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A Contemporary Voice Revisits the Past:
Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*

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Abstract. Heaney's controversial translation of *Beowulf* shows characteristics that make it look like an original work: in particular, the presence of Hiberno-English words and some unexpected structural features such as the use of italics, notes and running titles. Some of Heaney's artistic choices have been brought into question by the Germanic philologists, who reproached him with his lack of fidelity to the original text. Moreover, the insertion of Hiberno-English words, which cause an effect of estrangement on Standard English speakers, was considered by some critics not only an aesthetic choice but a provocative act, a linguistic and political claim recalling the ancient antagonism between the Irish and the English. Yet, from the point of view of Heaney's theoretical and cultural background, his innovations in his translation of *Beowulf* appear consistent with his personal notions of poetry and translation. Therefore, his *Beowulf* can be considered the result of a necessary interaction between translator and original text and be acclaimed in spite of all the criticism.

Key Words. Translation, 'self', 'other', Hiberno-English, 'further language', (act of/process of) 'appropriation', Scullionspeak.

Resumen. La controvertida traducción de *Beowulf* de Heaney posee características que la hacen parecer una obra original: en particular, la presencia de palabras en hiberno-inglés y algunos elementos estructurales inesperados como el empleo de la letra cursiva, de notas y de títulos en el poema. Algunas de las elecciones artísticas de Heaney han sido puestas en tela de juicio por los filólogos germánicos, que han reprochado falta de fidelidad al texto original. Además, la inserción de palabras en hiberno-inglés, que provocan un efecto de extrañamiento a quienes hablan el inglés estándar, fue considerada por algunos críticos no sólo una elección estética, sino también un acto provocativo, una reivindicación lingüística y política que recuerda el antiguo antagonismo entre los irlandeses y los ingleses. Sin embargo, desde el punto de vista del bagaje cultural y teórico de Heaney, sus innovaciones en la traducción de *Beowulf* resultan coherentes con su personal concepto de poesía y de traducción. Por lo tanto, su *Beowulf* puede considerarse el resultado de una interacción necesaria entre traductor y texto original, y es digno de loa a pesar de todas las críticas.

Palabras clave. Traducción, el 'yo', el 'otro', hiberno-inglés, acto/proceso de 'apropiación', habla de los 'Scullions'.

1. 1999: Two Translations of *Beowulf*

The translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf, assigned to Heaney by the Norton Anthology editor, took the poet about twenty years to fulfil. Saluted as the "official", par excellence translation of *Beowulf*[1], it outshone another translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem that was published in the same year (1999) by by Ray Liuzza, a Germanic

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[1] This is the opinion of Howe (2002: 37), Brunetti (2001: 94), O'Brien O'Keeffe (2001:1).

Philologist[2]. These two translations are completely different, as Liuzza himself pointed out (2002: 23-25). He produced a version of the Old English poem aimed at introducing *Beowulf* to students already familiar with (Old) English literature. He wanted it to be "as literal as I [i.e., Liuzza] could make it" and to keep it as close as possible to the original: this meant trying to reproduce the syntactical complexity of Anglo-Saxon and, where possible, its metric and stylistic devices (line stresses, caesura, alliteration), respectful of the 'tone' of the poem but, at the same time, fluent. On the other side, Heaney's translation was directed at a larger audience including first-time readers of *Beowulf*, as his marginal glosses, summing up each episode in a few words, show[3] . As soon as it was published, it aroused the interest of the critics for several reasons: first of all because it was much awaited, and secondly because of some particular features that make it an unusual version of *Beowulf*. Among these, the most striking are the presence of Hiberno-English terms[4] and an unexpected tone ("the note and pitch" of the poem) that Heaney himself defines "Scullionspeak" (1999a: xxvi-xxvii)[5]. Many scholars observed that Heaney created a completely new literary work[6] in which the story of Beowulf is seen, for the first time, through Irish eyes.

This essay aims at pointing out that Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* is, as an artistic work, completely coherent with the theoretical frame of reference elaborated by the poet throughout his career.

2. Heaney's Notion of Poetry and Translation

Heaney's literary production consists of collections of poems, lectures and critical essays on literature, but also of Modern English translations and adaptations of texts from various languages: that is why he is regarded as a poet, literary critic and translator all together. The number of complete translations published[7], together with the quotations and long passages from other authors that often appear in his poems[8], suggest the importance of translation in Heaney's conception of literature. For him, translating is not simply a seminal literary process: rather, it represents an *integral part* of his making poetry (Brunetti 2001: 94).

Poetry is, for Heaney, an 'artistic act' that enables a community to get in touch with its culture, with 'the values of its spirit'. Within a wider definition of culture as, in Baranczak's words, "that which allows our individual consciousness to have some negotiation with external reality and allows our inner selves to be in dialogue with everything that surrounds us" (Carvalho Homem 2001: 29), poetry represents to Heaney "the most apt interpreter" of our "inner world of […] feelings and thoughts", because it is a "source of images" and " of possible meanings" that has "a sure

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[2] "… our two versions arrived on the market simultaneously, but only one of them made the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*". Liuzza 2002: 23.

[3] Heaney (1999a): xi-xii: "… it is in hope of dispelling some of the puzzlement they are bound to feel that I have added the marginal glosses…". See below section 5.

[4] 'Hiberno-English' is the variety of English spoken in Ireland. See below section 6.

[5] With 'Scullionspeak' Heaney refers to the way his father's relatives talked and pronounced words, with "weightiness, solemnity and precision". Caie 2001: 69. See below section 3.

[6] Chickering (2002: 175): "He wants it to be seen as a poem by Seamus Heaney … more than as a translation from the Old English". Milfull–Sauer (2003: 128): "…Heaney obviously combines the endeavour to make *Beowulf* accessible and even fascinating for a modern audience with the claim to present a poetic re-creation of the Old English text".

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[7] His complete translations and adaptations into Modern English are Sophocle's *Philoctetes* (*The Cure at Troy*) and *Antigone* (*The burial at Thebes*), the Irish poem *Buile Suibhne* (*Sweeney Astray*), *The Midnight Court* by Brian Merryman (*The Midnight Verdict*), *Treny* by Jan Kochanowski (*Laments*), a song cycle by the Czech Leos Janácek (*Diary of the One Who Vanished*).

[8] Among many, extracts from Dante's *Inferno* in *Field Work* (in "Ugolino"), *Seeing Things* (in "The Crossing") and *Station Island* (in "Station Island"); passages from Virgil in *Seeing Things* (an episode from *Aeneid* VI in "The Golden Bough") and in *Electric Light* ("Virgil: Eclogue IX"); the "Scyld episode" from *Beowulf* in *The Haw Lantern* (in "A Ship of Death").

claim on our understanding" (Heaney 2001: 20, 23). It is a 'frame of reference' that enables us, on the one hand, to preserve our cultural heritage and, on the other, to better understand our time and ourselves. The poet, who contributes to the rediscovery of the past of a community, has thus a great social responsibility towards the group (the 'tribe') he belongs to.

At the same time, however, the poet has also a personal responsibility towards his own artistic gift and creativity. Heaney was influenced by the reflections of some modern East European poets (B. O'Donoghue 1994: 144) such as Czeslaw Milosz and, above all, Osip Mandelstam, who, with their theories and their lives, established a new mode of writing poetry which foregrounded the seminal issue of artistic freedom, generally neglected or considered irrelevant in the English context but profoundly rooted in the Irish one[9]. In Mandelstam's view poetic creativity should transcend public and personal issues and express itself freely and autonomously with regard to the historical, the political, the contingent (B. O'Donoghue 1994: 136). Thus poets from Eastern Europe, forced to take a stance about art by difficult historical circumstances (political pressure and repression, censure), chose to become the living demonstration of poetry as an "act of faith" (Heaney 1988: 44) and as a human act of freedom.

As regards translation, according to Heaney it is a complex artistic process that brings together two opposing entities, which can be identified as the 'self' and the 'other', eventually changing both. A linguistic and cultural system turns into another, because the language and the thought of the 'other' is changed into the language and thought of the 'self' to be received in a different cultural context. This phenomenon provokes a transformation of the *identities* of the two parts, because the "process of openness to alterity" leads each one to "rethinking what you know and transforming yourself" (O'Brien 2001-2002: 20-25), further complicating the notions of 'selfhood' and 'otherness'.

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[9] Irish writers in general were concerned with the issue of a literature of their own, independent from English literature: the matter was called "Irish Revival" (see Corcoran 1997: 14).

Translation shares with poetry the same aesthetic, ethical and political functions, because it counterbalances the double responsibility of the self towards his group and towards his own freedom, highlighting a seminal political issue: to what extent should an individual be faithful to one's tribe (his/her first source of identity and understood as a 'fixed entity') and to what extent, instead, should one be faithful to one's own personal freedom (which may bring him/her in contact with the 'other', transforming him/her and eventually changing his/her relation to the tribe, and the very notion of 'belonging'). According to Heaney, identity is not an immutable essence, but it must be interpreted and re-defined from time to time through the interaction with the other, for example through translation. It is a *necessary* creative act that complicates the notion of *différence*[10]. This interpretative function of translation highlights the importance of cultural heritage for a group. Culture as both recollection of the past and encounter with the 'other', the different, supplies the community with an image of the present time. Heaney's translations are constantly informed by these views, and they exemplify both the preservation of the past and a new orientation to the 'other' in a linguistic and cultural sense.

The translation of *Beowulf*, therefore, makes sense within this perspective, as both dialogue with and recovery of a distant past that, although apparently 'other', is still felt by the Irish poet as "part of my voice right" (Heaney 1999a: xxiii). Thanks to this encounter *Beowulf* becomes, in Heaney's words, "part of his self", of his cultural heritage, and gives him (and his tribe) the chance to re-think his notion of 'selfhood'.

3. Why Translating *Beowulf*?

Heaney started working on the translation in the mid-1980s. The complexity of the poem and the difficulty of translating from Old English without being an expert in Anglo-

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[10] The definition comes from Derrida's theory of *différance* (O'Brien 2001-2002: 23), which considers "the process of *différance* as governed by a logic of 'this *and* that' as opposed to 'this *or* that'", so that it changes the sense of "opposition" between the 'self' and the 'other'.

Saxon[11] did not stop the Irish poet: his decision to accept has been partly explained in his 'Introduction' (1999a: ix-xxx), but further possible reasons have been suggested by the critics. First of all, coherently with his theories concerning poetry and translation Heaney is, in O'Brien's words (2001-2002: 22), "unwilling to speak only the language of his tribe": he shows to be naturally gifted with an "openness to alterity" which urges him to challenge himself continually with different texts and languages.

His fascination for a work belonging to the English tradition can be seen, in part, as a reaction to the seminal problem of the "Irish/English duality" (McCarthy 2001: 150), that is to say, the double inheritance characterizing the identity of Irish writers and literature. Although, as some scholars pointed out, Heaney might have chosen *Beowulf* for certain thematic aspects. Milfull and Sauer (2003: 91-96) and, in particular, McGowan (2002), stress the poet's 'archaeological' interest in Scandinavia and in the Middle Ages in general: a thread that connects the Old English poem with his previous production. Actually, more than one of his collections is, to a certain extent, inspired by the remote past of the Celt, the Anglo-Saxon and the Norse people. In *Wintering Out* and *North* a mythical past transpires through numerous scattered references to the Northern Neolithic, the Iron and the Heroic Age (with their ritual killings, sacrifices, burials in bogs[12]) and to the Vikings[13]. Moreover, specific medieval legendary figures appear in single poems: for example, "St. Kevin and the Blackbird" (in *The Spirit Level*) is dedicated to the medieval Celtic legend of St. Kevin of Glendalough, while "Hercules and Antaeus" and "Funeral Rites" (both in *North*) feature, respectively, Byrhtnoth, a character from *The Battle of Maldon*, and Gunnar of Hlidarend, from *Njal's*

Saga. The figure of the Northumber Cædmon, a herdsman gifted by God with the craft of poetry, with whom Heaney seems to identify (McGowan 2002: 35), is central to "Whitby-sur-Moyola" (in *The Spirit Level*). Not only was the pastness of *Beowulf*, but also its roots in Scandinavia that was relevant in Heaney's interest in the Anglo-Saxon work. The north is not an abstract geographical world for the poet: he comes from the North of Ireland; the collection of poems that gave him renown – and his most political volume at same time – was titled *North*, and it highlighted the underlying relations between Ireland and the wider north of Europe. According to this intertextual frame of references, then, *Beowulf* can be considered the natural culmination of a path through ancient times and a northern territory that Heaney followed almost from the beginning of his poetic career.

Another theme in *Beowulf* that, according to some critics (Eagleton 1999: 5; H. O'Donoghue 2000; Milfull-Sauer 2003: 128-129), recalls both the poet's personal background and most of his previous works, is that of conflict and violence, in particular sectarian violence. H. O'Donoghue (2000: 234-235) points out that the very structure of *Beowulf* consists of the "interrelationship" of three forms of violence, "among family members, between warring tribes and between men and monsters"; she also highlights a correspondence between the role of violence in the poem and its pervasiveness in Heaney's literary production. Milfull and Sauer (2003: 128-129) read the conflict in *Beowulf* as an instance of the recurrence of sectarian violence in history, with the sense of loss, sadness and mourning that it always entails: this theme is also pervasive in Heaney's work, often inspired by the history of Northern Ireland, and certainly so in his poetry up to *North*, where a mythical frame of ritual sacrifice is used to interpret sectarian killings in Ulster. This topic also marks later collections, such as *Field Work* and *Station Island*, whose sequence poem represents, among other things, an elaboration on the topic of the right to poetic freedom in times of violence.

Heaney explained (1999b: 14-16) how he, Irish born but English-speaking, was able to approach the Old English work in translation. First of all his familiarity with the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which echo some

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[11] These themes are visible in the so-called Bog Poems: "The Tollund Man" (in *Wintering Out*) and "The Grauballe Man", "The Bog Queen", "Punishment", "Strange Fruit", "Kinship" (in *North*).

[12] Vikings appear especially in *North* (see "North" and "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces").

[13] Gerard Manley Hopkins' characteristic metre, the 'sprung rhythm', was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon rhythmic structure.

aspects of Anglo-Saxon poetry[14], softened his impact with Old English, so that he dared to face the complex syntactical structures, the unusual vocabulary and the alliterative meter. Last but not least came his fascination for Ted Hughes' poetry, whose language and world views, in Heaney's words, "rely on the northern deposits, the pagan Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements" (Heaney 1980: 151). But the event that brought him to "the gradual acceptance of the voice of the other" (O'Brien 2001-2002: 32), that is to say that helped him to set up a "communication" with *Beowulf*, was the discovery of an Anglo-Saxon term, *þolian*[15] ('to suffer, endure'), disappeared in Modern English but still surviving in Ulster vernacular in the form *to thole*, that means 'to suffer'. As a consequence of this philological awareness[16], he felt a correspondence between his personal cultural background and Old English that made him see the old poem as (Heaney 1999b: 16) "an inheritance planked in the long ago" ("… to persuade myself that I was born into its language and that its language was born into me took a while" – Heaney 1999a: xxiii).

This discovery not only legitimated his translation ("it opened my right of way"), but also enabled him to find the right "note and pitch for the overall music of the work" (Heaney 1999a: xxvi) in the everyday language of his father's relatives (the 'Scullions', literally 'kitchen boys', 'servants'), whose "solemnity of utterance" and "weighty distinctiveness" seemed to Heaney to suit the "foursquareness" (Heaney 1999a: xxvii) of the voice of the poem[17]. An example of this is the

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[14] Gerard Manley Hopkins' characteristic metre, the 'sprung rhythm', was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon rhythmic structure.

[15] For example, in *Beowulf* l. 832. This term was replaced in Modern English by the Romance loanword "suffer", but it still exists as "to thole" in Northern English and in Scottish dialects. (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 99).

[16] Milfull and Sauer (2003: 99) define these philological deductions as "a sentimental and highly subjective philology".

[17] Milfull and Sauer (2003: 101) stress that the term 'to thole' presently does not belong to the language of the ruling class in Northern Ireland: according to the critics, this fact authorized Heaney to recreate the tone of the Anglo-Saxon poem through the voice of the 'Scullions', common people.

rendering of the first word of *Boewulf*, which seems to "declare the tonal landscape" (Chickering 2002: 171) of the whole translation: the exclamation *Hwæt* (l.1), an interjection traditionally linked to the oral context, pronounced by scops when they had to summon the audience's attention. Heaney's choice "So" distances, for its familiar tone, other English translations (for example Liuzza's "Listen!", Crawford's "Lo!"[18]), and has been considered by some critics too colloquial, too "understated"[19] as a beginning for the poem but, according to Heaney, it is legitimated by the Scullions' typical way of calling for attention[20]. From the choice of the very first word the poet seems thus to provide an Irish background to his translation (Sauer 2004: 345).

The recreation, in *Beowulf*, of the "dignity and pithiness" (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 101) of the Scullions, together with other features such as the insertion of Hiberno-English words (see below section 6.), implied a sort of 'appropriation' of the Anglo-Saxon work. This cultural process is a metaphorical conquest of the Old English context and language and represents, on a theoretical level, Heaney's only way to interact with the poem. He thus creates a form of intertextual, intercultural and intersubjective structure (O'Brien 2004: 281) capable of (to borrow a phrase from Derrida) "accommodating selfhood and alterity in itself": a "creative translation" that enabled the 'self' and the 'other' to "interfuse and transform each other's discourse" (O'Brien 2001-2002: 32). From a political and ethical point of view, this translation provides a new perspective through which the Irish poet can "come to terms" (Heaney 1999a: xxx) with the history of Northern Ireland and its difficult

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[18] Liuzza's *Beowulf* was published in 1999 (see section 1.), Crawford's in 1926.

[19] Howe (2000: 34) thinks that Heaney's translation, in the very first lines, tends to "level the diction" of the poem and to "flatten [its] claim on the audience".

[20] 'So', that in Standard English mostly introduces questions or non-affirmative clauses (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 116), according to Heaney (1999a: xxvii) " … in Hiberno-English Scullionspeak… operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention".

relation with England's oppressive power. As a result, an important transformation takes place, on the linguistic level: as the example of *þolian* shows, the opposition between Irish and English (in the form of Anglo-Saxon), and all the other antitheses this entails (historically, colonised *vs* colonizer) seem to collapse, and the language of the self and that of the other become a language that is "allthroughhafter" (O'Brien 2001-2002: 33), a "further language"[21], through which the poet can enunciate the voice of the other[22]. The tone, the vocabulary and the stylistic devices chosen by Heaney in his translation are the concrete evidence of this transformation, which aims at orienting the cultural context of *Beowulf* from the past to the present in the form of a constructive dialogue with the poet's cultural background and poetics.

4. The Reception of Heaney's Translation

Heaney's *Beowulf* was a striking box-office success, so that, in addition to the *Norton's Anthology* edition (Abrams-Greenblatt 2000 [1962]), it was published in various other editions[23]. The interest in the poet and his new work was so great that excerpts of his *Beowulf* –read by himself– were broadcast on the radio; then, finally and unexpectedly, his translation was even awarded the Whitbread Book of the Year Award for 1999, a prize usually intended for original literary works. However, there was no unanimous acclaim: among the critics the translation produced two opposing reactions. On the one side scholars who are not Old English specialists generally considered the work pleasing and 'readable' (Caie 2001: 69)

and appreciated Heaney's effort to imitate the formal characteristics of Anglo-Saxon verse: his recreation of alliteration and line stresses, the rendering of variation and compounds and of the difficult syntax (Murphy 2000; Stanley 2000), the ability of capturing "the directness and ornateness" of the original (Stanley 2000: 348). On the other side were the Anglo-Saxon philologists (Shippey 1999; Howe 2000; Chickering 2002; Gruber 2002), who underlined the book's limitations, claiming that the poet's translation was, in general, "in its dullest passages, no worse than many others" (Howe 2000: 37). Some critics stated that Heaney's work did not do justice to the stylistic features of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, as the syntax seemed looser because lacking "epigrammatic force" (Howe 2000: 34), the transformation of some subjunctive forms into indicative appeared unsatisfactory[24], the introduction of (over-)alliteration unfaithful to the original (Storms 2002: 177)[25], the rendering of the metre very far from "Beowulfian"[26]. Heaney's vocabulary is, stylistically, very mixed: some expressions, contrasting with the occasional use of archaisms and the recreation of poetic compounds, appeared too colloquial, "with a flattening effect on the diction of the poem" (Chickering 2002: 167)[27].

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[21] Heaney (1997: 10-11, 1999a: 25) talks about a language which is not simply "a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language", and it can be created through the process of translation.

[22] Heaney (1997: 10) had already observed an instance of this when, years before, his Professor John Braiwood explained the origin of the English word 'whisky', which turned out to be a loanword from Gaelic *uisge*, 'water'. On this occasion too, Heaney glimpsed a different linguistic perspective allowing him to surmount the barrier between English and Irish.

[23] Among the other editions there are that by Faber & Faber (Heaney 1999a), and that by D. Donoghue (2002).

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[24] In Old English the subjunctive is used to introduce the possibility that an event may happen in the future, so it represents a grammatical mood completely different from the indicative one. Shippey 1999: 10.

[25] Facing the difficulty of reproducing the Anglo-Saxon metrical and alliterative rules in Modern English, Heaney created new alliterative patterns, and in some lines he just eliminated the alliteration (see Heaney 1999a: xxviii-xxix). Storms (2002: 177) considers his use of the alliteration in his Modern English version 'weak', while Murphy (2000: 213) considers "amazing how much of the alliterative music of the original he is able to keep alive".

[26] Storms (2002: 177) points out that Heaney did not reproduce the different metrical patterns existing in Anglo-Saxon, the clear *caesura* in the middle of each line and, in general, the balance of the line itself.

[27] Milfull and Sauer (2003: 109) point out the use of contracted forms (for example l. 948: "… there'll be nothing you'll want for").

Critical response was thus manifold. It should not be forgotten, though, that criticism on Heaney's work sometimes overlooked an important aspect of the relationship between original and translation: the formal characteristics of Anglo-Saxon poetry created effects that are very difficult to reproduce in Modern English (Howe 2000: 32-33; Chickering 2002: 161-162). The metre depended on a completely different syntax, and alliteration was strictly connected to the metrical structure and aimed at emphasizing the most meaningful words in the line. Variation tends to appear, in Modern English, a senseless repetition (Howe 2000: 35), while in Old English it was used to highlight new characteristics of previously mentioned people or objects. Moreover, there is a gap between the register of the vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon poetry and that of Modern English: words that in Old English were probably familiar to the audience, once translated into Modern English sound archaic or poetically ornate, because the distance between the poem and the readers has become enormous (Howe 2000: 32). All these observations, however, should be considered within the frame of a general question: the way medieval texts should be translated into modern languages. From a philological point of view, in the last decades two antithetical theoretical options emerged: a "source-oriented" type of translation and a "target-oriented" one (Molinari 2001: 10). The first tries to imitate the characteristics and effects produced by the original, even to the detriment of the modern reader; the second is aimed at favouring the approach between original work and modern audience, even if this implies re-elaborating or "modernizing" some of the original features of the content or the form.

Although Heaney does not take part in this theoretical discussion, being a poet and an experienced translator he is well aware of the difficulty of translating, especially of translating poetry. When he declares (1999b: 16) "[t]he proper translation exists halfway between a crib and an 'appropriation', on the one side he means that the translator needs to mediate between the language and form of the original text and those of the translation; on the other side he hints at the necessity of 'taking possession' –to a certain extent– of the original work. This, consistently with Heaney's theories (see above section 2.), appears to be

the only way to approach a text and to start a transformative process that will enable the 'self' (the translator) to get in touch and communicate with the 'other' (the literary work): as a result of this 'dialogue', both entities will change. As a matter of fact, Heaney felt changed after the discovery of *þolian* (see above section 3.), and *Beowulf* itself was changed after the encounter with Heaney. This interaction is evident in Heaney's translation, even though he tried to respect the content and the spirit of the original poem. That is why most of the critics talk about an 'act of appropriation' and define it a poetic recreation of the Old English *Beowulf*, an independent work of art, more than a translation (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 128).

Two characteristics in particular contribute to make Heaney's *Beowulf* look like an 'original work': the first one, which provoked heated scholarly debates, is the presence of Hiberno-English, an unexpected Irish touch to the poem; the second one is represented by non-conventional choices regarding the 'structural' features of the poem, such as running titles and notes.

5. Layout of the Translation[28]

In the first place there are unexpected features in the layout of Heaney's work: he provides details that help follow the story, in order to guide the reader through the text. The first element is the division into paragraphs (often – but not always– coinciding with the 'fitts'[29] of the poem) introduced by titles[30] that summarize the content, which is further summed up in running titles inserted in the margin.[31] Of course these indications, even if concise,

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[28] All the quotations from Heaney's translation (if not otherwise stated) are taken from the Faber & Faber edition (Heaney 1999a).

[29] On the manuscript *Beowulf* is written in *scriptio continua*, but a division in numbered sections (forty-three) also appears, introduced perhaps by the scribe (Milfull-Sauer 2003:103).

[30] For example, the paragraph containing ll. 86-188 is introduced by the title "Heorot is attacked".

[31] For instance, at l. 86 the running title is "Heorot is threatened"; then, at l. 99, "Grendel, a monster descended from 'Cain's clan', begins to prowl", and so on.

suggest a kind of interpretation of the story (Sauer 2004: 337), showing the translator's intention to influence the reader's understanding of the poem[32] . The voice of Heaney is even more evident in the notes added to explain the Hiberno-English terms (see below section 6.).

Another meaningful element is the use of italics in order to underline the two main digressions of the poem: the so-called "Sigemund episode" (ll. 883b-914) and the "Finnsburh episode" (ll. 1070-1159), both sung by a scop. Obviously, italics signal the change of narrator (Sauer 2004: 337). The "Finnsburh episode", considered by Heaney of great importance in the poem, is also marked by another typographic feature: the half-lines are split and printed in separate lines (which still respect, on the page, the position of first and second half-line). This particular layout may be a way to highlight the difference between the metrical length and rhythm in the two digressions and in the rest of the poem, at which Heaney hints in his 'Introduction' (1999a: xiii).

Another 'formal' feature quite characteristic in Heaney's *Beowulf* is the translation of the first lines (ll. 1-20), printed in parallel with the original Anglo-Saxon lines on the left. This may be aimed at suggesting a formal correspondence between original and modern version, and perhaps also at showing the apparent 'impenetrability' of the original text to a modern reader (H. O'Donoghue 2000: 232). Of course, the juxtaposition between the first lines of his work and the corresponding lines in Old English is also part of Heaney's process of 'appropriation' of *Beowulf*.

6. Presence of Hiberno-English

Hiberno-English, or Irish English, is the variety of English commonly in use in Ireland[33]. The presence of words belonging to

this dialect (some of which belong to Heaney's own local dialect, Ulster Hiberno-English[34]) in a translation from Anglo-Saxon is the most striking sign of the poet's 'appropriation' of *Beowulf*. Actually, these terms are limited in number, so that it is possible to list and locate them in the poem: *thole* ("to suffer", l. 15), *bawn* (used to indicate Hrothgar's or Hygelac's "hall", ll. 522, 720, 721, 1304, 1968, 1970), *brehon* (used to indicate "spokesman", l. 1456), *clan* ("tribe", for example in l. 9), *keens* ("laments", l. 1118), *kesh* (to indicate a bridge or a passage, l. 539), *bothie* ("hut", l. 140), *sept* ("branch of a family", l. 1673), *howe* ("barrow", l. 2774), *hirpling* ("limping", l. 975), *graith* ("harness" or "armour", ll. 324, 2988), *session* (in "hall-session", used with the Hiberno-English meaning "gathering", l. 767), *wean* ("young child", l. 2433), *hoked* ("rooted about", l. 3026), *scaresomly* ("terrifyingly", l. 3041).

It has been noticed that all these words are archaic (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 112)[35] and almost all (with the exception of *thole*, from Old English *þolian*, widely commented by Heaney [1999a: xxv-xxvi], *hoke* from Middle English [Dolan 2003: 89] and *graith*, which has a Scandinavian origin) come from Gaelic. This means that they do not even derive from Anglo-Saxon: that is why their use seemed strange and non-conventional. Critics tried to find a reason to the presence of Hiberno-English terms. Of course they form part of

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[32] For example, at l. 874 the title "The tale of Sigemund, the dragon-slayer. Appropriate for Beowulf, who has defeated Grendel" introduces a digression in the poem, the "Sigemund episode", drawing the reader's attention on the occasion on which the tale was sung and on the importance attributed by Heaney to this passage (Milfull-Sauer 2003: 104).

[33] "Hiberno-English" is generally used to indicate the variety of English spoken in Ireland, which can be further divided in many variants corresponding to the different districts. Filppula (1999: 32) and other scholars distinguish between "northern Hiberno-English", spoken in the historical province of Ulster (where Heaney was brought up), and "southern Hiberno-English", spoken in the provinces of Leinster, Connacht and Munster. However, further distinctions could be made, depending on vocabulary, vowel quantity and lexical distribution of phonemes.

[34] The specific words that come from Ulster Hiberno-English are *thole* (l. 15), *graith* (ll. 324, 2988), *hoked* (l. 3026).

[35] Dolan (2003: 78) underlines that the use of obsolete, obsolescent and dialectal words is one of the specific characteristics of Hiberno-English.

Heaney's own native idiolect; however, as McCarthy (2001: 152) pointed out, the choice of this variety of English is a part of a specific project in Heaney's mind: actually the poet seems to "legitimate" the use of Irish English talking about his "entry into further language" and referring to the "Hiberno-English Scullionspeak" (1999: xxv-xxvii).

However, the *aim* of Irish English in *Beowulf* is not easy to explain. Brunetti (2001: 94-95) praised the idea to provide an "entry" to the poem "from the North", instead than through the usual way "from the South" with literary Standard English[36], and appreciated Heaney's effort to "move 'diglossically' through different contemporary Englishes". On the contrary, a great number of scholars criticized the presence of Irish English: Chickering (2002: 173), for example, considered this translation a "disservice to students", to people who face *Beowulf* for the first time, because Hiberno-English words mislead the reader, suggesting the idea that the original poem contained Gaelic terms mixed with the Anglo-Saxon ones, which is not true. Moreover, several scholars –among them Howe (2000: 35-36), Gruber (2002: 73-74) and Chickering (2002: 173)– saw a provocative and polemical intention behind the use of Irish English. Actually these words sound intrusive because, mixed with Standard English, they seem to bear a political connotation which, of course, is not present in the original: they recall the conflict between Ireland and England and English colonization. They represent not only an 'act of appropriation' of *Beowulf* but, in a way, also a "political claim" (Howe 2000: 35), as though they tried to "subvert the Englishness of the poem" (Chickering 2000: 174).

Of course the presence of Hiberno-English involves historical and political issues concerning the Irish and their relationship with England. McCarthy (2001: 153-154) remarks that many of the Irish English words inserted

by Heaney, such as *clan*, *brehon*, *sept*, are specifically linked to Gaelic society[37] and seem to hint at Irish history. Heaney himself (1999a: xxx) explained his use of *bawn* ("fortified dwellings that the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay") and the historical suggestions inspired by this word, declaring that "Putting a bawn into *Beowulf* seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance…". The poet suggests he is aware that, with Hiberno-English, he's challenging the Standard English speakers' understanding of the poem; he admits (1999b: 16) that "at certain points, it is the very translation that has to be translated for the benefit of the worldwide audience of English-speakers to whom the anthology is directed": the result was the insertion of footnotes explaining Irish English and unusual terms[38] However, the question of Hiberno-English can also be seen in a wider perspective, as something more than a political/polemical act. First of all, it is a further evidence of the "linguistic pluralism" (Molino 1993: 184) characterizing Heaney's whole literary production (for example, in his approach to different languages through his translations). From another point of view, then, this variety of English spoken in Ireland is strictly connected to the poet's personal background, with all the implications of his being Irish but English-speaking: Hiberno-English can be considered "the non-standard language of a sub-group" (Heaney 1999b: 16) to which Heaney belongs and which he can not leave aside. This is of great significance in his literary activity. In fact, according to Heaney (1999b: 16) every writer is "poised between his own idiolect and … the language's total availability": this means that his literary work

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[36] Brunetti defines this choice 'an entry from the North', recalling also that Hiberno-English was, in its origin, related to Scottish, because there were extensive Scottish settlements in Ulster (see Filppula 1999: 18). Hiberno-English, then, comes from the Old English spoken in Northumbria – the English of Cædmon.

[37] McCarthy (2001: 153-154) notices that, besides the Hiberno-English terms, there are also English expressions linked to Irish medieval history, such as 'beyond the pale' (which translates *wræc-lastas*, literally 'paths of exile'). 'Pale' identifies the fortifications or dividing lines built by the English in Ireland, in particular around Dublin, out of which the Irish lived.

[38] He comments on the words *graith* (l. 324), *bawn* (l. 523), *session* (l. 767), *brehon* (l. 1457), *wean* (l. 2433), *hoked* (l. 3026), *scaresomly* (l. 3041).

is necessarily influenced by "some subgroup's (the author's) system of shared under standings" but, at the same time, aspires to take part in a multi-culture, an idiom that potentially includes all the language possibilities (what Ted Hughes calls 'lingua franca', and Heaney 'a language allthroughafter' – see section 3.). Heaney's mixing of Hiberno-English and Standard English in *Beowulf* can be seen as an attempt to re-codify language in order to show its "hidden wealth" (1999b: 16) and its infinite possibilities. The translation of an old Anglo-Saxon poem has thus became an opportunity to activate a "recirculation" of these linguistic potentialities.

7. Conclusion

In spite of all the criticism it was subjected to, Heaney's *Beowulf* seems to me completely legitimated by the artistic context in which it takes part: all Heaney's stylistic choices make sense in the light of his theories about translation. Even the presence of Hiberno-English, although slightly misleading for the reader, has a natural feel and seems to be much more than an act of linguistic imperialism: it results from the dialogue between the translator (the 'self') and the poem (the 'other'), from the collapse of their opposition. This interaction changes the two identities: as a matter of fact, on the one hand *Beowulf* lost something of its original Anglo-Saxon identity and gained a foreign element belonging to Heaney's culture; on the other hand the poet, approaching the poem, introduced it in his cultural view, which consequently started developing towards new directions.

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