

Beowulf at Kalamazoo
Essays on Translation and Performance

Edited by Jana K. Schulman and Paul E. Szarmach

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The Intimacy of *Bjólfskviða*

Pétur Knútsson

Of all the movements of textuality, the act of translation is the most intimate, the most naked, the most truthful; for both the source text and the translation must disclose their true identities, each to the other. As such it is also invasive, and so may be shocking to some; but if both parties are prepared to put aside their fear of new territories and alien gestures, then the invasion offers solace, the alien will be the loved one. The act itself is a close cohabitation; the two languages exchange their most precious gifts and transact together a third text, a new movement.

Fidelity is not an essential factor in the act: this must be said at the beginning. Insofar as it is a constraint imposed by one of the texts, supposedly the more ancient, the more authoritative, upon the other, it is an unacceptable violence. When it occurs spontaneously, as an act of love, it may be beautiful and enriching in itself, as a mutual bond between the texts; but it has different meanings for different texts, and so often causes frictions and misunderstandings.

Traditionally, the partners are dissimilar, even verging on the incompatible. An oriental language, analytic, tonal, with simple syllabic structure, shares its secrets with an inflected European language of harsh consonant clusters: such unions produce the most strikingly beautiful offspring, citizens of Goethe's "third epoch of translation."¹ From the beginning, translation theory has addressed movements of this type. The European tradition of translation goes back to the literary migrations between Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, starting with the Homeric translations of Livius Andronicus and Ennius in the third and second centuries BC and, in the same era, the translation of the Septuagint. Franz Rosenzweig, for whom translation plays a central role in the history of human thought, sees these movements as seminal in the history not merely of translation but of global culture: "Whatever unity of spirit and purpose exists on the five continents of this earth today derives from the fusion of these two events, and the consequences

thereof, events originally related only because in them the Greeks played the double role of giving and taking.”²

It may be that our planet has shrunk a little in the eighty years since Rosenzweig wrote, and that the so-called West, in thus naming itself and admitting its subglobal identity, has become a little less sure of the centrality of its cultural heritage; although we can probably still agree with Rosenzweig’s sense of the enormous import of these beginnings. Crucially, however, we must take account of the set of attitudes towards the activity of translation, which were shaped, from the outset, by the chance linguistic configuration of the languages concerned. Greek, Latin, and Hebrew are linguistically very diverse: Greek and Latin represent two quite different branches of Indo-European, while Hebrew is an unrelated Semitic language. Later, Greek thought was channeled into the European Middle Ages through the medium of Arabic, another Semitic language. This linguistic diversity is also true of the main languages of literature and commerce in the world today. Thus it is not surprising that the burden of translation theory as we know it concerns problems of translation across quite imposing linguistic barriers, and the strategies that have been proposed to negotiate solutions.

Paradoxically, this disparity between the languages draws the discussion away from linguistic form: the translator consciously puts aside the shapes and sounds of the source text, searching for an “underlying” content which alone, it is assumed, will feed the translation. A dual discourse, even a double-talk, arises: while on the one hand form and content are recognized—at least since Saussure—as an indissoluble whole, each entirely informing the other, the quest for “fidelity” to the source text applies itself to content alone, pretending to find there a free spirit without body. Etiquette allows polite discussion of the stylistics of the source text, even strategies for the transfer of discrete formal elements such as meter, assonance, alliteration, and the like; but any more barefaced mention of the limbs and features of language are beyond the pale.

We can take Schopenhauer as a representative voice. Resorting (as we all do) to metaphor based on the technology of his time, he suggests that translation between languages “requires that we melt down our thoughts entirely and recast them in a different form.” Nothing of the original dross must remain. “The translation into Latin often requires a breakdown of a sentence into its most refined, elementary components (the pure thought content) from which the sentence is then regenerated in totally different forms.”³

Schopenhauer’s term *regeneration* is disturbingly prophetic: by the middle of the twentieth century the advent of generative grammar provided Nida and Taber with the excuse for a computational model of translation which succeeded at a stroke in erasing linguistic form from the computation.⁴ Translation now consists of “back-transformation” to an underlying linguistic layer where “transfer”

between the languages occurs, and then “forward-transformation” to the surface form of the language of translation. These movements invoke Schopenhauer’s “regeneration” and his terrible unspoken “degeneration,” which is surely what “melting down our thoughts entirely” implies.⁵ Direct intercourse between the form of the source to the form of the translation is illicit, corrupt; the model is an expressly prescriptive protocol designed to insulate the process of translation from all undesirable—we might say carnal—influence of the original text. The shape of the word is taboo, named only in disparaging terms: false friends, slavish imitation, *translatorese*. This devaluation of the physical form of language suggests comparison with various other textual and social tensions: the suppression of the feminine, the noncanonical, the peripheral. “Content” receives the privilege of convention, of unspoken acceptance, while “form” is demoted to the subaltern. And here is the root of the misconception of “fidelity” which I noted earlier: “fidelity” becomes a weighted concept, with different meanings for the different partners.

We can see this at work in one of its slippery synonyms, the vexed concept of the “literal translation.” Etymologically, the word *literal* means “letter-wise”; but literality in translation has little to do with the letters, and in fact not very much with words. The old dichotomy from Cicero and Horace, through Jerome to Alfred and down to Dryden, between word-for-word translation (metaphrase) and sense-by-sense translation (paraphrase) works not in the form or shape of words but in their supposed sememic identity, the slots in the mythical thesaurus of “pure thought.” The concept of the “word” is deprived of form. *Dog*, *chien*, and *Hund* are said to be “literal” translations of each other; *Hund* and *hound* are not—although the literal letters tell us a different story. This recursive discrepancy between the “literal” meaning of “literal” and its indeterminate usage is symptomatic of a wider unease, the difficulty of reconciling the simultaneous arbitrariness and unity of the Saussurean sign, the ineffable link between *signans* and *signatum* in which we see most clearly the fundamental Kantian problem of relation. We are left with a merciless metalinguistic which denies the essential role of form while couched in language made up of forms.

In this essay I shall suggest that while these lapses may pass for the most part unnoticed in “mainstream” translation—translation between dissimilar languages—they become conspicuous in what I shall call “intimate” translation—translation between closely related languages.⁶ This does not necessarily imply that linguistic form is *more active* in intimate than in mainstream translation; rather that the nature of intimate translation lays bear its activity. It is *always* active in translation; and we ignore it at our peril.



Shortly before her death in 1968, the Icelandic poet Halldóra B. Björnsson finished her translation into Icelandic of the Old English *Beowulf*, which she called *Bjólfskviða* [The lay of Bjólfur] (1983):⁷ the name was already in use by Icelandic scholars to refer to the poem. In the preface to his Icelandic translation of the OE poem *Widsith*, published in *Skírnir* in 1936, Stefán Einarsson remarks that it is high time an Icelandic poet attempt a translation of *Beowulf*,⁸ and in an undated letter to Marijane Osborn states his intention to introduce *Beowulf* to Halldóra Björnsson and to suggest that she translate it.⁹ Einarsson's own translation of the first sixty-three lines of the poem are kept in his papers (uncatalogued) in the National Archives, National Library of Iceland.

Born on a small upland farm in Borgarfjörður in the West of Iceland in 1907, Björnsson was the second of eight brothers and sisters, six of whom published collections of poetry.¹⁰ She herself had published two books of poetry in 1949 and 1952, a book of translations of Greenlandic and African poetry in 1959, and several prose works before embarking on *Beowulf*. Two further volumes of poetry and a collection of essays were published posthumously.¹¹ She was well versed in medieval Icelandic literature and some of her published poems were in the Icelandic *ríma* (ballad) tradition which has survived into modern Icelandic from late medieval times.

Halldóra Björnsson's translation of *Beowulf* is an extraordinary work. She had little prior knowledge of Old English, and translated directly from Klaeber's edition of the poem without consulting any translations.¹² However, native competence in Icelandic is probably a better platform from which to learn Old English than any other modern language, since some 90 percent of the Old English poetic vocabulary has close or fairly close Icelandic cognates,¹³ and there are significant syntactic and inflectional similarities between the two languages. But Björnsson rarely relies on sustained levels of cognition, and on my count she uses some 53 percent of the original vocabulary.¹⁴ However, while these similarities are not sufficient for sustained word-for-word translation, they allow many present-day Icelanders, with some practice, to read Old English texts without great difficulty. Björnsson's translation is thus *intimate* not only in the sense of the proximity of the languages, but also in her familiarity with the idiom, an almost palpable domesticity, close to her familiarity with medieval Icelandic. Her ear was tuned to the temper of Old English in a distinct fashion, a decidedly, studiedly Icelandic textuality with its roots in medieval poetic diction.

In this essay I shall offer some examples of this "fidelity," examining aspects of Björnsson's concern with the survival of form in defiance of traditional protocols. These occur as relationships that can be traced between phrases, words, or

parts of words in both texts, the original and the translation. I have elsewhere used the term *quantum*¹⁵ to refer to the entities in these parcels of text which partake in the relationships, and find that they can be roughly grouped into three types: semantic content or *meaning*, syntactic *function*, and phonological/graphological *form*. These three types are largely independent of one another insofar as they may coincide, forming joint relationships in the same word across the texts, but are also likely to form independent and sometimes multiple relationships with “different” words across the texts.

When all types coincide, the Icelandic translation is “literal” in the strictest sense of the word: it is a *transliteration* of the original. Short stretches of such close correspondence occur throughout the translation. In the following example the original Old English text is given above, followed by Björnsson’s translation:

- (1) Ðæt wæs gōd cyning
 (Beowulf, line 11)
 Ðað var góður konungur
 [That was a good king]

For the moment, it will be enough to observe that there is full semantic, syntactic and formal correspondence between the two languages in this passage, given the residue of difference that we would expect: the systematic change of phonemes (“þæt” becomes “það,” “cyning” becomes “konung”) and the slight inflectional dissimilarity of the Icelandic nominative singular ending *-ur*, representing an original form which the Old English had already lost. And yet, in spite of these close correspondences, there is a remarkable undertow of noncorrespondence and incompatibility; we shall ignore it for the present, but return to it later in this discussion.

This level of close correspondence is however rarely sustained in the translation and never for more than a single line at the most. Stretches of exact correspondence are usually restricted to single words or short collocations. In the following, underlined words are quanta with simultaneous semantic, syntactic, and formal correspondences:

- (2a) Hæfdon swurd nacod, þā wit on sund rêon,
 heard on handa; wit unc wið hronfixas
 werian þohton.
 (Beowulf, lines 539–41)
 [[We] had swords naked when we into sea rowed
 hard in hands; we ourselves against hornfish
 thought to defend.]
- (2b) Höfðum sverð nakin, er við á sæ runnum
 í hörðum höndum, því við hvalfiskum

verjast vildum.
 [[We] had swords naked, as we into sea ran
 in hard hands, for against whalefish
 defend ourselves [we] would.]

In this example there are only minor paradigmatic dissimilarities: the OE preposition “wið” governs the acc. pl. “fixas” (a form of *fiscas*) [fishes] while the Icelandic “við” governs the dative “fiskum”; and the OE reflexive “unc” [us two, ourselves] surfaces in Icelandic as the suffix *-st* on the verb “verjast” [defend oneself]. Analysis of lines 499–606 of *Beowulf*, the so-called “Breca Episode,” indicates that 39.4 percent of the translation is made up of these close correspondences.¹⁶

Other cognate pairs in (2) have lost the syntactic aspect of their correspondence. The OE “hard swords in the hand” appears in Icelandic as “swords in hard hands”; only the semantic and the phonological correspondences remain. Note that I said above that the different quanta were *largely* independent of each other: this does not imply that they do not influence one another, but rather that their independent movements are relatively unconstrained. Thus the reterritorialization (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense)¹⁷ of the semantic concept HARD, relocating it from SWORD to HAND, does indeed change the overall “meaning”—an example of the independent movement of the functional correspondence.

This passage also contains examples of partial rather than full (cognate) phonological correspondence. OE “sund” [sound, sea] becomes “sæ” [sea] (both acc. sg.), while OE “hronfisc” [hornfish] becomes “hvalfisk” [whalefish].¹⁸ The correspondence of these forms is in this case informed by the alliteration of their lines but can often occur without it: the verbs “rêon” [rowed] and “runnum” [ran] also retain a partial similarity, although they are not constrained by alliteration. This illustrates an important aspect of the phonological correspondences in Björnsson’s translation: the tendency to retain a measure of phonological form where there are no ready cognate correspondences to hand. This typically appears when a sudden “cognition gap” appears in Icelandic following a stretch of close cognate translation, as in the following:

- (3a) Ful oft gebēotedon bēore druncne
 ofer ealowāge oretmecgas
 (*Beowulf*, lines 480–81)
 [Full oft boasted, drunken with beer,
 over ale-cups, warriors . . .]

Björnsson translates the first line fairly closely, but without any formal correspondences; the second, however, has all the appearance of being a word-for-word cognate rendering:

- (3b) Margir stærðu sig að staupafulli
 yfir ölveigum örvameiðar
 [Many boasted, with full cups,
 over ale-drinks, warriors . . .]

OE “ealowāge” [ale-cup] and Icelandic “ölveig” [drink of ale] are full cognates, and although there is a semantic shift between OE “wāge” [cup] and Icelandic “veig” [[intoxicating] drink] the two compounds are very nearly equivalent. However, “ōretmecg” [warrior] presents Björnsson with problems. This compound, which occurs three times in *Beowulf*, is formed from *ōret* ‘battle’ and *mecg* ‘man’, and she finds no immediate cognates in Icelandic. Her solution is to use the kenning “örva-meid̄ar” which, although it may not occur in this exact form in the medieval Icelandic corpus on which Björnsson models her diction, has many distinct parallels: the element *meid̄ar*, which may be the plural of either *meid̄ur* ‘tree’ (as metaphor for “man”) or *meid̄ir* ‘harm-doer’, combines readily in the sources with terms such as *brynja* ‘coat of mail’, *stál* ‘steel’, *málmhrið* ‘shower of metal (i.e., arrows)’ to make kennings for men or warriors.¹⁹ The formal similarities between the OE and the Icelandic forms are striking: the initial noncognate vowels of *ōret* ‘battle’ and *örva* ‘arrows’ are graphologically similar although phonetically different (*ō* is a back, *ö* a rounded front vowel); the medial OE *-r-* appears in the Icelandic as the cluster *-rv-*; and the remainder does not correspond. The elements *mecgas* and *meid̄ar* have the same onsets, the initial consonant being unchanged and the vowel remaining a medium height front vowel. The medial consonants are dissimilar but the inflectional endings are in fact cognate.

I have suggested the term *quasi-cognition* to describe this use of formal noncognate correspondences where “cognition gaps” occur.²⁰ It is important, however, not to see this as an idiosyncratic tendency of Björnsson’s, for it appears to be a recurrent interlinguistic phenomenon. For example, in line 550 Björnsson translates OE “licsyrc” [body-shirt, coat of mail] with the coinage “lífsserkur,” which has the same meaning. *Syrce* and *serkur* ‘tunic’ are both cognates, but the pair *lic* ‘body’ and *líf* ‘life, belly, body’ display a characteristic lexical shift. OE *lic* can refer to a living body, while in Icelandic the term *lík* has narrowed its meaning to “corpse.” Thus Björnsson cannot coin the term **líkserkur*, which would mean, if anything, a shroud. It seems that Icelandic *líf* ‘life’ has acquired the secondary meaning ‘body, belly’ in order to compensate for the loss of *lík* in the sense ‘living body’;²¹ it would be plausible to suggest that the modern Icelandic collocation *lífs og sálar* ‘(of) body and soul’ looks back to an earlier (unattested) *líks og sálar*, which became unusable as the meaning of *lík* changed. The point I wish to make here is that this is not a peculiarity of this text, but rather the result of an interlingual constraint acting throughout

the potential corpus; in other words the formal correspondence—quasi-cognition—is already present in the most “literal” translation. It seems that semantic shifts along the diachronic axis of language change often seek out phonological channels, sliding as it were along the lines of least resistance, like *lík* and *líf*. Thus with Icelandic and Faeroese, languages at least as close to each other as Standard English and Lallands Scots, where Faroese *hyggja* translates as Icelandic *horfa* ‘to look’, with the same initial consonant; while Faroese *horfa* and Icelandic *hyggja* have other meanings. In the same way these phonological channels often enable interlinguistic loans: many Icelandic neologisms turn out to be formal, noncognate echoes of other languages. We might mention *ímynd* ‘image’ and Latin *imago*, which dates from the sixteenth century, the use of *ás* ‘main rafter, cross-beam’ for *axis*, which dates from the nineteenth century,²² or the current linguistic term *umdæmi*, which corresponds to English *domain*, where *-dæm-* and *dom-* are quite unrelated, and the second vowel of *domain* seems to have colored into the Icelandic form. Between Greek and Latin we may note Cicero’s calque of *etumologia* (literally “true wording”) as *veriloquium*,²³ where the elements *-logia* and *-loquium* are not cognate. In French, one example of many would be *dérive*, with its associations with English *drive*, *drift*. In English, *day* is unrelated to Latin *dies*, *bridegroom* was associated with *groom* only after the old word *goom* ‘man’ ceased to be current, and *bastard* is not a cousin to *base*, in spite of Edmund’s “Why brand they us / With base? with baseness? bastardy?”²⁴ Holyrood House in Edinburgh seems to be named after the Holy Rood, while at the same time it echoes the Gaelic *ruigh choille* ‘base of the hill’. The list is endless: one example has crept into my crib for passage (3) above, where the verb *bēotian* is necessarily rendered by the formally similar but noncognate “boast.”²⁵



Björnsson’s concern with the phonological—the carnal, or even carnivalesque—aspect of her translation not only insists on the inexorable presence of the original text, but also opens up a complex intertextual environment with threads of connection in both the Old English and Old Icelandic corpora. And as I have already noted, this goes far beyond her own reading: it is as if her text moves freely through the established landscapes of Old English poetic formulae without her knowledge. One short example will have to suffice here: *Beowulf* opens with a memory of the ancient glory of the Danish kings, in which the formula “ellen fremedon” (line 3) [performed deeds of valour] occurs. Björnsson’s translation is “örlög drýgðu” [performed/fulfilled [their] fate]. This does not at first sight look very close to the phonological form of the original: admittedly there are affinities in modern Icelandic pronunciation between *ll* and *rl*, but this is hardly distinctive.

If, however, we examine the formulaic sets to which these phrases belong, we find channels of much closer formal correspondence. Björnsson's formula "örlög drýgja" is found in the Icelandic Eddic poem *Völundarkviða* (stanza 3, line 10); exactly the same formula also occurs in Old English as "orleg drēogan" (*Judgment Day I*, line 29). We can trace this formulaic set in Old English as it approaches the form in *Beowulf*:

- (4) orleg drēogan [accomplish deeds of war] (*Judgment Day I*, line 29)
 ellen drēogan [accomplish deeds of valour] (*Riddle 58*, line 1)
 ellen dugan [achieve deeds of valour] (*Andreas*, line 460; *Genesis*, line 1288)
 ellen fremman [execute deeds of valour] (*Beowulf*, line 4)
 (data from Bessinger and Smith, *Concordance*)

Björnsson's association of OE *ellen* with Icelandic *örlög* is thus a correlation that also exists within the OE corpus.

This is one of a number of examples²⁶ of echoic relationships between formulae in the original Old English texts and in Björnsson's translation that take up or extend formulaic echoic relationships in the Old English corpus—a corpus that she did not have access to. There is no mystique here: the two traditions come together not only in Björnsson's translation, but in the common heritage of alliterative Germanic formulae which can be clearly traced in the literature of both languages, and it illustrates the crucial Barthesian understanding that intertextualities are not the works of the authors: they exist by virtue of the readerly movements of the text. I shall return to this point shortly.



My examples so far have all shown form surviving the translation by virtue of the semantic and/or syntactic support it receives. In the following examples I shall examine what happens when form moves freely, completely abandoning its associations with syntax and semantics.

The first requires some narrative background. At line 1537 the hero Beowulf is grappling with Grendel's mother in the cave at the bottom of the hellish lake. Grendel's mother is not described in the poem, and her son is only indirectly described; we have the impression of a large humanoid creature with claws, living on the "misty moors." Important for our appreciation of the translation here is the fact that the monsters are at least in part aquatic creatures, and the action takes place at this point in an unresolved underwater environment: Beowulf takes "a good part of the day" (line 1495) [hwil dæges] to dive through the murky waters to reach their cave. The setting is confused, being both under

water and apparently in fresh air; there is a fire burning in their dwelling-place (line 1516), and yet when Beowulf hews off the dead Grendel's head, blood wells up immediately and colors the surface of the lake (lines 1591–95). Clearly the long account of Beowulf's swimming contest and his bloody underwater struggles with the monsters of the deep (lines 506–83) have been in part a preparation for the narrative of his exploits in the hellish lake. Grendel and his mother are of much the same perilous kin as the sea monsters.

Thus it is that during his struggle with Grendel's mother, Beowulf—identified in this passage as the “man of the war-Geats”—reaches out and grips her by the shoulder:

- (5a) Gefēng þā be eaxle —nalas for fāhðe mearn—
Gūð-Gēata lēod Grendles mōdor

(*Beowulf*, lines 1537–38)

[Gripped then by shoulder—shrank not from the conflict
the War-Geats' man—Grendel's mother]

However, in her translation Björnsson explicitly presents Grendel's mother as nonhuman by referring to her shoulder as “bægsli” [flipper] rather than the expected *öxl* ‘shoulder’:

- (5b) Greip þá í bægsli —glímdi ósmeykur—
Gautaleiðtogi Grendils móður

[Gripped then by the *bægsli*—wrestled undismayed
the Geatish leader—Grendel's mother]

This is a surprising change, since a straightforward cognate translation involving the Icelandic *öxl* for OE *eaxl* would be perfectly in order: “greip þá í öxl” [gripped then by the shoulder] (neither the original “öxl” nor the translation “bægsli” is constrained by the alliteration: the OE alliterates on *f*, with “gefēng . . . fāhðe” and the Icelandic on *g*: “greip . . . glímdi”).

The word “bægsli” is a formation from *bógur* ‘shoulder of a beast’, defined in Cleasby and Vigfússon (under an older form, *bæxl*) as “the shoulder (Lat. *armus*) of a dragon, whale, shark or the like”; in modern Icelandic it may refer to the front limb of aquatic creatures such as seals or penguins. The same root occurs in the verb *bægja frá* ‘push away, ward off’ (presumably as if with the shoulder) and in the word *bægslagangur* ‘commotion’. Björnsson's monster has become a lumbering, fishy creature; perhaps too there are sound-associations with *bæklaður* ‘crippled’, making her malformed or hunchbacked. However, this is not simply a stylistic embellishment: the word “bægsli” turns out to be a crux, a crossroads where two dissimilar flows are signposted: on the one hand a

formal phonological reference to the OE text and on the other a pointer to some remarkable Icelandic counterparts to the *Beowulf* narrative.

The formal correspondence is a striking example of the independence of form. The word “bægsli” is a close formal echo of the Old English text: “be eaxle” [by the shoulder]. Ignoring the word boundary in *be-eaxle*, the vowel undergoes what is essentially an elliptical metathesis (*e-ea* > *æ*), while the medial consonant cluster is in fact identical, since the two spellings *bægsli/bæxli* indicate the same pronunciation (the *g* and *s* of *bægsli* are both unvoiced in Modern Icelandic). The final vowels *-e* and *-i* are (often, although not here) cognates in OE and Icelandic inflections.

It seems that the phonological string has broken free and acquired a completely new significatum in the translation; we are witnessing what Deleuze and Guattari call “no longer an imitation at all, but the capture of a code, the code’s surplus value, an increase in valence, a genuine becoming.”²⁷ But Björnsson is not simply signaling the Old English text in a spirit of paronomasia. In calling up the Old Icelandic word *bæxl* she invokes the atmosphere of the later prose romances in which the Icelandic imagination looks back beyond the relatively realistic phase of the Icelandic family sagas to an earlier, more mythical time, where trolls, dragons, and underwater monsters walk freely. In fact she is making an explicit reference to the fourteenth-century *Gull-Þóris saga*, which as it happens figures prominently in scholarly speculations of the relationships between *Beowulf* and Icelandic sources. The fifth chapter of the saga tells of a sally made by the hero and his comrades into a cave of dragons, which, like the dragon fought by the aged Beowulf, are guardians of treasure. Associations with *Beowulf* seem to cluster at this point: the cave is situated in a deep gorge into which Þórir leads the difficult descent by means of a rope suspended from a tree (cf. Beowulf’s daylong descent into the lake). The entrance to the cave lies behind a mighty waterfall, and much is made in the saga of the drenching spray and the way the earth quakes under the force of the falling waters (cf. the watery parallel of Grendel’s hellish lake). Inside the cave Þórir and his companions conjure up a magic light which causes the dragons to fall asleep, and their way is then lit by the magnificent light that emanates from the treasure and the dragons themselves (cf. the fire burning in Grendel’s cave [line 1516] and the great light, like the light of the sun, which flashes from Beowulf’s sword after he has killed Grendel’s mother [lines 1570–72]). At this point the men see the hilts of swords standing up out of the treasure (Beowulf saves his life by finding a magnificent sword of giants lying in the treasure in Grendel’s cave [lines 1557–62]); they snatch up the swords and, running over the sleeping dragons, plunge them “under their *bæxl*.” A battle ensues, producing flashes of light which are seen through the great falls so that the men who have remained outside fear for their comrades (blood wells up to the surface of the hellish lake and the watching men fear for Beowulf [lines 1591–99]).²⁸

There are further correspondences with Icelandic sources: Beowulf's sword Hrunting (Björnsson's Hrotti), which fails him in the cave (cf. the torches which fail Þórir in the cave) is referred to by the hapax "hæftmēce" [haft-knife] in line 1457, for which Björnsson uses the Icelandic form "heftimækir," which also occurs as a "hapax" in *Grettis saga*. And since we are now deep in the realm of speculation we might allow the phonological similarities between Hrunting and Hyrningur to start us off on another track: Þórir's companion Hyrningur is injured in the foot by contact with poisonous dragon blood; later Þórir heals him by passing his hands, clad in magic gloves, over the foot. One of Beowulf's companions, Hondscio, was killed in the earlier fight with Grendel (lines 2072–82). *Hondscio* means "glove" (hand-shoe): it seems that hands, feet, gloves, and injured or dead retainers come together here in another focus of (readerly) activity.

These correspondences would not have escaped Björnsson; we can safely assume that she knew *Gull-Þóris saga*, which Klaeber mentions, albeit briefly.²⁹ The striking phonological echo on *be eaxle/bægslí* is a symptom of this readerly environment, a breach in the elusive boundary between Björnsson's text and the other texts it invokes. If texts have edges, as Derrida suggests they do,³⁰ they must dissolve on intimate contact. Here we see this contact in the act and observe its fertility: the unconstrained association of form between the two texts signals a lateral coupling to a third corpus in what we can best characterize as a *triangulation*.

This tangential intercourse occurs readily in Björnsson's translation. Here is another example: in the Finn episode (lines 1066–1159) Hildeburh, Hōc's daughter, a Danish princess, is married to the Jutish king Finn, who is responsible for the deaths of her kinsmen. The poem goes on to recount the death of Finn at the hands of Hildeburh's Danish kinsmen: the theme of the passage is the grim ethos of the ancient Germanic feud.

- (6a) Nalles hōlinga Hōces dohtor . . . bemearn
(*Beowulf*, lines 1076–77)
[Not at all without cause did Hōc's daughter bewail]

Björnsson translates:

- (6b) Hló eigi hugur Haka dóttur
[Laughed not the mind of Haki's daughter]
(i.e., There was no mirth in her heart)

The striking echoism of the underlined words "hōlinga" [without cause] (related to "hollowly") and the unrelated Icelandic "hló" [laughed] flags for the Icelandic reader a no less striking intertextuality from *Þrymskviða*, the Old Icelandic Eddic

poem dealing with Thor and Loki's journey to Jötunheim, the land of the giants, to recapture Thor's stolen hammer. When Thor regains his hammer he rejoices at the prospect of revenge for the theft:

- (7) Hló Hlorriða hugr í briósti
 er harðhugaðr hamar um þecpi³¹
 [Hlorriði's [Thor's] mind laughed in his breast
 as, stern of mind, he recognized his hammer]

The essential quality of the phrase "hló hugr" [laughs the mind, i.e., the mind laughs], is one of mirthless rejoicing at the prospect of feudal revenge, a prospect that Hildeburh is denied. Thus the heroic character of the OE litotes "nalles hōlinga" [not at all without cause] in (6) is perfectly captured by Björnsson's "hló eigi hugur" [laughed not the mind]. Projecting the figure into modern English we might say that Hōc's daughter laughed a *hollow* laugh.

Walter Benjamin, too, has noted this tangential contact, but for him it is formless, occurring at too small a point to admit of physical form: "Just as a tangent glancingly, at a single point only, touches the circle, and as the contact and not the point prescribes the law by which it draws its straight line out to infinity, in the same way, glancingly, and only at the infinitely small point of the sense does the translation touch the original, to follow its personal course, set by the law of fidelity, in the freedom of linguistic growth and movement."³²

Much as we may admire this metaphor we cannot deny that it also suggests the suppression of form. Even in the final vision of his essay, where he joins with Jerome³³ in claiming for Scripture the possibility of immediate literal translatability, Benjamin is not thinking of the "literal" literalness, the literality of letters: "Where the text belongs immediately, without mediation of sense, in its literalness, to true universal language, to truth and teaching, it is translatable absolutely. . . . The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the archetype or ideal of all translation."³⁴ And how could he accept linguistic form into this archetype, given the incompatibility of the great languages of Scripture? The austere pairing of Hebrew with Greek or Latin is almost incorporeal in its lack of phonetic grounding: Benjamin's "sense" moves invisibly, without form, breaking free by virtue of its infinite smallness ("the infinitely small point of the sense"). In contrast, in our homely texts of intimate translation, the tangents are solid and readable, consisting of strings of letters, the two texts fusing in a boisterous intercourse. We allow both tangential sense and tangential form their own mutual infidelities, their own independent movements; they embrace and move on. Sometimes, as in (5) and (6), they involve further triangulations, but this is not necessarily the case. Alert readers may have noticed another echo in (5), where "lēod" [man] reappears in

Björnsson's "leiðtogi" [leader, one who leads the way] (*leið* 'way'); this is another example of an independent formal correspondence, but I detect no reference to Icelandic sources (although others may). But the echo is nevertheless not an empty one, even without triangulation: it reaffirms the identity of the Icelandic language, and its intimacy with Old English.



These movements, then, pay no respect to traditional boundaries, those between words, between texts, and between corpora; which like mathematical sets implode on each other and breed Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomic counterflows. Such intertextual flows are thus often perceivable at only certain resolutions, or levels of focus: formal and semantic flows typically appear at levels at which the word is in focus, while wider corpora- or culture-related flows may only appear on the level of discourse, of narrative, of genre, and even display unmistakable traces of extratextuality, effects that originate outside language. I shall return to my first passage to illustrate this point:

(8) (cf. (1))

Ðæt wæs gōd cyning
 Það var góður konungur
 (line 11)
 [That was a good king]

In spite of the formal similarities discussed above, there is an undertow of incompatibility, a semiotic tension between cultures separated by the lapse of a millennium, although their disparities are belied by a similarity of the language. In this case the concept of the GOOD KING has changed radically over the ensuing centuries. In the context of the original story the king was the focus of social consciousness, an ever-present figure in the Hall, united with many of his people by blood relationship; he was the living repository of much of the tribal wisdom and expertise upon which their existence in a hostile environment depended. More tellingly, the sense of individual identity, which has developed in the West since the Renaissance, was unknown in the feudal hall. Yuri Lotman describes the shared identity of the boyar, his family, his serfs, and villagers under Ivan the Terrible, pointing out that the "notion of collective (in this case, clan) personality, and not individual personality, lies behind the idea of the blood feud, according to which the whole clan of the murderer is perceived to be responsible."³⁵ This shared identity of lord and subject is manifest in *Beowulf* and in Anglo-Saxon society as late as *The Battle of Maldon*; it also underlies the family feuds in the Icelandic sagas. The modern European concept of royalty has a very different aspect, and it is arguable that, for

modern Icelanders, it is even more alien: throughout the history of the Icelandic settlement it has been anomalous at least, if not at times downright suspect. Modern Icelanders tend to be proud of their republican status and a shade derisive of the royal pageantry of the English or Scandinavian thrones.

In other words, there is a lack of correspondence at a wavelength—a domain, shall we say, of analysis—far lower than those we have been working with so far. But it registers nevertheless in the text of (8) in that there occurs a *correspondence between two noncorrespondences* at widely different wavelengths: just as “cyning” and “konungur” refer to different concepts—although we have little choice other than to translate them both as “king”—so *c* differs from *k* and *y* differs from *o*. There is a source of noncorrespondence, which resonates at several different wavelengths.

In order to understand more clearly in what way this source originates beyond the horizons of language, we might compare it to another focus of non-compatibility in the same passage, this time fully intralinguistic, residing only in linguistic form. It concerns the pronoun “þæt”/“það” [that] at the beginning of the sentence. This time the mismatch occurs between modern English on the one hand and Old English and Icelandic on the other; between Old English and Icelandic there is full agreement. The difficulty becomes apparent if we examine some of the choices made by modern English translators of *Beowulf*:

- (9) A good king was that. (Morris, 1910–15)
 A noble king was he! (Clark Hall, 1911)
 A good king he! (C. W. Kennedy, 1940)
 He was an excellent king. (Wright, 1956)
 . . . : king worth the name! (Morgan, 1964)
 That was a good king. (Hieatt, 1967)
 He was a noble king! (Crossley-Holland, 1968)
 He was a good king! (Alexander, 1973)
 That was a good king. (Donaldson, in Tusso, 1975)
 That was a great king! (Swanton, 1978)
 Yes—a good king! (Osborn, 1983)
 That was one good king. (Heaney, 1999)

Of these, only Hieatt and Donaldson are content with the “literal” translation “that was a good king”; the other translators are uncomfortable with the antecedent of anaphoric *that*. In modern English *that* is not marked for case or gender and refers unequivocally to the king who figures in the discourse: the copula “was” joins “that” and “a good king” in an equation: “that = a good king.” But in Old English there is a grammatical mismatch between *þæt*, which is neuter, and *cyning*, which is masculine: the masculine form of the neuter *þæt* is *sē*, and the Old English form for the equation would be “*sē wæs gōd cyning*.” In classical Old English poetry we

find that in sentences of the type “that + copula + complement” the form for “that” is sometimes in gender agreement with the complement:

- (10) “sē wæs hēah ond brēd” (*Beowulf*, line 3156)
 [that [= Beowulf’s *blæw* ‘burial mound’, masc.] was high and
 broad]
 “sē wæs eald genēat” (*Battle of Maldon*, line 309)
 [that was an old retainer [masc.]]
 “sēo is eallum cūð eorðbūendum” (*Riddle 29*, line 8)
 [that [= *wundorlicu wiht* ‘wondrous being’, fem.] is known to
 all earth-dwellers]

and at other times has the neuter form without agreement:

- (11) “þæt wæs drihten sylf” (*Andreas*, line 248)
 [that was the lord [masc.] himself]
 “þæt wæs egeslic wyrd” (*Dream of the Rood*, line 74)
 [that was a terrible fate [fem.]]

The difference between these two structures seems to be that the form in agreement (*sē*, *sēo*) refers directly to its antecedent, while the neuter form without agreement has a wider scope, referring to the discourse of which the antecedent is the subject. Thus the use of the neuter “þæt” in (8) widens the scope to apply to the whole panoply of Scyld’s kingship from the time of his miraculous coming as a foundling: (8) really means “this phenomenon was a good king.”

Modern English *that* carries no gender, and so cannot partake in these structures. Many of the translations in (9) attempt to reflect this wider reference, not only by tampering with *that* but also by using a more elaborate adjective than *good*, or rearranging the syntax. Wright responds by substituting “excellent,” while Clark Hall’s “noble” evokes post-feudal royalty. Swanton’s “great” is spoiled by the modern colloquial use of the word. Morgan turns the sentence into an appositive exclamation in order to render the tone and ceremony. Morris, unfettered by the trammels of acceptable English, achieves the weight of affirmative summing-up of the OE sentence with a shift of word order. Osborn manages to achieve the summing-up without unnatural word order and retains a degree of measured but vital ceremony; but this all hangs on the literary register of “yes,” which is perilously close to “yeah, man.” In contrast, playing with registers is not a danger for Heaney, with his express commitment to the speech patterns of Ulster.

In Icelandic, however, the situation is exactly as in Old English: *það* is the neuter form of masculine *sá* and feminine *sú*, and the usage is the same. These questions simply do not arise: Björnsson has the same choice as the OE poet,

between “Sá var góður konungur” and “Það var góður konungur.” Her translation does exactly what the original does.

And so the translation problems concerning “that” in this passage are of an entirely different nature from those concerning the “good king.” “That” is anaphoric and intralinguistic, an example of textual tension quite unconnected to the cultural backgrounds of the languages concerned, segregating analytic modern English on the one hand from the more synthetic Old English and modern Icelandic together on the other. In contrast, “good king” sets up other tensions that are not confined to the structure of the language but rather involve the historical development of kingship, which occurs outside the immediate text. And yet both these modes of activity, the intra- and the extratextual, occupy the same ground, and resonate in the same phonological form.



The development of the concept of kingship beyond the wildest imaginings of the *Beowulf*-poet is of course only one aspect of the momentous changes that occurred between *Beowulf* and Björnsson’s translation. The movement from memory to the manuscript, the advent of writing, was still in progress at the time the *Beowulf* manuscript was written. Franz Rosenzweig identified a later, perhaps even more momentous development, the establishment of Holy Scripture: “So also in the life of a people: a moment comes when writing ceases to be a handmaiden of language and becomes its mistress. This moment comes when a matter encompassing the whole life of a people has been cast into writing.”³⁶ The timescales are very different: *Beowulf* was committed to vellum long before the Bible became a canonical English text, and a good while before Icelandic became a written language. This slippage of contemporaneity, together with a host of other historical changes in the fabric of textuality, sunders our two texts with a far greater mutual incompatibility than we find in the burden of modern translations. In spite of much greater disparities of linguistic structure, today’s texts are usually couched in closely related dialects of global culture.

Another radical divide between Björnsson’s translation and her exemplar comes with the Bakhtinian proliferation of voices. (Readers may already have been reminded of Bakhtin in this essay; for instance in my use of the term *triangulation* to refer to multiple contacts between texts, *thirdness* being one of his most significant preoccupations.) These many voices that echo in the silence of novelistic discourse, in the midst of the noise in which we conduct our lives, sound no less insistently in our reading of Björnsson’s translation, behind closed doors which muffle the accents of the television; in contrast, the chanting of the original poem in a small, noisy hall was surrounded by the silence of the forest. Charles Lock discusses the implications

of the fashion of silent reading that grew up in the West in the eighteenth century, a development which coincides nicely with the new plurality of voices in novelistic discourse: only silent reading can elicit the “unspeakable intonation” of the novel.³⁷ This emancipation of the single word, its diastasis in a plurality of voices, also inevitably ushers into the text a host of gestures from outside, transforming it with multi-textual plurality: the explicit reference to another text, the bent finger pointing over the local horizon, demands the same mute intonation.

The original *Beowulf* manuscript is in many respects the archive of a recital, of a single voice, perhaps chanting, perhaps accompanied by a harp; the flow of narrative, the performer’s occasional asides, the poem’s spectacular digressions, are all strung together in the same monolinear channel, the voice of the Anglo-Saxon scop, the maker and the speaker of the verse. Björnsson’s text on the other hand is not limited in this way. By virtue of its epoch alone, the epoch of silent reading and silent writing, it is already infected with the freedom to shift and multiply its references. Both texts, the original and the translation, are woven of inter-textualities, as all texts are; but in each text the role of these linkages appears to be radically different. The scop’s conventional formulations were elements in the *wordbord*, the treasury of words, the tokens known and understood and expected by the audience. The choice of the formula “ellen fremedon” (line 4) [performed deeds of valour] in *Beowulf* involves no explicit reference to similar formulae in other poems, any more than the choice of the word “æþelingas” [princes] in the same line explicitly invokes the 150-odd occurrences of the word elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus.³⁸ In both cases there is of course a close weft of relationships: just as the audience is granted knowledge of the word “æþelingas” by the texts that they already know, so “ellen fremedon” takes its force from its attendant community of formulae. But these relationships are not foregrounded in the text; they are simply features of the machinery of language. In contrast, Björnsson’s translation “örlög drýgðu” [performed deeds of fate] for “ellen fremedon” is a multifaceted reference, explicitly linking the Old Norse *Völundarkviða* with the Old English *Beowulf* in an articulate, writerly statement.

In the monologic recital of *Beowulf* in the Anglo Saxon hall, the turns of language that point, index-like, to elements outside the text, and anchor the text in the world of its audience, would be heard in the intonation of the scop, the set of his features, the set of her features, the laughter of the audience, the give and take of the performance. Indexicality would be carried by speakable, audible intonation. But only unspeakable intonation will tell us when Björnsson’s finger points beyond her text. The writer cannot speak, for unspeakable intonation can only be heard in the mind of the reader, and in any case much of this pointing is, as we have seen, to texts that Björnsson never knew. In our reading, we have promoted—the ecclesiastical term is *translated*—the original text of *Beowulf* into

our own era, putting it on a par with Björnsson's translation; and in our reading the ecclesiastical and literary meanings come together: all reading is translation. We have Bessinger's *Concordance* to hand; and in our computers we can run searches for formulae in our downloaded Old English texts. What was once a pleasing turn of the scop's diction has become for us a silent finger, the memory of another text we have studied. *Beowulf* suddenly teems with indexicality, which feeds back into the textual environment of Björnsson's translation. Both texts, the original *Beowulf* and Björnsson's *Bjólfskviða*, can only be read in translation: translation into our time.

Notes

See the accompanying CD to listen to the first fifty-two lines of the poem read in Icelandic.

1. Goethe, "Translations," p. 62.
2. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, p. 272.
3. Schopenhauer, "Language and Words," p. 35.
4. Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice*, p. 33.

5. I am perhaps unnecessarily harsh on Nida and Taber. Their underlying level of transfer is not in fact Schopenhauer's spectral "pure thought content," shorn of all linguistic form, but a level of "kernel structures," a term also used by the early Chomsky: primitive but recognizable bundles of language. After toying with the idea of transfer at the Chomskyan level of "deep structure," Nida in fact rejects it: "Theoretically and ideally the transfer should take place on the level of the deep structures [although] there are a number of practical reasons for carrying this out in actual practice on the kernel level" (Nida, "Translation," p. 1049). The "depth" of transfer is however beside my point, which is the model's express prohibition of any transfer at "surface level."

6. The term *intimate* is from Knútsson, "Intimations of the Third Text."

7. The 1983 text is an editorial construct from three typescripts left by Björnsson, read and approved by her brother, the poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson. It is no longer in print, but can be found at <<http://notendur.hi.is/peturk/3T/bjolfskvida.html>> (accessed December 2010).

8. "Ekki efast ég um, að hagröðingar og skáld muni gera hér betur, enda ættu þeir að taka sig til og snara öllum ensku hetjukvæðunum og fyrst og fremst Bjólfskviðu á íslenzku" (Einarsson, "Widsið," p. 184). Stefán Einarsson (1897–1972) was professor of English at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1945–62.

9. Osborn, "Foreign Studies of *Beowulf*," p. 21.

10. Björnsson et al., *Raddir dalsins*.

11. See the bibliography in the present volume for a full list of her works. Björnsson's life and works are summarized in Einarsson et al., "Minning."

12. She would of course have read Einarsson's translation of *Widsið*, and among Einarsson's uncatalogued papers in the National Library of Iceland there are two translations of the nineteen lines of the Old English lyric *Wulf and Eadwacer*, one by Einarsson and one by Björnsson. She told me herself of her lack of prior knowledge of Old English and the fact that she did not consult other translations. Einarsson's copy of Klaeber's *Beowulf* remains in Björnsson's library, now in the possession of her daughter Þóra Björnsson.

13. In the first four sentences (nineteen lines) of *Beowulf*, 79 percent of the word stems have full Icelandic cognates with little or no change in meaning; another 14 percent have close but not full Icelandic cognates with minor shifts of meaning, and only the remaining 7 percent have no clear Icelandic cognates.

14. Knútsson, "Intimations of the Third Text," p. 160.

15. Knútsson, "Intertextual Quanta," p. 115.

16. Knútsson, "Intimations of the Third Text" ("Appendices," pp. 269–90). This figure, based on a crude word count, breaks down into 34.7 percent for full cognate correspondence between the source and the translation, and 4.7 percent for closely cognate but not fully cognate forms. It does not register the forms where cognate correspondence is not supported by syntactic and semantic correspondence, nor the number of close but noncognate echoes discussed below.

17. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 10.

18. Klaeber (Björnsson's source) glosses *bron* as "whale"; for *hornfish* the *OED* gives "The garfish, *Belone vulgaris*," quoting *Andreas*, line 370: "Hornfisc plegode, glad geond garsecg."

19. Egilsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, s.v. "meiðir, meiðr" (p. 399).

20. Knútsson, "Intertextual Quanta," pp. 112–13.

21. Magnússon, *Íslensk Orðsifjabók*, suggests that the meaning "body" for *lif* is a loan-meaning from German.

22. For *ímynd* and *ás* see my "Learned and Popular Etymology," p. 110. The Icelandic word *ás* 'heathen god', unrelated to *ás* 'beam', has similarly been recycled in the sense of "ace" (in cards).

23. Cicero, *Topica*, line 35.

24. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 1, scene 2.

25. The *OED* gives *boast* as having an unknown etymology.

26. I discuss this and other examples in "Intertextual Quanta" and "Intimations of the Third Text" (chap. 3).

27. Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 10; here quoted from Johnston's translation in *On the Line*, p. 19.

28. The relevant text of *Gull-Þóris saga* (also known as *Þorsfirðinga saga*) reads: "Þórir var nú kominn í hellinn og dró þá til sín, hvern er ofan kom. Bergsnös nokkur gekk fram við sjóinn allt fyrir fossinn, og fóru þeir Björn Beruson og Hyrningur þar á fram og þaðan upp undir fossinn. Þeir höfðu þar tjald hjá snösinni, því að eign mátti nær vera fossinum fyrir skjálfta og vatnsfalli og regni. Þeir Þórir tendruðu ljós í hellinum og gengu þar til, er vindi laust á móti þeim, og slokknuðu lá login. Þá hét Þórir á Agnar til liðs, og þegar kom elding mikil frá hellisdyrunum og gengu þá um stund við það ljós, þar til er þeir heyrðu blástur til drekana. En jafnskjótt sem eldingin kom yfir drekana, þá sofna þeir allir. En þá skorti eigi ljós, er lýsti af drekunum og gulli því er þeir lágu á. Þeir sáu, hvar sverð voru, og komu upp hjá þeim meðalkaflarnir. Þeir Þórir þrifu þá skjótt til sverðanna, og síðan hlupu þeir yfir drekana og lögðu undir bægsli þeim, og svo til hjartans" (pp. 292–93).

29. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., p. xvii. The validity of these correspondences is hotly debated. A recent contribution by Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence*, gives a good overview of scholarly accounts of points of similarity between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*, showing how speculation only too easily becomes accepted wisdom. However, in dealing with each point of contention in isolation, Fjalldal fails to account for the combined weight of evidence; he also confines himself to *Grettis saga*, which

is only one of a number of apparent *Beowulf* analogues in medieval Icelandic literature. More tellingly, he is talking solely in terms of historical textuality and the search for specific routes of textual migration, his point being that only what he calls “genetic” relationships bear scrutiny. He is therefore not concerned with lateral thematic movement, and even less with the readerly cross-connections, which I am invoking.

30. “If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge” (Derrida, “Living On,” p. 83).

31. *Þrymskviða*, line 30 (p. 113).

32. Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” p. 94.

33. Jerome, *Epistola 57, Ad Pammachium*.

34. Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” p. 96.

35. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 139.

36. Buber and Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, p. 51.

37. Lock, “Double Voicing.”

38. Figures from Bessinger, *Concordance*.

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