



SEAMUS HEANEY
AND MEDIEVAL POETRY

CONOR MCCARTHY

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Seamus Heaney's engagement with medieval literature constitutes a significant body of work by a major poet that extends across four decades, including a landmark translation of *Beowulf*. This book, the first to look exclusively at Heaney's engagement with the poetry of the Middle Ages, examines both Heaney's direct translations and his adaptation of medieval material in his original poems. Each of the four chapters focuses substantially on a single major text: *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *Station Island* (1984), *Beowulf* (1999), and *The Testament of Cresseid* (2004). The discussion examines Heaney's translation practice in relation to source texts from a variety of languages (Irish, Italian, Old English, and Middle Scots) from across the medieval period, and also in relation to Heaney's own broader body of work. It suggests that Heaney's translations and adaptations give a contemporary voice to medieval texts, bringing the past to bear upon contemporary concerns both personal and political.

CONOR MCCARTHY's previous publications include *Love, Sex and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*, and *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice*.

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AND
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Conor McCarthy

D. S. BREWER

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Conor McCarthy
Sydney
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Abbreviations

<i>DIL</i>	<i>Dictionary of the Irish Language</i>
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Text Society
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>

Introduction

IT'S unlikely to be news to the general reader that Seamus Heaney is a distinguished translator of medieval poetry, for subsequent to its publication in 1999, Heaney's translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf* provoked extensive comment, garnered substantial sales, and won the Whitbread Prize.¹ Important as the *Beowulf* translation is, however, it is not the full extent of Heaney's engagement with medieval poetry. In 1983, Heaney published a translation of the medieval Irish *Buile Suibhne*,² and he has held an extensive dialogue with Dante's *Commedia* involving translation, adaptation, and allusion across three books in particular: *Field Work*, *Station Island*, and *Seeing Things*.³ Further to that, the *Beowulf* translation is not Heaney's most recent translation of a major work of medieval literature, for it has been followed by a modern English translation of Robert Henryson's Middle Scots text, *The Testament of Cresseid*.⁴ Heaney's translations and adaptations of medieval poetry, then, form a substantial body of work, drawn from across the medieval period and from a number of languages (Irish, Italian, Old English, Middle Scots), extending through much of his career.

These translations of medieval material are not the full extent of Heaney's translation work, of course, for Heaney's translations now make for a considerable list, and that list covers a number of categories: as well as medieval poetry, he has made translations from classical material, from Eastern European poetry, and from post-medieval poetry in Irish and Scots Gaelic. Reviewing Heaney's *Beowulf* translation in *The Irish Times* in 1999, Bernard O'Donoghue commented that 'from early in his career

¹ *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (London: Faber, 1999).

² Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (Derry: Field Day, 1983; London: Faber, 1984).

³ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979); Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984); Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991).

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Testament of Cresseid: A Retelling of Robert Henryson's Poem by Seamus Heaney with Images by Hughie O'Donoghue* (London: Enitharmon Editions, 2004).

Seamus Heaney has been recognised as a major critic as well as poet, in the great English tradition of artist/commentators from Sidney to Coleridge to Eliot. What has dawned on us more slowly is that he is also – to borrow a phrase used to describe Chaucer – a great translator.¹

It is my contention here that Heaney's engagement with medieval literature constitutes a significant body of work by a major poet, a body of work worthy of independent consideration, or at least semi-independent, for, as the discussion below argues at length, Heaney's original work and translation practice are mutually informing, and Heaney's engagement with the literature of the Middle Ages extends to adaptation and allusion as well as translation. This discussion looks in two directions in seeking to examine Heaney's use of the literature of the Middle Ages both in relation to the medieval source materials and with reference to Heaney's own broader body of work. Its focus is on four texts: the translation of *Buile Suibhne* and the accompanying adaptation of that work in the 'Sweeney Redivivus' sequence, the adaptation of Dante's *Commedia* in 'Station Island,' the *Beowulf* translation, and the recent translation of Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. In discussing these works, I argue here that the version of the medieval that Heaney presents to us is complex and multifaceted, a reality that is taken to be equal in complexity to our own, and hence a resource for understanding of our present circumstances. I further suggest that, because the medieval is brought to bear upon the contemporary in Heaney's work, there is an ongoing dialogue between the translations and the original poetry, a dialogue traced in some detail in the discussion that follows.

Echoes of the Middle Ages: translation, adaptation, allusion

Heaney's translations from medieval poetry begin with his version of the medieval Irish *Buile Suibhne*, published as *Sweeney Astray* in 1983. Both his translation of the story of Ugolino, from cantos xxxii and xxxiii of the *Inferno* (published as 'Ugolino' in *Field Work* in 1979),² and a translation of the Middle English short poem 'The Names of the Hare' (1981) actually saw print first, but Heaney had been working on *Sweeney Astray* for many years before its publication, and it's noticeable that in *Opened Ground*, Heaney's most recent gathering of his earlier work, the sequence of selections breaks chronological order just once, to give *Sweeney Astray* precedence

¹ Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Master's Voice-Right,' *Irish Times* (9 Oct. 1999).

² Heaney, *Field Work*, 61–64; Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber, 1998), 187–90.

over the Middle English poem.¹ Heaney also translated the opening cantos of Dante's *Inferno* around 1982–83, intending to embark upon a translation of the entire *Inferno*, but then abandoning the project.² His version of the first three cantos was published in 1993 as part of a collaborative translation of the *Inferno* edited by Daniel Halpern, fragments having previously appeared in other Heaney poems, and a portion of Canto III having formed the closing section of *Seeing Things* as 'The Crossing.'³ In 1999, Heaney published an award-winning translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*: again, this was a project on which he had originally embarked many years earlier, with a portion of the translation appearing in print as early as 1987 as 'The Ship of Death' in *The Haw Lantern*.⁴ Since then, there have been translations of Robert Henryson's Middle Scots poems *The Cock and the Jasp* and *The Testament of Cresseid*, with the suggestion that there might be more translations of Henryson's fables to come.⁵ Most recently, in April 2006, *Poetry* magazine published an issue on translation that opened with Heaney's version of the ninth-century Irish poem, 'Pangur Bán.'⁶

Heaney's engagement with medieval poetry as a translator, then, is considerable. But a consideration of the translations from medieval poetry on their own is clearly inadequate: the account of Heaney's engagement with Dante just given mentions the translations, but not the long adaptation of the *Commedia* in 'Station Island,' the critical essay on Dante, 'Envy and Identifications,' or the many allusions to Dante elsewhere in Heaney's poetry, particularly in *Field Work* and *Seeing Things*. An account of Heaney's responses to medieval poetry, then, also needs to take heed of the adaptations of medieval material in his original work. This is the case not least because of the extent to which Heaney writes other people's poetry into his own, just as, through his translation practice, he writes his own poetry into that of others. The extent of this intertextual give-and-take is visible across Heaney's work. In an overview of intertextual references in *North*, Neil Corcoran lists *Njal's Saga*, Tacitus' *Germania* and *Agricola*, *Hamlet*,

¹ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 191–211.

² Maria Cristina Fumagalli, *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and the Impress of Dante* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), 260, cites a letter of Heaney's saying 'after completing three cantos I reneged'; cf. Heaney's comment in 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet,' *Irish University Review* 15 (1985), 5–19 at 18, repr. in *Dante Readings*, ed. Eric Haywood (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1987), 29–46, that he had translated, but not published, the first four cantos.

³ *Dante's Inferno: Translations by Twenty Contemporary Poets*, ed. Daniel Halpern (New York: Ecco, 1993); Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 111–13.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), 22.

⁵ Heaney's *Testament* suggests (p. 8) a possible future book of *Four Fables and a Testament*.

⁶ 'Pangur Bán,' trans. Seamus Heaney, *Poetry* 188/1 (April 2006), 3–5.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Bede's *History of the English Church and People*, Yeats's poems and *Autobiographies*, writings by Walter Raleigh, John Aubrey, and Edmund Spenser, the Old English *Battle of Maldon*, Conor Cruise O'Brien's *States of Ireland*, Horace's *Odes*, R. H. Barrow's *The Romans*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Patrick Kavanagh, Hopkins's *Journals*, and Osip Mandelstam.¹ Bernard O'Donoghue has a similarly long list for *Station Island*;² equivalent lists might be compiled for most of Heaney's books.

While the list of Heaney's translations from medieval poetry is in itself substantial, then, it's a list that would be significantly lengthened if expanded to include all of Heaney's original poems that show the influence of the Middle Ages. That list would at least include the following: 'The Wanderer' from *Stations*, which draws on the Old English poem of the same name;³ 'Funeral Rites,' which retells a story from *Njal's Saga*, 'North' and 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces,' which draw on Viking archaeology, 'Bone Dreams,' which quotes a fragment of Old English and alludes to Bede, and 'Hercules and Antaeus,' which refers to *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and *The Battle of Maldon*, all from *North*;⁴ 'The Strand at Lough Beg,' which quotes from Dante (in Dorothy L. Sayers's translation) and alludes to *Buile Suibhne*, 'An Afterwards,' where Heaney imagines himself condemned to Dante's ninth circle of hell, 'Leavings,' which contains another reference to Dante's hell, the translation of the first line of the *Commedia* in 'September Song,' possible allusions to Dante in 'A Dream of Jealousy' and 'The Harvest Bow,' and a line quoted from James Stephens's version of the medieval Irish tale 'The Boyhood of Fionn,' all in *Field Work*;⁵ the allusion to the story of Guy de Montfort from the *Commedia* in 'Sandstone Keepsake,' and the direct reference to Dante in 'The Loaning,' the 'Station Island' sequence itself, which draws upon Dante's *Commedia*, and the subsequent 'Sweeney Redivivus' sequence, which draws on *Buile Suibhne*,

¹ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1998), 56.

² Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1994), 104.

³ Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 88.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), 15–24, 27–30, 52–53; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 96–III, 129–30.

⁵ Heaney, *Field Work*, 17–18, 43, 44, 50, 56, 57, 58; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 152–53, 173, 177, 181, 182, 183; for those possible allusions to Dante, see Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Dante's Versatility and Seamus Heaney's Modernism,' in *Dante's Modern Afterlife: Reception and Response from Blake to Heaney*, ed. Nick Havelly (London: Macmillan, 1998), 242–57 at 244–45; the phrase from James Stephens's *Irish Fairy Stories* is from the words of Fionn when asked what is the finest music: 'The music of what happens,' said great Fionn, 'that is the finest music in the world.'

all in *Station Island*;¹ the figure of Larkin quoting (Heaney's translation of) Dante in 'The Journey Back,' the story of Thor, Hymer, and the world-serpent in 'A Haul,' the allusion to the *Purgatorio* in 'The Biretta,' the quotation from the opening line of the *Commedia* in 'The Schoolbag,' the medieval otherworldly vision in 'Lightenings' viii, the mention of Snorri Sturluson in 'Settings' xxiii, the suggestion of Dante in 'Crossings' xxvi, followed by the allusion in 'Crossings' xxxvi, and the reference back to 'The Names of the Hare' in 'Squarings' xliii, all from *Seeing Things*;² the retelling of a story from Gerald of Wales in 'St Kevin and the Blackbird,' the allusion to *Sweeney Astray* and the quotation from Dante in 'The Flight Path,' 'Whitby-sur-Moyola' and its version of the Cædmon story from Bede, and the story of the seventh-century Saint Adamnan from 'The Thimble' in *The Spirit Level*;³ from *Electric Light*, the allusions to *Beowulf* in 'The Border Campaign' and 'On his Work in the English Tongue,' the echo of Dante in 'The Gaeltacht,' the allusion to Bede in 'The Bookcase,' and the references in 'Ten Glosses' to both Moling (he of *Sweeney Astray*) and Gerald of Wales;⁴ and, from *District and Circle*, the references to the Vikings in 'Out of Shot' and to the fifteenth-century English poem 'Smoke Blackened Smiths' in 'Midnight Anvil.'⁵

Medieval resonances: the personal and the political

Heaney himself, commenting on Yeats's poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' and that poem's representation of Dante, notes that 'when poets turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures.'⁶ This is true of Heaney no less than it is of Yeats, and the uses to which Heaney puts medieval literature extend to the personal. There is a sense of identification or empathy to be found between Heaney himself and figures as diverse as Suibhne Geilt, Dante Alighieri, and Cædmon, and notwithstanding the complexities attached to the first-person pronoun in Heaney's use of it, Heaney can be seen to write versions of himself into several of the works discussed below. The figure

¹ Heaney, *Station Island*, 20, 61–121; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 217, 242–88.

² Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 7, 12, 26–27, 30, 62, 79, 94, 103; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 364, 380, 387.

³ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), 20–21, 22–26, 41, 42–43; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410–13, 425.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), 18, 44, 51–52, 54–56.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 15, 26–27.

⁶ Heaney, 'Envy and Identifications,' 5.

of Sweeney is, among other things, an autobiographical self-projection for Heaney; the 'Station Island' sequence is, in part, a sort of personal purgation; the *Beowulf* translation sees Heaney write his personal foundations, in the form of his home place of Mossbawn, into the foundations of literature in English; and the figure of Cresseid, while not a self-projection along the lines of the Sweeney figure, is, like Sweeney, one of a sequence of outcast figures treated with empathy in Heaney's work.

If Heaney writes himself into his versions of medieval texts, there is also a give-and-take between the translations and the original poetry. Not only does Heaney's original work draw upon the work of translation (as in the 'Sweeney Redivivus' sequence, for example, where the character of Sweeney from Heaney's translation of the medieval Irish text *Buile Suibhne* appears in a sequence of original poems), and sometimes eclipse it (as in Heaney's debts to Dante, where fragments of translation from *Inferno* I–III are incorporated into the wider body of work across several volumes, while the translation itself is published only in retrospect), but the translations themselves echo and resonate with the original work (as with the *Beowulf* translation's clearly signalled debts to Heaney's earlier bog poems).

If Heaney's translations and adaptations use medieval texts to give expression to themes of personal relevance, they also bring medieval texts to bear upon political concerns. In his survey of Irish translation practice, Michael Cronin has argued that the motivation for the turn to translation visible in the work of a number of contemporary Northern Irish poets, including Heaney, has been threefold. First, Irish writing in English has engaged through translation in a dialogue with the Irish language, the other vernacular on the island, a dialogue Cronin sees as an act of self-understanding. Secondly, there is translation as liberation, an escape from Irish politics and history into other worlds of language and expression. Thirdly, there is the use of translation as an indirect means of addressing the Northern Irish conflict.¹ My discussion below approaches Heaney's translation practice in relation to this third motivation for translation as identified by Cronin by focusing on how Heaney has brought medieval literary texts to bear upon contemporary issues, and in particular upon the problems that afflicted Northern Ireland during twenty-five years of conflict from 1969 to 1994. In doing so, the discussion here views Heaney's translation practice as one where the translated texts share the concerns of his original work: as such, the conflict in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1994 and the subsequent attempts to reach a political settlement are

¹ Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 181.

seen a substantial factor in the translations, just as they are in his original poems.

Heaney has been explicit in stating that the original motivation for his translation of *Buile Suibhne* was political. He comments that he began the translation at a time when writers sought ‘images and analogies that could ease the strain of the present,’ and he asked himself how *Buile Suibhne* could be seen as relating to contemporary Ulster: ‘what had all this amalgam in verse and prose to do with me or the moment? How could a text engendered within the Gaelic order of medieval Ireland speak to a modern Ulster audience riven by divisions resulting from the final destruction of that order? [...] What had the translation of the tale of a Celtic wild man to do with the devastations of the new wild men of the Provisional IRA?’¹ That said, however, the essay in which Heaney poses these questions provides more than one answer to the questions posed, and the differing answers express a tension visible through much of Heaney’s work, between a desire for a poetry that engages with the demands of the present and a competing desire for a transcendent poetry concerned with an art that can surpass all that. If the questions posed here suggest a desire to bring the literature of the past to bear on present concerns, the essay also expresses a desire for the translation to be a thing in itself, ‘a poem from beyond’ as Heaney puts it.² Heaney’s translation of *Buile Suibhne*, then, fits to a certain extent all three of Cronin’s categories – a translation into English from Irish literature, it encompasses a tension between a political and a transcendent poetry.

Medieval multiplicities

Heaney’s translations of and adaptations from medieval literature represent the Middle Ages not as premodern and monocultural, or as some prelapsarian point of origin, but as a multicultural and complex reality equivalent to our own. Although Heaney’s work engages significantly with medieval literature, it’s not surprising to find that his critical writing doesn’t discuss the medieval *per se*: the medieval literature that Heaney translates and alludes to is seen as being of relevance to contemporary concerns rather than demarcated as separate from them. In his introduction to the *Beowulf* translation, Heaney argues that as a work of art, the poem

¹ Seamus Heaney, ‘Earning a Rhyme,’ in Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (London: Faber, 2002), 59–66 at 60–61, first published in *Poetry Ireland Review* (Spring 1989).

² Heaney, ‘Earning a Rhyme,’ 65.

'lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time' (p. ix).¹ The implication of this is not that art is timeless and unchanging; rather, it is that the poem is as much a complex response to a complex reality as any piece of contemporary writing could be. Given that the medieval is often thought of as being both premodern and marginal,² this is a challenging assertion that a medieval text can be expressive of a complex understanding of a reality of equal value to our own.

The sense of diversity present in Heaney's engagement with medieval poetry is evident in several ways. First, it's noticeable that Heaney's work does not seek to produce a single, stable, fixed reworking of a medieval text, but rather constitutes an ongoing engagement with the source texts. Heaney says in his introduction to *Sweeney's Flight* that 'in the case of translation, it is even truer than usual that a poem is never completed, merely abandoned,'³ and if that is the case, what is abandoned is also revisited. His translation of *Buile Suibhne* produces not one text, but several – the *Sweeney Astray* translation published in 1983 (itself a second attempt at the translation), an adaptation of the Sweeney story for autobiographical purposes in the 'Sweeney Redivivus' sequence from *Station Island* (autobiographical purposes that are revisited again briefly in section three of 'The Flight Path' from *The Spirit Level*), the inclusion of echoes of Sweeney in the other *Station Island* poems, including the title sequence, a selection of portions of the translation (slightly revised) to accompany Rachel Giese's images in *Sweeney's Flight*, and the revision of the entire translation for that same collaboration. The adaptation and translation of Dante in both 'The Strand at Lough Beg' and 'Ugolino' in *Field Work* is similarly revisited in later poems when 'Station Island' and 'The Flight Path' both react to and rework these poems; aside from these specific instances of reworkings of earlier responses to Dante, Heaney's engagement with Dante in general is both multifaceted and ongoing. More recently, the *Beowulf* translation is striking not just for what the text does in reimagining an Old English poem in a way that bears upon the concerns of Ulster at the end of the second millenium, but for the introduction's opening up of a range of further alternative imaginative spaces, from *bunraku* to animation, where *Beowulf* might be reimagined, further translated, and reworked again (p. xiii). Parts

¹ Heaney may have in mind here Mandelstam's comment on Dante: 'Dante is an antimodernist. His contemporaneity is inexhaustible, measureless, and unending'; Osip Mandelstam, 'Conversation about Dante', trans. Clarence Brown and Robert Hughes, in *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays*, trans. Sidney Monas (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1977), 3–44 at 24.

² On which see Lee Patterson, 'On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,' *Speculum* 65 (1990), 87–108.

³ Seamus Heaney and Rachel Giese, *Sweeney's Flight* (London: Faber, 1992), p. vii.

of the *Beowulf* translation also appear elsewhere in Heaney's poetry (in 1987's *The Haw Lantern* and 2001's *Electric Light*), as earlier or later drafts, with the text slightly reworked – here, again, the translation is something open to revision, rather than fixed in print. Given also that the *Beowulf* translation revisits the concerns of Heaney's earlier engagement with Germanic literatures in *North*, it's possible to suggest that the 1999 translation is a re-engagement with a set of concerns visible since the 1970s.¹ This circling back and reworking of earlier translations extends even to 'The Names of the Hare,' a brief piece of Middle English linguistic exuberance translated in 1981 and revisited in 'Squarings' xliii from *Seeing Things*.²

Further to this ability to produce multiple responses to a given medieval text, Heaney's translation practice embodies a commitment to vernacularity in which linguistic diversity is a prominent feature, a stance that has its debts to Dante among others. This commitment to linguistic diversity has posed challenges: if the medieval is often thought of as premodern and hence marginal, it can also (paradoxically) be thought of as foundational, and so reworkings of medieval texts that challenge what seem from a contemporary perspective to be linear narratives of cultural evolution can impinge upon contemporary notions of identity. This was noticeably the case for Heaney's use of an Irish-inflected vernacular in translating *Beowulf*, a poem thought to be inaccessible to contemporary English speakers but at the same time at least potentially foundational for English cultural identity, and both Heaney himself and the translation's many commentators and reviewers have felt it necessary to discuss the implications of an Irish poet translating an Anglo-Saxon poem into an Irish-inflected English. The question is partly one of the language chosen: another popular translation of a foundational medieval English text by an Irish writer, Nevill Coghill's translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, poses no such problems given its choice of 'standard' English, which does not threaten to disrupt a sense of a linear literary tradition.³ Heaney's rendering of *Beowulf* in an English inflected with an Ulster vernacular raises the question of the claim which speakers of non-standard English might have upon the English literary canon. Rather than adopting an adversarial stance, however,

¹ Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 228, makes the case for *Beowulf* as one of Heaney's 'major preoccupations.'

² Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 209–11, 387; Heaney, *Seeing Things*, 103.

³ On Coghill's translation and criticisms of it, see Steve Ellis, *Chaucer at Large: The Poet in the Modern Imagination*, Medieval Cultures 24 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 98–120; for Coghill's biography, see John Carey, 'Coghill, Nevill Henry Kendal Aylmer (1899–1980),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Heaney's embrace of linguistic diversity in translating an Old English text is a gesture towards breaking down the barriers that are perceived to exist between Irish and English, an attempt to move past the either/or positions that define English and Irish as adversarial and opposing terms. His commitment to linguistic pluralism is a way of overcoming a binary view of English and Irish, in favour of what he refers to in the introduction to the *Beowulf* translation as an unpartitioned linguistic country, where language is not a badge of identity but an entry into further language (p. xxv).

Heaney's commitment to linguistic diversity, and his refusal of a separation between literatures in Irish and English, is also something visible when the translation process moves in the opposite direction, whether in *Sweeney Astray*, where the translation includes echoes of Irish but also Ulster dialect words of Old English and Scots origin, or in the recent translation of the short medieval Irish poem 'Pangur Bán,' where a canonical medieval Irish poem is placed in relation to what Heaney calls the 'big cat English' of Blake's 'The Tyger' (p. 5).¹ Nor is this advocacy of a dialogue between poetic cultures something artificially imposed by the translation on the medieval source text. Heaney (following earlier commentators) notes that the name of the cat, *Pangur Bán*, 'White Pangur,' comes from an old spelling of the Welsh word for 'fuller' (p. 5), and this linguistic echo, along with the location of the poem's composition in Carinthia (modern-day Austria), emphasises that the poem is multicultural to start with.

Important in this refusal of a separation of cultures is Heaney's advocacy of what he calls the 'through-other,' a strategy discussed specifically in relation to the *Beowulf* translation, but perhaps visible elsewhere in Heaney's responses to the medieval, as in his retelling of an Irish story via Gerald of Wales in 'Saint Kevin and the Blackbird'² (Gerald of Wales being, among other things, the chronicler of the 1169 incursion of the Anglo-Normans into Irish affairs, which served as a point of origin for all that followed). This notion of the 'through-other' is also present in Heaney's self-identification with the Anglo-Saxon cowherd turned poet, Cædmon, in 'Whitby-sur-Moyola,'³ although Cædmon may himself be

¹ There is a point of connection between these two medieval Irish poems translated by Heaney: a fragment of a ninth-century version of *Buile Suibhne* is preserved in the same manuscript as *Pangur Bán*: the fragment is translated into English in *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, ed. and trans. David Greene and Frank O'Connor (London: Macmillan, 1967), 100–101; the manuscript's contents are discussed in the second chapter of Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947), 24–66.

² Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 20–21; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 410–11; the source of the story retold by Heaney here is Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, trans. John J. O'Meara (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 77–79.

³ Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 41; Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 425.

an example of the ‘through-other,’ because, as Chris Jones explains, his name is of British rather than Anglo-Saxon origin, and so it’s possible that, for Heaney, the founding text of English literature (Cædmon’s ‘Hymn’) comes ‘with its cultural margins already built into its centre.’¹ Heaney’s advocacy of the ‘through-other’ also seems in keeping with an earlier motif where the act of imagination is conceived of as being analogous to boundary-crossing, something visible for instance in the poems ‘Terminus’ and ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ from *The Haw Lantern*, and in the similarly titled essay ‘Frontiers of Writing’ from *The Redress of Poetry*.² The crossing of boundaries is something particularly evident in the act of translation, etymologically a carrying across, and at the end of ‘Frontiers of Writing,’ Heaney brings this motif of boundary crossing to bear upon a retelling of a narrative of crossing between this world and the next, itself a translation from a medieval Irish text.³

The complexity of Heaney’s response to the medieval, however, extends not only to his ability to produce multiple responses over time to individual source texts, or to his ability to give a view of medieval texts as being multicultural rather than monocultural in their affinities and resonances. It also extends to the complex layerings visible within the poetry, as medieval texts are given a contemporary voice and brought to bear upon contemporary concerns. An example might be the opening of ‘Station Island.’ The poem is an account of a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, set in the present, and concerned at least in part with contemporary social and political issues, in particular Irish Catholicism and the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is also, however, an adaptation in an Irish context of Dante’s *Commedia*: the narrative of ‘Station Island’ describes the poet’s encounters with multiple revenants, and there are allusions to and quotations from Dante in the text. The poem opens with the figure of Simon Sweeney, a woodcutter, a character reminiscent of the medieval Ulster king from *Sweeney Astray*, of the similar figure invoked in the poem ‘The King of the Ditchbacks,’ of Dante as described by Osip Mandelstam, and

¹ Jones, *Strange Likeness*, 184–86; note Jones’s caveat (184 n.) regarding this possibility.

² Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 4–7, Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 295–98; Seamus Heaney, ‘Frontiers of Writing,’ in Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), 186–203.

³ ‘Lightenings’ viii, which Heaney quotes at the end of his essay, is a loose translation from an Old Irish anecdote found in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, iii, ed. O. J. Bergin, R. I. Best, Kuno Meyer, J. G. O’Keeffe (Halle: Max Niemeyer; Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1910), 8–9: see the archives of the Old Irish discussion list at <https://listserv.heanet.ie/old-irish-1.html> for June 2000 (Dennis King’s posting on 20 June to the thread ‘Minks [mistake for Monks] at Clonmacnoise’), which identifies this text as the source for Heaney’s poem.

others. Sweeney is elsewhere reminiscent of the figure of the Wanderer from the Anglo-Saxon poem of that name, of Ulysses, of Icarus, and of Heaney himself. This procedure of creating compound allusions extends to characterisation and to intertextual allusion, and like Heaney's practice of revisiting and reworking the same material in different ways, produces complex layers of comparison. This process of layering, of producing multiple echoes, is something visible in many of the texts discussed below, not least where Heaney writes echoes of his original poetry into his translations and adaptations from the medieval.

Heaney's engagement with medieval literature is not merely significant and enduring, but also coherent, in that the complexity of his response to medieval literature is something in evidence from the very outset. Heaney's use of medieval texts to address contemporary concerns, both personal and political, his establishment of a dialogue between his original work and his translation practice, his representation of medieval texts as multicultural rather than monocultural in their affinities, and his willingness to produce multiple and diverse responses to a given medieval source text: all of this is present right at the beginning, with Heaney's self-projection as the exiled Sweeney in *Sweeney Astray*.