

Eponymous Écriture and the Poetics of Reading a Transnational Epic

Alamgir Hashmi

Alamgir Hashmi's essay deals with contextualised readings of poetry through the medium of translations, using the Old English Epic poem, *Beowulf*, as representational text. It looks at how various translation renderings - from John Gardner's fiction, *Grendel* (1971) through Sturla Gunnarsson's 2005 film, *Beowulf and Grendel* and Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007) to Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* (2000) - address the issues of language, meaning and message. It thus raises two fundamental questions in literary criticism: what is literature and how does literary theory address itself to all aspects of literary tradition?

I

The protagonist may not have chosen the place of action, but there he was. The penchant for epic battles or minor skirmishes was always well-known in the area; accounts of these sold like hot *roti* and *cha*. In peace, romance held sway. Mystical ways of the sufis were seen as contiguous, worthy alternatives. Much song and dance made of politics in the last century was a curiosity, a diversion for the folk in trance of what might yet unfold--from the mysterious and equally salacious layers of an easy-going lifestyle otherwise regulated by a seasonal, devotional calendar. Such was the site of arrival.

The year 1947 had something to do with Grendel and gore, Grendel's mom, and a dragon (who from all known records was not an immigrant). A different order was to be induced. England was tutored as the source. Literature and literary criticism were seen as goods and services masterminded by social managers and their political overlords. Form, content, inter-subjectivity, social norms, ethical ideals, sense of beauty, humane feelings were all subordinated to the command of praetorian guards shouting some didactic jargon that few understood. How was this human being in their hold to be formed? Morgan Forster, who spoke ever so softly in his Cambridge rooms about personal relationships in the later years, brought Whitman to the shores of the Arabian Sea. Forster had been in Lahore for a while, during the empire period, and went to Jaipur later and stated matters of some intercultural

importance there. What did we know? Virginia Woolf never made it here: Who would follow her that far *To the Lighthouse*?

It was quite enough that Leonard (Woolf) had lived in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and written of it incisively. African, Asian, American (especially those below the Rio Grande or above Lake Superior), and Australian, New Zealand, and other Pacific writers hardly existed over here. Pound, whom I called EP, mentioned “Hussain”. T. S. Eliot wrote a verse for “Mirza Murad Ali Beg”. Who were these weird folks? To the educational bureaucracy, from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, English Literature sounded as happily dynastic as the society receiving them as civilisational presents; even as this un-self-conscious readership was actually based in a far more advanced, older, and pluralistic yet coherent literary culture. The putative “CLERK[s]...of Oxenford”, who had had their workbooks thrown into the fireplace, preferred to recite some verses at club meets (and a free supper at the Tabard) from a supposedly eighth- or tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem they called “Beowulf”.

It has yet to be mentioned that the single extant manuscript of this poem in the British Library (unless an avid fan is already busy shipping it across the Pond as you read this) is without a title. It was recited as if from an oral edition modifying the stem vowel like those strong verbs and alliterative rhythms echoing down the ages. The recitation normally referred to an original translation. Authorship was of little consequence. Post-structuralism was anticipated by pre-medieval scholarship: the poem had written itself. In any case, the author dropped dead after writing it. There were no birth records for people or words. Ever since a 1930s Tolkien essay about the poem, it has not ceased attracting more and more scholars and translators from the same language. Any plausible thesis to be drawn from experience, empirical or any other, is that art and science are method not subject.

Anyway, the events in this heroic poem take place in some bleak north land; the setting of what is often described as England’s national epic is not England *per se*. In its compelling narrative flow,



the story offers the rise of a hero forming a community, a mighty contest that may inspire a moral dimension, the culmination of bleeding undo-or-die wills. Is there anything to compare it with? There was little time for any contemporaneous work, like Firdousi’s *Shahnamah*; or for that matter for *Shakuntala*, *Edda*, or *Kalevala*. And how is it to be read? The poem was set down by hand (or likely by more than one hand) at some point in time on paper, in the vernacular. It was not composed by a literate person in a literate culture.

Thus we move, as the text appears to move, between philology and literature, between literature and literary criticism, and between literary criticism and theory. Over the years, prose fiction has also drawn on the poem. John Gardner’s *Grendel* (1971), for example, portrays the animal sense or dread of existence and, ultimately, the incomprehensible, incommunicable nature of reality. Besides paper, the poem has had other renderings. Sturla Gunnarsson’s 2005 film *Beowulf and Grendel* is great fun while Nick Lyon’s *Grendel* (2007) follows parts of the “original” story that interest contemporary deadpan small screen.

Robert Zemeckis’ *Beowulf* (2007) is a bold yet subtle retelling of the ‘sins of the fathers.’ The film versions raise points of historical and generic instantaneity, meaning, message, and massage. But what is literature? How does it appear? A relatively blank counterfoil against

which reality cheques are issued to be cashed? The answer requires a surefire definition of reality to justify anything done on its behalf. While we wait for that answer, it is an aspect of language and imagination keeping the world at play. In other words, as a New York wit put it some time ago, “when appearance and reality coincide, philosophy and literary criticism find themselves with nothing to say.” Oh dear, we would like to know “when”, if ever, such a thing (as refraction or parallax) happens, so that theory can be ushered in for its rightful place to recompose the universe.

II

Theory, whether of the literary or the critical kind, must address itself to nearly all aspects of reading, listening, and seeing,

even the undertone of anoetic feeling; as well as to the act of writing, telling, showing; indeed to all aspects of the literary tradition(s) embedded in the cultural ecology that such texts embody - to the extent of comprehending even the most abstract metaphysics of language signalling itself to be there outside books. For there were few books in Europe at the time in question. A subterranean grammar of rhetoric operating above the textual surface is often a feature of the best imaginative writing. This was never claimed as *new* by our eminent writers and scholars of the last century.

They understood well, in W. H. Auden's words, "its human position". Allegories have long existed to supplant the seeming simplicity of linear narratives. Rigid or explicit grammar, therefore, may be abandoned where the alphabet is interspersed with runes, as in *Beowulf*, or where, as in Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, the ideogramme takes over a relatively natural if diffuse formation from a different language order.

Apart from the linguistic nature, nature as a spatial entity and associated ekistics are by themselves of sufficient interest to anyone who cares about life and the learning about it. The "natural" in *Beowulf* is presented as unfriendly to human life, and essentially has much to do with culture-specific uses of space. The great warriors have connections to the great house, Heorot; big fish have domain of the sea; Grendel and his kind are assigned the mere; dragons guard the treasure; time operates on climatic changes. However, such easy handles on the natural are problematised the moment the actors deign to negotiate across or beyond their respective space. At such moments, heroes and monsters tend to become rather indistinguishable—as fissure leads to fusion—in the natural world. Religious notions everywhere, therefore, have had to claim and convert the natural world, no less than the human, to their particular proportions in the relevant scriptures. Insofar as it goes, isn't *Beowulf*, then, a contemporary poem?

III

Seamus Heaney (2000) certainly makes a persuasive case for *Beowulf* as "one of the foundation works of poetry in English". In certain ways, it is also a contemporary poem. Heaney anxiously reaches out even to the Ninja reader likely plucking out her cellphone hair on transposing these dubious English / Scandinavian / Germanic character-parts. He finds performative analogues far in the East, comparing the action with the Japanese *bunraku* theatre, as a piece to be played on stage for "the global village of the third millennium".

It will be difficult to draw a better illustration of the point made: "The Geat woman who cries out in dread as the flames consume the body of her dead lord could come straight from a late-twentieth-century news report, from Rwanda or Kosovo..."

Tragedy is as much a part of the epic scale on which events are weighed as the pageantry, the grand ceremony and ritual feasting, the heroic contest with evil, the fine celebration of victory over it expressed in communal joy and the heraldic ensigns of the social order that nature has been suitably tamed to sustain. The reading tradition both suggests and ensures appropriate placement of the design and its main features.

We begin to understand these features as we are enabled by literature studies to read a vernacular long extinct. Bilingual editions of the poem, with the "original" Old English and a contemporary English translation, are helpful; the reader may decide each time which translation is contemporary. Beginning with the late 18th Century Icelandic and Danish transcriptions of the "original" (or shall we say the only available) text, translations of varying quality have been made in the succeeding centuries. To take but only three examples from the past century, a popular early 20th Century translation was Frances Gummere's (1910), included in Harvard Classics. Here is how Gummere read the

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opening of the poem:
LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!

The same three lines have another fine translator render them as follows:

Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes,
Ancient kings and the glory they cut
For themselves, swinging mighty swords!

This is Burton Raffel's 1963 New American Library translation, later a Signet Classic edition. Versification in translation normally requires fresh decisions. And Raffel had to protest for his American enjambements against the *TLS* objections, even as Raffel's translation did create a fairly wide U.S. audience for the poem, as well as an argument to read what very few Americans read. Seamus Heaney's more recent translation (in Faber and Norton editions) attempts to splice together the centuries as well as the continents, and has generally been welcomed:

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

Reasonably well-formed, the translation is a localising foray. The alien is naturalised without stripping its distinctive status. What is ours remains and finds further correspondence, has a resonance beyond the immediate, the authenticity of the desired points of negotiation of time and space. Translating *Beowulf* was for Heaney "a way of ensuring my [his] linguistic anchor would stay lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea-floor". This is a protective measure he took while teaching at Harvard beside drawing on the Irish he knew or remembered, the dialect of Co. Derry, and his aunt's home-bred speech. In similar circumstances, I had gone it my own way, reading me in as many *Beowulfs* as I could do, reciting the pieces about Finnsburg (Europe) and Fredericksburg (U.S.A.) to keep me sailing in company—across the transatlantic hush induced by this intrusion from afar; but that is essaying into another translation of English, Whitman's continent of the spirit.

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Alamgir Hashmi has published eleven books of poetry and several volumes of literary criticism in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, India, Pakistan, etc. He has won a number of national and international awards and honours, and his work has been translated into several European and Asian languages. For four decades he has taught in European, Asian, and U.S. universities as Professor of English and Comparative Literature. Currently he lives and works in Islamabad, Pakistan.

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(Retrieved on December 28, 2013)