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Preface: An Experimental Poetic Adventure

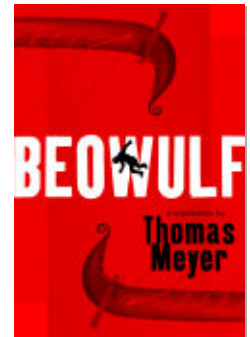
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PREFACE:

AN EXPERIMENTAL POETIC ADVENTURE

David Hadbawnik

Last year, I had the opportunity to edit and publish a portion of poet Jack Spicer's *Beowulf* translation, undertaken many years ago during his graduate studies at Berkeley, and existing only in handwritten manuscript form in his archive in the Bancroft Library. As I prepared that edition for CUNY's Lost and Found Document Series,¹ working with general editor Ammiel Alcalay and my co-editor Sean Reynolds, my friend Richard Owens casually mentioned *another* unknown translation of this text by *another* avant-garde poet from the previous generation — this one, by Thomas Meyer. Owens, who had worked on the Jargon Society archive in the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, had struck up a friendship with its founder, Jonathan Williams, and after Williams' death maintained a correspondence with his partner, Tom Meyer.

Meyer had been known to me as a criminally neglected poet of exceedingly fine abilities — such as his chapbook *Coromandel*, published by small but important independent press Skanky Possum in 2003. He had studied with Robert Kelly at Bard College and Gerrit Lansing was a friend at that same time, and he'd cut his

¹ See David Hadbawnik and Sean Reynolds, eds., *Jack Spicer's Beowulf*, Parts I-II, CUNY Poetics Documents Initiative, Series 2.5 (Spring 2011).

teeth in, and emerged from, that niche of poets who'd been impacted by the brief moment of vibrant cross-pollination between U.K. and U.S. experimental poetry in the late 1960s and early 1970s — a movement inspired by Ezra Pound, fueled by interactions among figures like Ed Dorn, J.H. Prynne, and Basil Bunting (see my interview with Meyer in Appendix A for more on his relationship with Bunting), and quickly overshadowed by the burgeoning Language Writing movement. In summary, it is this lineage, its concern with rigor, old forms, and translation, that explains both the existence of this translation and its decades-long neglect.

In short order, via Owens, I acquired a PDF copy of the text. Immediately it was clear that this was a translation in every sense of the word — taking liberties and risks with the Old English verse in astonishing ways. From a purely visual standpoint — as readers will quickly discover perusing the pages that follow — I had never seen anything quite like it. Certainly not in the numerous other translations of *Beowulf* that I'd studied and sampled, and really not of *any* poem, at least not in such a sustained and persistently experimental (yet persistently cohesive, and simply *fun*) manner. That includes Jack Spicer's *Beowulf*, which sadly, though it foreshadows his later translation experiments, and helps explain and contextualize his lifelong concern with the roots of language, does not reflect the kind of freedom and wildness of his "dictated" poetics beginning with *After Lorca*. Meyer's *Beowulf* provides the kind of experimental poetic adventure that the poem has long deserved.

The rest of the story partakes of a similar serendipity. Rich Owens, Micah Robbins (publisher of Interbirth Books), and I had talked about beginning a collaborative press, and I had hoped to approach Meyer about publishing his *Beowulf* on it. Meanwhile, preparing some remarks for the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo on Spicer's *Beowulf*, I included some images of Meyer's text in my presentation. Those images — with their visually arresting typographical arrangements and radical departures from standard form—stole the show, drawing enthusiastic responses from medievalists in the audience, including Eileen Joy and Jeffrey

Jerome Cohen, members of the BABEL Working Group² that had sponsored our panel. Encouraged by this, and the news about the new open-access publishing venture, punctum books, co-directed by BABEL members Eileen Joy and Nicola Masciandaro, it struck me that this might be a more appropriate venue for this text to finally emerge from the shadows. Returning to Buffalo, I pitched the idea to Tom Meyer and the editors of punctum, and the enthusiastic agreement of all confirmed this choice.



In a way, this publication is a token of faith. The tangled web of associations that led to my discovery of the translation, contact with Meyer, and bringing the text to punctum books, reveals an intersection of experimental poetics and academic (medieval) pursuits that doesn't happen nearly enough. Too often, there are strains and cliques of poetry, sealed off in advance from certain voices and tendencies. Likewise, there are worlds of academia and medieval studies that might look with suspicion on a nontraditional *Beowulf* such as this. Yet, as more and more contemporary poets — such as Daniel Remein, who provides the critical background to Meyer's *Beowulf* in the Introduction here — turn to medieval studies to follow the academic tracks of previous generations of avant-garde poets, such as the Berkeley Renaissance circle of Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and Robert Duncan, more connections such as this one will come to light, and further interactions and collaborations will become possible. Thus, we believe with the directors of punctum books that it's the perfect time for Tom Meyer's *Beowulf* — for those interested in experimental poetry, those eager to explore translations of medieval texts, and everyone in between.

² See the BABEL Working Group's website at <http://www.babelworkinggroup.org>.

