

Joseph McGowan



Heaney, Cædmon, *Beowulf*

In his 1995 Nobel lecture Seamus Heaney describes the “intimate, physical, creaturely existence” growing up on Mossbawn, a “traditional thatched farmstead” in County Derry, Northern Ireland.¹ Nursed in this world “ahistorical, pre-sexual, in suspension between the archaic and the modern” (*CP* 4), Heaney “credits poetry” in threefold manner: for making possible “this space walk” by which the rural student becomes world-famous poet; for “encouraging [him]self (and whoever else might be listening) to ‘walk on air against your better judgement’”; and “ultimately because poetry can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet’s being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago” (*CP* 9–10) when a train rumbled behind their three-room farmhouse. Heaney proceeds to limn the theme with “Exposure” from his 1975 collection *North*, grounding the address in the immediate context in which his poetry is so often seen within and against which, no doubt, the timing of his award of the Nobel Prize in Literature was measured—the continuing “Troubles” of the post-Partition North of Ireland. He counterbalances Archibald’s MacLeish’s injunction that “A poem should be equal to: / Not true” with a

deeper need . . . when we want the poem to be not only pleurably right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world but a returning of the world itself. We want the surprise to be transitive, like the impatient thump which unexpectedly restores the picture to the television set, or the electric shock which sets the fibrillating heart back to its proper rhythm. (*CP* 20)

This attempt to be true to life, to be equal to it in some way is alluded to in the opening lines of Heaney’s “St Kevin and the Blackbird”:

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

1. Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p. 4; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*CP* 4).

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.²

The story of St. Kevin, “a story out of Ireland” (*CP* 33), brings Heaney back to the medieval, specifically the Irish Age of Saints of the tripartite lives of Patrick and Columcille, and the blackbird episode of Kevin of Glendalough recorded in Book II, chapter 61 of Gerald of Wales’ *Topographia Hiberniae*:

Once upon a time the same Saint Kevin fleeing during Lent, as was his wont, the society of men, was by himself in a small cabin which warded off from him only the sun and the rain. He was giving his attention to contemplation and was reading and praying. According to his custom he put his hand, in raising it to heaven, out through the window, when, behold, a blackbird happened to settle on it, and using it as a nest, laid its eggs there. The saint was moved with such pity and was so patient with it that he neither closed nor withdrew his hand, but held it out in a suitable position without tiring until the young were completely hatched out. In perpetual remembrance of this wonderful happening, all the representations of Saint Kevin throughout Ireland have a blackbird in the outstretched hand.³

Though this is the Irish tradition as filtered through the often hostile and untrusting voice of a bishop in the employ of invading Anglo-Normans of Henry II’s twelfth-century reign, Heaney sees in it the “marvellous” he particularly tried to credit in *Seeing Things*: “I began a few years ago to try to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as for the murderous” (*CP* 31). And he sees himself as perhaps kin of the monk of Glendalough:

... for years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prieu-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. (CP 30)

This modern monk bent to his desk in County Wicklow, constrained by his rule, sought to battle back “the inclination . . . not only to not credit human nature with much constructive potential but not to credit anything too positive in the work of art” (*CP* 30). Heaney closes his address and his argument for “crediting poetry” with W.B. Yeats’s “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and its

2. Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p. 24; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*SL* 24).

3. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O’Meara (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 78–79.

injunction: “Come build in the empty house of the stare.”⁴ Yeats’s honey-bees of this poem serve also this notion of “building” or—perhaps better for the purposes of this essay—of “making,” and, with the cover illustration of bees entering hives from the Ashmole Bestiary (from an early thirteenth-century manuscript in Oxford’s Bodleian Library), brings us back to the medieval: scriptorium, vellum, bestiary. The “creaturely” existence of Heaney’s youth and the medieval world, the monastic community which, like Heaney’s farmhouse, was insulated “ahistorical, pre-sexual” (and therefore perennially medieval), and which too would hear the sound of the horse one wall over (*CP* 4).

The link between Heaney’s contemporary task of crediting the “makers” and this medieval world quarried by his poetry to get it “pleasurably right” and “compellingly wise” shows up perhaps most clearly with an illumination of his continued allusive relationship to one of the most compelling characters from the Venerable Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*: *Cædmon*, the cow-herd turned poet. Heaney’s “*Cædmon*” poems will be turned to, as will *North*, Heaney’s collection most fully indebted to the early medieval world of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celt. With that collection Heaney, writing amid the dangerous waters of Ireland after Bloody Sunday, most fully felt and conjured the medieval world of Northern literature—from Gunnar of Hlidarend from *Njal’s Saga* calling for revenge from within his burial cairn at one end, to the beckoning of the Anglo-Saxon scop’s word-ward at the other. And then there is Heaney’s new translation of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, which will be looked to as the natural culmination of a trajectory Heaney had been set on seemingly his whole poetic career—certainly since *North*, after which the meeting of poet-translator and Old English poem seemed not simply happy or fortuitous, but fated.

Part I of *North* is set in classical wrapping, “Antaeus” as fly-leaf at one end and “Hercules and Antaeus” as end-paper. “Antaeus” sets the earth-bound motif: “I cannot be weaned / Off the earth’s long contour, her river-veins. / Down here is my cave / Girdered with root and rock / I am cradled in the dark that wombed me. . . .”⁵ Antaeus, son of Poseidon and Gaia, gaining strength in some later versions of his tale from contact with the earth his mother, is set against the “sky-born and royal”; the poem’s end sets in place his end: “But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth, / My elevation, my fall.” “Hercules and Antaeus” completes

4. Perhaps Heaney also takes leave of Yeats who, seventy years earlier, talked before the Swedish Academy of the Irish national theater in the context of a new nation scarred by civil war and an island carved up by partition.

5. Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 12; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*N* 12).

the mythic ring composition as it must, Antaeus—in the catalogue style of classical and medieval verse—ceding “to elegists”: “the cradling dark, / the river-veins, the secret gullies / of his strength, / the hatching grounds of cave and souterrain” (*N* 52–53). “The sky-born” vanquishes the “mould-hugger” who, “weaned at last,” is joined to an *ex tempore* triumvirate of the defeated: “Balor will die / and Byrhtnoth and Sitting Bull” (*N* 53). Balor of the Evil Eye, the Fomorian giant whose eye could fell men with a look, opens the series, culled from Heaney’s native mythology. As recounted in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of the Takings of Ireland*),⁶ Balor must die at the hands of one of his own flesh and blood—so apposite in a collection of “dead relations” and “neighbourly murders”—to set in motion the subsequent history of Ireland: the coming of the Tuatha Dé Danaan (toward whose *sidhe* [*sithe*], or megalithic tombs and tumuli, of the Boyne valley the dragonlike cortège of “Funeral Rites” plods), the Milesians and Gaels. Sitting Bull closes the trio as a mould-hugger native dispossessed and filtered through a modern-day, Saturday matinee cowboys-and-Indians lens.

The second member of this series is of particular concern here: Byrhtnoth, the hoary-headed war-band leader of the Old English elegiac Chronicle poem “The Battle of Maldon”; Byrhtnoth the West Saxon holding the ford at the Pant against the Viking foe, clinging to the old code, a code old even in 991. All three are bound up in Heaney’s coda: “pap for the dispossessed.” If Sitting Bull is emblematic of a thread Heaney has often taken up—a people rooted in the land uprooted—and if Balor hearkens back to Ireland’s own cycles of taking, dispossession, repossession, then Byrhtnoth bears the standard of *North*’s quarrying of the older Northern European literatures. Whether a leader guilty of mistaken generalship, or a graying warrior puffed with *ofermod*, or the victim of Danish guile, Byrhtnoth stands at the threshold: the last of his kind, the exemplar of the old warrior honor code, the scop’s pap for the ageing Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

Before Byrhtnoth, and Antaeus, *North* opens with the dedicatory “Sunlight”: a counterpoint of light and warmth, the poet recalling the Aunt Mary “who baked bread through [his] childhood.”⁷ The “water honeyed / in the slung bucket,” “floury apron,” and “the scone rising / to the tick of two clocks” all contribute to the rural farmhouse world familiar from many of Heaney’s memory poems of Mossbawn and the Northern Irish countryside. What follows is slanting grays, a Northern Neolithic, Iron and Heroic Age panorama of “neolithic wheat,” “growth rings,” “balanced stones” (“Belderg,” “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces”). That “Sunlight” should precede such bog-burial gloom and ritual

6. *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. R.A.S. Macalister, 5 vols. (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1938–56), I: 35, 39, 41, 44.

7. Seamus Heaney, *Recording*, Harvard Poetry Room, 1987.

killing has its Northern rightness; in *Njal's Saga*, mined for the Gunnar of "Funeral Rites," the Njalssons kill their foster-brother Hoskuld Hvitaness-Priest in his homefield in broad daylight,⁸ the eldest Njalsson Skarp-Hedin striking the first blow, as Hoskuld falls to his knees intoning "May God help me and forgive you all."⁹

At the heart of Part I of *North* are the northwestern corridors of the Celt, Anglo-Saxon, and Viking, the unlettered world whose forebears' deeds were recorded by Diodorus Siculus ("Strange Fruit") or Tacitus ("Kinship"), the lettered world of the *Lebor Gabála* ("Hercules and Antaeus") and *Táin Bó Cuailgne* (the "Gap of the North" from "Funeral Rites"), the annals and chronicles (Irish and Anglo-Saxon, respectively), and sagas (Gunnar of *Njal's Saga*). The reading list for this northern landscape is a familiar one for the comparative philologist and medievalist: P.V. Glob's *The Bog People* for the bog-body poems, Tacitus' *Germania*, Diodorus Siculus, *Beowulf*, Kemp Malone's *Hamlet*, the Norse sagas of *Íslenzk Fornrit* (and the Magnusson and Pálsson Penguin translations), Caesar's *Gallia* (and the bronze statuary set of "The Dying Gaul").

Indeed, at the center of Part I, in the midst of the bog bodies, the atavistic analogizing on the Gap of the North (whether defended by CúChulainn or putative successors such as the IRA and others), the boneyards, trial pieces of interlace on bone fragment, is a meditation on the Old English word *banhus*, an exercise in "scopery":

Come back past
philology and kennings,
re-enter memory
where the bone's lair

is a love nest
in the grass. (N 29)

The injunction "Come back" takes the reader even further, past Old English verse, back to the chalk Hercules, to earthwork and vallum. The "language of touch" in "Bone Dreams" is activated by the bit of bone, the "flint-find, nugget / of chalk," the Sutton Hoo-like "ship-burial" pitched "at England" in "the sling of mind." It finds "in the tongue's / old dungeons" the *banhus*; to get there one

8. *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Hid Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954). *Íslenzk Fornrit* XII, cap CX: "Veðr var gott ok sól upp komin" ("The sun was up, and it was a fine morning"), p. 232. Translation taken from *Njal Saga*, tr. Magnus Magnussen and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 232.

9. *Brennu Njáls Saga*, cap. CXI: "Guó hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yór!" The chapter ends tersely noting: "Sjá einn hlutr var svá, at Njáli fell svá near, at hann mátti aldri ókkökvandi um tala" ("This was the only thing [the death of his foster-son Hoskuld] that grieved Njal so much that he could never speak of it unmoved"), p. 233.

must first “push back / through dictions, / Elizabethan canopies / Norman devices, the erotic mayflowers / of Provence / and the ivied latins / of churchmen // to the scop’s / twang, the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line” (N 28). This is a philological and literary historical journey: past Early Modern and Middle English, past conceit, drama, courtly eroticism, and the early medievalist’s Anglo- and Hiberno-Latin—past Bede’s ivy to *Cædmon*’s “twang” and “iron flash.” Heaney finds the bone-house “In the coffered / riches of grammar / and declensions,” and joins to Bede’s *Cædmon* story perhaps that other much celebrated passage from the *Ecclesiastical History*:

its fire, benches
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while

in the roofspace. (N 28)

Bede’s sparrow, decoded, flutters a while in the “guest-hall of Eden,” perhaps less a *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo* (Alcuin’s “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?”) moment than one of the marvellous.¹⁰ “Bone Dreams” probes further than *Cædmon*, to the poet’s ossification, his consummation (parallel to *Amergin’s Song*) of a relationship with the land. The “ground possessed and repossessed” in “Ocean’s Love to Ireland” brings us back to Antaeus, child of Poseidon and Gaia.

If at *North’s* center lies a retreat to this mythic past, then surrounding the core of the bone-housed wordhoard are the bog-body poems (“Come to the Bower,” “Bog Queen,” “The Grauballe Man,” “Punishment,” “Strange Fruit,” “Kinship”) in tow, and the “older strains of Norse” (“Belderg”) afore. “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces” touches, tastes, and smells the world of the Vikings of Dublin. It is a portrait of the town-building, sea-raiding, feuding Hiberno-Norse initiated, once again, by the physical artifact: a bit of bone with an interlace trial. The interlace art style, found in both Celtic and Norse design, serves as a template for the poem: calligraphy “like an eel swallowed / in a basket of eels”; “foliage, bestiaries, / interlacings elaborate / as the netted routes / of ancestry and trade” (N 22). Added to the pattern is the “swimming nostril” transformed into the dragonship’s prow “sniffing the Liffey” in the city of hurdles

10. Borrowed from Alvin A. Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). From Alcuin’s epistle to Speratus; cf. Ernst Dümmler, *Epistolae Karolini Aevi II* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Epistolae* 4.

(Baile Átha Cliath). The sense of smell is attuned to what is carried on the wind: “Come fly with me, / Come sniff the wind / with the expertise / of the Vikings” (N 23). Atavistic forebears of contemporary Northerners, Heaney’s Vikings are “neighbourly, scoretaking / killers, hagggers / and hagglers, gombeen-men, / hoarders of grudges and gain.” The very sound of the language and its etymological rightness cements the bond: Viking raider, sectarian killer; Viking trader, the *gaimbin* of the rural exploiter. The approximate accentual Anglo-Saxon meter and alliteration (“hagggers,” “hagglers,” “hoarders”; “gombeen,” “grudges,” “gain”) serve to make the lines virtual trial pieces of revived old Northern verse. And the next quatrain unveils the “blood eagle,” hallmark of tales of Viking cruelty:

With a butcher’s aplomb
they spread out your lungs
and make you warm wings
for your shoulders. (N 24)

The water-borne raiders, the Lochlannaigh of medieval Ireland, are appealed to in the crowning atavistic quatrain:

Old fathers, be with us.
Old cunning assessors
of feuds and sites
for ambush or town. (N 24)

We have to this point a veritable word-ward of the elder poetry: a prow “swanning it up to the ford,” “antler combs, bone pins, coins, weights, scale-pans,” “long-sword,” “keel,” “clinker-built hull,” “ribs of hurdle,” “longship,” “a worm of thought”—think Old English *wyrm*, “dragon, serpent”: dragon images pervade *North*—feuds. Like the journey toward the *banhus*, “Viking Dublin” takes us from the writing child’s protruding tongue to the poet’s dragon-like tongue whose “words lick around / cobbled quays,” employing a blunt physicality of bone, tongue, nostril, skull.

“North,” Heaney’s titular poem, had set out the general landscape in which to locate “Viking Dublin” with “the longship’s swimming tongue.” The “secular / powers of the Atlantic thundering” beckon from “the hammered shod of a bay” (N 20)—an image brought to its natural northern culmination with “Thor’s hammer.” *Mjöllnir*. The “unmagical / invitations of Iceland” and “pathetic colonies / of Greenland”—that is, the land of Gunnar and Njal, the landfall of Leif—are balanced by “those fabulous raiders,” the lords of Orkney and Viking Dublin. The *ubi sunt* motif of medieval elegy is reversed here by the congeries of “those”: “those fabulous raiders,” “those lying in Orkney and Dublin,” “those in the solid / belly of stone ships,” “those hacked and glinting /

in the gravel of thawed streams”—they “were ocean-deafened voices / warning me,” voices “lifted again,” atavism and prophecy conjoined, “in violence and epiphany” (*N* 19). The call of their voices—so important to the atavistic link made in *North* and elsewhere by Heaney between the violence of Ireland’s Celtic Iron Age and medieval Hiberno-Norse and post-Partition sectarian killers—operates on at least another level still: the form and diction (“althing” and “word-hoard”) of the verse itself. The “longship’s swimming tongue” speaks, like the unraveling word-hoard (as in the *Kalevala*) or Gunnar from his cairn, of the sweep of Mjöllnir, Thor’s hammer:

to geography and trade,
thick-witted coupling and revenges,

the hatreds and behind-backs
of the althing, lies and women,
exhaustions nominated peace,
memory incubating the spilled blood.

This is the feud landscape of *Njal’s Saga*; perhaps no finer précis of the movements of what is often known as the most literary of the Icelandic sagas could be concocted than “memory incubating the spilled blood.” The machinations and alliance-building of Althing season, the “hatreds and behind-backs” that can seal the fate of a Gunnar or Hoskuld, and the “thick-witted couplings and revenges” that draw parties to the Thingvellir: all of these inhabit the Iceland of Heaney’s *North* and Northern Ireland. The “exhaustions nominated peace” bespeak the end of *Njal’s Saga*; a feud that has run its bloody course to exhaustion when Kari Solmundarsson eliminates his fill of “The Burners” (*Njal’s Saga*, chs. 158–159). The tongue also said:

‘Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.’ (*N* 20)

Heaney’s Old English verse style returns to the vatic home of the scop: “word-
hoard.” We are in the dragon’s lair, the brain in coiled repose.

One more poem from Part I rounds out the word-
hoard motif—“Funeral Rites,” opening with its initiatory rite, one of obsequies for the dead in Catholic hues: “I shouldered a kind of manhood / stepping in to lift the coffins / of dead relations” (*N* 15). The familiar Irish Catholic ritual of the laying out and the wake or viewing, mingling images of alive-ness, with the dead in “quilted satin cribs,” candles “veined” with melted wax, with images of death: “their dough-white hands / shackled in rosary beads.” Heaney then invokes another northern

people, the Inuit with their traditional tellers of tales, as mediated by a Rasmus Rink or Knud Rasmussen:

Dear soapstone masks,
kissing their igloo brows
had to suffice

before the nails were sunk
and the black glacier
of each funeral
pushed away. (N 16)

“Funeral Rites” turns to the “neighbourly murder” (recalling the “dead relations”), the “cortège, winding past / each blinded home” headed for the megalithic. The “tomb / corbelled, turfed and chambered” of “Belderg” is joined by the Boyne valley passage tombs and the “black purring family cars” as they “nose into line” (N 16). The dragon-like procession enters its lair completing the cycle (from megalithic to sectarian) and preparing for the last of the “rites,” which returns to the Old Norse. The movement “past Strang and Carling fjords” sounds out a movement in time once more. Imagined, with “the cud of memory / allayed for once, arbitration / of the feud placated,” are those lying in their cairns unavenged, like Gunnar of Hlidarend was for a time:

who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon. (N 17–18)

This is *Njal's Saga*, chapters 75–78. Gunnar Hamundarson under the penalty of outlawry had been set to leave his farm at Hlidarend. His horse stumbles and he catches sight of fields and homestead: “‘How lovely the slopes are,’ he said, ‘more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before, golden cornfields and new-mown hay. I am going back home, and I will not go away.’”¹¹ Out-

11. Magnusson and Pálsson, p. 166; Sveinsson, cap. 75: “Fögr er Hliðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnzki, bleikir akrar ok slégin tún, ok mun ek riða heim aprt ok fara hvergi” (p. 182).

numbered and trapped in his home, Gunnar is killed by his enemies. He is buried sitting upright in the mound, his mother Rannveig reserving his halberd for the man who should avenge him. Chanting from inside the mound is soon heard; the eldest of the Njalssons, Skarp-Hedin, visits Gunnar's son Hogni and the two witness by moonlight the apparition with which Heaney closes "Funeral Rites." For Skarp and Hogni the portent is clear: vengeance must follow. And in the sagas, as elsewhere Heaney seems to be suggesting, it does. Gunnar's halberd sings when his son Hogni takes it down.¹²

In an otherwise pithy and illuminating chapter "Archaeologies: *North*" in *Seamus Heaney*, Helen Vendler curiously writes: "Though he imagines a possible cessation to conflict in the image of Gunnar Hamundarson, from *Njal's Saga*, who, though dead by violence, was deliberately left unavenged, Heaney's perennial hope remains unfulfilled in the moment of the writing of the poem."¹³ The point seems quite otherwise. Memory incubates blood here, a vengeful grandmother (Rannveig) goads a hesitant grandson (Hogni), and spectacular revenge follows. The reference is loaded rather, brimful with potential violence: violence one knows—in the sagas and too the Northern Ireland at the time of Heaney's writing *North*—will come. Heaney might be compared rather with the titular character of the saga, Njal Thorgeirsson, who with his conversion to Christianity, knowing he cannot serve two ways, refuses to fight off his attackers and is burned to death in his homestead, his wife Bergthora on his side, their grandson Thord between them (ch. 129).

This Iceland of Heaney's "northern poems" is not the Saga-land of Auden and MacNiece in their *Letters from Iceland*.⁴ Though for them not a land entirely without menace, it is a shadow of its former self, a little island appropriated for mythic purposes as Ireland had been earlier in the century. An extract from a letter to R. H. S. Crossman notes: "I have just been staying in the Njal country. I gather the Nazis look on that sort of life as the cradle of all the virtues."¹⁴ Though the land of Njal is invoked—"See Gunnar killed / At Hlitharendi white across the river, / And Flosi waiting on Three Corner Ridge, . . ."—this is a very different experience, particularly as mediated by the pair of bemused, irreverent, and cocky young poets.¹⁵ This is not to say that Heaney's Iceland, particularly as evoked in *North*, is naively literal and wooden. It is spectacularly brought to life, with a fidelity to the spirit of the saga writers who would know only too well the threats and behind-backs of his native North of Ireland. Perhaps it is

12. *Brenu Njals Saga*: cap. 79, Magnussen and Pállson, p. 174.

13. Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 53.

14. W. H. Auden, Louis MacNiece, *Letters from Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), p. 94.

15. *Letters from Iceland*, p. 92.

Heaney's task rather to sing, like *Cædmon*, *hwæt wugu*, "what he will or can," of his North, his universe and its origin.

Which brings us back to *Cædmon* and Heaney, in particular Heaney's identification with the Anglo-Saxon scop and his engagement of a scop's duties with his new translation of *Beowulf*. Writing of "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," Thomas Foster had noted that "The repeated references to handwriting, to calligraphy, all focus attention on the act of writing, upon 'the craft's mystery' as he calls it."¹⁶ That reference to "the craft's mystery" is crucial, particularly in light of the *Cædmon* story. If, on the one hand, "In this playful handling of self-referentiality, Heaney shows himself to be very much a postmodernist writer,"¹⁷ on the other Heaney's adoption of scop's guise is all the more telling, perhaps not so much antimodernist as alluding to a guild of wordsmiths who have worked for generations, named and unnamed—among the poems collected for the audio tapes of his Harvard Poetry Room readings is an impassioned recitation of William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makers."¹⁸ When Heaney pushes back "through dictions, / Elizabethan canopies, / Norman devices" to "the scop's / twang, the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line" he may indeed be, as Thomas Foster has argued, arriving back to English literature's "earliest level," where "the English poetic tradition remains distant, other, simultaneously familiar and alien."¹⁹ This would ring true for the Heaney of the "Open Letter." But there may also be an identification operant on a more personal level, an identification with a fellow poet of ages ago, one who, like Heaney, knew the sounds and smells of livestock, grew up in the north (*Cædmon* in Northumbria, Heaney in Northern Ireland), and upon whom was thrust—some sense of wonderment at fame can be felt in the opening pages of his 1995 Nobel address—the mantle of poet. Bede recorded the *Cædmon* story in his eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History*:

Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when [*Cædmon*] saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home.

On one such occasion when he did so, he left the place of feasting and went to the cattle byre, as it was his turn to take charge of them that night. In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep, whereupon he dreamt that someone

16. Thomas Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p. 64.

17. Foster, p. 64.

18. Seamus Heaney, *Recording*, Harvard Poetry Room, 1987.

19. Foster, p. 68.

stood by him, saluted him, and called him by name: ‘Cædmon,’ he said, ‘sing me something.’ Cædmon answered, ‘I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here because I could not sing.’ Once again the speaker said, ‘Nevertheless you must sing to me.’ ‘What must I sing?’ said Cædmon. ‘Sing,’ he said, ‘about the beginning of created things.’²⁰

Cædmon is of course of a different era and milieu and the gift of poetry is a gift of God. After receiving the call to song in the byre, Cædmon is brought the next day first before the *villicus* (the “overseer” or “reeve”), then the abbess Hild and other community members: *Visumque est omnibus, caelestem ei a Domino concessam esse gratiam* (“and it seemed clear to all of them that the Lord had granted him heavenly grace”).²¹ Heaney began his Nobel address *Crediting Poetry* with an allusion to a childhood memory of Stockholm as one name among many on the dial of the wireless, to which he listened closely, having clambered up onto the arm of the sofa—“Stockholm” never a place he could conceive of visiting in person. He brings the address to its close with that memory still in mind:

Which is a way of saying that I have never quite climbed down from the arm of that sofa. I may have grown more attentive to the news and more alive to the world history and world sorrow behind it. But the thing uttered by the speaker I strain towards is still not quite the story of what is going on; it is more reflexive than that, because as a poet I am in fact straining towards a strain, in the sense that the effort is to repose in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds. (CP 51)

The boy on the arm of the sofa straining toward the sound of the wireless is still present in the man addressing the Swedish Academy and Nobel Foundation in Stockholm. Like Cædmon, Heaney grew up in a creaturely existence; like Cædmon, too, the gift of poetry brought him before an audience and enrolled him in that guild of scopos and makars stretching from Cædmon forward. Heaney’s new translation of *Beowulf* may be seen in the context of the Cædmon story: as the culmination of a long association with a northern hoard of images, kennings, archaisms; as a quitting of an accumulated indebtedness to predecessors, including the *Beowulf* poet; as the shoring up of an ancient structure that it might suffice for a new generation of readers. It may also serve as a kind of exchange between poets, Cædmon and Heaney. Heaney’s closest self-identification with Cædmon comes in “Whitby-sur-Moyola” in *The Spirit Level*:

20. Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Judith McClure, Robert Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), IV, 24: 215 [or IV: 24, p. 215; or IV: xxiv, p. 215].

21. *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, IV, 24: 216 [or IV: 24, p. 216; or IV: xxiv, p. 216].

Caedmon too I was lucky to have known,
Back *in situ* there with his full bucket
And armfuls of clean straw, the perfect yardman,
Unabsorbed in what he had to do
But doing it perfectly, and watching you.
He had worked his angel stint. He was hard as nails
And all that time he'd been poeting with the harp
His real gift was the big ignorant roar
He could still let out of him, just bogging in
As if the sacred subjects were a herd
That had broken out and needed rounding up.
I never saw him once with his hands joined
Unless it was a case of eyes to heaven
And the quick sniff and test of fingertips
After he'd passed them through a sick beast's water.
Oh, Caedmon was the real thing all right. (SL 50)

One could certainly allege the hubristic in any such self-identifications, but the choice of the seventh-century *Cædmon*, the “yardman” touched by God with the gift of poetry, seems rather a modest one, and one no doubt much more personally meaningful for Heaney. His picture of *Cædmon* in “Whitby-sur-Moyola”—the Northumbrian house of Abbess Hild and the Venerable Bede transplanted to Heaney’s rural Derry—focuses less on a “poeting,” vatic or Orpheus-like *Cædmon*,²² and more on the countryman bent to his work “with his full bucket,” “armfuls of clean straw,” “hard as nails,” “bogging in.” Heaney’s *Cædmon* is, of course, a poet, but one comfortable with and knowing of the scent of animal urine: “Caedmon was the real thing all right.” Translating *Beowulf* came as a commission for the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Heaney’s inclusion in an earlier edition of which occasioned his “Open Letter.” The meeting this time is more fortuitous, if no less fraught with unresolved contradictions and ironies. Heaney’s introduction to the translation, which seems to have been the primary source for some of the heat generated by the new version, encounters these head-on.

No small irony, then, that the leading poet in English whose new translation of *Beowulf* will serve for some time into the future as the introduction to the Old English epic for millions of readers—including the *Norton Anthology*’s prime market: students in survey of British Literature courses—should come from Northern Ireland, of Irish Catholic background and so, in the shorthand of place and identity on the ground in the North, of a nationalist community. But the choice of Heaney as translator was rather more natural than political, if

22. Compare Heaney’s reference to the Orpheus relief in Sparta in his Nobel address (CP 35–36).

choice can be said to have been involved with a poet already working the *Cædmonian* vein. A poet raised and versed in a “creaturely existence” is all the more at home in a poem of that world, with its meres, moors, and monsters. And for Heaney the nameless *Beowulf*-poet is a fellow worker of *Cædmon*’s—with emphasis on “worker”—calling to mind Terry Eagleton’s pithy assertion that “Heaney . . . conceives of art as labour, craft and production, precariously analogous to manual labour, a traffic with Nature mediated by verbal rather than material instruments.”²³ It may be said, nonetheless, that for *Cædmon* and Heaney the labor is still physical and material. Heaney appreciates, to paraphrase his own critical parlance, the *Beowulf*-poet’s “in-placeness,” and the

kind of foursquareness about the utterance, a feeling of living inside a constantly indicative mood, in the presence of an understanding that assumes you share an awareness of the perilous nature of life and are yet capable of seeing it steadily and, when necessary, sternly. There is an undeluded quality about the *Beowulf* poet’s sense of the world that gives his lines immense emotional credibility and allows him to make general observations about life that are far too grounded in experience and reticence to be called ‘moralizing.’²⁴

The very language of Heaney’s introduction cements the bond between scop and modern poet. Heaney found the work of translating the poem “scriptorium-slow” (*B* xxii). The elderly Geatish woman—*geomeowle* in Klaeber’s text and glossary²⁵—who sings at *Beowulf*’s funeral issues forth a keen” (*B* xxi), which glosses the “wild litany” in the translation itself (*B* 98). Grendel emerges “from marshes beyond the pale” (*B* xiv)—what better way to underscore the Anglo-Irish dynamic underlying the translation. In explaining the delays involved in producing the translation, Heaney acknowledges that he had been headed in the direction of *Cædmon* and the *Beowulf* poet all along:

Even so, I had an instinct that it should not be let go. An understanding I had worked out for myself concerning my own linguistic and literary origins made me reluctant to abandon the task. I had noticed, for example, that without any conscious intent on my part certain lines in the first poem in my first book conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics. These lines were made up of two balancing halves, each half containing two stressed syllables—“The spade sinks into gravelly ground: / My father digging. I look down . . .”—and in the case of the second line there was alliteration linking ‘digging’ and ‘down’ across

23. Terry Eagleton, review of *Field Work*, in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Michael Allen (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 102.

24. *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. xxviii; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*B* xxviii).

25. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Friedrich Klaeber (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1950), line 3150b, p. 118.

the caesura. Part of me, in other words, had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start

Joseph Brodsky once said that poets' biographies are present in the sounds they make and I suppose all I am saying is that I consider *Beowulf* to be part of my voice-right. (B xxiii)

In considering *Beowulf* part of his "voice-right," Heaney makes an intriguing addition to the question of language in his own poetry and prose and one certainly given much play by his critics: in Conor Cruise O'Brien's phrase a "love-hate of the English language."²⁶ To paraphrase a sentiment expressed by Heaney, his appreciation of the craft of *Cædmon* and the *Beowulf* poet is one of letting the poet be poet for a change—something certain readers of Heaney's poems, especially critics of *North*, have not often been willing to grant him.²⁷

The toughest critics of Heaney's *Beowulf* have been the Old English specialists. The fullest of the appraisals to date has been Nicholas Howe's "Scullionspeak."²⁸ Howe, an Anglo-Saxonist who has explored the role of Germanic myth-making in England's earliest literature, gives a sensitive and sensible, if not overly detailed, appraisal of what Heaney did with the Old English text.²⁹ He finds Heaney at his best in the poem's second part, comprising one third of its 3,182 lines, concerning an aging *Beowulf* who has reigned for "fifty of winters" (*fiftig wintra*; l. 2209), until the dragon comes:

The most moving and powerful moments of his translation appear in the speeches delivered by characters during the last third of the poem. This section takes place fifty years into the reign of *Beowulf*. His triumphs over Grendel and Grendel's mother are in the distant past; all that remains is the final contest. In these speeches, which are addressed at least as much to the audience as to other characters, we hear a wise and weary *Beowulf*, a man who knows that his time on earth is nearing its end. . . . In such passages, when Heaney seems to enter characters such as the old *Beowulf*, he finds the right melody for translating Old English.³⁰

That Heaney does not get it quite so right in other passages is not what Howe and others grumble most about. It is more a matter of words, of "Ulsterisms" or "Scullionspeak," which "Heaney sets into his translation carefully and spar-

26. Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Slow North-east Wind [review of *North*]," in *Seamus Heaney* (1997), p.25.

27. See, for example, Edna Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'? Seamus Heaney's *North*," in *Seamus Heaney* (1997), pp. 30–63.

28. Nicholas Howe, "Scullionspeak," *The New Republic*, February 28, 2000, pp. 32–37.

29. See Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Myth-making in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

30. Howe (2000), p. 35.

ingly, but also polemically.” Though Howe notes that such forms are used “sparingly,” and that the translator “has added some Celtic echoes to an Old English poem,”³¹ he nonetheless asserts that Heaney “sets out to make an Irish poem.”³¹

The charge is not unexpected and will no doubt be made again and again as Norton reprints its popular anthology. But do some Northern Irish dialect words and Celtic echoes³²—even if noticed by first-time readers—constitute such a revisionist project? The preface to the translation itself is far more suggestive, but is the shoe on the wrong foot? Why must the order of things be that of an Irish poet attempting “to graft himself onto the English literary tradition”?³³ Is it not just as likely that Heaney’s use of these forms, some deriving from Old English (such as “thole” from *þolian*), is rather more the consequence of nine centuries of English dominance over Irish affairs, life, and language? The more interesting postmodern argument is to see Heaney’s project as colonial rather than the end result of colonization, and to see Heaney’s relationship with *Cædmon* primarily as an act of canny appropriation:

Yet Whitby-sur-Moyola is a curious place to work from as a translator of *Beowulf*. One might even argue that someone writing from there is not really a translator of the poem at all. He is, rather, a reinventor of the poem, who turns Old English into Modern English to remake the literary and cultural history of the British Isles.³⁴

The roar over a “revisionist *Beowulf*” has less to do with a handful of words and a few echoes and much more to do with some lingering discomfort that the foremost poet writing in English should come from where he does, and is who

31. Howe (2000), pp. 35–36.

32. These include the very first word of the translation, “So,” for Old English *hwæt*, a gleaming from the Ulster vernacular; “tholed” (line 14; a survival in Ulster English of Old English *þolian*); the torque, or Celtic neck-ring, appears a half-dozen times (ll. 81, 1195, 1211, 1216, 3017, 3163); *bed æfter burum* (l. 140a) is given the apposite alliterative rendering “to bed in the bothies” (“bothy” from Old Irish *both*, “hut”); “beyond his shadow-bourne,” with reference to Grendel (l. 707), only technically qualifies (“bourne” from medieval Latin *bodina*, likely of Celtic origin); the “bawn” referred to in Heaney’s introduction (*B xxx*) appears three times (721, 1304, 1970); “keens” (1119) translates Old English *geomrode giddum* (“mournful songs, tales, lays”); Grendel’s treading the exile-paths (*wræclastas træd*) is handled with “moves beyond the pale”; *frece fengelad* (“dangerous fen-paths”; 1359) comes out “treacherous keshes” (perhaps jarring for those who can only call to mind the collocation Long Kesh); Unferth, the “thyle” of Hrothgar becomes “the brehon” (1457): since no one can agree what role a *þyle* played in the heroic age Germanic world (Klaeber glosses “orator, spokesman, official entertainer”), an allusion to the Old Irish lawman, with his spokesman role, does the text no great violence; and *leod* (“people” or, as Klaeber more rightly glosses, “member of a tribe or nation”) is rendered “sept”: quite apposite in a text reflecting a world not of ‘the people’ but ‘peoples,’ where it mattered who your people were.

33. Howe (2000), p. 36.

34. Howe (2000), p. 36.

he is. Of the translators of *Beowulf*, only Heaney has written so open a preface, discussing how he came to translate the poem, how he approached it. Heaney's *Beowulf*, to use the vocabulary of that poet, was perhaps to have been taken more as an act of "handselling," a gesture of the opened hand, a returning of the language upon itself. It would seem too easy a leap to put all of this on an Irish poet's inevitable upstart role when success is achieved in the English-speaking arena, a role all the more inescapable when venturing to translate sacred turf like *Beowulf*, if reactions of medievalists had not turned out so predictably.

How one takes Heaney as *Beowulf* translator will inevitably influence how one accepts his cultivated relationship and identification with *Cædmon*. If Heaney takes *Cædmon* as Orpheus-like, as the God-gifted yardman singing out with his armfuls of hay, he risks again the charge of reinvention:

. . . but to make the comparison work, to invent a lineage from *Caedmon* to Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes and, implicitly but no less firmly to himself and to his translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney has to forget that *Caedmon* matters because he composed thoroughly orthodox poems in English to persuade pagan Anglo-Saxons to renounce their faith and their culture in order to become good and dutiful Christians. *Caedmon* is an agent of conversion, of Christian conversion, which means that he is an agent of cultural betrayal. Whichever way one reads him, he is the figure who makes poetry the vehicle for a written scriptural tradition that has little place, or no place at all, for the bardic Orpheus.³⁵

Orpheus, it should be remembered, stands in as the essential bardic figure, but is one about whom also grew a cult, theogonies (*Orphei hymni*), pseudepigraphical corpus, and fairly orthodox body of thinking particularly after being adopted as a primitive theologian by Neoplatonists.³⁶ The corollary of Heaney, like *Cædmon*, as "agent of cultural betrayal," though not absent from more strident criticism of Heaney, seems especially off the mark.³⁷ It is also off the mark for the seventh-century cowherd. And if the Heaney-as-*Cædmon* conceit should falter under rigorous sociological analysis, small wonder.

Resting snugly at the front of the first volume of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Heaney's *Beowulf* will introduce a good many readers to the

35. Howe (2000), p. 36.

36. See Martin L. West, remarks that "Orpheus thus becomes an expert not only on theology, eschatology, and metaphysics, but on astronomy and astrology, divination and pharmacology. The wider world, however, continues to think of him as a theologian, as the principal exponent of Greek doctrines about the gods." Martin L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 261–2. See also John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

37. Take, for instance, the remarks of Terry Eagleton in "Hasped and Hooped and Hirpling [review of *Beowulf*, translated by Seamus Heaney]," *London Review of Books* 21, 22, 11 November 1999: 15–16.

poem for the first time; his choice to include “Ulsterisms” in the translation has generated some heat, if precious little light. He notes in his acknowledgements that at a medievalists’ seminar at Harvard he “recanted on the use of the word ‘gilly’” (B 105)—and one wishes he had not, if the poet is to be poet for a change. In discussing his choice of “bawn,” in place of standard “hall” for Old English *sele*, *reced*, or *heall*—as at line 720, with Grendel’s approach: “Spurned and joyless, he journeyed on ahead / and arrived at the bawn”—Heaney glosses:

Then, for reasons of historical suggestiveness, I have in several instances used the word ‘bawn’ to refer to Hrothgar’s hall. In Elizabethan English, bawn (from the Irish *bó-dhún*, a fort for cattle) referred specifically to the fortified dwellings that the English planters built in Ireland to keep the dispossessed natives at bay, so it seemed the proper term to apply to the embattled keep where Hrothgar waits and watches. Indeed, every time I read the lovely interlude that tells of the minstrel singing in Heorot just before the first attacks of Grendel, I cannot help thinking of Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Faerie Queen* to Sir Walter Raleigh, just before the Irish would burn the castle and drive Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court. 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, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more “willable forward / again and again and again.”
(B xxx)

A “bawn” in *Beowulf* is not just a matter of “historical suggestiveness,” of course, but a philological earnest, a token of where things stand and where they might go: the “Irish poet” translating a great English epic with its Scandinavian subject matter for inclusion in the most influential textbook of English literature. If Heaney’s *Beowulf* may be received not as an incursion by a poet working from a beleaguered Anglo-Irish tradition but as the work of a poet put in good stead by other poets such as *Cædmon* (“*Cædmon* too I was lucky to have known”) and led naturally to the task by consequence of language and idiom, then it may do more for Anglo-Irish literary relations than any other text of the late twentieth century. *Beowulf* represents, at least, the crowning of Heaney’s long apprenticeship as scop.