TRANSLATIONS FROM THE BONE-HOUSE:
On the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and John Hollander

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"The limits of my language are the limits of my world."
—Wittgenstein

Writers are strangers. It's commonplace, nowadays, to say that a writer is always an outsider, even inside his or her own life. Language — even a first language — remains foreign; language and reality seem received. Or something like that. Some of this rhetoric has undoubtedly come down to us from Modernism, from Eliot and Pound — fragmentation instead of fluency, and so on. In fact, of the many standards that Eliot and Pound and their ilk set for their poetic descendants, the importance of translation in their poetics may be the most essential. For Pound (think of his very loose translations from the Chinese and Japanese) and Eliot (think of the multiple voices transcribed into “The Waste Land”) the practice and performance of translation were the practice and performance of this self-alienation, this self-strangeness that is an essential condition of being for a modern writer.

But translators are martyrs, we think. Translators are selfless, sacrificing their time and talent in the name of another writer’s work. Translation (especially of poetry) is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, and usually profitless. Translation is seen as a service to a community of readers, or to a deserving body of work. But when it comes to poetry, the translator is most often a poet in his or her own right. What is the blowback of these translations, we might ask? Is translation as essential an aspect of contemporary poetics as it seemed to Modernist poetics? Many poets who began publishing in the shadow of High Modernism (Hughes, Bishop, Ashbery, Merwin, Heaney, Hollander) have also become accomplished translators. Two of these authors — Seamus Heaney and John Hollander — passed away in August, which left many bereft, and many baffled as to how to begin to consider their achievements.

Why not start with their translations? That is, after all, where they were most fully a stranger in the language and in themselves — and therefore, one could say, most fully a writer in the contemporary vein.
Seamus Heaney’s last words before his death were a phrase in Latin, sent as a text message to his wife: *Noli timere*, “Be not afraid.” His son Michael made this public; he delivered one of several eulogies for the poet and Nobel laureate at the funeral services. The phrase caused a small kerfuffle on the internet as several news outlets mistranscribed, mis-Tweeted, and misreported it (the mistake was a relatively small one: *Nolle* vs. *Noli*, infinitive vs. imperative). If the poet’s last lines served to breathe a moment’s life back into a “dead” language, perhaps we should not be entirely surprised — that is, in a sense, what he’d been doing for the past 47 years, since the appearance of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, in 1966. Often called the most “popular” poet since Robert Frost, the gruff grace of “Famous Seamus” Heaney has long seemed a throwback to a prior age. More to the point, his genius at translating Old English into our contemporary idiom has revitalized the study of the Anglo Saxon saga *Beowulf* — one of the oldest surviving texts in the language.

For poets of Heaney’s generation, in the shadow of Modernism and in an era entranced with the rising reality and rhetoric of globalization and cosmopolitanism, translation was part and parcel, an aspect of every poet’s job. Think of W.S. Merwin, for example, whose translations from Spanish and French are credited in part with importing an increased awareness of the possibilities of surrealism into his own poetry, but also into the milieu of American poetry in general. Unlike Merwin, who long ago retreated to his dreamy Hawaii, Heaney was a vocal and ever-present ambassador to and from his poetic realms: Ireland and the English-speaking world, both past and present. There are other translator-poets whose contributions have been more prolific, but Heaney’s relationship to translation was a special one, and especially generous — in fact, it was ideal.

In 1984 Heaney completed what was at that point his largest-scale project as a translator: a version of the medieval Irish poem *Buile Suibhne*. Heaney’s “Sweeney Astray” adapted and re-presented the tale of the metamorphosed Irish king in segments of both poetry and prose, rendering with particular care the flights of lyric fancy in Sweeney’s descriptions of his beloved home (an area of Ireland not far from the counties where Heaney himself grew up):

The blackthorn is a jaggy creel  
stippled with dark sloes;  
green watercress in thatch on wells  
where the drinking blackbird goes…

Low-set clumps of apple trees  
drum down fruit when shaken;  
scarlet berries clot like blood  
on mountain rowan.
On display in these translated lines are all of Heaney's own most distinctive features as a poet, and precisely what makes him such an excellent match for Old English poetry. Sharp, heavily stressed and spondaic phrases ("jaggy creel," "low-set clumps") populate the line, as strange strings of monosyllabic words jut off the page ("drum down fruit," "clot like blood"). The texture of a Seamus Heaney poem always feels physical, like "earth took of earth" (to quote another small but famous Anglo-Saxon poem). This is achieved partly through the clarity of his images, but mostly by the stressed clumps and clots of worded-sounds that make up his language:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

That, of course, is the beginning of "Digging," Heaney's most famous poem, which opens Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996. The poet's personal word-hoard has almost always seemed dragged from the Germanic, craggy reaches of the vast geography of modern English. Consider several lines from the close of another early poem, "Death of a Naturalist," for example:

Then one hot day when fields were rank
With cowdung in the grass the angry frogs
Invaded the flax-dam; I ducked through hedges
To a course croaking that I had not heard
Before. The air was thick with a bass chorus.
Right down the dam gross-bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.

Every other word, it seems, is an onomatopoeia. The lines, strung one monosyllable after another, become extraordinarily filthy: "frogs were cocked / On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped: The slap and plop." And I can't imagine anything more dazzlingly nasty than the plague of toads, "Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting." Of course this endless mirroring of form and content (earthly words for rustic subjects) can also be exhausting: Susan Sontag once said that Heaney seemed to live in his own theme park, a Disney Dublin. (Then again, to be insulted by Susan Sontag is surely one of the greatest compliments of the late 20th century.)

Around the same time that his translation of Sweeney Astray appeared (the mid-eighties), M.H. Abrams and the editors of the Norton Anthology of English Literature approached Heaney about producing a fresh version of the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf. It was undoubtedly clear that Heaney's own poetic language (jagged, rough-hewn, and heavily stressed) would make him the ideal translator for the alliterative verse of Old English, though politics might have seemed to make the fit an awkward one. "Sprung from an Irish nationalist background," as
Heaney eventually wrote of himself in the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, “and educated at a Northern Irish Catholic school, I had learned the Irish language and lived within a cultural and ideological frame that regarded it as the language that I should by rights have been speaking but which I had been robbed of.”

Though *Beowulf* is not a foundational text for England as a nation — the fact that England and its people are never even mentioned in the poem is all too easily forgotten (this is a saga about the medieval Danes and Geats, a tribe that hailed from what would now be southern Sweden) — the story is nevertheless a foundational text for the English *language*. It would seem impossible, especially for an Irishman, to separate that language from colonialism in general, or at least from linguistic colonialism. Or to forget that, as Heaney wrote in an early poem titled “Traditions,” (not included in his *Selected*), “Our guttural muse / was bullled long ago / by the alliterative tradition.”

A passage from Heaney’s Nobel lecture poignantly illustrates his artistic and moral predicaments as an Irish artist writing himself into the tradition of English literature, and specifically during the years of the Troubles:

> The child in the bedroom, listening simultaneously to the domestic idiom of his Irish home and the official idioms of the British broadcaster while picking up from behind both the signals of some other distress, that child was already being schooled for the complexities of his adult predicament, a future where he would have to adjudicate among promptings variously ethical, aesthetical, moral, political, metrical, sceptical, cultural, topical, typical, post-colonial and, taken all together, simply impossible.

Of course, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Heaney did accept the challenge of translating *Beowulf*. He had a special talent for appearing to be in the thick of a complex political issue while sidestepping it at the same time — what one might simply call being tasteful, though it was more than that. Heaney’s writing was always autobiographical without being confessional, political without being didactic, and it was frequently his historical perspective that created this effect. As in the “Bog” poems, he used a broad range of historical reference to expand, not shape, his reader’s understanding. This may well be the essential (and often achieved) ambition of his art: “to rhyme the contemporary with the archaic,” as he said in his *Paris Review* interview.

No wonder, then, that he set himself to work on the saga, though it soon proved to be a daunting task. Despite noticing his own inherent sense for an alliterative line (“[T]he poet who had first formed my ear was Gerard Manley Hopkins,” as Heaney notes in his introduction to *Beowulf*; he called Hopkins his “first love” in the *Paris Review* interview) the task was difficult on a day-to-day basis. Old English is a far, far cry from Modern English, and although he set himself a goal of completing 20 lines per day, Heaney soon felt he was “trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer,” and let the project lapse.

What revived the translation, Heaney has told us, was that he struck upon a voice that seemed to him to match the poem’s sense of self, an imagined voice that allowed his Irish identity back inside the Anglo-Saxon epic. Translation is to a greater or lesser degree always interpretation, and although the Norton editors assigned an Old English scholar as a sort of babysitter, to ensure a certain amount of accuracy, Heaney nevertheless found himself motivated by this unconventional approach, and the “erotics of composition,” as he called it, became possible again. In 2000, Heaney spoke to NPR about this:
This poem is written down, but it is also clearly a poem that was spoken out. And it is spoken in a very dignified, formal way. And I got the notion that the best voice I could hear it in was the voice of an old countryman who was a cousin of my father's who was not, as they say, educated, but he spoke with great dignity and formality. And I thought if I could write the translation in such a way that this man — Peter Scullion was his name — could speak it, then I would get it right. That's, in fact, how I started it.

These “big-voiced scullions,” as he calls them in the introduction, gave the tone and verve to Heaney's lines. This is apparent from the get-go. Consider the very first lines of the poem:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in gear-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnōn,
hū þā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

"Hwæt" is an Anglo-Saxon interjection meaning something like “Why, what! Ah!” Many of the (at least) 65 previous translators have used literary archaism that must have seemed befitting for the introduction of an important epic poem: Lo, harken! Behold! Attend! And on and on. Now consider Heaney's version of those first lines:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those prince's heroic campaigns.

Choosing “So” was motivated directly by that grand-rascal of an Irish uncle-figure that Heaney had imagined for himself. As he explains: “[I]n Hiberno-English Scullion speak, the particle ‘so’ [...] operates as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention.” That flat and accurate “so” called the reader's attention immediately to this forthright and plain spoken take on the complex rhythms of the Anglo-Saxon epic. Heaney makes countless of these sorts of confident compromises, where previous translators were bogged down in trying to recreate each and every poetic effect.

These poetic patterns can be extraordinarily complex. In the original, each line of Anglo-Saxon poetry is made up of two halves, split by a caesura. Each line's two halves contain two dominant stresses and are linked by their alliteration. (In the first half, both of the dominant stresses alliterate; in the second half, only the first of the two dominant stresses alliterates.) The last dominant stress in each line never alliterates, and from one line to the next, the alliterating sound never (or rarely) repeats. “So it sounds ... sort of like this, / All these arduous ... alliterations criss-crossing the lines,” in which so and sounds link to sort, and all and arduous link to alliteration. This can be a beautiful but cumbersome sound pattern, but Heaney doesn't bawk, forging lines that are both accurate, direct, and more subtle than one might anticipate — therefore more attuned to our contemporary standards. Consider the poem's keening finish, with the hero's funeral pyre:
The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf,
stacked and decked it until it stood foursquare,
hung with helmets, heavy war-shields
and shining armor, just as he had ordered.
Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it,
mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.

Heaney renders the Anglo-Saxon trademarks of repeated verbal phases ("stacked and decked") and of course the alliteration ("hung with helmets, heavy") but he manages this all without compromising the poem's sense or the sense of a direct address. I was lucky enough to hear Heaney recite these lines in the fall of 2012, at a reading established as a memorial for a man who had been killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With his characteristic grace, Heaney rededicated these lines to the memory of that man. The poem seemed then to speak directly to the grief of his friends and family:

On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

As James Shapiro pointed out in The New York Times when the translation first appeared, it also seems impossible to read these lines without thinking of the violence of the Troubles. And now, of course, we cannot read these lines without thinking of Famous Seamus himself.

It's been said that every generation needs its own translation of the classic texts, but it seems the achievement of Heaney's Beowulf speaks to many, and may last longer than a generation — for an era, at least; however long that may be. In these lines, and his own, Heaney's accomplishment is "to rhyme the contemporary with the archaic." It is for this most of all that we will continue to read and remember his work. As one final example, consider the poem "Bone Dreams," from his 1975 collection North, in which Heaney references that classic Old English kenning for the body that appears in the description of Beowulf's funeral: bān-būs, or bone-house:
In the coffered
riches of grammar
and declensions
I found bān-bās,
its fire, benches,
wattle and rafter,
where the soul
fluttered a while
in the roofspace.

The poet John Hollander also passed away this August, and was also known for both his poems and for his acts of poetic embassy. Hollander's virtuosic introduction to the art, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide To English Verse* (1981), is probably his most well-known work, and may well prove his most enduring, if only for its enshrinement in the syllabi of introductory poetry and creative writing classes. *Rhyme's Reason* is an act of inter-English translation in its own right, not only explaining what rhyme and meter are but reanimating just how some of the arcane-seeming aspects of versification work:

Iambic five-beat lines are labeled *blank* *Verse* (with sometimes a foot or two reversed,
Or one more syllable—"feminine ending").
Blank verse can be extremely flexible:
It ticks and tocks the time with even feet
(Or sometimes, cleverly, can end limping).

Clever, indeed. Hollander's *Types of Shape* (1969) had taken a similar tack, embodying visual forms with his typography while demonstrating how (some) "concrete" poetry works, and harkening back to British emblematic poetry of the long 16th century (think of George Herbert's typographic experimentation in "Easter Wings"). His career as an ambassador between different stylistic and historical realms of English poetry was exemplified in his lauded work as an editor. As the steward of the Library of Congress's *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, for example, Hollander was widely praised for including popular ballads and folk songs and a section on contemporaneous translations of American Indian poetry alongside the more canonical fare — Whitman, Emerson, Dickinson, Melville, Longfellow and so forth. In the world of poetry, Hollander did it all. As J.D. McClatchy was quoted in his obituary in *The New York Times*: "It is said of a man like John Hollander that when he dies it is like the burning of the library at Alexandria."

In fact, Hollander's career as an esteemed editor and literary scholar and critic has overshadowed his work as a poet. You might be hard pressed these days to find young poets or readers who are excited about Hollander's poetry, beyond the quads of Yale, where he taught
for many years—and perhaps understandably so. I for one find the vast majority of Hollander's verse entirely insufferable. His intellectual rigor and range and his playful wit are all quite praiseworthy, but it hasn't always made for the most engaging verse:

After issues raised first by the dawn
Had been considered for a while and (darn
It!) lost their appeal, some agent of the dark
Stabbed at the afternoon as if with a dirk:
The disappearance of the sun's red disk
In a sea of golden dust brought us to dusk.

That's the opening stanza of "Getting From Here to There," from Hollander's 1999 collection Figurehead and Other Poems. One can hardly blame a reader for being dissuaded by the combination of Hollander's essayistic tone ("issues raised") with his exhaustive wordplay (dawn/darn, dark/dirk, disk/dust/dusk). The lines flaunt their own artifice and flout the faith we supposedly place in words, showcasing the tottering between meanings that is possible in the slip of just one letter to another. And yet, of lines like these, one could say (and here Hollander seems to be Heaney's exact opposite) that they are interesting, but never that they are important.

The rhetorical case of late Auden (but not his moral questioning) and the high abstraction of Wallace Stevens (but not his aesthetic questing) are everywhere in Hollander. Consider the final lines of the 169th poem in his long, sonnet-esque sequence Powers of Thirteen, from 1983 (each poem is 13 lines; 13 raised to the second power is 169). The speaker and addressee are first compared to light and sound "disputing / Claims for primacy at the morning of the world," then to "object and image,"

Moving toward the mirror's surface each through the magic
Space that the other's world must needs transform in order
To comprehend; when our voices have surrounded one
Another, each like some penumbra of resonance.
So that you have the last word now I give it to you.

The lines, though certainly beautiful, would seem to need to outpace their own literary echoes (Stevens, first of all) and archaisms ("must needs") and their own cleverness in order to also be powerful. Hollander won the Bollingen Prize for Powers of Thirteen; let it never be said that he was not an extremely accomplished and well-respected poet. Whether he is one who will continue to be read is another question. In The New York Times Book Review, the poet Paul Zwieg once called Hollander "a virtuoso without a subject matter," and reading Hollander's work today, this seems quite accurate. Hollander's book-length poem Reflections on Espionage: The Question of Cupcake, published in 1974, may be the most egregious example. Just because you could write a book-length poem written as pseudo-diary entries of a secret agent codenamed Cupcake is no reason to actually do it.
What should we read of Hollander’s work then? Perhaps we might return to our original question: What did he translate?

In Hollander’s case there is a very small body of translation, but its impact on his own work is, I would argue, immense. In 1969, at the request of Irving Howe, Hollander translated several poems from Yiddish for anthology titled A Treasure of Yiddish Poetry. Although the poems are relatively minor, Hollander later told an interviewer that his engagement with Yiddish poetry had a way of “unlocking” something about his own poetry:

In the course of that work, I discovered the poet Moishe-Leib Halpern, and my translations of him were lucky. More than that, they seemed to help me develop a certain tonal mode in my own poems. That is, what I had to do to translate certain poems of Halpern’s, I’ve now retained as a vocal element.

Yiddish has a relatively short history as a literary language; as most of its poetry has been written since the 19th century, certain aspects are foreshortened: one becomes more aware of the presence of vernacular phrases and colloquialisms, for example. In any case, those poems from the Yiddish were the final translations Hollander completed for many years. But what they unlocked for him may have been essential.

Hollander’s most important and best work, in my estimation, is the long poem Spectral Emanations, published in 1978. The poem is bizarre, freakishly complex, and funny, and powerful. Subtitled “A Poem in Seven Branches in Lieu of a Lamp,” and dedicated to the memory of his father, Hollander’s sequence “kindl[es] the light of sound” and recreates a corollary to the golden lamp of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, which was supposedly carried to Rome in the Triumph of Titus, and rumored to have been lost off the Milvian bridge when Constantine converted to Christianity. Hollander’s poem is written in seven sections of poetry and prose, which correspond to the seven branches of the menorah, the seven colors of the rainbow, and seven celestial bodies. There are even — a note tells us — factorial seven divided by 10, or 504, lines in the seven sections of 72 lines each. But here, Hollander’s virtuosic wit takes on mystic weight — perhaps because the lines, from the first section (Red) and on, sing and lurch with crucial music:

Now at this red moment  
He forgets his city  
As his tongue is made to  
Fuck the roof of his mouth,  
His skull cradling little  
Ones of brain is dashed now  
Against rock, and the pulp  
Of him slips to the ground.
Vernacular, even vulgar diction ("Fuck the roof") and erratic comma splices are interrupted by powerful enjambments that either skewer axiomatic phrases ("little / Ones") or manufacture archaic-seeming inversions ("Of him slips"). Despite its intricate superstructures, the poem reads like a fugue state, its varying line-lengths shot-through with sections of Old Testament-infused prose (reminiscent of the playful and vaguely Early Modern prose stanzas of Robert Duncan): "At first our heroes stood for us, then among us, when we stood for ourselves; now they do not even represent our sorrows. The Paul Bunyan balloon was deflated and put away when Thanksgiving had passed [...] and the Book of the People of the Book is in tatters." And yet, one realizes, the poem proceeds and recedes in careful concert: The lines are syllabic, starting with six ("Red") and proceeding to eight ("Orange"), 10 ("Yellow"), 12 ("Green"), then down again by twos, back to six ("Violet").

So the poem is highly formal, highly wrought, and yet vulgar, funny, and playful. But nowhere else in Hollander does his playfulness take on such sinister implications. Frequently among the voices and images filtering and flickering through the poem is a register in which the lamp, conflated with poetic insight, is an anonymous weapon. Consider prose segments from the "Blue" section:

The laser-eye is itself dangerous, for like a speaking, destroying word of light it can nullify your subjects as if they were chaoses, but leave you not alone, merely a hologram of yourself and yet accompanied still.

The control panel is located deep inside, although an unreliable terminal is available at the top, from which there is a synoptic but distorted view of the power units.

[...]

Wait for the blue light to shine.

Remember that they are all despots.

If you get it to work properly, it will put an end to them, your predecessors.

Those lines seem simultaneously to beam themselves in from the realm of science-fiction, like cold instructions for a poetic weapon of mass destruction — and yet, at the same time, to frighteningly and obliquely reference the historical acts of vast destruction perpetrated against Jewish people before and since the sacking of the Second Temple. Whether it was the colloquial tone that Hollander retained from his translations of Yiddish, or simply a willingness to engage with a subject matter that could shade his wit, Hollander has here channeled a vein of poetic waters through a complicated set of sluices such that the refracted fragments of color and language do indeed "kindle the light of sound."

Harold Bloom wrote in a long essay on Spectral Emanations that he "[did] not hesitate to proclaim [it] as one of the central achievements of [Hollander's] generation, matching the long poems of Merrill, Ashbery, and Ammons." And I would agree: the poem, with its strictures and pyrotechnics, is, and will be, inspired.
A writer's death can be like a critical sunspot, blinding us to their flaws, or it can bring to light a more rational assessment of the poet's place in the narrative we call a canon. Heaney, for example, certainly merits the outpouring of superlatives that followed his death, but he also represents everything that Language poetry (which has become "the mainstream," if poetry can have a mainstream) has increasingly defined itself against for the past 40 years: the sovereign speaker, narrative, the Bard who gives his readings in that unmistakable Poet Voice, formalism. Heaney was out of fashion at the time of his death, but in the wake of his death, we're inclined to think he is timeless. But will he be? Hollander poses an opposite question: he never became the calcified, monolithic "Famous Seamus" that Heaney became, but in his restless formal virtuosity and curiosity he hasn't left audiences with a salient subject matter or a famous work, either.

Considering the poet at the limits of his or her language — considering the poet's translations — may be one way to ground our critical assessment not simply in the shifting sands of contemporary reputation or stylistic fads. In the case of Heaney, I believe his Beowulf will prove to be an important contribution to the canon of English literature, but also an important "rhyme" between his own poetry and that canon; I believe we will be reading Heaney, both his Old English and his own work, for many, many years. In the case of Hollander, his translations may have "unlocked" the best of his work — Spectral Emanations — but whether that work will gain the audience it deserves remains to be seen.  
