldson forgoes any pretensions of active literary engagement with the original poem in favor of accurately reproducing the literal sense of Old English words and phrases for the reader. Fidelity to the word is elevated and, consequently, the voice of the translator is silenced.

As it stands, therefore, many of the most widely read translations of *Beowulf* are concerned primarily with the faithful rendering of one or more dimensions of the original text for the benefit of the reader. Translators translate to present an otherwise obscure text to the uninformed. In order to present the text in such a manner, the text must be

reduced to strictly idiomatic English. Active literary engagement with the original text is bypassed in favor of enriching the reader's knowledge. Even translations such as Donaldson's which presume to reproduce the literary "tone," "feel," and/or "spirit" of the original are fundamentally impaired in their scope: these dimensions of the poem are transmuted into the target language for the accretion of the reader's knowledge. Does it not seem peculiar, then, that translators frequently maintain this orientation of pedagogical utility in their translations when the original works themselves aimed not at the transmission of subject matter—in fact, in many cases, the poet presumed the audience's foreknowledge of the stories from which he drew—but rather at the poetic representation of those stories? In this light, claims to linguistic fidelity appear misguided: if novelty and poetic artifice were intrinsic to the composition of the original, a translation, if it is to be faithful, should itself in some way be stylistically novel. Nevertheless, such an endeavor would necessitate artifice on the translator's part, artifice that could be formulated at the expense of the value and integrity of the original. Nevertheless, one could raise an equally justifiable objection to the charge of devaluing the original by representing the text in plain, lucid, ordinary modern English: the exercise of poetic "freedom" obscures the meanings of the original text. In what sense would the work then be an authentic translation? Both modes of faithfulness necessarily lead to divergence from the original. Fidelity to the text, it would seem, is a stubbornly moot issue.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Task of the Translator," identifies assiduous fidelity to either of these two ethical norms of translation practice as the "...hallmark of bad translations," (69-70). The translation whose *raison d'être* consists in a transmission

of the original text's content "...cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential" (69). Similarly, the translation that aims at reproducing "...the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'" falls short: it is, conversely, the "...inaccurate transmission of an inessential content" (70). Translations do not serve the original text, but rather "...owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering" (72). This is to say that it is to the fame of the original work and not to the piety of translators that translations owe their existence.

Rather, the true task of the translator lies in "...finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (76). Benjamin employs the contrastive analogies of the fruit and the monarch: the original text relates to its language like "a fruit and its skin" (75), whereas in a translation the original text's content lies ensconced within an alien language "...like royal robe with ample folds" (75). Benjamin's notions of the historical development of language aside, one can still make out his point: the target language in translation is foreign, excessive, artificial, and enveloping.

Translation, therefore, is an inherently violent practice but it can be calibrated in such a way as to exemplify the Pentecostal prefiguring of the great unifying motif of Christian eschatology; that is, of the many languages praising the same God. Benjamin explains: "unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one" (76). Translators, in contrast to poets, are not "...spontaneous, primary, graphic" but instead "...derivative, ultimate, ideational" (76-7):

thus their task consists in violent, hermeneutical reproduction, but one which should ultimately point to the pure language of signification of which our languages are merely ruins. By means of discovering and implementing the “intended effect,” then, the translator effectively re-presents the material of the original in such a way as to point to the fragmentary ruins of source and target languages post-Babel. In this manner, a translation acts as a replication or a “flowering” of the original poem. Benjamin explains:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (78)

It is the original’s mode of signification which must be incorporated into the translation which will, in effect, qualify its status as translation. As such, then, the translation will constitute a secondary, derivative fragment alongside the primary fragment of the original poem. What is crucial to Benjamin’s conception of translation here is the notion that a translation is not exactly a translation until it has reproduced what he calls the original’s mode of signification, which is to say its unique way of representing its subject. The translator must find the intended effect in his own language which will reproduce the echo of the original. This, as Benjamin has it, is the *telos* of all translation. As Derrida puts it somewhat cryptically in *Des Tours de Babel*:

What is intended, then, by this co-operation of languages and intentional *modes* is not transcendent to the language...No, what they are aiming at intentionally, individually and jointly, in translation is the language itself as Babelian event, a language that is not the universal language in the Leibnizian sense, a language which is not the natural language that each remains on its own either; it is the being-language of the language, tongue or language *as such*, that unity without any self-identity, which makes for the fact that there are languages and that there are languages. (201)

What about translation, however, ensures equity between fragments? How is this “co-operation,” as Derrida has it, to be effected? In his phenomenological account of the activity of translation, *After Babel*, George Steiner identifies this same notion of the original’s mode of signification as an integral component of translations of literary merit. For Steiner, however, this constitutes a final translational gesture by the translator towards the text from which he or she is translating. Steiner identifies four translational movements which occur at every level of linguistic translation: initiative trust (*élancement*; *After Babel*, 319), appropriation, incorporation, and restitution.¹⁵ The translator, before actually examining the source text, believes that there is substantive material to be translated; he trusts that there will be *something* to be translated. This material, after being perceived, is appropriated from the source text and incorporated into the target language of the translator. Finally, then, the translator must balance his or her translation with the source text. Otherwise the translation is ‘left open’, which is to suggest that the translation stands as an unqualified, appropriative *translatio*. As Steiner

¹⁵ Steiner discusses each of these in the “Hermeneutic Motion” chapter of his book (313-435).

puts it, “the system is now off-tilt. The hermeneutic act must compensate. If it is to be authentic it must mediate into exchange and restored parity” (316). The translation must, if it is at all to be considered a re-presentation of the original, instantiate a balance, a remunerative parity, between the translation itself and the text translated.

This final movement in the act of translation is, ultimately, the qualifying gesture of the translator; that is, it is the act which makes or breaks a translation. Steiner explains:

The enactment of reciprocity in order to restore balance is the crux of the *métier* and morals of translation. But it is very difficult to put abstractly. The appropriative ‘rapture’ of the translator...leaves the original with a dialectically enigmatic residue. Unquestionably there is a dimension of loss, of breakage—hence, as we have seen, the fear of translation, the taboos on revelatory export which hedge sacred texts, ritual nominations, and formulas in many cultures. But the residue is also, and decisively, positive. The work translated is enhanced...Being methodical, penetrative, analytic, enumerative, the process of translation, like all modes of focused understanding, will detail, illumine and generally body forth its object...to class a source-text as worth translating is to dignify it immediately and to involve it in a dynamic of magnification... (316-7)

There is, in other words, much to be gained in the process of translation. The ‘loss’ inherent in the translation of one text into another need not be emphasized as an ineluctable consequence of inter-lingual communication. Rather, a translation may in fact serve the original text in ways which the original text could not serve itself. In the

most basic sense it dignifies the text translated; as an echo of the original work, then, a translation proclaims the source text to be worthy of attention. In this act of restitution, the translation enhances and enriches the original. Translation, therefore, is an inherently reciprocal activity: the translator appropriates meaning(s) from the source text and recasts the meaning(s) in another language, and in so doing magnifies the original. As Steiner opines succinctly, "...the poet/translator appropriates in order to restore..." (410).¹⁶

But why this need for restoration? If the translational act is a singularly violent and appropriative gesture, how is such a remunerative gesture possible? Translation which does not actively restore inherently treats its source text—*a la* Cicero and St. Jerome¹⁷—as a cache of transmissible knowledge. A re-production of the text to-be-translated is not even in sight, for the source text itself is valuable only insofar as it presents itself as a foothold for a better understanding of, *inter alia*, the culture, history, or language of the source text. Translation which actively restores will not, as it were, see its source text as a repository of data transmissible into its target language, but will rather treat its source text as something to be re-produced—its tone, feel, meanings,

¹⁶ It is interesting to note in passing that under Steiner's view fidelity to a text is still a conceptually defensible ethical norm incumbent upon the translator. In this case fidelity is, however, more aptly described as an economic activity: "by virtue of tact, and tact intensified is moral vision, the translator-interpreter creates a condition of significant exchange. The arrows of meaning, of cultural, psychological benefaction, move both ways. There is, ideally, exchange without loss," (318-9).

¹⁷ The history of Western translation theory affords a provocative glance into the dynamic between empire and translation, and the ways in which the former has often deployed the latter as a systemic method of cultural appropriation and domination. See Douglas Robinson's *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome, 1997), *Translation and Empire: Postcolonial Theories Explained* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome, 1997), and *The Translator's Turn* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Likewise, many scholars of comparative literature have found translation studies to be fertile ground for discussions of language politics and the ways in which the "literary proletariat"—translators, editors, publishers, etc.—have shaped and do shape our approach to, and recognition of, what may be called "world literature" (see Apter, Emily. *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

themes, and so on—in a foreign tongue. At the most fundamental level translation should be, therefore, a repetition of an original work.

In this sense, the text translated in this manner will be enveloped in the “ample folds” (“Task of the Translator” 75) of the target language. Thus, the translator manipulates the language into which he or she is translating in such a way as to mimic for his audience the way in which the source text in its original language would have felt to its audience. The ideal translations, therefore, will be those which “...achieve an equilibrium and poise of radical equity between two works, two languages, two communities of historical experience and contemporary feeling” (429). In this respect, a genuine translation is typological of cultural reconciliation: the translator forgoes the dominating voice of his or her own culture for the voice of another. The translator treats both with equity; neither one nor the other takes precedence over the other.

But it is not simply that such parity between translation and source text is a prescriptive moral obligation on the part of the translator, and neither is it that better translations seek after this parity; rather, it is that this radical equity between the translation of one set of shared, communicable experiences from one culture into another precipitates lucidity in regards to both the text translated and the translation itself, as well as the historical *milieu* of each. As such, any violent, appropriative *translatio* cannot be considered full translation, for appropriation is only one movement in the act of translation. Restitution ensures that the effect of the source text intended upon the original writer’s audience is a viable force in the activity of translation, though how that effect is to be achieved could be and often is different from, or altogether alien to, the methods employed by the author of the source text. One could even go so far as to say

that it is the *duty* of the translator to reproduce this effect by whatever means available to him or her. “Genuine translation will seek to equalize,” Steiner writes, “though the mediating steps may be lengthy and oblique” (318), and the point is sufficiently clear: the instantiation of parity may be a convoluted and intensely complex process, but it nevertheless is necessary for genuine translation. Herein lies the freedom of the translator: he or she may manipulate the target language of his or her translation in such a way that magnifies a particular feature in the source text which may not be readily apparent in a more or less semantically literal translations. To reiterate, he or she must, as Benjamin puts it, “[find] that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (“Task of the Translator” 76).

It has already been noted that Heaney’s peculiar dictional register has no analogue in the original text itself. At such, this coloring appears superfluous and even adverse to a translation of the *Beowulf* poem. If Benjamin and Steiner are right, however, there may in fact be room for Heaney’s interposition: in this case, the intended effect of Heaney’s dictional admixture would be comparable to, if not commensurate with, the intended effect of the original’s mode of signification. This is, in other words, to suggest that the cultural and linguistic interpolations which comprise the arresting dictional colouring of Heaney’s translation must point towards the original *Beowulf* poem’s manner of representing its subject matter if these dialecticisms are to be considered anything more than flourishes of Heaney’s own poetic voice.

What, then, is the intended effect of these “Ulsterisms”? Again, it has already been noted that many instances of these signify cultural and linguistic difference within the translation itself—albeit differences rooted in Heaney’s own sensibilities as an

Anglo-Irish poet. Heorot is a “bawn” for the *Gar-Dene* and other clans (*Beowulf* 523, 721, 1304, 1970); Wealtheow, Hrothgar’s queen, presents Beowulf with a “...resplendent torque of gold” (1194-5); in pursuit of Grendel’s mother Beowulf and his retinue traverse “...windswept crags and treacherous keshes” (1358-9); in a speech just before he leaves his hall for the last time, Beowulf recounts that “[Hrethel] treated me no worse as a wean about the place than one of his own boys...” (2432-3). This strange diction literally envelops the entire narrative, though not in an altogether distracting manner. It is particularly striking here in his translation of *Beowulf* if not in his own original poetry, since one typically thinks of the translator’s task as a primarily elucidatory one. With Benjamin’s and Steiner’s analyses of translation in mind, then one might speculate that Heaney is drawing the reader’s attention to representations of cultural difference and/or reconciliation within the text. If this is indeed the case, then Heaney’s linguistic admixture undergirds and magnifies cultural alterity as a potent force both in the *Beowulf* poem as well as in his own translation. It would, in other words, be a way of restoring this dimension which would presumably be lost in translation.

For most scholars, it seems to be taken as a given of primitive cultures that cultural difference would play an important role in the poem itself. Any discussion of cultural difference takes the Christian interpolations of the *Beowulf* narrator to task without any consideration of representations of cultural difference within the narrative account of Beowulf’s life. Tolkien’s seminal essay, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” does just this. Working off of references to the Old Testament, a pejorative description of pagan rituals, and several clear references to the Christian God, Tolkien describes the narrative poise of the *Beowulf* poet as one of dignified regret: “we get in

fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old takes who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair” (23).

Likewise, Bruce Mitchell, Fred C. Robinson, and Kevin Kiernan consider the Christian interpolations to be functions of a similar narrative perspective. Echoing Tolkien, Robinson writes: “the poet and his audience are looking back through time to the places whence the founders of England had come, admiring their deeds, learning from their example, and, perhaps, mourning their crippling paganism” (*Beowulf: An Edition* 38). Mitchell’s take on the poem is slightly more sanguine, though relying on the same basic understanding of the Christian interpolations. Quoting Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, he opines: “For me *Beowulf* is a poetic exploration of life in this world, of the blind forces of nature and the dark passions of humans against ‘our little systems [which] have their day and cease to be.’ This contest is seen in terms of the system within which the poet lived...But I believe that the poet meant us to admire, not to condemn, *Beowulf* and that the poem ends on a note of hope not of despair” (*Ibid.* 37). Kiernan also musters a take on the perspective of the *Beowulf* poet’s narration in the poem: “[the poet’s] mood is elegiac and, in light of 11th century events, unbearably sad. The poet himself is a ‘last survivor of a noble race,’ who was left an enormous legacy after the death of his lord. If the last poet of *Beowulf* was the second scribe,...he increased, and continued to polish, an Anglo-Saxon treasure...” (278). Few scholars, however, have analyzed the passages pertaining to cultural antagonisms within the span of the pre-Christian world as depicted within the poem. It is worth mentioning, therefore, that cultural difference constitutes an

especially potent force not only in regard to the pagan mores of the poet's subjects and the poet's insistently Christian handling of those subjects, but also in regard to the different pagan clans themselves as represented within the poem.

After Beowulf's triumphant return to Heorot after having slain Grendel's mother and a lengthy conversation between Beowulf and Hrothgar, the *Gar-Dene* hold an elaborate feast in Beowulf's honor. Their merriment extends late into the night and the warriors finally sleep, a bounty of riches having been promised to them in the morning by Hrothgar. That morning, Hrothgar commends Beowulf for the final time:

'Me þin mod-sefa

licað leng swa wel, leofa Beowulf:
 hafast þu gefered, þat þam folcum sceal,
 Geata leodum ond Gar-Denum
 sib gemæne ond sacu restan,
 inwitnîðas, þe hie ær drugon;
 wesan, þenden ic wealde widan rices,
 maðmas gemæne, manig oðerne
 godum gegrettan ofer ganotes bað;
 sceal hringnaca ofer heaðu bringan
 lac and luftacen. Ic þa leode wat
 ge wið feond ge wið freond fæste geworhte,
 æghwæs untæle ealde wisan.' (*Beowulf*, 1853b-1865)

'Your heart

Pleases me well the longer (I know you), dear Beowulf.

You have brought it about that peace

Will be shared by the peoples, with the people of the Geats

And with the Spear-Danes, and the conflict,

The enmities which they endured before, will cease;

As long as I rule this wide kingdom, there will be

Treasures shared, many other (men)

Shall with gifts greet (one another) over the gannet's bath,

After the war a curved-prow ship shall bring

Tokens of affection. I know your people

To be firmly disposed to both friend and foe,

Altogether blameless in the ancient way.'

To Hrothgar, then, the magnanimity of Beowulf's deed consists in its reconciliatory effects: not only has Beowulf rid his kingdom of two marauding monsters, but he has more importantly "...draw[n] two peoples, the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes, into shared peace and pact of friendship/in spite of hatreds we have harboured in the past" (1855b-8). What is most striking about this passage, however, is that this is the final exchange between Beowulf and another Dane in the text. It is as if the poet himself tries to convey the monumental significance of Beowulf's slayings by means of Hrothgar's keen wisdom. As courageous or as bold as his doings may have been in the moment, their true worth consisted in their bringing about cultural reconciliation.

Other episodes evince the same characterization of Beowulf. As Wiglaf keeps a vigil over the dying Beowulf in the final passages of the poem, he is struck by an ominous prophesy:

Nu ys leodum wen
 orleg-hwile, syððan underne
 Froncum and Frysum fyll cyninges
 wide weorðeð. Was sio wroht scepem
 heard wið Hûgas, syððan Higelac cwom
 faran flot-herge on Fresna land...
 ...ûs wäs â syððan
 Merewioinga milts ungyfeðe. (2911b-5; 2920b-2921)

Now war is looming
 over our nation, soon it will be known
 to Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
 that the king is gone. Hostility has been great
 among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth
 at the head of a war-fleet into Friesland...

...The Merovingian king
 has been an enemy to us every since. (Heaney's translation)

The first thought that Wiglaf has after his lord's death is of his own country's imminent doom. To his people, therefore, Beowulf was a figurehead of security and stability. Insofar as monstrous evils continue to ravage human beings unabatedly—Beowulf is,

after all, human, and incapable of fending off all monsters—so also do the evils perpetrated by men persist after Beowulf's death. Not only, then, were his deeds paradigmatic of cultural reconciliation, but they ensured peace and stability amongst warring nations. This is most poignantly expressed in the Geat woman's nightmarish vision of the destruction of Beowulf's kingdom:

Geatisc meowle

.....bunden-heorde
 song sorg-cearig. Sæde geneahhe,
 þæt hio hyre here-geongas hearde ondrede
 wæl-fylla worn, werudes egesan,
 hynðo ond hæft-nyd. Heofon rece swealg. (3150b-5)

A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
 with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
 of her worst fears, a wild litany
 of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
 enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
 slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke. (Heaney's translation)

The poet presents a picture of the Geats after Beowulf's death similar to Wiglaf's depiction, thus driving the point home even further: Beowulf's death signifies regression in the stability of the Geat nation, a step back into the chaos of a primeval world. The poet simultaneously complicates the horror with *heofon rece swealg*; it is as if the

Christian God himself bears witness—even further, *swallows*—the unjust ruination of the Geats.

It is with this in mind that Tolkien famously describes the fundamental structure of *Beowulf*: “It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death” (29). However, we may venture even further: perhaps sensing the ultimate death of pagan culture with the establishment of Christianity in England (if not it had not already happened at the time of his writing), the poet felt urged to set about the task of retelling the tales of his ancestors. The *Beowulf* poem itself, therefore, may be considered an inquiry into cultural antagonisms, between the native pagan culture and the Christianity of Western Europe at large. On its own, therefore, it may be considered as a poem paradigmatic of an act of cultural reconciliation—a *translation*, even, of an ancient narrative into the moral framework of Christian culture. Tolkien writes: “We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair” (23). This is what Tolkien calls the “great temporal tragedy” at work in *Beowulf*.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Heaney says the following:

“Once again, I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing—as we have learnt to say—the local [in my poetry]. I wish instead to suggest that images and stories of the kind I am invoking here do function as bearers of

value. The century has witnessed the defeat of Nazism by force of arms; but the erosion of the Soviet regimes was caused, among other things, by the sheer persistence, beneath the imposed ideological conformity, of cultural values and psychic resistances of a kind that these stories and images enshrine. Even if we have learned to be rightly and deeply fearful of elevating the cultural forms and conservatisms of any nation into normative and exclusivist systems, even if we have terrible proof that pride in an ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic, our vigilance on that score should not displace our love and trust in the good of the indigenous *per se*. On the contrary, a trust in the staying power and travel-worthiness of such good should encourage us to credit the possibility of a world where respect for the validity of every tradition will issue in the creation and maintenance of a salubrious political space...(257)

It is a trust akin to one described here by Heaney which the *Beowulf* poet holds in regard to his own pagan ancestors, a trust in the inherent value of the indigenous. As Tolkien puts it, “he cast his time into the long-ago, because already the long-ago had a special poetical attraction. He knew much about old days, and though his knowledge—of such things as sea-burial and the funeral pyre, for instance—was rich and poetical rather than accurate with the accuracy of modern archaeology (such as that is), one thing he knew clearly: those days were heathen—heathen, noble, and hopeless” (22). In other words, even though he himself maintained fidelity to the Christian faith, this faith did not preclude a condemnation of his heritage into oblivion. *Beowulf* stands, then, as a relic of

an old order of the world, the pagan Anglo-Saxon world, translated with care and dignity for a Christian audience.

The *Beowulf* poet makes this unambiguously clear with the concluding lines of his poem:

cwædon þæt he wære wyruld-cyninga,
 mannum mildust ond mon-ðwærust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost. (3180-2)

They say that of the world-kings, he was
 Most generous to men and kindest to people,
 Most benevolent to all and most eager for fame.

The *Beowulf* poet lauds Beowulf's momentous life with a series of appositional encomiums. Not only was he uncannily brave—his deeds alone attest to this—but he was, as far as kings go, the most beneficent to all people. Yet the final appositive, *lofgeornost*, marks the only chink in Beowulf's heroic ethic: a propensity to vanity. This pronouncement, however, relies upon the reader's judgment of such a character trait as ignoble. To, say, a pagan Anglo-Saxon, this feature might appear worthy and desirable. Thus, it is the audience's responsibility to ultimately adjudicate the status of Beowulf's character. The Christian coloring of *Beowulf* suggests, therefore, that Beowulf *should* be faulted for this flaw. Even so, this *lofgeornost* is only a function of ignorance: just as the pagans offered sacrifices to idols out of mere ignorance of the Christian God, so also did they pursue renown out of ignorance of Christian values. The pagan Anglo-Saxon ancestors may be deemed good and worthy of respect. Violent extirpation of the pagan

Anglo-Saxon legacy from Anglo-Saxon culture or revulsion at other pagans thus appears ruthless and illogical. The final pronouncement of Beowulf's character thus contains an ethical dimension which warns against ethnic or ideological hate, suggesting that such a disposition is illogical even among the most violent of religious hermeneutics.

Therefore, in developing the ambiguous and complex relationship between the pagan subjects, the forces of evil, the Christian God, and his audience, the *Beowulf* poet restores his Norse ancestors (who were nonetheless members of a pagan culture) with dignity.

This is a case in which one dogmatic worldview, Christianity, reconciles itself with another, Norse paganism. The essential fault of the pagans lies not in their inherent wickedness and cruelty but in their ignorance of the Christian God. In order to come to terms with his or her pagan ancestry, an Anglo-Saxon Christian must recognize the inherent dignity and worth in his or her forbearers, while simultaneously admitting that their paganism stems from their ignorance of the Christian God: "Swylc wæs þeaw hyra...ne wiston hie Drihten God/ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon,/wuldres Waldend"¹⁸ (*Beowulf* 178b; 181b-183a).

How, then, does Heaney's poetic diction reflect this rich ambivalence at the heart of the *Beowulf* poem? Heaney translates the last lines of the poem in the following manner: "They said that of all the kings upon the earth/he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,/kindest to his people and keenest to win fame" (3180-2). "Keenest to win fame," then, represents Beowulf's vanity. The meaning of "keenest" in this instance is quite unambiguous (here, it means "eager," or "enthused"). Nevertheless, at this point in the poem there are several other meanings of the word in tow. The word occurs nine

¹⁸ "Such was their way...they did not know the Lord God,/ they did not know at all to extol the Protector of heaven,/The Ruler of the world"

times in the poem and accretes at least three distinct meanings. “Keen” first crops up in the poem in a description of Beowulf’s wary disposition as he waits in Heorot for the coming of Grendel (“mighty and canny, Hygelac’s kinsman was keenly watching for the first move the monster would make” (Heaney’s translation 735b-7)). Here the meaning of “keen” is somewhat obscured, though it seems more akin to the word from which it derives, the Anglo-Saxon *cene*, meaning “bold,” “brave,” or “clever.” It is then used fifty-one lines later in the account of Grendel’s battle with Beowulf as a sign of Grendel’s defeat: “everyone felt it/who heard that cry as it echoed off the wall, a God-cursed scream and strain of catastrophe, the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf/keening his wound” (783b-7a). The usage of “keen” here is undoubtedly Irish, coming from the Gaelic *caoin*, meaning “to wail.” Later, “keen” is used to describe a helmet: “An embossed ridge, a band lapped with wire/to keep the keen-ground cutting edge/from damaging it...” (1029-1031a). In this case, then, it takes on a more contemporary meaning—“sharp,” or “penetrating.” The usages of “keen” then alternate for another five times between these meanings until its final usage, “keenest to win fame”. In this final instance, then, other meanings are at work beneath the surface level of the text: Beowulf is as bold, brave, uncannily intelligent as he is eager for fame. This combination is, however, lamentable for the Christian, and the word’s Irish meaning lurks not far behind: Beowulf, the chief of the Geats, is “keenest to win fame,” though this in and of itself is worthy of the audience’s “keening.” The Irish use of the word, though not manifestly meant, tinges this final description of Beowulf with the deepest remorse. Thus, by the end of the poem “keen” accretes into a word whose meanings are as rich and complex as the poem itself.

The elaborate imbrications of Heaney's poetic diction, therefore, serve as able signifiers of a fundamental tension between the original poet's pagan heritage and the Christian religion, a tension resolved ultimately by a fundamental belief in the inherent value of culture. In Benjamin's words, Heaney finds "that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original"(76). Heaney's task in translating *Beowulf*, therefore, consists primarily in *word oper findan* ("finding other words"¹⁹), and it is through these words—vibrant, powerful relics brimming with history and culture—that Heaney ultimately restores the lost vision of the world's potential first articulated by the *Beowulf* poet.

¹⁹ cf. *Beowulf: An Edition*; l. 871.

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