'Seeing a Picture Before Us': Tolkien's commentary in his translation of *Beowulf*

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Tolkien's commentary on *Beowulf* is rich in ideas and insights on the poem itself but also revealing of Tolkien's ideas as a thinker, literary critic and writer.[1] In his university lectures, now edited to form the commentary, we hear him exploring the world of the poem through the so-called *cruces*, the difficult words and expressions that need elucidation if we are fully to understand the text and the culture that it depicts. Famous words that he tackles are *meodosetl, duguth, wyrd, fæge, gydd* (for his comments see pp. 140, 205, 243-5, 259 and 260). Most of these cruces are well known to students of the poem *Beowulf* but I think that Tolkien's contributions are always refreshing, and sometimes also enlightening, for example when he offers 'new' interpretations of *fyrwyt* as meaning 'anxiety' (p. 195) and of *gilpcwide* not only as 'proud speech', a common gloss, but also as 'exultation' (p. 223).

In his essay on translating *Beowulf* in the book *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* Tolkien wrote eloquently of the poet's use of condensed poetic phrases and compounds: two words conjoined are used to 'flash […] a picture before us, often the more clear and bright for its brevity'. These poetic compounds (termed *kennings*) – these small, brief pictures – accumulate to form a much larger panorama of the world of the poem and the role of human beings within it. For an example one might think of the kenning *hronrad*, often rendered 'whale-road' by other translators of the poem. But as Britton Brooks shows in this issue of *Mallorn*, Tolkien in his translation very often expands these kennings into short explanatory phrases. So also here Tolkien translates the expression *ofer hronrade* (line *10 of the poem) as 'over the sea where the whale rides' (lines 7-8 of his translation).[2] And in his commentary (p. 142), he adds the insight that *hron* denotes not necessarily mean a whale but a smaller member of the whale family, and he emphasises that *rad* though the ancestor of modern *road* does not mean simplistically 'road' but rather the 'action of riding'. Instead, the expression *hron-rad* evokes a picture of the watery fields where the dolphins play, or where they seem 'to gallop like a line of riders on the watery plains'. Horsemanship on the wide plains (echoes of Rohan here?) is here interpreted as the *Beowulf* poet's unique metaphor for describing the sea.

Another technique that the *Beowulf* poet employs has been compared to that of a movie camera. A classic case would be the way the poet shows the monster Grendel setting off to attack the hall, then immediately cuts to the hall itself and the sleeping men, all asleep except Beowulf himself, who is waiting for Grendel; the poet then cuts back to Grendel again setting off to attack the hall. The effect is to heighten the tension. In another example, the 'film-maker' wants to convey the awe-inspiring impression made by a band of approaching warriors in full and rich war-gear; accordingly the camera 'zooms in' on a bright mailcoat as it shone in the sun (line *321), or on the skilfully wrought iron link in that mailcoat as it jangled or 'sang' as the warrior moved (*323). In order to capture the way the poet focusses on one single artefact or detail of that artefact, Tolkien employs the term 'the representative singular' (p. 202). The zooming-in on one single mailcoat is used to represent the sights and sounds of all fifteen armoured men as they march towards the hall.

Scribal Errors

A similar effect occurs in a description of a helmet just a little earlier in the poem (translation 246-8; poem *303-6). Generally, as a philologist, Tolkien saw his task as the recovery of the original text as written by the author, and in the case of *Beowulf* he thinks the poet wrote perhaps 250 years before the actual copy was made by the two late tenth-century scribes. Like all medieval scribes, these two copyists sometimes made errors or mistakes and sometimes reinterpreted and rationalised what they copied because the word or image was no longer current in their own day in the tenth century. In the description of the helmet, then, Tolkien uncovers another example of the representative singular which the scribe had missed. Correcting the error, Tolkien amends the original Old English text, explaining his rationale in the commentary. The scene is the arrival in Denmark: the Geats disembark and parley with the Danish coastguard, who grants them passage, and they set off from the shore in their full war gear for the king's court. In the description of the helmet Tolkien's translation reads: 'fierce and challenging war-mask kept guard over life' (line 248). For 'war-mask', the scribe actually wrote *grummon* (line *306), which could mean 'they raged forward, hurried on', though most editors feel that the word does not fit. In a modern popular student edition, George Jack rewrites the word as *grimmon* meaning 'for the fierce ones'. Thinking of the boar images on the cheek guards of the helmet Jack translates metaphorically or perhaps even magically: 'the boar, of warlike spirit, kept guard over life for the fierce warriors.'[3] Tolkien in his commentary prefers to amend to *gríma*, which means another part of the helmet, the mask or vizor covering the face. By restoring the corrupt text in this way, Tolkien is more in spirit with the style of the passage and its use of the concrete detail, the representative singular; he shows us that the poet's focus was on one single war-mask whose purpose was to protect, to 'keep guard over life'.

It will be seen then that Tolkien's commentary pays close attention to the fine detail of the poem but he also likes to picture a whole scene. In his reading of the earlier exchange

between Beowulf and the coastguard, for example, when the coastguard had to challenge the newcomers and assess their credentials, Tolkien observes not only the careful weighing of words and the cloaking of the hostile challenge in courteous phrases, but also the 'blocking' of the scene – in terms of where and how each person is standing. For Tolkien it is obvious (p. 196) that the coastguard was driven by *fyrwyt* i.e. anxiety, to know who and what these fifteen men were, but we may be sure that he remained further away than an 'easy spear's cast' and that he shouted his challenge 'in a high clear voice from a fair distance' (readers will recall a number of similar scenes of challenge and parley at a distance in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*).

Yet another case of challenge in *Beowulf* is practically the opposite in terms of the constellation of characters and their positioning on the 'stage'. This is the scene of 'flyting' (though Tolkien seems to doubt whether it is a true example of a real flyting. i.e. a ritual exchange of insults). The scene presents the moment of welcome at Heorot when Unferth, sitting at the feet of King Hrothgar, directly questions the veracity of Beowulf's supposed previous exploits, which occasions a sharp rebuff from Beowulf himself in reply. But in Tolkien's considered opinion, Unferth's challenge is not delivered in a high voice from one end of the hall to the other, for the three men are sitting close together; and, as Tolkien points out, we learn in the later report to Hygelac (1690-2, *2011-13) that Beowulf was sitting close to Hrothgar's young son and so not at all far away from the king himself. Moreover, the king is the dignified head of a courtly world, like King Arthur in later medieval literature, and he would not allow Unferth to shout his challenge, for that would be savagely discourteous and break the time-honoured rules of hospitality. So the register of Unferth's speech is outwardly polite, and begins almost with a compliment until it artfully shifts into challenge. The dynamics of this scene, as Tolkien analyses them here, are subtly different to that similar confrontation between Gandalf and Wormtongue in the chapter 'The King of the Golden Hall' in *The Two Towers*. There is no doubt that Tolkien based the Meduseld of King Theoden on the Heorot of King Hrothgar, but the two scenes of challenge require different analyses.

Folk Tale and Hero

Tolkien does not restrict himself to word, phrase and scene. At times he departs from minute analysis to look at greater issues. One large idea that he tackles is the tension between the folk-tale character and the hero of the historical epic, which emerges sometimes in the way Beowulf the man is presented in the poem (these two significant themes, folk-tale and history, are discussed by Dimitra Fimi and Tom Shippey elsewhere in this volume). One refreshing insight is the 'stern young pride' that Tolkien discerns in the character of the man *Beowulf*, as well as later in the poem what he calls Beowulf's 'political sagacity'. The latter quality is found in that very dramatic homecoming speech by Beowulf at Hygelac's court in Geatland (1697-1739; *2020-69). Here Beowulf has returned home bearing gifts

and good news, and he talks about how Hrothgar king of the Danes has agreed to betroth his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld of the Heathobards in order to weave peace and put an end to a feud between the two nations. The marriage will not last, fears Beowulf, though not through any fault of the young lovers. Instead Beowulf imagines an an old embittered Heathobard warrior who will stir up thoughts of revenge among the impetuous youth of the court when they see the Danish visitors bearing weapons and rings that once belonged to Heathobards who had fallen in the earlier feud (pp. 324-8). Tolkien admires the conception of this scene, though he finds it too precise in detail for a political prophecy (the poet of course had hindsight – he knew that the scene with the old warrior actually did take place and that the vendetta and the violence did break out once again). In passing, it is worth mentioning the love-interest that Tolkien detects in this narrative, and the intriguing remarks on the peace-loving nature of the (Heatho)bards, 'whose traditions are of Frey and the Vanir rather than Odin the Goth' (p. 338); Tolkien evidently finds the mythological associations of the Vanir more congenial than those of the Aesir – an interesting insight, which invites further exploration.

There has not been space here to cover all of Tolkien's preoccupations, but it is time to pull at least some of the strands of Tolkien's varied *Beowulf* commentary together. At first sight it is an elaborate glossary, as found, admittedly, in many philological editions of Old English texts, but I think this is tempered by a profound knowledge of the cultural world of the poem, and as well as a study of words the commentary frequently offers a pictured scene. A number of larger ideas also informed the way Tolkien wrote his lectures: a mythological awareness, an emphasis on 'Arthurian' courtliness and courtesy in the world of the poem, a feeling for the drama of characters in confrontation. A highpoint is his summary of the key themes of the poem on pages 273 to 275, which should be recommended reading for any student of the poem. Tolkien is a poet as well as a critic, he feels keenly the moods and emotions of the poem *Beowulf*, and he responds with sympathy to the Anglo-Saxon poet's imaginative pondering and re-picturing of the old histories and legends that had passed down to him.

1   The commentary, found on pp. 137-353 of Tolkien's *Beowulf*, is based on extracts selected by Christopher Tolkien from the lecture courses that his father taught at Oxford University.
2   Christopher Tolkien uses plain numbers to indicate the lines of the now published translation and an asterisk to indicate the line numbers of the original *Beowulf* poem.
3   George Jack (ed.) *Beowulf: A Student Edition* (Oxford, 1994), p. 46.

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