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Book Review: Bone House

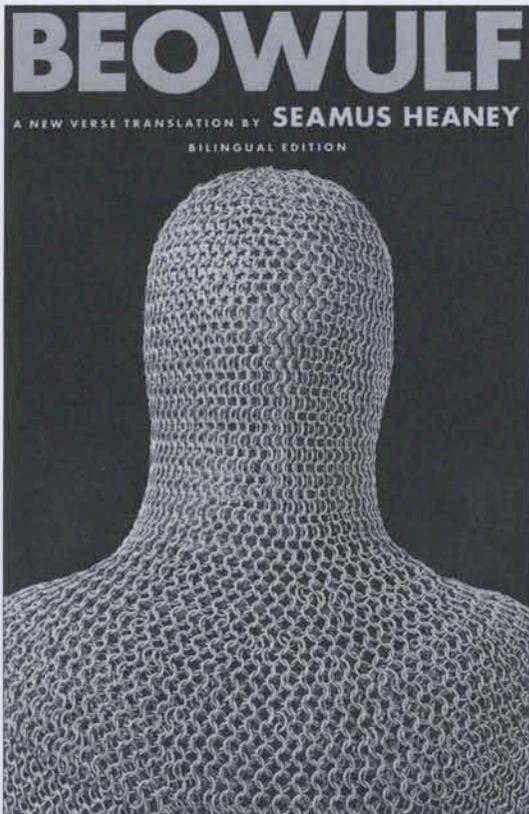
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Seamus Heaney
Beowulf: A New Verse Translation
 Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000

BONE HOUSE

BY CHARLES F. ANGELL

A few years ago editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* must have realized the inadequacy of their prose translation of *Beowulf*. They commissioned Seamus Heaney in the early 1980s to rework the Anglo-Saxon epic, a project he admits he only dallied with until, finally, some ten years later, he felt confident enough to complete the project. Heaney's translation succeeds in revitalizing *Beowulf* by shading the warrior's heroic thirst and quest for glory into that elegaic "final day... when Beowulf fought and fate denied him glory in battle."

I say elegaic because that is the tone Heaney adopts for the epic. For

Heaney, translating *Beowulf* properly is a matter of tone. The epic's virtually untranslatable opening word *hwæt* offers a case in point. Charles Kennedy's 1940 version, the verse translation I used in college, opts to begin with *Lo*, a very literary equivalent to what sounds like a throat clearing or an after dinner belch. Heaney rejects the "conventional renderings of *hwæt* and observes that the "particle 'so' came naturally to the rescue, because in that idiom 'so' operates as an expression which obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention." Heaney, knowing the oral tradition of the epic, realizes the crucial need for attentiveness in the listener/reader.

Heaney's attentiveness to the speech he had heard throughout his childhood in Ireland, the direct talk and inflections of men he calls "big voiced Scullions," aids him in echoing "the sound and sense of the Anglo-Saxon." Anyone who has attempted to translate *Beowulf* knows that Beowulf's glory in battle is not always equaled by any translator's glory in matching the poem's sound with its sense. I spent a semester in graduate school translating the epic, a fun but fraught exercise, and so speak with some experience about the challenges posed by the alliterative and syllabic verse. The Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of Heaney's translation reprints the full Anglo-Saxon text on the *verso* page and thus provides even the inexperienced reader with some notion of the original poetry. It's easy to recognize that the alliteration and syllabic beats of the original are difficult to reproduce in English without sounding artificially stilted and rhythmically uneven. The original Anglo-Saxon which, as I noted, retains remnants of an earlier oral tradition relies upon formula phrases or *kennings*, mnemonic devices to aid the bard's or scop's recall. I reproduce a brief passage in the original where Beowulf and his companions leave their "ring-prowed ship" and journey to

Hrothgar's monster beset court:

Gewiton him þá foeran. Flota stille bád,
 Seomode on sále sid-fæþmed scip,
 On ancre fæst. Eofor-líc scionon
 ofer hléor-bergan: gehroden golde,
 Fá ond fý-heard, ferh wearde héold:
 Gúþ-mód grummon.

Kennedy translates these lines as:

*Then the Geats marched on;
 behind at her mooring,
 Fastened at anchor, their
 broad-beamed boat
 Safely rode on her swinging cable.
 Boar heads glittered on
 glistening helmets
 Above their cheek guards,
 gleaming with gold;
 Bright and fire-hardened
 the boar held watch
 Over the column of marching men.*

Kennedy says of his method that he has used "alliteration, both of vowel and consonant, flexibly and freely both within the line itself and, if it seemed desirable, as a device for binding lines together." Nonetheless, the reader senses the heavy presence of the 'glittered' and 'glistening' and the somewhat too prosaic "over the column of marching men" with its reliance on prepositions to convey the beat. Heaney organizes his translation by a different principle, saying he has "been guided by the fundamental pattern of four stresses to the line, but I allow myself several transgressions. For example, I don't always employ alliteration, and sometimes I alliterate only in one half of the line" to permit the "natural 'sound of sense' [to] prevail over the demands of the convention." Thus he evokes the original as:

*So they went their way.
 The ship rode the water,
 Broad-beamed, bound by its hawser
 And anchored fast.
 Boar-shapes flashed
 Above their cheek guards,
 the brightly forged
 Work of goldsmiths, watching over
 Those stern-faced men.*

Here the positioning of 'rode,' 'broad,' 'boar,' 'forged,' and 'work' show Heaney employing the alliterative convention to advantage, constrained not by the

single line but open to the sense and movement of the whole passage.

Yet, the technical virtuosity of the translation would be insufficient to rekindle interest in Beowulf were it not accompanied by Heaney's sensibility about the ancient heroes moving across a contested landscape. In his 1975 collection *North* appears a set of stanzas from "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces":

*Come fly with me,
Come sniff the wind
With the expertise
Of the Vikings—
neighbourly, scoretaking
killers, hagggers
and hagggers, gombeen-men,
hoarders of grudges and gain.
With a butcher's aplomb
they spread out your lungs
and made you warm wings
for your shoulders.
Old fathers, be with us.
Old cunning assessors
of feuds and of sites
for ambush or town.*

The reader senses in his lines Heaney's affinity not just for the older poetry but for the "old fathers" who retain and revitalize the memories that keep alive the grudges and fuel the revenges. As readers of *Beowulf* know, the narrative of the hero's exploits pauses on a number of occasions to allow the scop to interpolate cautionary tales. After Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, the scop recalls how Sigemund slew the dragon and how from this deed came renown and then trouble. Later, the scop rehearses the fight at Finn's Hall and the fraternal betrayals that consumed the people in a blood feud. Heroic valor and glory inevitably yield to renewed care and darkness, to Grendel, to Cain's kin, outcast and prowling beyond the light.

Heaney seamlessly weaves the scop's interruptions into the epic and smoothly moves the narrative from Beowulf's arrival among the Danes at Heorot Hall, to his defeat of Grendel, and the rejoicing that follows. "You have made yourself immortal/ by your

glorious action," Hrothgar tells Beowulf; "may the God of Ages/ continue to keep and requite you well." Hrothgar leaves ambiguous whether the hero's "glorious action" or God's protection has conferred immortality; Beowulf suffers from no such uncertainty and, at his boasting best, claims that Grendel "has done his worst but the wound will end him./ He is hasped and hooped and hirpling [crawling, dragging a limb] with pain, limping and looped in it," the hero refiguring his physical prowess in verbal display.

Celebration and banquet, gifts of gold distributed to Beowulf and his warriors, then "sorh is geniwod," sorrow returns in the form of Grendel's mother seeking to avenge her murdered son, for monsters too must follow the blood feud's code. Again, this time in the murky depths of the woodland mere where even his sword fails him, Beowulf must confront a foe swollen with hatred. Beowulf prevails in a struggle of so long endurance that his waiting followers believe he has perished and have "abandoned the cliff top [wishing] without hope, to behold their lord." The hero re-emerges from the mere, bearing for good measure Grendel's severed head, and tells Hrothgar that now he "can sleep secure with [his] company of troops in Heorot Hall."

More celebration, more lavishing of gifts, and after some well-meant advice on the seductions of power, Hrothgar allows Beowulf and his warriors to embark for their homeland where, after some years of service to his father Hygelac, Beowulf assumes the kingship and for fifty years "grew old and wise/ as warden of the land." But suddenly, angered at the theft of a goblet from his treasure hoard, a dragon begins to ravage the kingdom. Beowulf hears the news and feels "unaccustomed anxiety and gloom/ [confuse] his brain." Again, as the aged and careworn Beowulf prepares to confront this newest enemy, the scop interjects more stories of trouble and ill-fortune, this time of a father "who has lived to see his son's body/ swing on the gallows."

*He begins to keen
and weep for his boy,
watching the raven
gloat where he hangs:
he can be no help.
The wisdom of age is
worthless to him.*

Tempus edax rerum, or as Shakespeare was to write: "Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion's paws/ And make the earth devour her own sweet brood." The elegaic shadow darkens the epic, for "Such was the feeling of loss endured by the land of the Geats." The dragon proves too powerful for Beowulf; his warriors retreat to safety; only Wiglaf assists the hero and manages to overcome the wyrm. Beowulf, knowing he has suffered a mortal wound, gives the gold collar of his office to the young hero Wiglaf, telling him "Fate swept us away,/ sent my whole brave high-born clan to their final doom. Now I must follow them." The epic closes amid dark forecasts of doom for the entire Geatish people who now have only the flames of Beowulf's funeral pyre to push against the darkness.

Heaney, as I hope my synopsis implies, sees in *Beowulf* the struggles of a proud but beleaguered race, invaded by strangers, betrayed by kin and friends, heroically attempting to keep their history alive through chronicle and song. "In the coffered/ riches of grammar/ and declensions," Heaney tells us in another of his poems,

*I found bán-hús,
its fire, benches
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while
in the roofspace.
There was a small crock
for the brain,
and a cauldron
of generation
swung at the centre:
love-den, blood-holt,
dream-bower.*

Beowulf.

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