

Thomas Meyer—*Beowulf* Interview



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Q: You’ve mentioned that for your senior thesis at Bard during the 1970s, you decided to translate “three quarters of the extant poetry in Old English, including *Beowulf*.” How long did that take you? I realize it’s relatively small, but still, I’d imagine, a considerable amount of work. What was your training in Anglo Saxon prior to taking that on—did it mostly come at Bard?

A: Despite the translations I’ve done and some of my earlier work, I’m really an academic or scholar manqué. So what was meant by my statement about that 1969 senior project was that apart from *Beowulf* (not “including” it), ie., what’s left then, my work covered “three quarters of the extant poetry in Old English.” Having just checked Wikipedia, can’t give you the line count, which was how that figure came about. Anyway, you’re right, it’s not a huge amount.

Otherwise, I had no training in Anglo Saxon. The faculty had approved me for doing a creative project, a bunch of poems. But in his wisdom Robert Kelly took me aside and said, “Look, you’re going to write the poems anyway, why not use this opportunity to learn something you might not otherwise?” I’d had a Chaucer course and eventually did a paper on “The Franklin’s Tale,” all of which fascinated

me. Old English seemed like the natural next step and there was a faculty member who was willing to be my advisor and tutor me. The romance that held me was being in on the ground floor of English. Otto Jespersen's *Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909–1949) had provided a lot of treasure in that direction.

Q: Next, you talk about translating—at Gerrit Lansing's suggestion—Cockayne's "Leechdoms, wortcunning, and starcraft of early England" (and wound up also doing Apuleius's *Herbarium*). What (besides Gerrit) drew you to this, and what kind of different challenges did this translation present compared to something like *Beowulf*?

A: I was living with Jonathan Williams in the Yorkshire Dales, in the countryside and the plant matter was pretty much right there under my feet. And the *Herbarium* had a certain occult edge to it I liked, obviously, plus an element of British folklore that got appended during the rendering of the Latin original into Anglo Saxon.

Anyone who takes even the slightest glance at Old English can see the huge difference between the language of its prose and the language of its poetry – that's probably the ground of my interest and attraction to the material in the first place. My idea about translating the *Herbarium* was to keep the language, syntax and vocabulary, as simple as possible, as "native," avoiding all Latinate forms.

Q: Basil Bunting was a "frequent visitor" and "table companion" during the time you were working on Old English. Obviously, his *Briggflatts* engages with Anglo Saxon as well. Or perhaps not so obviously; at any rate, Chris Jones, in *Strange Likeness*, his study of 20th-century poets and Old English, writes, "the influence of Old English in [Bunting's] own poetry seems to me impossible to separate from that of Old Norse." He quotes him saying, "I think our best hope of an art or literature of our own does not lie in imitating what has come to us from Rome or Europe or from the South of England, but in trying to discern what is our own, and to develop it and fit it for 20th and 21st century conditions." The two of you discussed the "long poem," and I'm curious to what extent those conversations helped shape the direction you went in with your *Beowulf* translation.

A: How can someone mid 20th century ... Wait, is it even possible

to create a kind of rhetorical equivalent in modern English of Old English poetic diction without slipping into some sort of pre-Raphaelite, William Morris affectation? Bunting thought Coverdale's and Tyndale's translations of the Bible was the place to look; that the King James Version watered down their strengths. Well, as the above quote about "the best hope" makes clear, the bias was Northern.

Linguistically his essential interest was Welsh, and to some extent Norse, elaborate verse forms, the sort of thing English, even Old English, can't quite do, not having enough curly-cues, inflected formations and pure rhyme. The Book of Kells he would point to as a visual representation of what he was after aurally.

Because of these discussions, translating *Beowulf* suddenly stared me square in the face. Something of a mess as far as "long poem" is concerned, but a real gymnasium for trying out the possibilities of a poetic language. That was my real concern. The natural source for grand eloquence in contemporary English, it then seemed to me, was Elizabethan, the Bible. Not Shakespeare who has always struck me as too clever by half, as they say, and just too, too much in general, in spite of all his "humanism."

To be fair, Bunting's major point was not the lack of a poetic diction in contemporary English but that "the long poem" was no longer a possibility because of the speed at which the culture changes. He used to point out that he paid the same rent for a room near the British Museum that Charles Dickens had a hundred years previously. That cultural stability vanished by 1914. Since then eventually the only long poem possible he thought was autobiographical. Zukofsky's *A*, or *Briggflatts*.

Q: I think I'm most intrigued with your statement that "instead of the text's orality, perhaps perversely I went for the visual. Deciding to use page layout (recto/ verso) as a unit. Every translation I'd read felt impenetrable to me with its block after block of nearly uniform lines. Among other quirky decisions made in order to open up the text, the project wound up being a kind of typological specimen book for long American poems extant circa 1965." I wonder if you could talk more about that—were there any translations in particular you'd seen that bothered you (or any since then)? Any books in particular that influenced your visual structuring? I immediately thought of Dorn's *Gunslinger*.

A: There's not a translation of *Beowulf* that doesn't have me yawning. Having said that, Edwin Morgan's and Michael Alexander's are maybe my favorites. The Seamus Heaney strikes me as somehow pedestrian, at the same time somehow over-bearing.

Q: There seemed to be, at that time—say late 1960s, early 1970s—a lot of interest in Anglo Saxon poetry, perhaps responding to Pound's influence. You, Michael Alexander (his *Beowulf* was published in 1973)—and Bill Griffiths, who was later to get a degree in Old English, published a small edition of a translation by John Porter in 1975. We now know, too, of course, that Jack Spicer studied Old English with Arthur Brodeur at Berkeley, and did his own translation of *Beowulf*. Meanwhile, Paul Blackburn had worked on medieval Spanish, translating *El Cid* in 1966. I wonder to what extent you were conscious of there being some sort of medieval “revival” going on, and whether you talked (with Lansing or Bunting, say) about the potential such older forms might have for your poetry.

A: I don't know, I felt completely isolated. This was a time of the Great American Presence in UK Poetry and the creation of American Studies programs at new UK universities. Clearly Anglo Saxon had fallen out of fashion in the early 60s, dead and buried by 1970. When Michael Alexander's translation appeared in 1973, personally it came as a complete shock.

Nor did anyone mention Anglo Saxon as an influence on me, apart from a kind of nerdiness. My own work at the time was definitely involved with “early Anglo Saxon lore,” plants, local legends, Englishness. What 19th century vicars wrote diaries about, or someone up at the manor collected, birds' eggs, bezoars, or household tales. After all that's where I was living. The English Countryside.

However, one of the most profound effects Anglo Saxon had on me from the beginning and to this day, as I've said, is avoiding the Latinate.

Q: Perhaps along those same lines, how important was the influence of Pound—obviously there in the case of Bunting, but what about “next generation” poets like yourself in approaching Anglo Saxon material?

A: Pound was The Influence. His Seafarer. Because of it I decided on Old English for the Bard Senior Project. As a translator (Old English, Chinese, Greek, Sanskrit) he's my model, in particular "Homage to Sextus Propertius." Me, I'm not a "real" translator, some one working hard to be faithful to the original text, at the same time writing good, clear English. That I admire. Immensely. My excuse for bending and re-shaping the original text, often straying from it radically, is that mine are not the only available translations in English. They weigh heavily on the pan of the scales marked "commentary," as in "all translation is commentary," each choice a nudging of the text in a certain direction.

Q: Turning to the translation itself: Right away, you seem to signal that this is going to be quite different than other verse translations.

Here is Jack Spicer's version:

1 Hwæt, We Gardena in geardagum,
 Lo, we ~~of the spear~~ = Danes in former days
 Lo, we ~~of the spear~~ = Danes have heard

 þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
 of the kings of the people glory have heard
 of the spear Danes
 of the glory of the kings of the people in former days,
 ^

 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!
 how the princes (deeds of) valor performed.
 how the princes performed deeds of valor.

With the second line of text being his rough draft, the third the version he ultimately decided on. Even that first word, "Hwæt," is notoriously difficult to render; Seamus Heaney has it, "So." Others have used "Listen," etc. Then you are presented with the syntactical difficulties, as is apparent from Spicer's obvious struggles to figure out what to do with the genitive plural "Gardena."

At any rate, here's yours:

HEY now hear

what spears of Danes
 in days of years gone
 by did, what deeds made
 their power their glory —

their kings & princes:

The “HEY now hear” seems both an obvious and radical solution, as it hints at a sonic relationship to “Hwæt” while being pretty informal, like someone getting people’s attention at a party. You don’t bother trying to approximate the syntax, or indeed worrying about the overwhelming genitives—for that matter, you don’t mimic the standard (translated) alliterative verse line, with its three dutifully alliterating words and a space to indicate caesura. This is just a hint of what’s to come, but it’s already so different than even what Heaney was willing to do. The question then—and relate this back to the notion of visual structure if need be—how did you make such choices, and what balance did you try to strike between sound, sense, being “faithful” to the poem, and your own aesthetic procedure?

A: That “Hwæt” did perplexed me. There was a successful revival of Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* in the West End (London) in 1971. Near the end of Act One, Captain Andy is concerned that although the house is filling up for that evening’s performance, no “colored folks” are turning up when his cook, Queenie, shows him how to ballyhoo them. She shouts “Hey!” then vamping her spiel three or four more times. When I heard that, I thought, “That’s it.”

Embedded in there too was Thornton Wilder’s transcription of some remarks made by Gertrude Stein at the University of Chicago on her American tour (1934) where she catches the audience attention by shouting “Now listen!” Though that sounded a bit to class-roomy.

Q: To continue in this vein: The beginning of Fitt Five, which looks like a minimalist poem sculptured on the page; the description of Beowulf entering Heorot in Fitt Six, with single-word lines centered on the page; and finally, one of my favorite parts, your rendering of the fight with Grendel in Fitt 11, which reads in part:

footstephandclawfiendreachmanbedquicktrick
 beastarmpainclampnewnotknownheartrunflesho
 feargetawaygonowrunrun

never before had
 sinherd feared anything so.

(“or cringed crushed ...
 or my days’ end ...”

Beowulf stoop up straight,
 beast in his grip,
 his knuckles popped.
 Ent bent on escape

runwideflatopenswampholesafebadfingerman
 squeezeletgowantnotcomesadgobadhallrunrun

Here the reader is confronted with the words themselves running together, as if in panic, in much the same way that the original passage seems in such a rush to tell the story of the battle that bodies become confused, as in, e.g., lines 748-50: “he quickly grabbed / with ill intent / and leaned on [Grendel’s? his own?] arm,” etc., wherein it’s often difficult to tell with whom an action originates and who is being acted upon. This seems like a particularly provocative and brilliant solution to the translation problems presented by the passage.

Taken all together, this approach both brings to light a troubling assumption of most Old English verse translations, and proposes an

interesting alternative. The assumption is that we can, and should want to, approximate a verse form that is based on oral transmission (and possibly aural composition). Your approach acknowledges that we don't have the cultural tools (or need) to do that anymore, as poets and listeners (readers) of poems. Instead, your text suggests that poems are now composed on the page, as texts, and challenges the reader in all the ways that 20th-century long-form poetry can, from Pound's *Cantos* on down. So I'd really like to hear you say more about that, both in the context of typical translations of older texts, and the adventurous approaches put forward by Modernism, etc.

A: The other two legs of my three-legged translation stool, besides Pound, were Zukofsky's *Catullus* and Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

Permission, as Robert Duncan might have it, for the inconsistent formalities all throughout my *Beowulf* was granted directly by Pound's Propertius where he runs the gamut from Victorian mediaeval to H.L. Menken wise-cracking. (Not to mention the variety of voices in his *Cantos*). While Zukofsky's *Catullus* presented me with the idea of homophony dispensing with syntax, ironically even if the homophony wasn't present. And of course *Finnegan's Wake* provided the cloud-chamber for running words together. These were the tools to dismantle then realign a text. Another influence was what would eventually become Christopher Logue's eight books of the *Iliad*, *War Music*, its pace, and to some extent the look, in order to crack the mind-numbing, conventional, uniform stanza block after stanza block translation.

When I met Jonathan Williams in 1968 he was something of a kingpin in the International Concrete Poetry movement. However, it got much more attention in South American and Europe than in Britain or the US. Though, frankly it struck me as dumb, literally and figuratively. Or too often clever and curious risking cute. Also aligned with Jonathan, my interest in typography. Those two things were the big conscious push behind the page as a unit/ recto verso idea. You're right, although it wasn't a completely conscious strategy, these visual elements from Jonathan and Bunting's "end of the long poem" tipped me over from oral to visual as the answer, how to put across an old (epic) poem in 1972.

Q: What's been the impact of this translation work on your own

poetic practice? You've published other translations—notably Sappho, and the *Tao Te Ching*. You've published a dozen-plus books of your own poetry. How has working with Old English at the outset of your career affected and perhaps shaped your other work in poetry?

A: Hook, line, and sinker, at a young age, I swallowed Pound's dicta: translation is how you learn how to write a poem. It's only been since re-typing my *Beowulf* last summer that I've realized how profound an effect it's had on my work. For no other reason than the total textual immersion it and every other such project afforded me. All my translating has been of texts that drew themselves to me for one or another specific reason. My lack of linguistic expertise and cack-handed approach in each instance meant my focus was total, word for word. Skating on thin ice the whole time.

As I've said a couple times in this interview, the need to make the translation vital and various made me daring.

Q: Finally (for now), what kind of response did this translation receive around the time you did it? You mentioned Guy Davenport showing some interest, but eventually backing away. I would have thought that something of this nature would appeal to avant-garde poets and poetry movements as a way to build bridges to past poetics via contemporary innovations, and show what those innovations can accomplish in relation to older poetry. Sometimes I wonder if such movements get so attached to the idea of the "new" that they just don't want to deal with historical literature. Also, of course, there has always been a whiff of the "cultural purity," "desire for origins" aspect to philology and Old English in particular, though more recently, so-called "post-philology" has opened things up again.

A: Basil Bunting, my shade and mentor for this endeavor, to paraphrase Pound on HD, found my *Beowulf* "fascinating if you can stand the quirkiness." That and Davenport's indifference – they were such towering figures for me at the time – led me to stick it in a drawer and go on to something else. Ann Lee and the Shakers, as it happened, poem not translation.

Not being much of a self-promoter, and something of a "forest dweller," otherwise no one really saw it.

You know the elephant in the room is that *Beowulf* is really an

odd work, an anomaly right from the start. Single extant manuscript, jumbled narrative, murky transition from oral to written, etc. etc. In the early 70s no one was interested in that kind of textuality. Well, maybe in their own way, the French were. Certainly not Americans. From this, my present vantage, that was just what appealed to me. Subliminally. The liminality of the text. And now, as you suggest, there's a richer cultural context – and possible impact.

—*Note: this interview appears in Beowulf: A Translation, by Thomas Meyer, edited by David Habdawnik. punctum books, Brooklyn, N.Y., 2012*