Seamus Heaney’s new translation of Beowulf—an Irish poet (and Nobel Laureate) translating the Anglo-Saxon epic—has gone through six printings so far this year in the United States, and more in Britain (where it came out last year), and has been on the bestseller list for weeks, an astonishing feat for a verse translation of a heroic poem of 3,200 lines written in Anglo-Saxon England sometime between the Seventh and Ninth centuries A.D.

Although it is unclear why so many people are buying this apparently rather esoteric work—as media coverage keeps reminding us, Beowulf is rarely read outside college courses in English literature—what is certain, is that this is a wonderful translation of a wonderful poem, the masterwork of Anglo-Saxon high culture and earliest surviving epic poem in any Germanic language.

Beowulf is, in brief, a tale written down in English, in England, but set among the Danes, Swedes, and Frisians—the Anglo-Saxons’ homeland before they migrated, during the great Völkerwanderung of the Germanic peoples, into Britain. Beowulf tells of warrior-heroes fighting evil, of loyalty and courage, of betrayal and doom—and, of a Christian sense of self and others. For, far from being a barbarian saga, or celebration of pagan Norse mythology, as one might suppose, Beowulf was written by a Christian poet, sometime in the first two centuries after the evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons.

It is for this reason, therefore, that Beowulf can truly be called an epic, in the best sense of the word: Because it created a people, using the already ancient “Beowulf matter” of oral poetic tradition, which celebrated the deeds of pagan ancestors, to transform the pagan tribal society the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to Britain, into what would become the Christian civilization of Anglo-Saxon England.

Hence, Beowulf stands in utter contrast to the Romantic, Nineteenth-century “revivalism” associated with Richard Wagner and the like, the supposed “return” to Germanic antiquities in the form of the Nibelungenlied and a nostalgia for the gods of Valhalla. In fact, those revivals, or, rather, modern constructs only tangentially related to the actual pre-Christian myth and folklore of the Norse peoples, are artificial in the extreme: The truth of the matter is, that the oldest epic poem we have in any Germanic language—namely, Beowulf—is Christian, and the literary products of the first literate Germanic language—namely, Gothic—are translations of the Bible.

The Translation

Heaney’s verse gives us both the directness and the loftiness of the poem’s heroic language, sometimes with gorgeous adjectives piled high; sometimes short, sharp, alliterative.

Consider the following passages. First, we are near the opening of the poem (lines 81-98), reading the description of the great hall Heorot, hall of the Danes’ king Hrothgar:

...The hall towered, its gables wide and high and awaiting a barbarous burning. That doom abided, but in time it would come; the killer instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark, nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet every day in the hall, the harp being struck and the clear song of a skilled poet telling with mastery of man’s beginnings, how the Almighty had made the earth, a gleaming plain girdled with waters;
Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, deploys a marvelously powerful musicality dominated by alliteration, rather than rhyme. Alliteration in Anglo-Saxon poetry is, as Anglo-Saxon scholar Robert Diamond puts it, not an embellishment, but a structural necessity; one in which verses are arranged in alliterating pairs, with the first half of a line (the “on-verse”) having two alliterating pairs of syllables, and the second half (“off-verse”) only one.

To translate this directly, or literally, into modern English poetry, is impossible. The effect would be something like the spoof “Witan’s Wail” in the comic history 1066 and All That. Heaney solves the problem beautifully, not (necessarily) adhering to the alliteration scheme the Beowulf poet uses, but evoking it in richly intricate patterns which echo, rather than mimic, the Anglo-Saxon.

Here is an example from the very outset of the poem; the poet is telling the story of Scyld Scefing (pronounced Shield Sheafing, translated by Heaney as Shield Sheafson). Scyld is described as flourishing:

wéox under wolcnum, weord-myndum þah.

or, transliterated and slightly modernized:

wax under wolcnum, worth-myndum thah.

Wax means to grow, to flourish—as it still does today. Under has not changed meaning. Wolcnum has become the rarely used modern English word welkin (sky, heaven)—and there is at least one rarely used modern English word welkin meaning. Wolcnum has become the still does today. Under has not changed.

Here is how Heaney translates it:

as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.

The alliteration (signified in both cases by italic) is no longer paired in the same way as in the Anglo-Saxon verse architecture, but it is paired, and cross-connected, just as in the original; the meaning is intact, and the line is metrically satisfying.

Another striking feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry lies in its rich use of metaphor, combinations of thoughts or things which make us see the world differently, offer new analogies, possibilities, ironies; and incidentally, enable us to see through the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons in an age long past. Thus, the now-famous images for sea—“whale-road” (hron-rade); or sail—“sea-shawl” (mere-hraegla); or ship—“wave-croosser” (weg-flotan); or language—“word-hoard” (word-horde); for skeleton, “bone-cage” (ban-cofan).

These and many more occur frequently, as fixed phrases, part of the poetic stock (or word-hoard) that is characteristic of ancient epic poetry (readers of Homer will recall some of his fixed phrases: the wine-dark sea, rosy-fingered dawn, grey-eyed Athena, Zeus Cloud-Gatherer). The recurring fixed phrase points back to an oral tradition, in which repetition, and the use of fixed matter to fill out a poetic line, enable the minstrel or singer reciting the poem to remember it more easily.

Heaney handles this material deftly, using these images where they will be compelling and exciting, or evocative, but not enslaved to them, able to abandon them if they threaten to become simply doggerel or cant, or impede the flow of the poem he has created through his translation.

I highlight the above with emphasis because, at bottom, that is what Heaney has done: create a new poem, and for good reason. One cannot translate a poem literally, and have it still be poetry, since in poetry, evocation and metaphor are everything. There exist perfectly respectable, and extremely useful, prose translations of great poetical works; but really to translate a poem, to give us in our own time and idiom, the poetic impact of the original, means essentially to write a new poem, which will, as closely as possible, create in our minds the experience that the original poem created in the minds of its first hearers or readers.

That, of all the translators of Beowulf thus far, Heaney is uniquely qualified to do.
The Poem
But, why Beowulf at all?
There is no doubt that Beowulf is a
great work of art. In the “ringing,
singing” language of Old English, as one
reviewer called it, it is the story of the young
man Beowulf who, defeating the
monster Grendel, frees the Danes from
the monster’s thrall; the story of
Beowulf fifty years later, an old man
and king, defeating the dragon that
menaces his people, and dying in the
attempt.
Against this remote and barbarian
backdrop, the poem examines the great
issues of man in his relations among
men, and his relation to God: the tran-
sience of life, mortality, and one’s life’s
work; the roles of freedom and neces-
sity; of the individual person, and of
Fate. Some of the poem’s strangeness
and its power, lie in the fact of its com-
bining the pagan world of the Northern
heroic age, with an unmistakably Chris-
tian outlook, transmuting the Anglo-
Saxons’ grim Nordic view of inexorable
Fate, into something freer and more
forgiving.
Beowulf was written perhaps only
decades after the Anglo-Saxons were
evangelized (a process whose beginning
is traditionally dated to 597, and the
arrival in England of missionaries from
the Rome of Pope Gregory the Great),
composed by an artist who was looking
back on the pagan days with new eyes.
It simultaneously honors the past, and
polemicizes for the new faith, being
composed for an English whose popula-
tion is perhaps half-Christian, half-
pagan. Its author takes every opportuni-
ty to teach his hearers, to remind them of
the superiority of the new religion of
the “All-Father,” over one-eyed, sinister
Wotan/Odin, and hammer-wielding
Thor/Thunor. It is therefore a civilizing
undertaking.
As a work of art, it remains with us
because the character of Beowulf
remains with us, a man who at first
seems to embody the heroic old Norse
marauders, but who instead, we come to
realize, is an expression of something
much higher: a hero, yes, but more
important, a “Christian,” generous and
gentle, and in protecting others, great-
hearted. This portrait is the antithesis of

the Northern beserker-hero so beloved
of the Romantics, the battle-axe-swing-
ing champion actuated by rage. At first,
before he performed his great feats,
Beowulf’s countrymen regarded him as
a weakling, precisely because of this
gentleness:

... he was formidable in battle yet
behaved with honour
and took no advantage; never cut
down
a comrade who was drunk, kept his
temper
and, warrior that he was, watched
and controlled
his God-sent strength and his out-
standing
natural powers. He had been poorly
regarded
for a long time, was taken by the
Geats
for less than he was worth: and their
lord too
had never much esteemed him in the
mead-hall.
They firmly believed that he lacked
force,
that the prince was a weakling; ...

The viewpoint of the poet is made
beautifully clear in the following pas-
sage, in which he describes the practices
of his pagan ancestors:
Sometimes at pagan shrines they
vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to
their aid
and save the people. That was their
way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their
hearts
they remembered hell. The
Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King
of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is
he
who in time of trouble has to thrust
his soul
in the fire’s embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed
is he
who after death can approach the
Lord

and find friendship in the Father’s
embrace.

Perhaps most moving of all, is the
advice the old king Hrothgar gives the
young Beowulf, embarking on his great
battle against Grendel. Hrothgar teaches
the lesson—to Beowulf, and to the
poem’s readers and hearers—to avoid
the sin of overweening pride, the lust for
power, for blood, for gold, and to be
ever-mindful of the bounty of God, the
transitoriness of this life, and the impor-
tance of how we live these short lives of
ours, to make a difference:

“... It is a great wonder
how Almighty God in His magnifi-
cence
favours our race with rank and scope
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is
wide.
Sometimes He allows the mind of a
man
of distinguished birth to follow its bent,
grants him fulfillment and felicity on
earth
and forts to command in his own
country.
He permits him to lord it in many
lands
until the man in his unthinkingness
forgets that it will ever end for him.
He indulges his desires; illness and
old age
mean nothing to him; his mind is
untroubled
by envy or malice or the thought of
enemies
with their hate-honed swords. The
whole world
conforms to his will; he is kept from
the worst
until an element of overweening
enters him and takes hold
while the soul’s guard, its sentry,
drowses,
grown too distracted. A killer stalks
him,
An archer who draws a deadly bow.
And then the man is hit in the heart,
the arrow flies beneath his defences,
the devious promptings of the demon
start.
His old possessions seem paltry to
him now.
He covets and resents; dishonours
custom

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“O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part, eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
For a brief while your strength is in bloom but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow illness or the sword to lay you low, or a sudden fire or surge of water or jabbing blade or javelin from the air or repellent age. Your piercing eye will dim and darken; and death will arrive, dear warrior, to sweep you away.”

The Cultural Context

Broadly, Beowulf was part of the process of the Christianization of all Northern Europe—for the English, once converted, played a central role, as did their neighbors the Irish, long Christian, in the evangelization of the continent. It was the product of a period of tremendous literary fertility among the Anglo-Saxons, which was, in turn, the result of the Anglo-Saxon Renaissance (sometimes called the Northumbrian Renaissance, in deference to one of its geographical foci; less often, but usefully, called the Anglo-Irish Renaissance, in recognition of the role of Irish Christianity in helping to civilize the English).

When, at length, and after many reversions and scrappy civil wars, the English people overall did become Christianized—primarily from Rome, but in part thanks to the impact in northern Britain of the Irish missionary saints, foremost among them St. Columba and his foundation at Iona off northern Scotland; and Aidan and his monastery at Lindisfarne, off the coast of England Northumbria—religion and letters took hold fast and deep among the English, such that, within a short time of the founding of the Irish monastery at Lindisfarne, St. Cuthbert, an Englishman, was widely recognized as the monastery’s greatest son. This was so much true that within a century of the very beginning of the conversion, there had arisen in Northumbria one of the very greatest of the early medieval scholars and saints: the Venerable Bede (673-735). His greatest work (in Latin) is his History of the English Church and People, sometimes called the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, probably the first history written by a Northern European, and certainly one of the greatest.

Bede was the product of twin centers of learning at Wearmouth and Jarrow, by the eastern end of Hadrian’s Wall, near where Newcastle-on-Tyne stands today. He was regarded, especially in the Carolingian age, as one of the great Church fathers. He was the author of numerous commentaries on Scripture, of scientific treatises, and of books on technical chronology and astronomical calculation. His History continues to this day to be a vital source of information on the Coming of the English to Britain, as it was called, on the life of the “Old Saxon” relatives left behind on the continent, and on the history of the English adoption of Christianity.

From the same area as Bede, in the city of York, came the great scholar Alcuin, the intimate of Charlemagne. Thirty years after Bede published his History, Alcuin, in 767, took over the church school established at York by his teacher and master, Aethelbert. Fifteen years after that, Alcuin embarked on the second half of his career—in the court of Charlemagne at Aachen, where he created and directed the Palace School, which he oversaw from 782 to 796. He was joined there by many of his English circle, to help him teach King and court the “English learning” of York; he
became chief adviser to Charlemagne on doctrinal matters, and his agent in all his relations to England.

Alcuin and his colleagues from York played a crucial role in the Carolingian Renaissance. Under Alcuin, the Palace School became an important factor in Frankish national life, a magnet for the sons of patrician and plebeian alike. Any boy with talent, no matter how humble his station, was welcomed. Alcuin taught the classes in person, drawing other intellectuals in to follow his example, and Charlemagne set the tone by taking classes himself.

Alcuin bought books widely for the school, but also wrote numerous primers covering, among other subjects, orthography, grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, "astrology" (more akin to cosmology and astronomy, than to the present-day mumbo-jumbo) and theology—works which are still extant. Under Alcuin’s direction, students of marked talent were selected for further training to become abbots of the Frankish monasteries, and great monastic schools were set up at Fulda, Tours, and the like. Scribe-monks working in the Carolingian scriptoria preserved the writings of authors of Classical antiquity.

At the same time, the Northumbrian English were the first to undertake missions of evangelization to Northern Europe, their mandate being to convert their cousins in Frisia, among the "Old Saxons," and in Central Germany. English missionaries set up foundations at Fulda, Echternach, Regensburg, Eichstatt, as far south as Salzburg, as far north as Bremen. With them they brought beautiful illuminated Gospels, done in the Anglo-Saxon scriptoria—like the Echternach Gospels, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. (Among the illuminated manuscripts created in Anglo-Saxon England were the famous Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells, now both in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.)

An almost exact contemporary of Bede was the Apostle of the Germans, St. Boniface, born around 675. His Anglo-Saxon name was Wynfrith; he was raised in a monastery in Exeter, later headed the monastic school at Nursling in Hampshire near Southampton, and then, in 716, left England for Frisia and the very beginnings of his mission. In 722, at Rome, he was consecrated Bishop to the Germans, whereupon he returned to his work, by now in Hesse and Thuringia, bringing to Germany numerous Englishmen to help in his task of founding churches and suppressing heathen sanctuaries. By 742 he had founded sees at Wurzburg, Buraburg, and Erfurt, and had brought over Englishmen to be their first bishops. He died a martyr in 754, massacred with more than fifty of his companions by a heathen band in Frisia, to which he had returned at the end of his long life.

Although Bede wrote exclusively in Latin, there is a passage so famous from his History, concerning the conversion in 627 of the Northumbrian English King Edwin and his thanes, that we reproduce it here, mostly for the way it conveys the early Anglo-Saxon worldview in transition from paganism to Christianity, the same view illuminated so perfectly in Beowulf.

Bede recounts the argument one of Edwin’s thanes gives, for acceptance of the new faith proposed to them by the Roman missionaries:

"Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to us like the swift flight of the lone sparrow through the banquet-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors. Inside there is a comforting fire to warm the room; outside, the wintry storms of snow and rain are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms, but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the darkness whence he came. Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, or what comes after. Therefore, if this new teaching can reveal any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it."

That haunting image, of the lone sparrow flying from darkness through light and warmth into darkness again, has resonated throughout centuries, perhaps the most remembered of all the speeches, letters, and colloquia recorded in Bede’s History.

Nor did Anglo-Saxon literature written in English (as opposed to Bede’s and Alcuin’s Latin), lag behind this efflorescence of culture and evangelization. From this general period come the beautiful and haunting elegaic poems, like “The Wanderer,” “The Seafarer,” or “The Ruin”; the great religious poems, of which “The Song of the Rood” (Seventh or Eighth century) is certainly the greatest (rood is an Anglo-Saxon word for cross); the work of the poet Caedmon, and so on.

Alfred’s Translation Project

Then, in the great crisis of Anglo-Saxon England, as the Danes were invading and pillaging their English cousins, came the most remarkable cultural achievement of Anglo-Saxon high culture. That achievement is associated with

- Centers of Anglo-Saxon Renaissance and Church
- Principal English missions to the Continent
- Charlemagne’s court at Aachen

Anglo-Saxon missionaries brought learning and Christian civilization to the homelands of their Germanic ancestors.
the name of King Alfred the Great (b. 849), of whom historian Peter Hunter Blair writes:

“In 878 this remarkable man had little left”—because of the Danish advances in eastern England—“but an island fortress in the Somerset marshes, but ten years later, then a man rising forty, he ruled a wide kingdom and was learning Latin, so that he could make those translations of ancient books which can now be recognized as the foundations of English prose literature. It was a very sound instinct which bestowed on this man alone of all the kings of England the title of The Great.”

A number of the books Alfred chose to translate in this project, show his intense desire to give the English people, in the dark days of the Danish invasions, a national identity, a sense of their history, origins, and evangelization. This preoccupation with national history and national identity was a precocious development, with the Anglo-Saxons stepping directly, as it were, from Nordic barbarism, into a sense of nation.

Among the works Alfred translated were the Dialogues and the Pastoral Care of St. Gregory (Gregory the Great). Translating Gregory into English was a project Bede had recommended in a letter of 734, and Alcuin in 796; Alfred took those admonitions to heart. From the fathers of the Church, he translated St. Augustine’s Soliloquies, Orosius’s Seven Books of History Against the Pagans, and Boethius’s Platonist Consolation of Philosophy.

Alfred also translated Bede’s History, so that the people could read their own history in their own tongue. He directed the compilation of the material that inaugurated the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a monumental work of national record-keeping. Completed in 890, the compilation incorporated material reaching back to the mid-400’s, and covered items of history on the continent, before the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians migrated. It continued to be kept as a national history until 1154 and the death of King Stephen, nearly 100 years after the Norman Conquest of 1066 put an end to Anglo-Saxon England.

So, returning to Beowulf. It is not just some curiosity for musty antiquarians.

As one of the beacons of European culture, it inspires us today, just as it did 1,400 years ago, with an understanding of how poetry can uplift and re-create a population; that is, bring civilization out of barbarism.

In its history, and as a living work of art, Beowulf teaches us that human minds and human culture are not fixed and predetermined things, but processes open to transformation. Although the predicates of today’s great global crisis, and concomitant cultural degeneration, are different from those of that earlier time, Beowulf’s example, and its capacity to inspire, can yet be used by those of us who are fighting today for a new, ecumenical evangelization of the human spirit.

—Molly Hammett Kronberg

2. The word “grim” is originally an epithet for the Norse god Wotan (Odin), one of the chief gods in the Anglo-Saxon pagan pantheon. And the Anglo-Saxon word for Fate is Wyrd (modern: weird). Thus, in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, when we meet the Three Weird Sisters, we are not meeting simply witches, but the three Fates—whom we have seen before in Greek and Roman mythology; or as the Norns, the three sister-Fates of Norse mythology.

Additional illustrations appear on the inside front cover of this issue.

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OTHER BEOWULF TRANSLATIONS

