

## **The Manner of Boyan: Translating Oral Literature**

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The force of oral transmission—its accuracy and integrity—is perhaps best demonstrated by comparing texts which have been transmitted in written form and orally transmitted texts, both sorts of transmission covering some fairly extensive period of time. One might expect that oral transmission would be far less effective, and that texts transmitted orally would contain many more errors, changes, deletions, accretions, and all manner of other divergences from the original form. Judah Goldin, however, describes the “baskets full of books,” the “living texts” represented by the living men who both orally transmitted and constituted, in their own persons, effective “oral publication” of Hebrew sacred material. He adds that “to us it no doubt seems that an oral text would be less trustworthy than a written one. This was not necessarily the case with the ancients” —and he cites the very plain passage in Plato’s *Phaedrus* which argues that writing, as opposed to oral transmission, tends to decrease rather than to increase understanding (Goldin 1955:24, n.). It must be understood, of course, not only that the ancients were accustomed both to transmitting texts orally and to acquiring texts from others via oral transmission, but also that such transmission is a very different thing from what we think of, today, as memorization. Memorization, that is, is understood by us as an essentially word-for-word affair. Oral transmission, on the other hand, plainly works with larger blocks of material, using thematic and a variety of traditionally derived patternings to aid retention. Goldin notes that in Jewish tradition “no written text, particularly if it is meant as a guide for conduct, can in and of itself be complete; it must have some form of oral commentary associated with it.”<sup>1</sup>

So too with literary rather than religious texts: scribes and copyists plainly corrupt texts quite as readily as they preserve them, sometimes from carelessness or stupidity or inability to read what they are reproducing, but sometimes also from such motives as shaping a text to more modern standards or eliminating or altering something no longer either appropriate or apposite. It is for such reasons, to be sure, that we have, and that we need, textual scholars, even in dealing with material as recent, relatively speaking, as the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, dead only so short a time ago as A.D. 1400.

There is of course no need to argue that oral transmission is always and inevitably superior to written transmission. Where a single piece of written material survives intact, over some lengthy period, written transmission is in fact almost invariably superior. But single pieces (or single collections or groups) of written material do not usually survive intact. They are usually recopied, and recopied again, and that is what produces true comparability between the two methods of transmitting texts. In this process of re-transmission, which is arguably a more accurate term for what actually takes place, oral transmission is apt to be as good as or even better than its written competitor. As Marc Slonim noted in 1950 (10), Russian *byliny* (“tales-of-things-that-have-been,” a form of folk epic poetry conclusively oral both in origin and in transmission) have been “collected quite recently in certain remote villages of northern and eastern Russia, where they were still being narrated in an amazingly well-preserved form by old men or women” (see also Arant 1967, 1970).

## I.

In the best of all possible worlds, where written texts and oral texts might be neatly and conclusively separable, translation too would be a simpler and infinitely more straightforward process. Interpenetration is however a fact of life: oral texts influence written ones, and vice versa, and at various stages of literary development it is essentially impossible to know which (if either) is primary (cp. Foley 1983). The *Slovo o pulku Igoreve* (“Word of the Campaign of Igor,” or as Sidney Monas and I have translated it, “The Tale of Igor’s Men”), for example, may well combine both aspects of indeterminacy. That is, it was found in a

sixteenth-century manuscript, later burned, and was probably composed in the fourteenth century. Transmission from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century may have been via written texts; it may also have been by oral means, since as Dmitri Mirsky says, “There existed in Kievan times [tenth through thirteenth centuries] a secular oral poetry, preserved by singers belonging to the upper military class. . . . This poetry flourished in the eleventh century; some of the poems were still remembered in the end of the twelfth. . . . But it is not clear that at the time of the composition of the *Slovo* this oral poetry was still alive.” Mirsky quite properly insists that “the *Campaign of Igor* itself is a purely literary work, *written*, and not sung.” Scholars are on the whole well agreed on this. But it remains perfectly clear, too, that the author of the *Slovo*, to quote Mirsky again (1949:14), “was steeped [both] in books and in oral tradition. The great originality of his work was that he used the methods of oral poetry in a work of written literature.”

This sort of inchoate interpenetration is surely a more problematic matter, especially for the translator of such a work, than Mirsky seems willing to recognize. It seemed plain to Vladimir Nabokov (1960:6) that the *Slovo* “is a harmonious, many leveled, many hued, uniquely poetic structure created in a sustained and controlled surge of inspiration,” a work of such polished, balanced art that its very existence “attests to deliberate artistic endeavor and excludes the possibility of that gradual accretion of lumpy parts which is so typical of folklore. It is the lucid work of one man, not the random thrum of a people.” Thais Lindstrom (1966:11), operating with fewer preconceptions, points out that “The *Slovo* is written in rhythmic prose and its title (*slovo* meaning ‘word,’ ‘discourse’) tells us that it was intended to be declaimed rather than read. It is almost certain that the minstrels, as they recited it, emphasized the rolling alliteration of its phrases with accompanying chords on the gusli, an ancient Russian harp.” Dimitri Obolensky speaks, similarly, of “the highly musical texture of the poem,” noting too that “the use of the repetitions and refrains, the numerous fixed epithets so characteristic of heroic poetry, and the visible signs of strophic composition leave no doubt that the [*Slovo*] was intended for oral recitation; and the author himself describes his work as a ‘song’.” Like other scholars, Obolensky is clear that the *Slovo* was a written performance: “the terseness of its style, the richness and complexity

of the imagery, the subtlety of its euphonic devices, are quite incompatible with the view that it was ever improvised orally.” The point can be argued, to be sure: if oral transmission is in fact based on a patterning of structures larger than single words, then the sort of acoustic patterning Obolensky describes may well be a sign that the *Slovo* is distinctly related to orally transmitted texts about which, today, we know nothing. But Obolensky also understands that these neither are nor can be black-and-white matters; he like most scholars recognizes without hesitation that “the author [of the *Slovo*] seems to have known and sought inspiration in an earlier, oral tradition” (Obolensky 1962:xxxii). And Serge A. Zenkovsky, finally, after pointing out that, although poetic, the *Slovo* is not in the usual sense a poem, being “neither rhymed nor organized in verses, nor does it follow any metrical pattern,” goes on to observe that “the rhythm and the length of the sentences to some extent replace verse organization.... Among other devices, the author of the [*Slovo*] employs the repetition of characteristic images, stylized descriptions of military action, assonance and alliteration.” And he concludes, accurately, that these devices are “impossible to reproduce in translation” (Zenkovsky 1963:137-38).

How does a translator approach this mare’s nest of uncertainties? The *Slovo* is not an oral text, but it is heavily oral-influenced; it may or may not have been transmitted orally, at some point in its history; it features a rhythmic prose but also many of the devices characteristic of oral heroic poetry; and its artistic density, above all else, is remarkable, making it “a national classic, familiar to every educated Russian and often known by heart by lovers of poetry” (Mirsky 1949:15). Nabokov’s translation chooses a poetic form, and the lineation of verse, but employs a diction so remote and strained that we seem to be reading some ancient artifact, effectively neither literary nor oral (1960:29):

Might it not become us, brothers,  
to begin in the diction of yore  
the stern tale  
of the campaign of Igor,  
Igor son of Svyatoslav?

Let us, however, begin this song  
in keeping with the happenings

of these times  
and not with the contriving of Boyan.

Zenkovsky too seems to believe that an ancient poem is necessarily an archaic poem and that, as J. R. R. Tolkien insisted (1950:xviii), you must not “eschew the traditional literary and poetic diction which we now possess in favour of the current and trivial”:

Might it not behoove us brethren  
to commence in ancient strains  
the stern lay of Igor’s campaign,  
Igor, son of Sviatoslav?  
Then let this begin  
according to the events of our time,  
and not according to the cunning of Boyan.

(Zenkovsky 1963:139)

It seemed to Sidney Monas and myself, on the other hand, that something of the sweep, the rolling prose rhythms of the *Slovo* could in fact be brought over into modern English, which is surely as dignified a tongue as is old Russian. That which is “current,” despite Tolkien’s (and Nabokov’s) prejudices, is not necessarily “trivial.” One can adjust, one can fine-tune any language, at any time, to reflect such matters as heroism and ambition, suffering and celebration.

And how would it be, brothers, to begin telling the hard tales of the men of Igor, of Igor Svyatoslavich, telling the tales as they used to be told?

But let us rather be true to our time, not to the manner of Boyan.

(Monas and Raffel 1971:5)

I take my title from this last-quoted line. No one knows just who Boyan was, but everyone assumes, probably correctly, that he was a once-famous poet, a singer perhaps of orally-composed songs, certainly dead though not yet forgotten at the time of the *Slovo*’s composition. Like the author of the *Slovo*, I want the translator of oral poetry, and of partially oral poetry, and of oral-connected or oral-derived poetry, to be “true to our time, not to the manner of Boyan.” And I insist quite as fervently as Nabokov that it can be done, and done well, given a proper respect for both original and translation.

## II.

Topi saya bundar,  
 bundar topi saya;  
 kalau tidak bundar,  
 bukan topi saya.

This is a child's verse, from a game familiar, in different linguistic guise, to many children all over the world. In dogtrot translation, this Indonesian exemplar would run: "My hat is round,/ round is my hat;/ if it's not round/ it's not my hat." No one would argue, and I certainly do not propose to, that this is significant poetry. But it is distinctly oral—and in this particular linguistic guise, at least, it presents both linguistic features and translation problems that make it worth some attention. Most notably, for Indonesian is a syllabic rather than a stress-phonemic language, this little oral quatrain demonstrates a quite remarkable pattern of stress. As sung, which it always is, and to a melody which is similarly employed in a good many other cultures, including our own, it sounds like this (with stressed syllables marked in capital letters):

TOpi SAya BUNdar  
 bunDAR toPI saYA  
 KAlau TIdak BUNdar  
 buKAN toPI saYA

Neither spoken nor written Indonesian ever organizes a linguistic presentation in this fashion, lines one and three following a completely trochaic mode, lines two and four counter-balancing with a completely iambic mode. Neither iambic nor trochaic, to be sure, either means or possibly can mean anything in Indonesian, which has no prosodic pattern of a stress-based nature. Stress not being phonemic, one can as readily say BUNdar or bunDAR, TOpi or toPI, SAya or saYA. The prosodic organization of traditional Indonesian verse is entirely syllabic; stress has nothing to do with it. One neither would nor could hear a stress patterning of this sort either in ordinary spoken Indonesian or in Indonesian poetry. Here for example is a classic Indonesian *pantun*, or traditional four-line poem:

Dari mans hendak kemana?  
 Tinggi rumput dari padi.  
 Tahun mana bulan yang mana,

Hendak kita berjumpa lagi?

The lines each contain eight or nine syllables, but the rules of Indonesian prosody, which disqualify particles and the like, reduce the syllable count to eight. (All particles in Indonesian are enclitic. *Ke-*, in line 1, is a direction particle; the first word in line 3, *tahun*, is invariably pronounced with one syllable; and *ber-*, in line 4, is again a particle, though here indicating certain verb-like meanings rather than direction.) There is rhyme, there is a steady, stable syllable count (by Indonesian prosodic standards), but there is no detectable pattern of stress whatever. One possible way of emphasizing the poem in speaking or reciting it (and I deliberately use the term “emphasize” rather than the more technical, linguistically-oriented term “stress”) would be:

dari MAna hendak keMAna  
 TINGgi rumput dari PAdi  
 tahun MAna bulan yang MAna  
 HENdak kita berjumpa LAgI

What this indicates, truthfully, is a phrasal sort of emphasis, allied in lines 1 through 3 with meaning clusters, and switching in line 4 to a greater emphasis on meaning. The *pantun* says, once more in dogtrot translation: “Where are (were) you from? where are (were) you going?/ Grass is taller than [wet field] rice./ When will it be the year? when will it be the month?/ that we’ll want to meet again?” (I have rendered it, in more literary fashion: “Where have you gone to, where were you from?/ Weeds grow taller than grain./ What year, what month, will time have spun/ Around to when we meet again?” [Raffel 1967:14])

The important thing about the stress pattern in the Indonesian child’s quatrain, bluntly, is that it is not in the usual sense prosodic at all, but melodic. That is, only in sung form, and only in conjunction with the particular, familiar melody used around the world for versions of this quatrain, do we get a stress pattern of this sort in a syllabic language like Indonesian. Material which is not sung does not and cannot have any such pattern, in Indonesian. And what this means for the conscientious translator is that usual translation practices for dealing with poetry must be altered. That is, verse which is not only oral but also and always melodic falls into a distinctly separate category; one needs to try to reconstruct, on the page, at least something of what the tightly joined combination of words and melody produces, in performance.

One might, for example, translate the words of the child's quatrain like this (that is, without trying to match the melody):

I've got a hat  
That isn't flat,  
If that one's flat  
It's not my hat.

What this sort of translation does, plainly, is reconstitute the original's overall verbal effect, but via lexically very variant usages. The formal, structural patterns are different, though related, but the lexical differences are most significant; in material of greater breadth and range than this little poem those differences would appear enormous, not to say disabling. And then, to attempt to match not only the words but also the music, presents complications of enormous difficulty, involving such issues as singability of consonants, the difficulty of certain vowels at higher pitch levels, and so on. This is why translations of texts set to music (songs, opera) are ordinarily so awful.<sup>2</sup> Their translators seem not to understand that lexical fidelity is not only not expected of them, not only impossible of attainment, but is in fact counter-productive. Lexically accurate translations of a text tied to a melody cannot be properly sung, cannot be properly heard, cannot be properly understood or appreciated if one does try to sing them.

But this is a very special order of oral poetry; the *requirement* of nonlexical translation applies only to texts that in a sense do not exist apart from some particular melody. This is not the case with most fully oral poetry, and is certainly not the case with oral-connected or oral-derived poetry. The *pantun*, for example, is a traditional poem very often recited aloud, frequently in "battles" of two reciters (who may in some areas of Indonesia be a man hunting a wife and the young woman he is trying to win), but it is not tied to a melody (Raffel 1967:8-9, 12-15). That there is an oral and a folk background to the *pantun* is plain; exactly which *pantun* are derived from this nonlettered background, and which have been composed by lettered authors, is often impossible to say. Nor does it matter: "I have excluded a good many which seemed to me to smell of the lamp," explains C. C. Brown in his admirable *Malay Sayings*, "but some had to be admitted, by reason of their being heard so often . . . that they could not well be left out" (Brown 1951: ix). Combining oral and



lettered traditions does not leave the resultant form diminished in vitality, or in endurance.

Let me set out, once again, the *pantun* quoted earlier:  
 Dari mana hendak kemana?  
 Tinggi rumput dari padi.  
 Tahun mana bulan yang mana,  
 Hendak kita berjumpa lagi?

And let me, this time, give a word-for-word, syntactically absurd rendering, so that something of the flavor of the poem may be appreciated:

From where wish to-where?  
 High[er] grass than [wet field] rice.  
 Year where month where,  
 Wish we meet again?

Note that *yang*, in line 3, is not translated; it is a function word, a connective, sometimes with lexical meaning, sometimes without it. Note too that “we” in line 4 is the form which includes the person spoken to, rather than (as in Indonesian’s other form of “we”) excluding that person. In a sense, then, “we” is here understood by an Indonesian to mean something like “we two.”

Once more, here is my translation of this *pantun*:  
 Where have you gone to, where were you from?  
 Weeds grow taller than grain.  
 What year, what month, will time have spun  
 Around to when we meet again?

The original rhymes A B A B; so too (more or less) does this translation. The assumption of a past tense query in line 1 is only that, an assumption, since Indonesian does not usually specify tenses. The assumption permits use of the rhyme word “from”; it is lexically quite as justifiable as the assumption of a present tense would be. More importantly, as well as more basically, the translation follows a metrical pattern familiar to all readers of English balladry, namely, first and third lines of four metrical feet, second and fourth lines of three metrical feet. (Basically iambic, as of course the English language itself is, the translation has three trochaic substitutions, at the start of lines 1 and 2, and internally in the third foot of line 1, where the line—like the Indonesian original—repeats itself syntactically. Trochaic substitutions, especially in the first foot of a line, are of course so frequent in English prosodic tradition as almost to be as regular as the iambic

feet they replace.) Again: the single most important fact of the translation is exactly this use of a ballad metric, for it explicitly recognizes that comparability of forms requires, when possible, the use of forms that more or less evoke the same genre-feeling in the host language as they evoke in the original. It might be possible, surely, to produce a better piece of poetry in the translation, if this requirement were to be scanted, but comparability would be sharply reduced. For example:

Where have you come from? Where will you go?  
 Grass grows taller than grain. What year will it be,  
 What month will it be,  
 When we come together again?

This version, which I have just concocted, does preserve the lexical shape of the original; it also keeps a bit of the rhyme. And it may well be, as I say, somewhat better poetry. But it is obviously, indeed flagrantly less *like* the original, in the basic structural sense. The repetitions in lines 1 and 2, and in lines 4 and 5, also preserve something of the folk character of the original; again, this version seems to me to preserve less of the original than a structurally parallel version like my first one. And that, I would argue, is inevitable and unavoidable, for poetry is structure and genre quite as much as it is individual words or even syntactical patterns, and oral and oral-connected poetry, as I shall hereafter argue, is even more structure- and genre-dependent than is strictly lettered poetry.

### III.

Longer poems, and especially more sophisticated poems, with more and more admixture of written literature's approaches and devices, require the translator to scramble a good deal more flexibly. Nor do we need to move to a full-length epic to exhibit this difficulty. Indeed, we can choose one of the few Old English works we know pretty reliably to have been composed orally, and by an illiterate, namely the poem we now call "Caedmon's Hymn" (see, e.g., Fry 1974 and 1981). But we also need to note that Caedmon surely learned his poetic techniques in some significant

part from learned monks, whose ultimate literary ancestors were oral bards (or *scops*), but whose poetry just as surely reflected a whole battery of lettered influences. Caedmon, that is, is an oral poet shaped by lettered poets who were in turn shaped in good part by both oral and lettered influences.

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,  
 meotodes meahte and his modgethanc,  
 weorc wuldorfaeder, swa he wundra gehwaes,  
 ece drihten, or onstealde.  
 He aereþ sceop eorþan bearnum  
 heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend;  
 tha middangeard moncynnes weard,  
 ece drihten, aefter teode  
 firum foldan, frea aelmihtig.

(West Saxon version, typographically  
 normalized; see Dobbie 1942:106)

In plain prose, arranged to follow the original's lineation:

Now should (must) we praise the lord (keeper, guard) of heaven,  
 the power (strength) of God (the creator; fate) and his thought,  
 the work (action, labor) of the glorious father, as he all (each  
     one of the) wonders (marvels, miracles),  
 eternal (everlasting) lord, in the beginning created (established).  
 First he shaped (created, formed) for the sons of earth  
 heaven as a roof (summit), holy creator;  
 then the earth (world) mankind's guardian,  
 eternal (everlasting) lord, afterwards created (intended, appointed)  
 the land for men (mankind), lord (king, ruler) almighty.

Large cosmological matters, and large theological ones, are here handled with great sureness and, equally, with immense conviction. The stuff of the poet's belief, that is, is of no greater importance for the poem than the quality of his belief, its intensity and persuasive power. It is a noble and a memorable poem—as is witnessed by the fact that no less than seventeen manuscript versions have survived (thirteen in the West Saxon version here reproduced; summary in Dobbie 1942:xciv). People obviously listened to, and read, this nine-line hymn with engaged, devoted attention.

It seems to me indisputable as well as completely sensible to say with John Foley (1983:206) that “the phraseology is most productively understood not as a collection of prefabricated units

ready to hand, but as a living tissue of language with genetic associations.” The signs of oral connection are of course different, here, than in either the *Slovo* or the *pantun*. Caedmon’s poem employs formulaic or formula-like expressions, and a prosodic patterning which joins stressed syllables within a line by means of alliteration. It is next to impossible to fully evaluate just how truly oral a poet Caedmon was, for just as we lack much understanding of the background to the *Slovo*, so too we do not know a great deal about Caedmon, his training, just what he had heard and what not heard, to whom he talked, by whom he might have been instructed, and so on.<sup>3</sup> We lack almost entirely the poems that preceded and were contemporaneous with the *Slovo*; we have some but by no means all the poems that were roughly contemporary with “Caedmon’s Hymn,” and that deficiency makes it impossible to be authoritative about what is and what is not formulaic in the poem. In translating it, accordingly, we have to reckon not only with assorted uncertainties, but also with the imprecise certainty that it is in part an oral poem, that it is connected to all sorts of other poems in the same tradition, some of which we know, most of which we probably do not and never will know, and also that “Caedmon’s Hymn” is, as I have said, doctrinally and cosmologically distinctly sophisticated. Its diction fairly rings with echoes both poetic and theological/philosophical. And yet that direction, at the same time, resonates quite as fervently with the strength and joy of Caedmon’s personal faith.

Now we must praise the Ruler of Heaven  
 The might of the Lord and His purpose of mind,  
 The work of the Glorious Father; for He,  
 God Eternal, established each wonder,  
 He, Holy Creator, first fashioned the heavens  
 As a roof for the children of earth.  
 And then our guardian, the Everlasting Lord,  
 Adorned this middle-earth for men.  
 Praise the Almighty King of Heaven.

(Crossley-Holland 1965:95)

This translation is by Kevin Crossley-Holland; it dates from 1965 and is plainly very competent. I want however neither to praise nor to damn it, but only to try to understand, from the perspectives so far here employed, what its rationale is and is not. The Old English *scop* employs three large phrase units (which is

what contemporary poets are apt to call breath units), the first of four, the second of two, the third of three lines. Crossley-Holland uses four phrase units, the first of almost three lines, the second of just over three, the third of two, and the last of just a single line. His is a similar patterning, though not identical; since however there is no reason to think the *scop*'s phrase units inherently fixed, such minor variations are in one way unimportant. More significant by far are the particular rhythmic effects aimed at, and created, by the translation's use of phrase units. That is, whatever Caedmon's models (and we do not know what they were, or whether he indeed had any), he obviously aimed at a series of sweeping, piled-up phrasal units, with all the usual repetitions and sideways poetic movement (as opposed, that is, to straight-ahead, linear movement) that we inevitably and correctly associate with Old English poetry generally. The translator has plainly sensed this rhythmic intention and done his best to reproduce it. His one-line final phrase unit, however, seems just as plainly a totally different sort of verse movement from Caedmon's. It may not be a crucial difference, but it is quite unlike the original's more modular effect, built like a series of waves, each sweeping in to the shore, rather than on such neat, single, separate assertions.

The *scop*'s architectonic, as opposed to his strictly architectural, patternings are however partially ignored in this translation. We have replication of the formulaic phrasing; we do not have any replication of the stress-alliteration prosody. One can argue that Old English prosody no longer exists, in the language that modern English has become. The answer, however, must I think be that we need not attempt fully to re-create it in the different language we work in, but only suggest it, re-create it to the extent feasible. The loss of stress-alliteration seems to me distinctly critical, and a serious deficiency in the translation.

Lexically—and I trust it is plain that lexical considerations are a second order of consideration: structure and genre most emphatically come first—the variations are somewhat more serious. And they fit, it seems to me, a doctrinal pattern. *Weard* comes to us as “ruler” rather than as “lord, guard, keeper.” *Drihten* (commonly used for both secular and sacred monarchs) comes to us as “god” rather than “lord.” *Teode* comes to us as a distinctly King-James-Bible-sounding “adorned” rather than as “created, intended.” And *frea*, “lord, king,” which is sufficient for the *scop*, comes to us as “*King of Heaven*” (italics added). These variations

create an oddly late-nineteenth-century verbal atmosphere—at the same time, too, as the rendering of *middangeard* as “middle-earth” rather than “earth, world” sounds a note of antiquarian preciousness which is sharply out of key with both the original and with the general tone of the translation itself. There is some sense, too, of lexical inconsistency, with words like “established,” “fashioned,” and “adorned” being somewhat more formal than the rest of the translation’s vocabulary—as well as distinctly stiffer, more constrained, less “popular,” even less colloquial, than their Old English equivalents, *onstealde*, *sceop*, and *teode*.

The essential competency of the translation, however, becomes clear when we compare it to what has sometimes been done with the poem. Here for example is the rendering of Richard Hamer (1970:123), who sees very fully the structural principles involved but who totally fails to embody them lexically:

Now must we praise the Guardian of heaven,  
The power and conception of the Lord,  
And all His works, as He, eternal Lord,  
Father of glory, started every wonder.  
First He created heaven as a roof,  
The Holy Maker, for the sons of men.  
Then the eternal Keeper of mankind  
Furnished the earth below, the land for men,  
Almighty God and everlasting Lord.

All the same, note how the verse movement of the last three lines here, no matter how dull and flatfooted the translation as a whole, far exceeds Crossley-Holland’s in both inherent sweep and in accurate reflection of the original. Structural matters, again, almost automatically take precedence over merely lexical ones in this sort of poetry, despite the equally obvious fact that inadequate handling at the lexical level can ruin a sound structural perception. Had Hamer made some attempt to echo the stress-alliteration pattern, which in fact he ignores quite as steadfastly (and erroneously) as does Crossley-Holland, he could have much improved the translation. Its general insensitivity, however, seems clear. One can acquire some notion of the original from Crossley-Holland. One can acquire very little notion of the original from Hamer.

Now sing the glory of God, the King  
Of Heaven, our Father’s power and His perfect

Labor, the world's conception, worked  
 In miracles as eternity's Lord made  
 The beginning. First the heavens were formed as a roof  
 For men, and then the holy Creator,  
 Eternal Lord and protector of souls,  
 Shaped our earth, prepared our home,  
 The almighty Master, our Prince, our God.

(Raffel 1964:21)

This translation, now thirty years old (though it was not published until 1960), is one for which I am myself responsible. It makes use of only two phrase unit structures, one just over four lines long, the second just under five lines long. In strictly numerical terms, plainly, this is neither closer to nor farther from the phrase unit arrangement of the original than is Crossley-Holland's rendering, which as I have noted consists of four units of just under three lines, just over three lines, then of two lines, and finally of one line. The original, once more, has three phrase units, of four, two, and then of three lines. But numerical terms hardly settle the issue, for as I have said Crossley-Holland's final phrase unit, consisting of but a single line, does not accurately reflect the verse movement of the original. I would argue—quite apart from my own authorship of the translation—that my version does in fact capture more of the basic structural sweep of the Old English. Furthermore, the second of the original's primary attributes, namely its stress-alliteration prosody, is distinctly echoed, if not entirely accurately replicated. (The four-stress pattern, too, is more carefully adhered to than in Crossley-Holland, where lines 5 through 8 are of dubious four-stress authenticity.) Only lines 5 through 8 do not preserve some clear stress-alliterative patterning, and even these lines at least hint at what they do not quite effect. Line 5 has /f/ as the initial sound of the third stressed word in the line, and /f/ as the final sound of the fourth stressed word. Line 6 substitutes rhyme for stress-alliteration, in the first two stressed words, just as line 7 blends /l/ and /r/ to at least suggest stress-alliteration, and line 8 uses /r/ to the same impressionistic but nevertheless palpable effect.

Lexically, though it may seem somewhat less close to the original, the translation follows a deliberate course that may not at first seem apparent, namely, an attempt to replicate key Old English words with a small cluster of alternate meanings, rather

than merely rendering them word for word, and a parallel attempt to use modest syntactic rearrangement to replicate more of the lexical variety of the original. Modern English is of course a very great deal freer in its word arrangements, having a decidedly analytical syntax and employing many fewer morphological markings to indicate a word's function. And Old English poetry is notorious for its insistent delight in multiple iteration of essentially the same thing. "Heofonrices weard," in line 1, is thus rendered doubly as "God, the King/Of Heaven"; *frea aelmihtig*, in line 9, becomes "The almighty Master, Our Prince, our God." "Prince" evokes some of the dual sense of *drihten*, in line 4, just as *frea*, which Crossley-Holland correctly renders "King," here evokes "Master," making a total of nine epithets for God in this translation, as against a total of seven in Crossley-Holland and eight in the original. *Wuldorfaeder*, in line 3, is divided among "the glory of God," in line 1 of the translation and "our Father's power," in line 2 of the translation. *Modgethanc* in line 2 and *weorc* in line 3 become, in the translation, "the world's conception" and "His perfect labor."

In short, the translation attempts to incorporate structural and lexical features of the Old English original, adapting those features to the very different linguistic nature of modern English. The verse movement of the partially oral original is not precisely recreated, but it is echoed—and, just as importantly, it is never contravened, as it is in the last line of Crossley-Holland's version. Literary tone and rhetoric, too, are adapted rather than precisely replicated.

However, there is I think nothing internally inconsistent in the presentation of rhetoric and tone, as there is in line 8 of Crossley-Holland and in certain of his lexical choices. Just as the original is internally consistent, so too must the translation be, if it is to convey in a new linguistic garb any of the authority of the original. Translation is surely approximation, but like Janus the translator must constantly be looking in both directions, carrying out of the original as much as he is able, but also creating in his translation a replica which can have some chance of standing for itself as well as for the original on which it is based.

This is in some ways doubly difficult, when that original incorporates indeterminate elements of two traditions, one oral, one lettered. But a scale of priorities—whether analytical and articulated or impressionistic and unstated: it does not matter, to



my mind, so long as the scale is basically accurate, and so long as the resultant translation works—can do a great deal to help point the way. For oral or oral-connected poetry, as I have argued, the two highest priority items on that scale must be genre and structure, with the latter incorporating both formal external structure and such internal structuring devices as stress-alliteration, in Old English poetry, or balanced eight-syllable lines, in Indonesian forms like the *pantun*.

Indeed, the translator of oral or oral-connected poetry who keeps his priorities right can succeed, I firmly believe, far better than a perhaps more talented competitor who simply follows his nose (and his sometimes too contemporary inclinations). For those priorities reflect, and when properly framed accurately reflect, the true meaning of the word “tradition,” which is inevitably the single key word both in reading and in translating all oral and oral-connected literature (cp. Foley 1983:*passim*).

We cannot, either in reading or in translating, validly substitute our own basic priorities for those of the original poet: his priorities, functionally embedded in the operating forms of his culture and tradition, are in fact what “tradition” means to him. In seeking to understand another tradition, what more fundamental error could there be than replacing one set of basic priorities with another—thus effectively replacing one tradition with another? All cross-cultural, cross-traditional understanding ought to involve as little substitution, and as much replication, as can possibly be achieved.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Goldin 1955:22. See also Kellogg 1977, and especially Snyder 1982: “In a completely pre-literate society the oral tradition is not memorized, but *remembered*” (vii).

<sup>2</sup>Let me expressly exclude the intelligent and obviously *singable* translations of Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter. Dr. Apter, who is also the author of *Digging for the Treasure: Translation after Pound* (1984), observes in a letter to me, dated 5 May 1984, that while the translator of poetry “may choose to be tied to a syllable-for-syllable translation, or a stress-for-stress translation, he may choose to be free of both. The translator of lyrics [meant to be sung] has no such freedom. He must translate syllable-for-syllable, stress-for-stress (although the stress may be ordained by the music, rather than by the original words). He must crest meaning where the melodic line crests. Also, he must . . . [ask] can this syllable be held for two beats without sounding silly? Can the tenor get off this syllable in the space of an eighth note and take a catch breath?”

<sup>3</sup>All we really know is from Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, book iv, chapter 24; see Sherley-Price 1955:245-48.

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