

What Seamus Heaney Did to *Beowulf*: An Essay on Translation and the Transmutation of English Identity

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Essay

In 1999, critics, scholars and classrooms were introduced to Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf: A New Translation*, and found themselves struck with the difficulty of criticizing the poet's translation of one of the classics of English literature. As Tom Shippey wrote in his review for the *Times Literary Supplement*,

Seamus Heaney is a Nobel Prize-winner; his translation of the poem was commissioned for and is going straight into *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, set for virtually every introductory course in English on the North American continent [. . .] and he is a Northern Irish Catholic, one of the excluded, a poet in internal exile. All this, within the power poker of American academe, gives him something like a straight flush, ace high; to which any reviewer must feel he can oppose no more than two pairs, and aces and eights at that [. . .]. Like it or not, Heaney's *Beowulf* is the poem now.

(9-10)

Shippey's hesitations concerning his evaluation of Heaney's translation of the *Beowulf* text reflect a similar notion proposed by John Niles in 1993, before Heaney had published; he writes that the *Beowulf* poem lends itself to the artistic sentiments of modern translators, and that we as the audience—for modern academic audiences are more likely to read translations of *Beowulf* in their classes—are in some ways "at the mercy of translators" and their desires for their texts (Niles 858). Such concerns have plagued

critics, translations and translators for a long time, and are commonly coupled with concerns over the accuracy of both language and sentiment.¹

But while some audiences might have been critically and academically supportive of Heaney's effort to resurrect the text in the popular public sphere, Heaney's introductory comments suggest that there is something of a translatable struggle going on in his text which reflects Niles's concerns. Heaney's *Beowulf* provides us with a great deal which other translations do not: a poetic fluency rendered in Modern English, a skilled understanding of linguistic choices, and most importantly, a consciousness of the translatable act which negotiates fluidly between modern perspectives and Anglo Saxon artistry. But Heaney's desire to "come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism," (xxx) in the end, leaves us in what Gayatri Spivak has called a *frayed place*, resulting from the violent retextualizing of the work through translation (370). In exploring many of Heaney's translatable choices, we discover that his desires to keep true to his source and explore those Anglo Saxon cultural aspects which he cites are quite troubled by his translatable positioning, and in the end, troubled even by the position of the target audience.

It is quite clear from Heaney's *Introduction* that his attention to and appreciation of Old English language and poetry supports many of his decisions in his translation practices; he fondly describes Old English as a language in which "the keel [. . .] is deeply set in the element of sensation while the mind's lookout sways metrically and far-sightedly in the element of pure comprehension—which is to say that the elevation of *Beowulf* is always, paradoxically, buoyantly down-to-earth" (Heaney xxi). This lyrical language, Heaney felt, served as a sort of linguistic anchor for himself, and therefore his desire to accurately translate the poetic feel of the Anglo Saxon poem guided his first attempts at

¹An examination of such translatable tensions might start with the Prologues to the Wycliffite Bible, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*'s Book II Prologue, to Lawrence Venuti's foundational work in establishing the critical area of Translation Studies. See Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and *The Idea of the Vernacular*, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., eds (University Park, PA: PSUP, 1999).

translation. But as Lawrence Venuti has noted, such "replicative" translations are nearly impossible if they are to be successful because "the viability of a translation is established by the relationship to the cultural and social conditions under which it was produced and read" (18). It is not dogged accuracy which makes for a successful translation, but the crafting of the target audience's cultural sentiments within the foreign text. In this sense, Heaney's desire to keep the text *foreignized*, meaning to preserve the poetic crafting and cultural idiom of the original, was in some ways compromised from the start.

But in the struggles between the desire to create a *foreignized*, "accurate" translation and the desire to convey the artistry of the original to the target audience, textual moments are often paradoxically *domesticated* in some way in order to bring the original text closer to its readers' cultural expectations. Such techniques as *smoothing* the translation's language, *recrafting* the idioms, and even *refiguring* the relationship of the form to its meaning situate the translated text in the artistic and cultural consciousness of the target audience, without asking its readers to accept the distinct cultural difference (and distance) of the original (Venuti 5-7). And this struggle between foreignizing and domesticating translation practices is precisely where Heaney admits that he stumbled in his initial work on the text:

I would set myself twenty lines a day, write out my glossary of hard words in longhand, try to pick a way through the syntax, get the run of the meaning established in my head and then hope that the lines could be turned into metrical shape and raised to the power of verse.

(xxii-xxiii)

Heaney reveals that the mechanical accuracy of the foreignizing practices of translation to "get the run of the meaning" struggled against his own desire for modern, domesticated notions of metrical shape and "the power of verse," even though *Beowulf* represents a finely crafted example of Anglo Saxon verse and meter. This frayed positioning is evidenced in the possessive sort of relationship which Heaney sees between Old English and his own Ulster dialect. He writes that the two languages work smoothly together, reflecting each other in his early poetic mimicry

of Gerard Manly Hopkins' Anglo Saxon speech patterns, but resulting in a sort of affirmation of the Ulster dialect's value in his own writing. "Part of me," he writes, "has been writing Anglo Saxon from the start" (xxiii), but continues to address this realization in terms of his persistent Irish awareness, primarily in its Ulster speech patterns. While this explanation of his poetic connection to the text affirms our modern awareness of poetic style, what emerges from his struggle with language and poetic craft, however, creates an *echoic text*, but not one whose linguistic and cultural echoes are linear or even unidirectional. Heaney's text of *Beowulf* echoes within itself, culturally and linguistically—backwards, forwards, and across national boundaries and these echoes resonate in a sort of *repossession*, or as Eugene Nida has called it, the *transmutation*, of Heaney's *Beowulf* text (4).

Heaney's translatable approach to *Beowulf* centers on the linguistic connections he perceives between Old English and his own Anglo-Irish language history. In his attempts to accurately translate the Old English into Modern, he writes that the Anglo Saxon poetic structures are echoed in his own understanding of modern poetic verse, and also that several words resonated in his work with his memories of what he once perceived as distinctly Irish words, but now calls them "loopholes" in his own linguistic barriers. For example, the Old English *bolian*, meaning *to suffer*, is used nine times in different forms throughout the text, and for Heaney was echoed in his aunt's Ulster dialect, and in the poetry of John Crowe Ransom from the eighteenth century American south. Heaney's entry into the larger framework of comparative linguistics rested on these connections between both the language itself and its poetic structures, and indeed, his perception of the Old English echoes in modern dialects motivated him to lay a kind of claim on what he calls the "voice-right" of *Beowulf* (xxiv).

Certainly, such a claim cannot be denied, that Old English words still exist in modern dialects. Heaney's linguistic choices in some distinctly difficult translatable moments, however, do not return this echo from the Standard English practices we might expect to find in a modern *Norton* translation, but from his own experiences with Irish dialectical idioms. Two distinctly representative moments of Heaney's translatable positioning occur early on in his *Beowulf*, and serve to illuminate several facets of the

negotiation and domestication of the *Beowulf* text to which Heaney aims.

First, Heaney himself notes the problematic first word of the text, *Hwæt*, and writes that previous translations "tend towards the archaic literary, with 'lo', 'hark', 'behold', 'attend' and—more colloquially—"listen"" (xxvii). He, instead, chooses to forego the "archaic" and echo those who he calls the "big-voiced scullions" of his Anglo-Irish community, whose language and bearing carried a colloquial solemnity and dignity which Heaney claims conveys a similar directness of delivery as the voice of the *Beowulf* poet. He translates *Hwæt*, as *So*, using it in the same way as the Scullions of his family did, to both "obliterate [. . .] all previous discourse and narrative" and to call for attention (xxvii). Placing a period after this first word emphasizes these effects.

But while the text becomes somewhat more familiar and comfortable in this domesticating translative choice, this distinct connection to the idioms of modern Irish parlance obscures several performative aspects of the Anglo Saxon poem. Certainly, Heaney's suggestion of *So* as an aspect of Irish dialectical narrative helps to maintain the performance value of the Old English *Hwæt*, but at the cost of a tonal shift which loosens the text's connection to Anglo Saxon traditions of poetic performance. In using *So*, no longer does the text emerge from a *scop*, an entertainer and poet whose Anglo Saxon identity is wrapped in the structured performance and recitation of the poem. In this instance, the translation to *So* narrows the experience of the poem by transmuting the relationship from the traditional performer /audience separation to the more colloquial relationship of the *town curmudgeon and his fellows*, localizing and domesticating the text from its first word.

But the performative Anglo Irish transmutation does something even more than to dislodge the translation from its Anglo Saxon roots. Additionally, we might also look to Heaney's *So* as a discourse marker, which is a word which is independent of syntax and carries no function in the grammatical structure of the utterance serving only as a transitional, connective word between ideas in regular speech. If it is a connective discourse marker and, as Heaney suggests, completely removes "all previous discourse and narrative," there exists the suggestion that there *was* discourse and narrative previous. In this sense, Heaney's *Beowulf* becomes a

piece of a larger narrative to which we have no access either literally or figuratively.

Moreover, in several modern English dialects (both geographically and age-defined), the word *So* can work as a discourse marker in another way, one which doesn't simply negate previous discourse, but uncomfortably shifts the discourse trajectory. As Deborah Schiffrin argues, *So* is often used as a signal of shifting topics, or that a speaker is finished *their own* discourse, and acts as an invitation to transition among the participants of a conversation (217). Still carrying no meaning, in this sense, the word *So* might indicate a level of tension or anticipation to some audiences which Heaney had no intent of expressing.

In the end, Heaney's use of *So* for *Hwæt* frays the translatable correlation of the two texts in a number of ways, problematizing the expression of the performative moment, but also potentially raising both denotative and connotative questions for those audiences whose personal histories do not include the Anglo Irish "big-voiced scullions" of Heaney's youth.

A second word in Heaney's translation mirrors the Irish ancestry of *So* but carries with it a much narrower (and therefore distinctive) linguistic marking, thereby reinforcing the Irish echoes of the translation throughout the text. In line 140, Heaney translates *búrum*, meaning "in the chambers/apartments/dwellings"² as "in the *bothies*," a corrupted Gaelic word referring to a basic accommodation, usually used without charge by travelers, townsfolk, and workers. Heaney's translation in context works with the intent of the passage, which follows the description of Hrothgar's bewildered helplessness after waking to find the remains of Grendel's attack:

It was easy then to meet with a man
shifting himself to a safer distance
to bed in the *bothies*, for who could be blind
to the evidence of his eyes, the obviousness
of the hall-watcher's hate?
(lines 138-142)

² According to Klaeber 311.

When *būr* is used elsewhere in the text, Heaney resorts to translations of both "chamber" (line 1310) and the larger "dwelling" (line 2455), both instances referring to a location possessed/occupied by an individual. *Būr*, then, carries three denotations in the translation, and while his choice to use *bothy* in line 140 clarifies the definition and echoes the meanings of the passage, we are still left with *bothy* being a specifically Gaelic word, and moreover, one not commonly used in modern dialects. Thus *bothy* leaves us unsure again, for as a domesticating translation, its distant Gaelic roots are troubled for the modern North American audience in both its linguistic and conceptual foreignness.

These two lexical examples, coupled with Heaney's admissions concerning his newly discovered connections between his own Irish childhood and the Old English language, reveal the echoes between the source text of *Beowulf* and Heaney's own translation, and, in fact, also show how the act of translation bounces off of Heaney's own language memory. If we are to consider Heaney's translation as "the poem now" as Shippey would have us do, we must consider the implications of Heaney's positioning as the translator, as well as our own position as his target audience. In this, we might turn to Schleiermacher, whose arguments concerning foreignization and domestication practices problematize the perspective of every translation, creating moments which both "send the reader abroad" and "bring them back home," often within words or lines of each other (qtd. in LeFevere 66).

Heaney's *Beowulf* is likewise subverted in its translatable position, but in ways which trouble the relationship of the text to its target audience more complexly than simply considering the original's Anglo Saxon origins and the modern reader's expectations. In this, Heaney's linguistic choices reveal his own positioning and create a modern Anglo-Irish stamp on the *Beowulf* text. His introduction constructs these moments as his own sentimental domestications which recall his idiomatic linguistic childhood. His audience, however, does not necessarily share his linguistic history, and in the case of many students in our North American classes, these domesticating moments for Heaney, in fact, foreignize the *Beowulf* text in more ways, according to new and different cultural constructs from the original. In the end, many readers need to negotiate through two foreign idioms in order to experience the

text. Heaney's project translates moments of the Old English into a modern Anglo-Irish dialect, and in this, some readers might still need some cues—or translative hints—from outside the text concerning some of Heaney's poetic and linguistic choices.

The implications of this frayed, doubly-foreignized place in which Heaney places us (and, in many ways, places himself) result in troubled relationships between the text and its varied audiences. Turning first to the experience of reading, the Anglo-Irish connections obscure the Anglo Saxon cultural idiom of the original, not to an uncomfortable degree for reading or for undergraduate classrooms, but to the degree in which the distinctions between Anglo Saxon and Irish culture start to blur. The text as it is now, therefore, provides many students who already romanticize both the Saxon and Celtic cultures with a new text which subtly bridges the two.

This bridge, however, must then lead us to Heaney himself and the implications of the translation in the larger definitions of nationalistic textualities. The sum of Heaney's poetic work continues to be examined extensively for its political and social commentary, most of which centers on identity—of himself as an Irishman, and of Northern Ireland as a somewhat schizophrenic nation, caught between Irish and English identities (Ward, par. 1). In light of Heaney's translative choices, we see this struggle occurring likewise in *Beowulf*. In the act of translating this Old English masterpiece, Heaney's Irishness takes possession of the text, both in its cultural and temporal aspects. No longer is the text a dynamic example of pure Anglo Saxon poetic craft; now it is the story seen through the eyes of a modern Irish poet, whose clear perspective of national identities tries to make sense of it in those terms, and through the history of the Anglo-Irish conflict. The English masterpiece, in effect, has been transmuted and possessed by an Irish national identity.

If we are to take Heaney at his word, that in his translation project he wished to "come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism" (xxx), we can see that in a way he has, but has done so by using far more complex means than by producing a sort of study of an Anglo Saxon poetic artifact. He has, as Gayatri Spivak would have all translators do, "surrendered to the text," to its language, its form, and its voice. But where Heaney challenges our

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modern relationship with *Beowulf* is in our own, doubled identities as the target audience of both the Anglo Saxon and the modern Anglo Irish cultures, and we find ourselves—the target audience—positioned with Heaney as moderns searching for echoes in the Anglo Saxon past, looking through modern Irish lenses in North American classrooms.

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