

Gleaning the Unsaid off the Palpable

Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf*. Faber & Faber, £14.99stg

For a variety of reasons, *Beowulf* has long enjoyed the reputation of a classic that—like the dragon in it—is best left undisturbed in the depths of literary time. Some twenty modern English translations of the poem, full or partial, by scholars and poets alike, have not redeemed the epic for a late twentieth-century reading public. With the latest translation—by Seamus Heaney, perhaps the most distinct and authoritative of recent poetic voices in the lands of *Beowulf* and a Nobel Prize-winner—we may, however, have a breakthrough. The Anglo-Saxonists, who “put a sheen” by research and commentary on the verses of the poem like ancient burnishers, should be particularly pleased by the act of this new translation: a better *edwenden*, or change, could hardly have come to the cause of the earliest literature in English. And yet, when the distinguished Anglo-Saxonist, Tom Shippey, writes in a review of the translation, “Like it or not, Heaney’s *Beowulf* is the poem now, for probably two generations”, we feel a joy mingled with sadness, even apprehension: that Heaney’s rendering may eclipse not only the efforts of his predecessors but also, quite possibly, the Anonymous Creator of the original epic; that a son has, for a long time to come, displaced the father.

But the fact that Heaney gave voice to *Beowulf* could equally be considered an act of loyalty—a thegnly tribute to one of the foundation works of poetry in English and to language seen as a mode of existence that, for poets and philologists alike, is of mythical importance because it gives us our origin. It is in this “unpartitioned linguistic country”, as Heaney says in his Introduction, a space *somewhere behind*, in “a region where one’s language would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language” that poets, Heaney as much as the author of *Beowulf*, have always found the words—

“symptoms of memory”, as Heaney wrote in “England of the Mind”, wells of wisdom, anchors of experience. “I prefer to let the natural ‘sound of sense’ prevail over the demands of the convention: I have been reluctant to force an artificial shape or an unusual word choice just for the sake of correctness”, Heaney states in defining the prime rule of his translation. Most often, the sound of sense rings in perfect accord with what the Old English line requires and the two poets share, like Beowulf and Breca once, the same wave length: consider, for example, the image of the boat awaiting the load of Scyld’s dead body and treasures before its venture into the unknown:

A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,
ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince.

Where there would be a danger of a correct but limp line, the poet, following the paths of auditory imagination, returns to the original, unpartitioned realm of linguistic signs and brings something back: in describing the last stages of the hero’s first duel, the *Beowulf*-poet focuses more on the atmosphere of terror and Grendel’s dismay at his physical and spiritual defeat, than on everybody’s whereabouts at just that moment. Heaney saves the prepositional phrase “from the wall” in l. 785, which is puzzling to some critics of the poem (*Where were the Danes?*) while a mere expletive to others, by filling out the half-line with a richly sounding imaginative detail:

...and bewildering fear
came over the Danes. Everyone felt it
who heard that cry as it *echoed off the wall*,
.....
the howl of the loser, the lament of the hell-serf
keening his wound.

No less revealing are moments when “poetic truth” prevails over “correctness” without artificiality or a strained word choice being the risk. It is in the latter instances that Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*, despite its overall confidence and cogency, can be shown—using the chivalrous idiom of medieval romance—“to lack a little”.

Let’s consider the very first lines of the poem after the initial address, introduced by the silence-breaking *so* (ll. 4-11):

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

In the end each clan on the outlying coasts
beyond the whale-road had to yield to him
and begin to pay tribute. That was one good-king.

This paragraph illustrates several of the important differences between the original and Heaney's rendering. They are both semantic and structural and recur with a consistence that turns what was begun as a translation into a highly imaginative rewriting. Of Scyld the "rampaging wrecker" the original text merely says that he "took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes". The characteristically subdued diction of the two Old English half-lines is here, just as in numerous other places, converted into a forceful, expressive language of heroic conflict with all its violence and clamour. While Grendel in the good old days "sought his dwelling, proud of plunder", Heaney has him rushing to his lair, "flushed up and inflamed from the raid". When the Old English Hrothgar "feels sorrow for his (dead) thanes", the Modern English king is made to be "humiliated by the loss of his guard". The Unferth of the translation is "sick with envy" at Beowulf's arrival even though what he experiences in the original is merely "great vexation"; Unferth's account of Beowulf's swimming match with Breca by Heaney contains an extra lashing remark "the sea-test obsessed you", missing from the original. The translator sees actions and feelings in the poem through a magnifying glass and there is a characteristic bodily quality about his poem: of Grendel in his opponent's grip the *Beowulf*-poet says no more than that "in mind he became frightened, in his spirit", whereas Heaney translates "every bone in his body / quailed and recoiled". We shall never know precisely what the Anglo-Saxon poet's choices and constraints were but his sophisticated, often abstract diction and his reticent style have long been understood to be sure components of his voice. The colour and sensuous power of Heaney's translation is reminiscent of such Old English poems as *The Exodus*, with its abiding terror and vehement heroism.

Another telling instance in the first verse paragraph above is "he would flourish later on". E. Talbot Donaldson's "he lived to find comfort (for being first found helpless)" translates a clause containing two word-emblems of Anglo-Saxon spirituality: *frofor*, "consolation, solace, relief", and *gebidan*, "to await; wait for" and (though combined with a different case of the noun) "to live to see, experience, live through". Phrases like this restore in *Beowulf* a balance between two of its most central themes: courage and endurance. Neither of the concepts is preserved by Heaney who favours courage and with it the foursquare, confident, performative language of active voice and indicative mood: the self-assured heroes of *his Beowulf*

go out in the world along the path to power to prove their worth and earn admiration.

A problem on a different level of the text occurs in “(each clan) had to yield to him and begin to pay tribute” above when compared to the Old English “had to obey him, pay him tribute”. Heaney’s wording breaks the asyndetic unity of the two phrases and the simultaneity of their reference. Seeking explicitness and steady progression, he establishes a temporal sequence of the two acts of subjection. The *Beowulf*-poet’s strategy is a contrary one: by uniting the two phrases in the figure of variation, he works with the implicit. By refusing to spell out the link, temporal or other, he chooses to meditate, however briefly, on the nature of obeisance. The contemplative order, with its chains of variations, thus naturally assumes a different pace and structuring of the verse paragraph. This difference of approach, though negligible with regard to one phrase, becomes vastly important when applied consistently throughout the text. The relative prevalence in Heaney’s *Beowulf* of the narrative over meditative element neatly dovetails with his predilection for the magnifying glass of the heroic and the forthright, “big-voiced” language.

These are, very briefly, some of the important shifts distinguishing *Beowulf* from this *Beowulfing*, the father from a son, the poem for ever from its most recent and a wonderfully imaginative translation into an idiom of extraordinary lexico-stylistic breadth. In assessing this idiom in relation to Heaney’s own verse as well as placing this translation in the context of its predecessors we must admit the union of great poets that is embodied in *Seamus Heaney’s Beowulf*.