

# HERMENEUTICS, RETRANSLATION AND PARATEXT: A CASE STUDY OF SEAMUS HEANEY'S PREFACE TO HIS RETRANSLATION OF *BEOWULF*

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**Abstract:**

This paper sets to analyse the hermeneutical process of highlighting at work in the preface written by the North Irish poet Seamus Heaney to his retranslations of *Beowulf* (1999). My analysis takes into account the generic identity of the preface by considering it as a textual subgenre where the translator becomes a metatranslator to voice herself out of invisibility, engages in a (self-reflexive) hermeneutical analysis and “justification” by commenting on the choice of the translated work and their translation choices. The analysis is carried out with the help of two concepts elaborated by Gadamer: *situatedness* and *self-understanding* to show how Seamus Heaney fuses different horizons in the process of his retranslation.

**Key words:** hermeneutics, retranslation, situatedness, self-understanding, preface, metatranslator

## 1. Introduction

The preface of a (re)translated work is a crucial locus where one can grasp the hermeneutical dimension of (re)translation. In fact, in this hybrid textual subgenre, the preface writer, when herself the (re)translator, steps out of invisibility and exposes, both directly and indirectly, not only the reasons behind (re)translating a text, but explains, justifies, argues in favour of her translational choices. Indeed, if retranslating a text means updating it and / or unveiling its meaning potential from a new vantage point, then the preface is an ideal locus for the exercise of hermeneutical translation. It is this hermeneutical activity of highlighting that I will be investigating in this paper by analysing Seamus Heaney's preface to his retranslation of *Beowulf* (1999).

Seamus Heaney's (re)translations, which are quite diverse, are part and parcel of his literary works (Hersant, 2014; O'Brien 2001/2). Besides his translation of *Beowulf*, which won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 2000, Seamus Heaney translated *The Testament of Cresseid & Seven Fables*, from middle Scots Book VI of Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid*, as well as a version of

Sophocles' "*Antigone*" - *The Burial At Thebes* - ; from ancient Greek, *Sweeney Astray*, translated from Irish. He also translated Cantos I-III of Dante's *Inferno*.

I will carry out my analysis of Heaney's preface with the help of two fundamental hermeneutic notions: *situatedness* and *self-understanding*. It is my contention that these two concepts will shed light on the bonds that tie Seamus Heaney to *Beowulf* and that they will bring to the fore the translator's interpretive horizon, his awareness of the historicity of his own retranslation and his appropriation of the original text. These two concepts are of uttermost importance; they help understand why the meanings of a text have no determinate end-points, that no text can be definitely interpreted because it evolves permanently against the backdrop of a changing horizon and according to a potentially unlimited number of subjective appropriations. I will point out, in my analysis, how Seamus Heaney engages creatively with *Beowulf*, how he endeavours to convince his readers that he has a deep understanding of the message of the translated text and that he has the adequate knowledge of its conditions of origination. My analysis will also show that Heaney situates his retranslation against a more personal and sociohistorical background. In sum, the concepts of *situatedness* and *self-understanding* will make it clear that Heaney's retranslation of *Beowulf* is informed by a deep and meticulous hermeneutical (self)reflexion on translation and on himself. For these reasons, Heaney will be considered, in this paper, first and foremost as a metatranslator (Saki, 2017) who tackles issues that are hermeneutic in essence, at the heart of which we find the process of highlighting (Gadamer 1996: 386).

In the following pages, I will first show why the preface to a (re)translated text is a semantic locus for a genuine hermeneutical process of highlighting; then I will deal with the situatedness of Heaney's retranslation and finally I will show how, for him, writing this preface is underpinned by a process of self-understanding.

## **2. Paratext, (re)translation and hermeneutics**

The preface belongs to what G. Genette calls the paratext, which is composed of those textual elements that surround and accompany the main text (1987). More particularly, the preface – just like the title, the epigraphs, the table of contents, etc. – belongs to the peritext because it shares the same printable space as the “central” text, from which it is not “physically” dissociated (Simon 1990; Saki 2013). Far from being a transparent and straightforward appendix to a book, the preface is, in fact, fundamentally metadiscursive since it always somehow initiates to the knowledge of the text it precedes. G. Genette qualifies the preface as a transitional and a transactional space; it is transitional because it is a threshold, located between the text and the “off-text”; it is transactional because it is a contact zone where the preface writers negotiate a specific relation with a more or less

clearly delineated community of (ideal) readers and with the central text they introduce (Genette 1987: 374). Preface writers usually explain, overtly or explicitly, why the text the preface introduces is worth reading as well as how it should be read. They also seek to elucidate what might be obscure or stated cryptically in the main text, to provide the reader with any type of background information that might help them better understand the meaning of the central text. Therefore, the preface, as a textual subgenre, presupposes that the preface writer takes a stance towards the “central” text and positions it in its different contexts (Saki 2013).

As we can see, a preface is a semantic space where there is always an exegetical and a hermeneutic process. For these reasons, I will investigate Heaney’s preface to his retranslation of *Beowulf* from a hermeneutical perspective. Hermeneutics is concerned, not so much with imposing or providing a definite and authoritative explanation of a text, than with the very process of understanding and with the volatile and fluid meaning of text. As a matter of fact, from the point of hermeneutics, the message of any text is a virtual entity which is permanently bound in language, anchored in the historicity of its production and whose meaning each interpretive attempt seeks to expound in a historically determined context (Gadamer 1996; Grondin, 1994; Jasper 2004).

Gadamer, for instance, is deeply committed to the historicity of understanding and to the historical situatedness of every text. To him, understanding is always partial and perspectival since the interpreter is also always situated at a given moment, in a particular culture, society, etc. To Gadamer, understanding always involves a “fusion of horizons”; each individual approaches a text with a set of prejudices, of which they are more or less aware, and which they bring along in the process of interpretation:

One intends to understand the text itself. But this means that the interpreter's own thoughts too have gone into re-awakening the texts' meaning. In this, the interpreter's own horizon is decisive, yet not as a personal standpoint that he maintains or enforces, but more as an opinion and a possibility that one brings into play and puts at risk, and that helps one truly to make one's own what the text says. (Gadamer 1996: 388)

Situatedness is one of the means of the manifestation of the process of “fusion of horizons”; it means that no text can be approached from a detached perspective and that its interpreter always inhabits a culture, belongs to a tradition that goes beyond herself and informs to a large extent the way she approaches and appropriates the text.

Therefore,

A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he himself is conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him ... A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light (Gadamer 1996: 360).

Retranslation, which is a practice almost limited to canonical texts, can be conceived of as hermeneutical approaches to a text written in a foreign language (Berman 1990, Canullo 2011; Stolze 2004, 2011). One of the main aims of retranslation is to update the linguistic rendering of a previously translated text and to make its language more accessible to the contemporary reader. Retranslation actually presupposes that a text is a meaning potential both already explored and also as yet to be explored. Every retranslation subsumes that the retranslated text calls for updating and re-awakening so as to enlarge and enrich our understanding of it (Paloposki, Koskinen 2004: 29). Indeed, every retranslation presupposes that there is no fully adequate and once for all translation of any text; none is ever final because an irreducible possible meaning still persists. An irreducible possible meaning that has been left out of previous pales of translations and that requires to be grasped from different and new hermeneutic vistas (Lamdiral 2011).

All translation and translational hermeneutics scholars insist on the situatedness of each translation; on the fact that translating authored and / or culture-bound texts always contributes to the “growth of texts” by giving them another audience. Besides, enlarging, if not transforming, the messages of the translated texts, retranslation often follows a helical movement; Stolze maintains that each retranslation enables us to figure out more or new aspects of the potential meaning of the original text and to fathom our understanding of its message (2011: 66). Therefore, as a hermeneutical practice, retranslation displays a new layer of the meaning potential of the text and unveils its semantic fertility and fecundity.

### **3. A Situated retranslation of *Beowulf***

From a hermeneutical point of view, then, it is impossible to seal off the meaning of a text by assuming the existence of an achieved understanding; a text is a meaning potential, open to a variety of possible readings. Likewise, retranslation should be considered as a particular instance of an ongoing process that contributes to opening up the text to new explorations and to excavating new meanings out of it. Therefore, it is worth analyzing what a metatranslator says about the retranslation that is being introduced and how she situates her retranslation and herself in a complex web of interrelated contexts and affiliations.

In a translational hermeneutical perspective, each retranslation is historically and culturally situated: we each time have a different interpretation of the same original text. Each retranslation is, therefore, always a new act of reading, underpinned by a hermeneutical process of highlighting, which often leads to a more or less slightly different view of the retranslated text. Cumulatively with other readings and previous translations of the same text, each retranslation ends up by providing a sufficiently comprehensive – but not definite – understanding of this very text.

The hermeneutical process of highlighting is all the more obvious when the retranslator becomes a metatranslator who comments on her retranslation, expresses her awareness of past translations of the same work and positions her own retranslation in a broader affiliation. As Gadamer makes plain, each interpreter is deeply engaged with her historical situatedness, hence the importance for any hermeneutical approach to lay bare the interpretive path that has led to a particular interpretation (1996).

From a hermeneutical perspective, as we have seen, retranslation is an eminently hermeneutical practice. It is concerned with up-dating and recovering the meaning of a text in a new context, as well as making sense of texts handed over from the past and bridging the gap between two cultures, two languages and two historical periods. In this respect, the retranslated texts, from whatever tradition, travel down from a more or less remote past and they always address readers and question them and their modes of understanding and self-understanding. Therefore, any analysis of retranslation should take into account the reasons behind undertaking it, the practical context out of which it arises and bring to the fore how the metatranslator touches on these questions in their text.

These translational hermeneutic assumptions are substantiated by Heaney's preface to his retranslation of *Beowulf*, which is informed, not only by his own historicity as a being in the world, but also by his own conception of translation. Heaney makes a distinction between what he calls "pure" and "impure" translations. To him, translation is "pure" when the translator seeks to reproduce a literary masterpiece or a poem from one language to their own; the aim, in this case, is to share with the members of a linguistic community a text that could not be read without the help of translation. "Impure" translation, which Heaney admits to practicing, is a sort of "eavesdropping":

You are listening through the wall of the original language as to a conversation in another room in a motel. Dully, you can hear something that is really interesting. And you say: 'God, I wish that I was in this room.' So you forage, you blunder through the wall. You go needily after something ... (Heaney 1989: 12)

"Impure" translation means to dig for what one thinks has heard with more or less certainty in the message, find it, and appropriate it in some way or another. The "impure" translation Heaney practices stems from an inner desire to grasp more fully what might sound and seem at first fuzzy and indiscernible.

In an interview with Haas, Heaney gives an even clearer image of how he conceives of translation; he explains that his translation practice is not premised on any particular theory but rather on a metaphor:

It [the metaphor]'s based upon the Viking relationship with the island of Ireland and the island of Britain. There was a historical period known as the Raids and then there was a period known as the Settlements. Now, a very good motive for translation is the Raid. You go in—it is the Lowell method—and you raid Italian, you raid German, you raid Greek, and you end up with booty that you call Imitations.

Then there is the Settlement approach: you enter an oeuvre, colonize it, take it over —but you stay with it, and you change it and it changes you a little bit. Robert Fitzgerald stayed with Homer, Lattimore stayed with him, Bob Hass has stayed with Czesław Miłosz. I stayed with *Beowulf*. But I also raided Dante in the late 70s. (2000: 1)

By settlement, Heaney alludes to the translation practice which consists of sticking to the original text and being ‘faithful’ to it. The raids – which can range from allusions to sheer imitations–, consist of appropriating the translated text in an almost personal way, of infusing it with a particular flavour, of situating it more clearly in the translator’s universe. In sum, settlement is not incompatible with “impure” translation; in both cases, the translated texts bear the marks of Heaney’s subjectivity and resonate with the issues at the heart of his poetics and his life.

In the 2000 interview, Heaney clearly indicates that his retranslation of *Beowulf* should be appraised through the metaphor of settlement, which combines both staying in and with the original text; “colonizing” and “taking it over”. What stems out from this conception is that each of his retranslation is, to a large extent, a personal appropriation of the original text and should be situated in his poetic, cultural and historical background. This is what he obviously sets out to do in his preface when he pinpoints that he has “taken over” the original text and that he has engaged with it in a creative and productive way:

In the course of the translation, such deviations, distortions, syncopations and extensions do occur; what I was after first and foremost was a narrative line that sounded as if it meant business and I was prepared to sacrifice other things in pursuit of this directness of utterance. (*Beowulf*, xxix)

This creative and personal appropriation of the text is even more obvious in the summary he makes of the poem; he infuses it with aesthetic and historical appraisals and at the same time he explains the hermeneutical stance he adopts:

*Still, in spite of* the sensation of being caught between a "shield-wall" of opaque references and a "word-hoard" that is old and strange, such readers *are also bound to* feel a certain "shock of the new." This is *because* the poem possesses a mythic potency. Like Shield Sheafson (as ScyldScefing), it arrives from somewhere beyond the known borne of our experience, and having fulfilled its purpose (again Shield), it passes once more into the beyond (*Beowulf*, xii; my italics)

The uses of the subordinators “still, in spite of”, “because” and the semi modal “be bound to” are the markers of the hermeneutical task Heaney is carrying out. They show how he instils his own subjective appropriation of the retranslated poem and how he seeks to orient his readers to the same interpretation he makes of the epic poem. Indeed, in this preface, appropriation and reader-orientation are inseparable:

The claustrophobic and doomsday atmosphere of this interlude gives the reader an intense intimation of what *wyrd*, or fate, meant not only to the character in the Finn story but to those participating in the main action of *Beowulf* itself. (*Beowulf*, xiv)

Heaney invests this preface as a poet and a literary critic so as to show his adequate knowledge of the text's aesthetic value, and to locate both it in their original and new cultural and historical contexts. Throughout this prefatory text, he points, explicitly and implicitly, to the temporal gap that separates the time of *Beowulf*'s writing from the moment of his own retranslation:

The poem called *Beowulf* was composed some time between the middle of the seventh and the end of the tenth century of the first millennium, in the language that is today called Anglo-Saxon or Old English.... The fact that the English language has changed so much in the last thousand years means, however, that the poem is now generally read in translation and mostly in English courses and universities. (*Beowulf*, ix)

To the Irish poet, the temporal gap that separates the time of the production of the text from his own time has, somehow, estranged *Beowulf*, cut it from potentially a big number of readers and confined into the academic domain. This confinement ended up by smothering the vibrancy of this literary monument and by reducing it to one of the required readings in a university syllabus, and therefore impoverishing and mutilating it:

For decades it has been a set book on English syllabuses at university level all over the world... For generations of undergraduates, academic study of the poem was often just a matter of construing the meaning, getting the grip on the grammar and vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon, and being able to recognize, translate, and comment upon random extracts which were presented in the examinations. For generations of scholars too the interest had been textual and philological. (*Beowulf*, x)

Heaney the metatranslator tells us that one of the motivations behind his retranslating *Beowulf* lies in the fact that the language of the text itself has become completely different from present-day English and has, as a matter of fact, made the text inaccessible to present-day readers. As a result, *Beowulf* was, before his retranslation, doubly inaccessible to large numbers of contemporary readers: first, it was confined in the academic "precincts" and, second, its language had become a foreign language.

Yet, the metatranslator also tells us that the time that separates the moment of the production of *Beowulf* from its modern retranslations is a token of its high value and timelessness as a literary masterpiece. Not only hasn't it fallen in oblivion, but it still resonates in a continuous present:

...what we are dealing with is a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the text is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language. Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art, it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time. (*Beowulf*, ix)

In fact, almost throughout his preface, Heaney explains why *Beowulf*, which he metalinguistically qualifies as a "masterpiece", has become a canonical literary

text and why it is still worth reading and retranslating. By so doing, he situates the text he introduces in the wide category of literary masterpieces; he explains why it has occupied a particular place in the literary history and how its status has evolved through time. In sum Heaney gives his own definition of what a real work of art is: it's a text that is anchored in its own moment of creation but which "lives in its own continuous present". One can be tempted to see in this definition an aesthetic and literary criterion with the help of which Heaney invites us, obliquely, to appraise his own works.

In different passages of his prefatory text, Heaney carries out the hermeneutical process of highlighting by insisting on the text's literary and aesthetic values and by explaining why and how it has ended by being imprisoned in the status of a canonical text that is only partially and selectively read and studied only in academic contexts. In the course of this highlighting process, the North Irish poet also situates his own retranslation of *Beowulf*. As a metatranslator, he positions his own rendering of this canonical text in a long exegetic and hermeneutic tradition from which, he maintains, it should not be dissociated. On several occasions in his preface, Heaney makes it clear that no tabula rasa is possible or recommended when dealing with *Beowulf*, for: "[I]tis impossible to attain a full understanding and estimate of *Beowulf* without recourse to this immense body of commentary and elucidation." (*Beowulf*, xi). What Heaney does here is situate his retranslation towards other (re)translations and against the backdrop of what has been written about the text itself. He thus contends that his own retranslation is but a new and situated attempt to breathe a new life in this canonical masterpiece in order to give it: "... a fresh chance to sweep 'in off the moors, down through the mist-bands' of Anglo-Saxon England, forward into the global village of the third millennium." (*Beowulf*, xiii)

To Heaney, breathing a new life in *Beowulf* takes different forms, one of which consists in highlighting the universality of the poem, taking it "off the moors" of "Anglo-Saxon England" and showing how it resounded in the historical moment his retranslation was published in:

The Great 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; her keen is a nightmare glimpse into the minds of people who have survived traumatic, even monstrous events and who are now being exposed to the comfortless future. (xxi)

One can grasp from this preface that Heaney's implicit hermeneutical premises postulate the indeterminacy of the meaning of poem. In several passages of his prefatory text, he points to the different possible readings one can have of *Beowulf*; each as legitimate and coherent as the others:

One way of reading *Beowulf* is to think of it as three agons in the hero's life, but another way would be to regard it as a poem that contemplates the destinies of three peoples by tracing their interweaving histories in the story of the central character. (xiv)

... its place in world art becomes clearer and more secure. We can conceive of it re-presented and transformed in performance in a *bunraku* theatre in Japan, where the puppetry and the poetry are mutually supportive, a mixture of technicolour spectacle and ritual chant. Or we can equally envisage it as an animated cartoon (and there has been at least one shot at this already), full of the meaning of mutating graphics and minatory stereophonies. (*Beowulf*, xii-xiii)

Heaney tells us that since the poem cannot have a transcendental and fixed meaning, each retranslation can bend it towards a particular direction and appropriate it in a subjective way. This explains why he quite often signals his appropriation of the poem by sometimes taking liberties with the metrical composition of *Beowulf*: “at two points in this translation I indicate that we are in fact participating in a poem-within-our-poem not only by the use of italics, but by a slight quickening of pace and shortening of metrical rein.” (*Beowulf*, xv). He also points to his subjective appropriation by modulating and tentatively lodging his own interpretation of the poem:

... this reconciliation occurs, *it seems to me*, most poignantly and most profoundly in the poem’s third section, once the dragon enters the picture and the hero in old age must gather his powers for the final climactic ordeal. From the moment *Beowulf* advances under the crags, into the comfortless arena bounded by the rock-wall, *the reader* knows he is one of those ‘marked by fate’. (*Beowulf*, xvii)

*Beowulf*’s mood as he gets ready to fight the dragon – who *could be read* as a projection of *Beowulf*’s own chthonic wisdom refined in the crucible of experience – recalls the mood of other tragic heroes: Oedipus at Colonus, Lear at his ‘ripeness is all’ extremity, Hamlet in the last illuminations of his ‘prophetic soul’ (*Beowulf*, xix, *my italics*)

While openly disclosing his own subjective appropriation of the poem, the metatranslator shows that he is not imposing any hermeneutical closure on the text. Indeed, his reading doesn’t claim to suppress previous or other readings; on the contrary, it expands and widens the interpretive potential of *Beowulf*. By affiliating the poem to Oedipus and Hamlet, Heaney brings to the fore what he considers as yet unknown threads of thematic continuity between *Beowulf* and other masterpieces of European culture. In sum, by situating his retranslation in its different contexts, in his own subjectivity and translation practice, the North Irish poet contends that his rendering of *Beowulf* should be considered, on the one hand, as a new exploration of the meaning potential of the original work and, on the other, as an enlargement of both his own interpretive horizons and our horizon, we his readers.

#### 4. Self-understanding and the situated translation of *Beowulf*

In this preface, Heaney exposes how he has engaged with the retranslation of *Beowulf*, how he has addressed the hermeneutical questions and how he has

answered challenges raised by the Anglo-Saxon epic poem. He instantiates, in his preface, two interrelated hermeneutical premises: first, understanding a text, which is a permanent and open-ended process, always means appropriating and translating it “into our own language (Gadamer 1996: 396); second, understanding a text always implies a certain degree of self-understanding. Gadamer maintains that “[A]ll understanding is ultimately self-understanding. In every case, the fact is that whoever understands understands himself, projects himself onto his own possibilities” (Gadamer 1996: 236). Indeed, understanding is in the last analysis self-understanding because in so far as it may be influenced and tainted, to a large extent, by the interpreter’s own awareness of her bias, situatedness and life experience. Therefore, understanding, according to Gadamer, is inextricably interwoven with self-understanding as it involves an existential understanding of one’s own intellectual, cultural and personal horizons.

It is obvious by now that the preface is a metadiscursive fragment characterized by an almost intrinsic hermeneutical process of enlightenment. It is also an ideal locus for the analyst to grasp how the process of self-understanding is brought to the fore, especially when it includes enarrative segments (Saki 2013: 49); i.e. when the preface writer decides to shed light on the genesis of the central text, the reasons behind writing it or (re)translating it and to inscribe it in a strictly personal and subjective history.

In this paper, I link the enarrative dimension of the preface to hermeneutic self-understanding; they conjointly point out to how Heaney, the Irish poet from Ulster had interacted with the retranslated text and how his retranslation is deeply related not only to aesthetic and poetic considerations but also to existential considerations. If we take into account the enarrative dimension of this prefatory text, we have another insight into how Heaney appropriates and assimilates what the text says, how he fuses his own horizon with the epic poem’s.

In this preface, Heaney describes the circuitous path he had followed before his published retranslation of *Beowulf*. He tells us that he started translating it when he was teaching at Harvard and saw in this project an “aural antidote” to what he was working on then; this first retranslation attempt was a means for him to keep his linguistic anchor “lodged on the Anglo-Saxon sea-floor” (xxii). But, this first attempt was, for many reasons, unsatisfactory, and Heaney ended up by dropping this retranslational project altogether. Years after this first attempt, Heaney undertook the retranslation he finally published in 1999 and which the preface under scrutiny introduces. In the process of retranslating the Anglo-Saxon poem, Heaney realized that the second attempt was far more different from the first retranslation attempt; it was more than just the simple rendering of an old text in a modern language, he tells us.

As a matter of fact, this second attempt, Heaney admits, proved to be more self-reflexive and helped him to better understand himself and to recover hidden parts of his past and culture. He tells us that, while translating *Beowulf* for the second time, he experienced moments of epiphanic revelations; moment which

enabled him to “repossess” himself and his own language in a moment of almost self-revelation. In an enarrative passage of high hermeneutical importance, the North Irish poet describes how he came across the Anglo-Saxon word for “suffering”, ‘bolian’ in *Beowulf*, and how this word triggered his memory and reminded him of its descendant, “thole”; a word that has now dropped out of modern English usage but which he learned when a child in Northern Ireland.

From this epiphanic moment follows his decision to openly anchor his retranslation in his Ulster background and to incorporate ‘a handful of Irish words’ so that *Beowulf* ‘be speakable’ by the ‘big voiced Scullions’, i. e. his father's relatives from Ulster (xxiii-iv). It is by grounding his retranslation in his Ulster background and culture that Heaney fuses his own horizon with the horizon of the poem:

There was one area, however, where certain strangeness in the diction came naturally. In those instances where a local Ulster word seemed either poetically or historically right, I felt free to use it. For example, at lines 324 and 2988 I use the word ‘graith’ for ‘harness’, and at 3026 ‘hoked’ for ‘rooted about’, because the local term seemed in each case to have special body and force. Then, for reasons of historical suggestiveness, I have in several instances used the word ‘bawn’ to refer to Hrothgar’s hall. (*Beowulf*, xxx)

Yet, this epiphanic moment of self-understanding goes deeper than just discovering the survival in the Ulster of his childhood remnants of the Anglo-Saxon language. Throughout this preface, Heaney weaves together his life experience, his poetic world and his translational choices. The translational choices he made and the linguistic hybridity with which he seasoned his retranslation have, obviously enough, a strong personal meaning. More importantly even, retranslating *Beowulf* helped him reassess, retrospectively, his own poems; indeed, Heaney explains in his preface that the second attempt at retranslating *Beowulf* made him, in an epiphanic revelation of a sort, realize that his earlier poetry, which broke with the conventional English pentameter line, “conformed to the requirements of Anglo-Saxon metrics.” This retranslation has, therefore, an almost ontological experience of self-revelation, as he comes to terms with the fact that part of him: “... had been writing Anglo-Saxon from the start” (xxiii).

Heaney’s preface to *Beowulf* is a textual space that tells us as much about the epic poem it introduces as about the author of the preface itself and this, in heart, is a fundamental hermeneutic process. The metatranslator describes how he re-appropriated the English language and how he managed to overcome the binary divisions between Irish and English, Celt and Saxon selves he was entrapped in. To him, all these oppositions coalesce in a hybrid, multi-layered self which, *Beowulf* showed him, are not doomed to be “partitioned”. As a matter of fact, the hermeneutical processes of self-understanding and the self-reflexivity that underlie it made him be aware of his own interstitial position as a poet belonging to, and for a long time torn between, two cultures and two languages:

When I translate lines 24-5 as 'Behaviour that's admired / is that path to power among peoples everywhere', I am attending as much to the grain of my original vernacular as to the content of the Anglo-Saxon lines. But then the evidence suggests that this middle ground between oral tradition and the demands of written practice was also the ground occupied by the *Beowulf* poet. The style of the poem is hospitable to the kind of formulaic phrases that are the stock-in-trade of oral bards, and yet it is marked too by the self-consciousness of an artist convinced that 'we must labour to be beautiful'. (*Beowulf*, xxviii)

The self-understanding and the self-reflexivity that the preface exposes mean the fusion of different horizons that has led Heaney to gain a new and a better understanding not only of the text that he retranslated, but of himself and his poetic practice. He fuses his cultural and historical horizon with the text's; in turn, he sieves the latter through his own Ulster, poetic and existential backgrounds. The fusion of horizons at work in this complex hermeneutic process is the means, for Heaney, to recover the dignity of his own heritage and to uncover the historical continuity that links the Anglo-Saxon language to his Ulster relatives and their often discarded language. Indeed, the pale of translation he has chosen helps him connect the Anglo-Saxon poem to a language similar and close to its original one; by using Ulster vernacular words and expressions, he also seeks to give dignity and prestige to a language and a culture that had been discarded and rejected for a long time. The fusion of horizons and the self-understanding that characterize every hermeneutical work take another aspect in the preface when Heaney clearly merges his own aesthetic, existential and even political questions with the meaning potential of the poem (O'Donoghue 2009).

In this preface, he gives saliency to the historical and the cultural backgrounds of his retranslation and their influence on his own appropriation of the Anglo-Saxon poem. The retranslation of *Beowulf* can be considered, from this point of view, as its *reterritorialization* in Heaney's social and cultural background. This reimplementation of *Beowulf* in a territory familiar to Heaney is one the poet's aims behind retranslating it i. e. to compensate for what has been lost and to fight against an act of dispossession his culture and people have been subjected to. Therefore, his retranslation of *Beowulf* and the hermeneutical stance he adopted are both an act of self-understanding and an act of 'fuller self-possession' (Lloyd, 1992: 95).

As we can now see, the fusion of the horizons at play in the retranslation of *Beowulf* is the occasion for Heaney to enlarge his own self; this retranslation has disclosed something that seems to have always existed deep inside him but which he had instinctively felt but which was not rationally grasped or clearly verbalised. At moments, it dawned on him that his retranslation was the occasion, for him, to accommodate a pre-Christian, pagan past and the Christian reality in the same text. Indeed, the retranslation of *Beowulf* has managed to reconcile him, as it were, with an estranged part of his own self by making the polarities -familiarity and strangeness- in the middle of which he was caught come to terms. To him:

Putting a bawn into 'Beowulf' seems one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history which has to be clearly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more 'willable forward / again and again and again. (*Beowulf*, xxx)

Therefore, the retranslation of *Beowulf* is, for Heaney, an act of interpretation and a process of self-understanding. He both actualizes the meaning and message of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem, and, at the same time, he apprehends his self-image in a different way; obviously enough, the self that has emerged from his retranslation is different from the self that had preceded it.

## 5. Conclusion

My analysis has shown the importance of taking into account not only the generic and pragmatic dimensions of the preface, but also the hermeneutical process that is almost always at work in it. A preface may potentially introduce the main text, situate it historically and culturally, highlight its aesthetic and literary values, as well as its importance and singularity. More specifically in the case of a preface to a (re)translated text, the preface may also be a semantic locus where the translator becomes a metatranslator who comments on the translational choices made and situations the new retranslation in relation to previous ones. In sum, the preface is an ideal textual space where the hermeneutical process of highlighting can be carried out and also brought to the fore by the analyst. To further illustrate how this hermeneutical process is at work in Heaney's preface to his retranslation to *Beowulf*, I have used Gadamer's concepts of "situatedness" and "self-understanding" to show how different horizons are fused.

These two concepts help understand how the North Irish poet appropriates the Anglo-Saxon epic poem by presenting his retranslation as a reawakening of a text and give it a new lease of life by making it more accessible to new audiences. I have shown, with the help of these two concepts, how Heaney has followed a subjective path, both methodologically and epistemologically, in his retranslation of *Beowulf*. The hermeneutical stance he adopts in his retranslation seeks to bestow on it a new intelligibility by adapting it to new historical and cultural contexts and to liberate it from fossilized academic traditions. But my analysis has equally shown that this retranslation goes beyond the mere re-enactment of a new layer of meaning of the epic poem, it is the occasion for the poet to perform an act of repossession and a process of self-understanding.

Heaney sets his retranslation against different backdrops and hints to the possible readings that may be made of it. First, he situates it in the particular historical context of the late twentieth century; second, he situates in the context of his Ulster culture and, third, he situates it within the realm of his own aesthetic and poetic practice and values. Throughout his preface, Heaney have us

understand that his retranslation of *Beowulf* is but one of the many possible appropriations of this text; and that his is an appropriation that resonates with his being in the world and his personal history.

In sum, Heaney demonstrates that he has a real hermeneutical competence for he shows “readiness for self-critical reflection, [the] openness for constant learning, [the] ability to integrate new cognitive input, the courage for linguistic creativity, and an empathetic identification with the message” (Stolze, 2012, 34)

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