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Introduction: Locating Beowulf

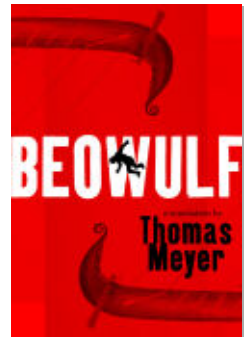
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INTRODUCTION:

LOCATING *BEOWULF*

Daniel C. Remein

Perhaps Wedermark, homeland of Beowulf and his dragon, can legitimately claim nothing but a dream status. Yet, in the secret fastness of my heart, I know I have been there.

Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn

There can be no duration (time of the poem) without *materium* — without the place where the strains are by which the enduring objects are made known.

Charles Olson

There is not much poetry in the world like this

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Old English poem known in the modern era as *Beowulf* consists of some 3182 lines of alliterative verse. The poem is preserved on folios 129r to 198v of a unique and badly damaged Anglo-Saxon manuscript sometimes called the ‘Nowell Codex’ and now known by its shelf mark as the London, British Library, MS. Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The text was copied by two different scribes, bound alongside a poetic version of *Judith* (the deuterocanonical Biblical narrative), a

prose version of the *Life of Saint Christopher*, and two texts of marvelous geography known as *The Wonders of the East* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*. Dating the poem remains a point of scholarly controversy between the views of 'early' and 'late' daters: spanning from some time not too long after the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain to a late ninth-century or even early eleventh-century (post-Viking invasion and settlement) Anglo-Danish political and cultural moment.³ As R.M. Liuzza notes, "on strictly historical grounds, then, there is no period in Anglo-Saxon history in which a poem like *Beowulf* might not have been written or appreciated."⁴ However, in terms of its textuality, the *Beowulf* we have is actually a very late Anglo-Saxon manuscript from the late tenth or even early eleventh century.⁵

Many students who read translations of the poem only under compulsion often rely on critical introductions that, as Allen Frantzen has explained, tend to offer a false sense of scholarly consensus about the poem and a historical frame delineated entirely in terms of a romanticized image of a Germanic antiquity (at least in part an invention of nineteenth-century criticism) that has long been critically dismantled.⁶ Such a poem is often still imagined as the invention of inspired oral poets who sing only of heroic deeds,

³ Cf. Colin Chase, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf* (1981; repr. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), and John D. Niles, "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History," *Exemplaria* 5 (1993): 79-109, reprinted in *The Postmodern Beowulf*, eds. Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2007), 131-162.

⁴ R.M. Liuzza, "Introduction," in *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, trans. Roy M. Liuzza (Toronto: Broadview, 2000), 28.

⁵ Niles, "Locating *Beowulf*," in *The Postmodern Beowulf*, 143. On the dating of the poem specifically in relation to its manuscript context, see also Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981).

⁶ See Allen Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), esp. Chapter 6, "Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*," reprinted in Joy and Ramsey, eds., *The Postmodern Beowulf*. See also E.G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 91-130.

monsters, and loyalty. As a result, *Beowulf* is a poem that many may think we know pretty well, a poem from which we should not expect much new or surprising. However, since the time of the first modern critical attempts to read the poem, critical understanding of *Beowulf* has undergone a series of radical shifts and transformations whose strange and often deeply embarrassing layers may leave the poem at once closer to hand and more unfamiliar than ever. As an encounter of *Beowulf* and twentieth-century avant-garde poetics, Thomas Meyer's translation of the poem can be understood as another transformation of this critical history.

THE UNKNOWABLE *BEOWULF*: THE CRITICS AND THE POETS

Other than the speculation that the *Beowulf*-manuscript likely passed from monastic into private ownership following the dissolution of the monasteries in England by Henry VIII, more or less nothing is known of what happened to it until the collector Lawrence Nowell inscribed his name on the first leaf in 1563.⁷ The manuscript was later acquired by Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631) and was damaged in the Cotton Library fire in 1731. The first known critical comment on *Beowulf* in print did not appear until Sharon Turner's second edition of his *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1805).⁸ A copyist working for the Icelandic scholar Grímur Thorkelin more famously transcribed the poem in 1787, and later Thorkelin himself made a copy.⁹ Thorkelin's own early print edition of the

⁷ See *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn., eds. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), xxvi. Critic Kevin Kiernan has speculated that Queen Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer William Cecil may have passed the book to Nowell, and that one John Bale (d. 1563) may have had the book earlier on. See Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf MS*, rev. edn. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

⁸ See Daniel G. Calder, "The Study of Style in Old English Poetry: A Historical Introduction," in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. Daniel G. Calder (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 8.

⁹ Because of the damage to the manuscript by the Cotton Library fire, these transcripts remain invaluable to editorial work on the poem,

poem (along with a Latin translation) is full of guesswork, and so John Mitchell Kemble's 1833 edition presented the first complete modern scholarly edition of the poem. Following Kemble, and alongside a flurry of publications on the poem, a number of editions appeared (many by German scholars), including that of Danish scholar N.F.S. Grundtvig in 1861. Frederick Klaeber's 1922 *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh*, the standard scholarly edition of the poem, was completely revised by R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles for a fourth edition in 2008.

John Josias Conybeare, one of the first scholars to begin to understand Anglo-Saxon alliteration and its metrical importance, offered English translations of long passages of the poem in his *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* in 1826. Kemble published the first full-length English translation in 1837. Relatively recent translations of more immediate interest to the reader of this volume might include Michael Alexander's, which remains the text of the Penguin Classics edition of the poem (1973); R.M. Liuzza's translation and introduction (1999); and Seamus Heaney's bestselling translation, which was commissioned by the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2000).

The earliest critical views of the poem often involve a dismissal of the poem as "barbaric" or lacking any prosodical structure. Strangely, this view developed alongside competing claims on the poem as national epic (which would eventually support and receive motivation from Nazi and other racist historical narratives of an idealized Germanic past).¹⁰ By the early twentieth century, the work of Frederick Klaeber and W.P. Ker consolidated the major critical

although, ironically, Thorkelin's own copy is often thought to be the less accurate.

¹⁰ See Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 62–74; Liuzza, "Introduction," in *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, 12; and Calder, "The Study of Style in Old English Poetry," in *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, esp. 1–29. On this history of philology, including its nationalist dimensions, see Haruko Momma, *From Philology to English Studies: Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (forthcoming from Cambridge University Press) and also Momma's forthcoming essay in *Communicative Spaces: Variation, Contact, and Change*, eds. Claudia Lange, Beatrix Weber, and Göran Wolf.

orientation around an interest in the poem's capacity to help the historian shed light on Germanic antiquity. Klaeber in particular regretted that the material in the poem that he thought could "disclose a magnificent historic background" played little role, while the narrative with which the poem is concerned consists of an "inferior" story preoccupied with monsters and the marvelous.¹¹ All these shifts are dwarfed by the effect of J.R.R. Tolkien's 1936 lecture "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," which argued that the poem should not stand or fall in its critical appraisal as a classical epic or a more or less adequate representation of a certain Germanic past (arguing in particular for the centrality of the "fabulous" monster elements in the poem). Tolkien's lecture could be considered in hindsight to have at once "saved" the poem for New Criticism and to have reduced the critical approaches to the poem to a choice between history and aesthetics.

However, any summary judgment of Tolkien's influence in the critical history of *Beowulf* may be unfair. In making *Beowulf* available to critical readings informed by the New Criticism (with all of its serious attendant problems), Tolkien also made possible certain strong attempts to think about the poem's poetics — through which *Beowulf* criticism impinged directly on avant-garde poetry.¹² Arthur Brodeur, and later, Stanley B. Greenfield, offered

¹¹ See Fr. Klaeber, "Introduction," in Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh*, 3rd edn. (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950), liv–lv.

¹² See J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. 22 (1936; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952). The situation of Europe in 1936 when Tolkien gave his lecture is not unimportant to his final conclusion that the poem "would still have power had it been written in some time or place unknown and without posterity, if it contained no name that could now be recognized or identified by research. Yet it is in fact written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal — until the dragon comes" (36). While Tolkien's allusions to modern English and modern England in particular are not without their own nationalist ring, the poem is here framed as worthy of aesthetic study not in order to cut it off forever from consideration of how it relates to

aesthetic readings which insisted on the ability of modern criticism to discuss the literary merits of Old English verse (against the assertions of proponents of Oral-formulaic theory such as Francis P. Magoun).¹³ Brodeur's *Beowulf* course at Berkeley — wherein he insisted that the poem can be read and experienced as, can stand or fall alongside, a modern poem — played an important role in the development of the poetics and the friendship of Berkeley Renaissance poets Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser.¹⁴ The importance of *Beowulf* to the circle of Spicer, Blaser, and Robert Duncan is currently emerging from relative critical obscurity thanks to David Hadbawnik and Sean Reynold's recent edition of Spicer's *Beowulf*.¹⁵ Meyer's translation again reminds us that the importance of *Beowulf* to poets writing in the American avant-garde remains a significant strain of the poem's critical history. A truncated list of the sites of its importance in the early and later twentieth century would include Ezra Pound's shorter poetry and the *Cantos*, W.H. Auden's early work,¹⁶ Basil Bunting's long poem *Briggflatts* (1966), and

history, but to de-legitimize the search for *Beowulf's* relations to history which could be pressed into the service of Nazi ideology. The way the poem is going to move under *our* northern sky is going to be categorically different than the way it moves in service of a narrative of fascism.

¹³ See Arthur G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), esp. 69–70; Stanley G. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London: Routledge, 1972); and Stanley G. Greenfield, trans., *A Readable Beowulf: The Old English Epic Newly Translated* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982).

¹⁴ See David Hadbawnik, “*Beowulf* Is A Hoax’: Jack Spicer’s Medievalism,” in David Hadbawnik and Sean Reynolds, eds., *Jack Spicer’s Beowulf*, Part 1, CUNY Poetics Documents Initiative, Series 2.5 (Spring 2011): 2–3.

¹⁵ This is the result of careful work by David Hadbawnik and Sean Reynolds: see their *Jack Spicer’s Beowulf*, noted above.

¹⁶ See Daniel C. Remein, “Auden, Translation, Betrayal: Radical Poetics and Translation from Old English,” *Literature Compass* 8.11 (Nov. 2011): 811–29. Many look to Pound's *Seafarer* and *Canto 1* as a navigational point. It was Auden, however, who suggested, for all of Pound's attention to meter, his technical failure: “Pound forgot not to alliterate on the last lift, Anglo-Saxon doesn't do that.” See the Robert H. Boyer Interview of Neville

Michael Alexander's translations, which attracted the attention of, among others, Robert Creeley.¹⁷

A largely historicist and patristic orientation followed the New Critical readings of the poem, and when "theory" finally hit *Beowulf* full force in the 1990s, criticism again underwent a transformation. In 1990 Gillian Overing published her feminist critique of the poem's signifying system.¹⁸ And by the decade's close, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* re-oriented *Beowulf* studies by pairing a reading of the monsters of the poem in terms of Lacanian and Kristevan semiotics with a deep concern for the poem's affective work.¹⁹ In the wake of the theory-driven readings of the poem from the 1990s, Eileen A. Joy and Mary K. Ramsey's collection *The Postmodern Beowulf* further reconfigured the place of the poem by drawing attention to the way that *Beowulf* criticism had already engaged in theory and how easily the poem fit into that discourse, and also by insisting on the pertinence of *Beowulf* to particularly postmodern experiences of gender, loss, identity, and historical memory.

At the beginning of these last ("postmodern") shifts in how we think and read *Beowulf*, critic Allen Franzten admitted that "*Beowulf* is an incomplete text, incompletely attested, and it will always be

Coghill and W.H. Auden (Columbia University Libraries, Special Collections, H. Carpenter Papers).

¹⁷Creeley's 1972 *A Day Book* opens with an epigraph from Alexander's translation OE Riddle 29: "To build itself a hideaway high up in the city,/ a room in a tower, timbered with art,/ was all it aimed at, if only it might," see Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 73.

¹⁸Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

¹⁹Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). See Chapter 1, "The Ruins of Identity," 1–28. Cohen's work appeared contemporaneously to Andy Orchard's study of the entire *Beowulf* manuscript as a book about monsters. See Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

controversial.”²⁰ James W. Earl offered this confession in his 1994 landmark study *Thinking About ‘Beowulf’*:

I no longer trust those who say they know what *Beowulf* means, or what it is about. The poem is hedged about with so many uncertainties — historical, textual, linguistic, hermeneutic — that even the simplest and most straightforward statements can provoke a battle royal among scholars.²¹

This critical history testifies to the extent that *Beowulf* is a poem we do not understand, and, over two decades after the postmodern turns in the poem’s critical history began, *Beowulf* criticism is perhaps primed once again for another shock.

LOCATING MEYER’S *BEOWULF*

Simply put, Meyer’s translation demonstrates that radical twentieth-century poetics harbor practices of making relations to *Beowulf* in new and necessary ways. As an alternative to the representational, Meyer’s *Beowulf* makes possible relations to the poem in terms of *locating* and then topographically exploring the poem. When I asked Meyer about the question of place in his translation, he explained, “Living in the north of England and in contact with [Basil] Bunting, the ‘North’ was certainly a powerful presence. Yet in my *Beowulf*, it was ‘here’ and ‘there.’ ‘Now’ and ‘then.’”²² Translating the poem in the West Riding of Yorkshire, near Northumbria — the site of political and ecclesiastical hegemony in the Age of Bede — results in the insight that *Beowulf*’s poetics seem fundamentally preoccupied with crossing elementary terms of worldly topographical and historical perception *as such* (here/there, now/then). The translation thus collects together the various ways twentieth-century long poems approach histories lodged within a

²⁰ Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*, 171.

²¹ James W. Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 11.

²² Thomas Meyer, private correspondence, 25 September, 2011.

place while giving rise to the poem in turn as its own “place,” paying particular attention to the visual qualities of these poetics. Discussing the range of its formal strategies, Meyer explains, “[T]he project wound up being a kind of typological specimen book for long American poems extant circa 1965. Having variously the ‘look’ of Pound’s *Cantos*, Williams’ *Paterson*, or Olson or Zukofsky, occasionally late Eliot, even David Jones.”²³

Perhaps most saliently, the topographical concerns of Charles Olson’s *Projective Verse* (or *Field Poetics*) are played out at the level of typography. More broadly, the division of Meyer’s translation into *Oversea* and *Homelands* aptly organizes the poem around the two main places around which the text of poem aggregates, and in turn invites readers to interface with the two sections topographically (*Oversea*: the land of Heorot and Hrothgar, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the murky waters of her lake, et alia; *Homelands*: Wedermark, Hygelac, Beowulf’s eventual kingship, and of course the dragon).

Turning to the topographical poetics of the poem brings to the fore a sense that is currently only quietly operative in *Beowulf* criticism. Klaeber influentially doubted whether “we can be sure that the Anglo-Saxon poet had a clear knowledge of Northern geography,” and maintained that “the topographical hints contained in the poem could not be used successfully for definite localization.”²⁴ More recently, James Earl has reasoned otherwise, insisting that “we cannot assume the poem is representative of any period, or even, finally, representative of anything at all,” or, alternately, “*Beowulf* bore a complex, indirect, and nonmimetic relation to any historical reality”²⁵ — a logic implying not that the poem produces no site-specific relations, but that it traffics instead in non-representational ones. After all, there are some obvious “real” sites to which the poem can relate. John D. Niles argues that archaeological digs at Gamel Lejre in Zealand, Denmark, in 1986-1988 and 2001-2004, offer “hard evidence that the *Beowulf* poet’s narrative, however fanciful it may be, is indeed grounded in that

²³ Quoted in David Hadbawnik, private correspondence [n.d.].

²⁴ Klaeber, “Introduction,” in *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, xlvii.

²⁵ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 17, 167.

locale.”²⁶ Scholars Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn, relying on a hired and enthusiastic boat captain, old maps, and *Beowulf* itself, “attempted to literally ‘reinvent’ Beowulf’s voyage to Heorot” (sailing to Lejre, Denmark) and by implication plausibly locate Wedermark and the homeland of the Geats.²⁷ Along with C.L. Wrenn, Overing and Osborn locate Wedermark as the home of the historical *gautar* in modern-day Götland, Sweden, where they begin their reinvention of Beowulf’s voyage.²⁸ They conclude that “the *Beowulf* poet . . . knew in some measure of the visual reality of which he wrote,” and Osborn implies a possible affinity of parts of the poem itself to an iron-age-style oral map for landmark sea-navigation.²⁹ The two scholars demonstrate that *Beowulf* has the remarkable capacity to physically move people through actual places on earth, which suggests a particularly non-representational relation of the poem to place: a poetic cartography less of representational maps than the sort of Anglo-Saxon linguistic map studied by the late critic Nicholas Howe (exemplified by Anglo-Saxon legal boundary-clauses) — less a representation of, than a procedural interface with, the landscape.³⁰

²⁶ John D. Niles, “Introduction,” in *Beowulf and Lejre*, ed. John D. Niles (Tempe: Arizona Center of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), 1. On the idea that the archaeology behind the poem can only ever be wishful and/or phantasmic, see also Helen T. Bennet, “The Postmodern Hall in *Beowulf*: Endings Embedded in Beginnings,” *The Heroic Age* 12 (2009): <http://www.heroicage.org/issues/12/ba.php>, and Roberta Frank, “*Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo: The Odd Couple,” in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. Catherine Karkov (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1999), 317–38.

²⁷ Gillian Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1.

²⁸ Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, 1. See, generally, xii–37.

²⁹ Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, xv, 17.

³⁰ See Overing and Osborn, *Landscape of Desire*, 12, 16–17, and Nicholas Howe, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Cultural Geography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 29–46.

Meyer's translation of Beowulf's sea-crossing to Heorot (Klaeber's lines 205–24b)³¹ makes for a nice specimen of *Beowulf's* commensurability with such a topographical poetics:

15 sought seawood,
led to land's edge
by seawise warrior,

set keel to breakers,

left
 shore's ledge,
leapt
 churned sand.

Sea surge bore forth
 bright cargo:

weapons, trappings,
hearts keen to man
 timberbound,
wavelapped,
 windwhipped,
foamthroated bird.

Ship floated. Sail filled.
A day & a day prow plowed
& crew saw bright cliffs,
steep hills, wide beaches.

Sea crossed. Land at last.
Boat moored. Byrnes shook.

³¹ All citations of the Old English text of *Beowulf* from *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn. Quotations unchanged except for the omission of diacritical marks.

It is not difficult to see how the poem literalizes the crossing of the sea in the concrete space between these two columns of text, the first waving in its indents and the second a solid block.

Yet, the above lines do not operate most programmatically as a specimen of mere mimetic typography. The shift of the left justification of stanza across the page also recalls any number of moments from Olson's *Maximus* poems.³² And the poetics of Olson's "Projective Verse" or "Field Composition" can helpfully frame this passage of Meyer's translation. Miriam Nichols has recently discussed the site-specific poetics of Projective Verse in terms of relations of "cosmicity" which remain particularly viable in our moment of ecological disaster.³³ As it pertains to Meyer's translation and to *Beowulf*, Olson explains that Projective Verse conceives of poesis as a radically open form in which "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT" and also in which, for the poet, "From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION — puts himself in the open — he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself."³⁴ Olson writes: "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge."³⁵ This sense of transfers of/from multiple points of energy that nonetheless holds together as a "Field" leaves us with a sense of the poem as itself an emergent site with finite but intense points of contiguity with the places of its energy transfers — a site made in projectively *contiguous* (topographical, *not* representational) relation

³² Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), cf. 32, 35, 150–156 ('Letter May 2, 1959'), 299, 441–45.

³³ See Miriam Nichols, "Charles Olson: Architect of Place," in *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 18–64.

³⁴ Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 240.

³⁵ Olson, "Projective Verse," 240.

to specific worldly sites (although authenticated less in terms of its worldly sites than the worldly quality of its procedures and particular field). Projective Verse frames the poem itself as a worldly place that can in turn move the reader though the physical world (Olson's *Maximus*, for instance, includes examples of mimetic carto-typography such as a map of the Gloucester harbor produced by typewriter characters arranged on the page by orienting it at various angles in the typewriter).³⁶ In some of Olson's recently published notes, he more exactly frames how the poem's non-representational paths (its form as extension of content) result in aggregating in turn another literal site:

A poem is a 'line' between any two points in creation In its passage it includes—in the meaning here it passes through—the material of itself. Such material is the 'field' This is only possibly if both line and field stay weighted with the individual peculiarities of the poem's relevant environment—its idiosyncratic quality of being itself, of being 'obstructive' at the same time that it is lucid, and of immediate worth.³⁷

The above-cited translation of the sea-voyage by Meyer, with its movement from one side of the page to the other, proceeds by exactly such a passage of the poem though the material of itself as a topographical field. Meyer twists the narration of the Old English into a tight knot. The Old English reads:

guman ut scufon,
 weras on wilsip wudu bundenne.
 Gewat þa ofer wægholm winde gefysed
 flota famiheals fugle gelicost,
 oð þæt ymb antid opres dogores
 wundenstefna gewaden hæfde

³⁶ See Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 156; see another such map on 150.

³⁷ Charles Olson, *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II*, ed. Joshua Hoeynck (Tuscon: Chax Press, 2010), 15.

þæt ða līpende land gesawon (ll. 215b–21)

And R.M. Liuzza's translation which closely maps the OE syntax offers:

. . . the men pushed off
on their wished-for journey in that wooden vessel.
Over the billowing waves, urged by the wind,
the foamy-necked floater flew like a bird,
until due time on the second day
the curved-prowed vessel had come so far
that the seafarers sighted land (ll. 215–21)

In Meyer's translation the staggered lines of this narration typographically grapple with the appositive style of Old English verse. The indentations of the entire first column of text overlap with caesura-like line breaks to both visually and audibly place the phrases "shore's edge" and "churned sand" into the topographical crevices of the field of the poem held by the energy-field of the alliterating verbs "left" and "leapt." The waving block of text forms a single shining summit of all the items that constitute the "bright cargo" and so gives place to the perception of the ship as a "foamthroated bird." Meyer thus works and twists the surface of the Old English poem into a knotted and wound-up topography — making it lucidly felt how *Beowulf* can move a person between these points of high-energy transfer along a line from Götland to Lejre. In this way the site-specificity of *Beowulf* is related to its specific internal self-organization, the "idiosyncratic quality of being itself," which gives rise to the poem's "obstructive" quality, its specific ecosystem. This specific typographical arrangement materially obstructs the reader's passage through the poem and so opens onto a concrete ecology for *Beowulf* in modern English, onto the possibility of a nonrepresentational relation to cliffs literary and geographical, a place where the sea-cliffs of the poem can take place in the present.

Meyer's *Beowulf*, however, is not trying to send us back to an authentic transcendent place that would secure the authority of

either translation or Anglo-Saxon poem — although, as poet and critic Lytle Shaw notes, it is the tendency of mid-twentieth-century poetics to slip into exactly this trap.³⁸ As an alternative to the traps of using the term “place” (and its art-history counterpart “site-specificity”) in an attempt to exhaustively ground and authenticate a given work, Shaw examines how rhetorical framing in certain contemporary poetics gives rise to discursive “sites” that are best treated literally as sites in which the very frame of site-specificity functions “less as an authoritative interpretive model that gives traction to a docent’s account of a particular location than as a discursive site that must *itself* be explored archaeologically.” In other words, the synchronic framing of site specificity itself requires diachronic framing of the pasts and futures of its rhetoric.³⁹

This is of course the very effect of Meyer’s pastiche of modernist long-poem forms: a translation that doubles as a museum of exhibits of modernist experiment requiring its own docent. Thus in the above-cited translation of the voyage to Heorot, Meyer quotes verbatim Ezra Pound’s line “set keel to breakers.” The line is taken from the opening of the very first of Pound’s *Cantos*, which recasts the narrative of Odysseus’ departure from Circe’s island in a verse reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon meter. Meyer’s translation invites an archaeological or geological investigation of its topography, from which uncoils a whole other set of literary histories that inescapably inhere in *Beowulf* in the present.

TRANSLATING DETAILS

An instance of what at first may seem more conventional typography in Meyer’s translation — Hrothgar’s description of the path to the lake of Grendel’s mother — instead witnesses the capacity for *Beowulf* (in Old English and its translation) to appear in terms of an attention to concrete elements on the minutest and subtlest of levels:

³⁸ See Lytle Shaw, “Docents of Discourse,” *boundary 2* 36.3 (2009): 25–47.

³⁹ Shaw, “Docents of Discourse,” 47.

. . . I'm told two *things*
can be seen to prowl the nearby
borderlands, a male & female,
who dwell in swamps on

[page break]

“dark land

riddled with
wolfhills, windy

cliffs, risky
swamptrails where

upland streams

glimpsed
through cragfog

flow on underground.

Not far,
a few miles from here,

a firmly rooted wood's
frost crusted branches

hand
shadows upon a lake

where each night sees
strange wonders:

firewaters,

flare above

unplumbed fathoms.”

Here, the short lines of the couplets and single lines do appear as the list of landmarks in a textual map, or, in modern terms, a set of directions (the capacity for *Beowulf* to provide textual maps translated into driving directions). In doing so, the concrete lines construct a slim column of text around which the passage to the lake and the lake itself coagulate together as a site charged with the energy of vertical movement — the lines connecting fire and water and atmosphere form exactly the single frightening mass the Old English poem offers. But while this passage lends itself to the terms of Projective Verse in making manifest the poem’s latent capacity to appear as modern, it also expands the translation’s range of reference to twentieth-century poetics.

In particular, the ability of this column of text to stand on its own by manner of the slow and exact allowances of detail across these short lines also displays Meyer’s *Beowulf* taking shape in terms of Louis Zukofsky’s articulation of “Objectivist” poetics. Compare Meyer’s passage to this early passage from Zukofsky’s “A”:

Giant sparkler,
Lights of the river,

(Horses turning)
Tide,

And pier lights
Under a light of the hill,

A lamp on the leaf-green
Lampost seen by the light

Of a trick (a song)
Lanterns swing behind horses,

Their sides gleam

The work of the loose group of poets included under the rubric of Objectivist writing (including Reznikov, Oppen, Niedecker, and Rakosi — modernist, running from the early 1930s and into the 1970s) follows a trajectory that both overlaps and significantly diverges from the tendencies and timeline of Projective Verse and its loose group of practitioners (often hailed as early postmodern poetry, running from the very late 1940s into the 1980s). As Peter Nicholls explains, Objectivist verse comprises one of the ways that “American modernism . . . generated counter-movements *within itself*, movements which revised and contested what had gone before.”⁴¹ Objectivist verse is marked by a desire for exteriority.⁴² For, the moniker for this “Objectivist” poetics is misleading, as it is not a poetry interested in concrete description of pre-existing objects the poet can take for granted, but the production of the poem as its own entity with its own reality of minute but exacting details. As Zukofsky explains, “writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing”; not in order to represent an already extant object, but because “distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing . . . which is an object or affects the mind as such.”⁴³ Moments of “sincerity,” which Zukofsky’s 1931 statement in *Poetry* (that became the de-facto manifesto for the poets about to be called the Objectivists) defines as the “accuracy of detail,” form the basic units of a new objectified shape.⁴⁴ As Nicholls notes, for Objectivist

⁴⁰ Louis Zukofsky, *A-4*, in “A” (New York: New Directions, 2011), 12.

⁴¹ Peter Nicholls, “Modernising Modernism: From Pound to Oppen,” *Critical Quarterly* 44.2 (2002): 43.

⁴² Nicholls, “Modernising modernism,” 42.

⁴³ Louis Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification, With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff,” *Poetry* 37.5 (1931): 273–74.

⁴⁴ Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 273–74.

poets “what was objectified was the poem itself,”⁴⁵ just as Zukofsky explains objectification as a “rested totality,” or “the apprehension satisfied completely as the appearance of the art form as an object.”⁴⁶ Most broadly and schematically put, it is around the interest in the particular that Objectivist writing and Projective Verse converge, but around this sense of the poem as rested (in contrast to the kinetics of Field Composition), that the tension between the pull of Projective Verse and the pull of Objectivist writing can be felt in Meyer’s translation.

Note how, in the quotation above, Meyer allows the phrase “upland streams” to sit as a self-sufficient unit of one-line stanza before it has to take its place within a subject noun-phrase of the couplet “upland streams // glimpsed / through cragfog,” and then allows that phrase to rest before taking its place as the subject of a whole sentence: “upland streams // glimpsed / through cragfog // flow on underground.” Each of these exacting units, with its attention to particularity, exemplifies precisely the “sincerity” that is to aggregate into the poem which rests in itself — and not without echoing Olson’s sense of the specific idiosyncrasy of the poem.⁴⁷ Consider, for example, the translation of “risky / swamp-trails” for the Old English “frecne fengelad” (Liuzza gives us “awful fenpaths,” l. 1359). The Old English adjective *frecne* most prominently means ‘perilous’ or ‘dangerous,’ but also appears in some instances with a moral inflection of wickedness or trickery (i.e., the danger resulting from wicked trickery found on the way to a monster’s lake) and can thus give way to a translation marked by a cloudy uncertainty or a proliferation of terms. Instead, “risky / swamptrails” focuses these senses into a very particular, and frighteningly casual, specificity.

While this strange particularity and tangibility of the Objectivist poem does not seem generally incommensurate with

⁴⁵ Peter Nicholls, “Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen,” in *The Objectivist Nexus*, eds. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 241.

⁴⁶ Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 274.

⁴⁷ Zukofsky, “Sincerity and Objectification,” 280; Olson, *Projective Verse II*, 15.

Field Composition, the Objectivist insistence on the *rested* exteriority of the poem-as-object would seem divergent from the contiguity of poem and world in Projectivist kinetics. The Objectivist poet follows, as Nicholls finds in George Oppen’s work, “a desire for some pure exteriority which allows the ‘ego’ to be defined only at the point at which it runs up against what is not itself.”⁴⁸ While similar to the obstructive quality of Olson’s field, such an alterity would seem to produce less proximity to and less permeable boundaries with the kinds of place implicated in an energy-transfer from sources to readers. Accordingly, more Objectivist moments of Meyer’s translation — such as the above passage of Hrothgar’s description of the path to the Grendelkin lake — do feel different, and readers familiar with the Old English might detect a sense of (medieval) place to a lesser extent than in more Projective passages. This may be the result of a kind of omission less conventional in *Beowulf*-translation, a type of condensation that registers in terms offered by Lorine Niedecker (that poet only on the margins of the Objectivist group), who posited the poet’s workspace as a ‘condensery.’⁴⁹ Compare, for example, Meyer’s above-cited rendition of the path to the lake of the Grendelkin to Klaeber’s text, Liuzza’s translation, as well as that of Edwin Morgan’s 1952 text (a translation contemporary to Olson and Zukofsky that is at least mildly self-reflexive about its poetics and its “modernity”).⁵⁰

Hie dygel lond
 warigeað, wulfhleoþu, windige næssas,
 frecne fengelad, ðær fyrgenstream
 under næssa genipu niþer gewiteð,
 flod under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon

⁴⁸ Nicholls, “Modernising modernism,” 53.

⁴⁹ See Lorine Niedecker, “Poet’s Work,” in Lorine Niedecker *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 194: “No layoff/ from this/ condensery.”

⁵⁰ Edwin Morgan, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation Into Modern English* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952). Morgan’s introduction patiently considers exactly how to construct the prosody of his translation in terms of an array of conservative and more adventurous modernisms.

milgearnearces þæt se mere standeð;
ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.
þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,
fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað
gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite
(Klaeber, ll. 1357b–67).

. . . That murky land
they hold, wolf-haunted slopes, windy headlands,
awful fenpaths, where the upland torrents
plunge downward under the dark crags,
the flood underground. It is not far hence
—measured in miles—that the mere stands;
over it hangs a grove hoar-frosted,
a firm-rooted wood looming over the water.
Every night one can see there an awesome wonder,
fire on the water. There lives none so wise
or bold that he can fathom its abyss.
(Liuzza, 1357b–67)

. . . They guard a region
Uncouth, wolves' dunes, blustering headlands,
Desperate fen-ground, where the mountain-torrent
Falls down under the louring bluffs,
Pours down to earth. It is not far distant
Measured by miles that the lake lies;
A great-rooted wood throws shade on its water.
There a strange horror at night may be seen.
A blaze on the stream. Of the children of men
No one has wisdom that could plumb that abyss.
(Morgan1357b–67)

Meyer's translation does not register the flow and eddy of the variation as it is scattered through the passage in the Old English text — to which Liuzza and Morgan both faithfully attend. Meyer however expands the phrase *fyr on flode* [literally, “fire on the

waters”] in a manner that also condenses the Old English. While the Old English does not produce variation specifically around this alliterative doublet, Meyer’s translation first combines the three words *fyr on flode* into one [“firewaters”] and then expands it into a variation which incorporates the lines that follow in Old English: “firewaters, / flare above unplumbed depths.” The lines condense the explanation that follows in the Old English (preserved by both Liuzza and Morgan) that none alive can perceive or understand the depths of the lake [“No þæs frod leofað / gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite”] by distilling the two-line Old English explanation into the attribution of the adjective “unplumbed” to the noun “depths” (in this instance also a respectable translation of Old English *grund*). In tension with the vertical kinetics of this passage, Meyer incorporates the quality of being unfathomable into the exactness of a single detail, and thus leaves the unit more precise and more at rest within the arrangement of the passage. This condensation radicalizes the non-human alterity of the lake by removing the mitigating term of a perplexed human from its construction. In this way, Meyer’s translation tends to avoid moments that purely exemplify a single distinct strain of twentieth-century poetics, producing instead an heroic attempt to balance Projectivist and Objectivist demands.

PALEOGRAPHY OF THE *BEOWULF*-TYPESCRIPT

The second section of the translation, *Homelands*, unfolds increasingly in small bits of print, demanding more page turns and granting more paper to each mark. Writing of his basic approach to the poem, Meyer explains, “instead of the text’s orality, perhaps perversely I went for the visual. Deciding to use page layout (recto/verso) as a unit.”⁵¹ The groupings of only a few lines extend the apparent style of Poundian Imagism, the sincerities of Objective verse, and the Field of the Projective, by more carefully tending to the concrete page. At the moment of the encounter of the poem’s famous dragon with the footprints of the slave responsible for the

⁵¹ Thomas Meyer, interview with David Hadbawnik (in this volume).

theft of a cup from the dragon's hoard, Meyer gives an entire page to merely two words and a comma:

manstink,
footprints

Perhaps, more than the vocabulary of active and germinal fecundity with which Pound described his earlier Imagism and Vorticism, this page recalls the economy of Pound's later use of the Chinese character that he understood to mean rest/hitching-post [*chih*⁵²] as epitomizing a self-sufficient rest,⁵² or the pages from Olson's *Maximus* with lone phrases on them such as "Veda upanishad edda than."⁵³ The visual impression of the print word "footprints" is here given enough concrete space to provoke the sensation of the non-visual "manstink" out from the hollow of a largely empty page. Meyer's translation drastically condenses the Old English text, which explains with a more conventional narrative sentence that "stearcheort onfand / feondes fotlast" [Liuzza: "stark-hearted he found/ his enemy's footprint," ll. 2288–89]. But by foregrounding the materiality of the word "footsteps" as print on a largely empty page, Meyer also renders concrete a latent sense of the Old English noun *fotlast*, the semantic content of which, as a compound of *fot* ['foot'] and the suffix *-last* ['track,' 'step,' 'trace'], resonates with the *empty space* (perhaps the very *différance* internal to the mark) that constitutes the hollow of any impression.⁵⁴

By thus radicalizing the usual tendency to attempt to represent the orality of the poem by instead sinking it ever more deeply into printed type, the oral qualities of what are usually referred to as

⁵² On Imagisme/Vorticism, see Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," and "Vorticism," in Ezra Pound, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (New York: Penguin, 2005), 253–65, 278–91; for uses of the Chinese character, see Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 3rd printing (New York: New Directions, 1996), 261, 563, 591.

⁵³ Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 298.

⁵⁴ See Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* [online edition], comp. Sean Christ and Ondřej Tichý, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/021193>, s.v. *last*.

“digressions” in the poem take a marked typographical shape, and are marked off from the main body-text in Meyer’s original typescript by a printed horizontal line. This seems to give license to stitch supplemental material into the extant poem, such as Meyer’s account of the “The Bear’s Son” — a folk re-telling of a *Beowulf*-narrative analogue from the Old Icelandic *Hrolf’s saga kraka* which Meyer incorporates into the poem itself as if it were a digression within *Beowulf* and not ancillary material customarily reserved for an appendix in a critical edition.⁵⁵ The practice recalls the philological inserts folded into certain poems by Pound, Olson, Duncan, and Zukofsky,⁵⁶ and strongly echoes Olson’s *Maximus*, which includes an inventory of supplies needed by particular European settlers in Massachusetts during their first winter.⁵⁷

Meyer’s translation of the episode of Herebald and Hæthcyn even includes a chart of comparative etymology to hook the two Old English names into Old Norse mythology:

HOTHcyn
HOTHr

BALDr
HereBALD

Here, Herebald and Hæthcyn are brothers to Hygelac (later to be king in Wedermark at the time of *Beowulf*’s journey to Heorot). Herebald’s accidental death (by a stray arrow) comes at the hand of his brother Hæthcyn, whose death during a raid on the Swedes leads to Hygelac’s kingship. This song-as-chart gives each brother’s name

⁵⁵ Compare with G.N. Garmonsway, Jacqueline Simpson, and Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans., *Beowulf And Its Analogues* (New York: Dutton, 1971).

⁵⁶ See Michael Davidson, “From the Latin *Speculum*’: Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Philology,” in Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 94–115.

⁵⁷ Charles Olson, “14 MEN STAGE HEAD WINTER 1624/5,” in Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, 122.

on the top and bottom, and the Norse cognate of the main part of each name in the center: Baldr and Hothr, proper names from the Old Icelandic Elder (or ‘Verse’) *Edda*. The linguistically pan-Germanic element in each name is given in capital letters while the element specific to the Anglo-Saxon or Norse names appears in lowercase, arranged with the distinctive Norse nominal case-marker *-r* appearing like a hinge before the line in the center (almost as if an arithmetic problem). The lowercase Anglo-Saxon elements appear diagonally opposite to each other, bottom right and upper left. The translation thus calls attention to a much larger and longer medieval Germanic literary history — gesturing towards the complicated relation of *Beowulf* to Scandinavian culture. This chart foregrounds the translation’s printed-ness in terms of a more complex history of writing, as a way to register *Beowulf*’s complex relation to orality but also recalling Anglo-Saxon inscriptions: consider these enigmatic graphic marks (like runes) whose concrete shape on the page faintly echoes Anglo-Saxon ornamental scrollwork which can be elaborated in a manner similar to Hrothgar’s “reading” of the runes on the sword-hilt *Beowulf* snatches from the lake.⁵⁸ The chart thus underscores the capacity for *Beowulf* to appear as a modern poem: the Old English poem already harbors the figure of a complicated concrete textuality similar to the one used by its twentieth-century translation.

Meyer’s translation of the account by the *scop* in Heorot of the Finn and Hengest episode strangely casts a scene of poetry as oral performance in one of the translation’s most visually intricate passages:

⁵⁸ Anina Seiler, “Factual and Fictional Inscriptions: Literacy and the Visual Imagination in Anglo-Saxon England” (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, University of Wisconsin-Madison, August 2, 2011). Seiler argues that “reading” an inscription in Anglo-Saxon England involved not merely pronouncing the very few (often runic) characters carved into a given surface, but also extemporaneously elaborating on the narrative they encode.

song
sung
sing
er's
saga

ended: joy rose
bench rows
noise boys brought
 wine in
wonderous
 cups
Wealhtheow

wore a golden crown

Critic Edward B. Irving, Jr. once considered the possibility that the editing of Old English texts might productively employ the typographically visual innovations of twentieth-century poetry in order to deal with the problems that arise in presenting Old English verse in print.⁵⁹ Meyer instead demonstrates the potential for a little bit of careful arrangement of print and typography to bring out visually oriented possibilities latent in the Old English in translation. The song about a singer finishing a song is here deeply entrenched within print conventions, relying on enjambment on the level of the morpheme and syllable (i.e., *sing/ er's*) to produce a thin rectangle of type. Ironically, it is a set of very medieval Germanic words hovering in a semantic field related to orality that constructs this typographically striking rectangle (*song* and *sung* remain almost identical to their Old English ancestors, *singer* is obviously related, and *saga* is attested in Old English, meaning “saying, story,

⁵⁹ See Edward B. Irving, Jr., “Editing Old English Verse: The Ideal,” in *New Approaches to Editing Old English Verse*, eds. Sarah Larratt Keefer and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 14.

statement”).⁶⁰ And playfully, this most typographically charged passage rings out with the famous aural device of Anglo-Saxon poetry: alliteration. The alliteration occurs not only in terms of the sounds read aloud, but also in the visual shape of each initial *s* moving down the left side of the column of text — excepting that of the line consisting entirely of “er’s,” in which the *s* appears alternately at the end of the line, stitching the surrounding lines into a piece in the way that sound-alliteration stitches together half-lines in Old English verse. The staggered lines below continue to stitch heavy aural effects into intricate typographical shape, in a manner recalling a passage of Zukofsky’s “A” in homage to William Carlos Williams:

reach
 C
 a cove—
 call it
 Carlos:

 smell W
 double U
 two W’s,
 ravine and
 runnel . . .⁶¹

Meyer’s passage offers us the pun on “rose” and “rows” (recalling Niedecker’s “very veery”)⁶² and the rhyme “noise boys,” which interleaves with the more traditional sounding alliteration of “boys brought” — a phrase that also interestingly casts the Old English *byrelas* [plural of *byrel*, l. 1161: ‘cup-bearers,’ ‘stewards’] into the precise detail of “boys.” The alliteration on the *w* in *wine*, *wonderous*,

⁶⁰ Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *sang*, *singen* (pp. *sungen*), and *saga*.

⁶¹ Louis Zukofsky, *A-17*, in Zukofsky “A”, 384.

⁶² Lorine Niedecker, “We are what the seas,” in Niedecker, *Collected Poems*, 240: “We are what the seas/ have made us // longingly immense // the very veery / on the fence.”

Weahltheow, *wore* and *crown* even more heavily echoes the aural effects of Anglo-Saxon prosody. The stitchings of sound already present in the Old English text, corresponding as they do in letterforms to visual rhymes, present on their own a set of “dots” ready to be rearranged for the reader as shape.

THE SHOCK OF PERMISSION

Writing to David Hadbawnik, Meyer offers a statement which functions at once as an insightful critical appraisal of the difficulty of *Beowulf*, an explanation of the preoccupation of his translation with material textuality, and a very partial sense of why he translated a long Anglo-Saxon poem when he did:

You know the elephant in the room is that *Beowulf* is really an odd work, an anomaly right from the start. Single extant manuscript, jumbled narrative, murky transition from oral to written, etc. etc. In the early 70s no one was interested in that kind of textuality. Well, maybe in their own way, the French were. Certainly not Americans. From this, my present vantage, that was just what appealed to me.⁶³

Just as the dating of *Beowulf* and the temporality of the unique Anglo-Saxon text in relation to the possible oral histories of the poem as we have it remain points of controversy, the temporalities of Meyer’s translation are multiple and strange. Meyer’s translation already belongs at least to these two times: the time of its composition forty years ago, and this time now of its wider print publication. Meyer’s pastiche of varying twentieth-century poetics produces a second crux. As Peter Nicholls notes, the fact of the publication of Pound’s *Cantos* well into the 1960s as well as the long careers of the Objectivists (including long periods in which certain of them did not write) extend the practice of modernism well into the 1970s and bring at least “some disorder to a chronology which likes to see ‘modernism’ expiring before the Second World War.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Thomas Meyer, interview with David Hadbawnik (in this volume).

⁶⁴ Nicholls, “Modernising modernism,” 42, 44.

Critics tend to view Zukofsky's modernism as part of a generation entirely previous to that of Olson, and foundational essays on "postmodern" American verse tend to locate Olson as the epitome of their subject (as Olson himself is often credited with early use of the term "post-modern" to describe himself and his practices).⁶⁵ But Olson and Zukofsky were born merely days apart and their partially resonant poetics flourished contemporaneously despite their mutual avoidance of each other.⁶⁶ In the midst of all of this, *Beowulf* remains an early medieval poem in Old English. The *Beowulf* of this volume attempts to embrace modernism while it moves beyond it, and at the same time it remains ineluctably an Anglo-Saxon poem and also entirely anterior to the possibility of such desires.

However, as Olson writes, "the weakness of poems is what they do not include," and it is by this virtue that the publication of this translation now recalls a moment of innovation in poetics and demonstrates their pertinence to thinking about *Beowulf* now.⁶⁷ Accordingly, Meyer explains that "permission, as Robert Duncan might have it, for the inconsistent formalities all throughout my *Beowulf* was granted directly by Pound's 'Propertius' where he runs the gamut from Victorian mediaeval to H.L. Menken wise-cracking."⁶⁸ In Duncan's "Often I am permitted to return to a meadow" (the first poem of the book *The Opening of the Field*, which inaugurated Duncan's engagement with Field Poetics in print), it is a "meadow . . . that is not mine, but is a made place," which famously

⁶⁵ See David Antin, "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry," *boundary 2* 1.1 (1972): 98–133; Charles Altieri, "From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics," *boundary 2* 1.3 (1973): 605–642; and Paul A. Bové, *Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), esp. xi, 217–81. For an example of Olson's very early use of the term "post-modern" to refer to himself, see *Letters for Origin: 1950-1956*, ed. Albert Glover (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 102.

⁶⁶ Stephen Fredman, "'And All Now Is War': George Oppen, Charles Olson, and the Problem of Literary Generations," in DuPlessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 286–93.

⁶⁷ Olson, *Projective Verse II*, 35.

⁶⁸ Thomas Meyer, interview with David Hadbawnik (in this volume).

forms “a place of first permission.” As such a place, Meyer’s *Beowulf* functions as a topography of forces and trajectories which harbor *Beowulf* as having always been a part of the phenomenon of the twentieth-century avant-garde long-poem. This is not merely a matter of obstructive or “difficult” aesthetics, but of lending to *Beowulf* what Duncan called the “permission poetry gives to the felt world.”⁶⁹

Brooklyn & Cleveland⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, eds. Michael Bough and Victor Coleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 13.

⁷⁰ I would like to thank David Hadbawnik, Roy Liuzza, Haruko Momma, and Eileen Joy for their help with this Introduction.

