1996

Edwin Morgan - Two Interviews

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Marco Fazzini: *When did you start to write?*

Edwin Morgan: Quite early, actually, in school. I loved writing anything: prose as well as poetry, long stories, long essays. The kind of poetry I was taught when I was at school was mostly romantic. It was in the early 1930s and at that time modern poetry as such wasn't taught at all. We did the Romantics: Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and I quite enjoyed that. I think the earliest poems I wrote—I don't have them now—were nature poems. Although I was living in the city the first things I wrote were not related to that; somehow I didn't take up that theme until a lot later and I suppose my first poetry was a kind of indulgence, a kind of escapism. I am thinking about Keats and Tennyson's language with its splendid, luscious phrasings which interested me at that time.

F: *What were your interests at that time?*

M: Although I probably feel, when I try to decide what my interests were, that it would be poetry, I think it was very often prose or the cinema. That was a great cinema-going time and Glasgow was a great cinema city in the 1930s, particularly before the war. There were tremendous queues all around the cinemas and you could see a great range of foreign films at the old Cosmo, now called Glasgow Film Theatre. Those films made a big impression. And prose too: the novels of Conrad, Hardy, Melville, the Brontës because I hadn't done very much

of them at school. It's really hard to say just exactly what interests you when you come to your own writing, but that background certainly gave me a great excitement and it's entered into my poetry in a certain way. As for poetry, I was really attracted by the French symbolists and by the Russians in particular, but also by the modern poets such as Eliot and Pound. But I, who took an English degree and was Professor of English Language and Literature, had to go through the process of learning both Old English and Middle English because the language component was very considerable at that time. I also had to know a lot about the history of English language through Germanic back to the Sanskrit.

I mention that simply because this was the time when I could read and enjoy Anglo-Saxon poetry and I liked it tremendously; that was why I translated *Beowulf* and the rest of the poetry too. And I think this kind of alliterative four-stressed line keeps surfacing and resurfacing in my work. Not as a conscious, deliberate device but as something which had imposed its typical metrical system, that way of counting not the syllables of each line but the number of beats. So the patterning was not a patterning of syllables but of stresses and of alliteration. I liked that but also liked the nature of the poetry too, the heroic poetry and that kind of stoic philosophy.

F: *Your poetry alternates between innovative and traditional structures. Can I ask you how much value you attach to the more conventional structures of poetry?*

M: I don't think I have one view of the matter. It seems to me that for certain things I have done I wanted to be free to follow what was around in recent poetry. That would allow me to move in unexpected ways. At other times I felt I really had to use strict form and the sonnet is still very much available as a form. In a sense, each poem presents its own problem which has to be solved; sometimes it is a strict metrical solution and other times it is a free form kind of solution, or maybe a mixture of the two which even contains elements of concrete poetry in a traditional patterns. I am not sure, really, but I have always liked the idea that poetry, like the other arts, is definitely entitled to explore its own formal potential even though it may make mistakes or may go into a cul-de-sac. But, occasionally, it may go into some interesting region and bring back something from somewhere else. I think that it is what happens to concrete poetry or sound poetry.

F: *But what's the origin of a poem?   Does it take its shape first as a sound, a rhythm or as an image?*

M: It can be either. I think it very often begins with a rhythmical sense of something that's in your mind and it hasn't been very well defined at all. But it can be an image. I don't think it's easy to generalize about that but I would say that the rhythm is very important to me. Even if there is a free form without a regular metrical structure I would try to pay a lot of attention to the way it moves rhythmically from one line to the next. I think any good poetry, whether it's free or not,

must please the ear, must be music. So I think rhythm is always important and that's probably why when I am writing a poem I vocalize it and read it aloud from line to line.

F: *Emmett Williams, introducing his* Anthology of Concrete Poetry, *says that this new poetry "was a poetry far beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be contemplated or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation . . . a kind of game, perhaps, but so is life. It was born of the times, as a way of knowing and saying something about the world of now with the techniques and insights of now."*[1] *Would you accept the idea that concrete poetry contains this element of game? And who do you think enjoys the poem most, the poet in composing it or the reader in activating it?*

M: Yes, I think there is an element of game, in the sense you have a play of words, a play of letters and perhaps also a play of sounds. But I suppose the hope is that what you produce is something that would give pleasure to other people because there is always an element of game in art in any case. Perhaps there is more of an element of that in concrete poetry. But the argument would be that it has something to do with structure, and although there are certain playful elements it may also be a way of discovering new means of structuring a poem which is not related to any of the previous metrical or free verse arrangements at all. Sometimes a poem becomes an object of contemplation on the page and although the reader or the viewer may enjoy the play or the humor or the satire that there may be in a concrete poem, other kinds of concrete poems are made for you to meditate on what is a surprising and beautiful object like a work of art. It can become very visual. Some of them cannot be read aloud at all and some people do not want to accept them as real poems. I suppose it divides people: I know that from the reaction to my own concrete poetry.

F: *If we look back to the origins or the first attempts of a visual conception of poetry we discover that the permutational poems of the cabalists, the anagrams of the early Christian monks, the* carmina figurata *of the Greek bucolic poets, the pattern poems of the Babylonians, Herbert's and Thomas's poetry in England and Apollinaire's* Calligrammes *in France have underlined that picture-writing was an ever-present impulse which had only to wait for the right moment to burst. Could you suggest any particular reason for this new development of concrete poetry from the early 1950s up to the 1960s? In other words, do you think that concrete poetry was an international movement because there were suitable social, technological and poetical situations for it to grow, or would you rather say that its internationalism was mere chance?*

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[1]Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York, Villefranche, Frankfurt, 1967), p. vi.

M: It is quite difficult to be sure where exactly it rose. It depends on how closely or not you can trace it back to the preceding decades. It began in German-speaking Switzerland and in Saõ Paulo, Brazil. You mentioned Apollinaire: you can certainly trace it back to the earlier part of the 20th century, but the fact that those poets came together at that time around the 1950s and the fact that most of the early practitioners were in contact with each other would argue that there was something going on, some groups which started to come out. I am quite sure there is some relation to the development of computer technology. The element of combination or re-combination of elements is quite strong in concrete poetry and it began to be written at the very time when computers began to be used. I do not know how far this affected South American poetry but I think in Switzerland and among the other German or German-Swiss poets who came on the scene that was a strong influence. Other factors are related to what was happening in the plastic arts. Just before that there was a thing called concrete art and the sculpture of Max Bill particularly. Hamilton Finlay is fond of saying that Max Bill was the originator of concrete poetry although he was a sculptor. And again the question: why his art was connected at that particular time? If it is a postwar situation one might expect something different to emerge, something like Dada. But one has this kind of thing which is partly abstract, partly playful and partly, as critics have said, a kind of neo-Modernism. I felt that there was a kind of new Modernism around after the 1930s, not just in concrete poetry but in other fields as well.

F: *In your essay on concrete poetry "Into the Constellation" you quote Eugen Gomringer who says that "the aim of the new poetry is to give poetry an organic function in society again, and in doing so to restate the position of the poet in society."[2] In which way do you think concrete poetry can give back the poet a social dimension?*

M: Hamilton Finlay's idea was that the poem would become a kind of object in society. If "concrete" implies something solid or perhaps tri-dimensional, the poem can get away from the books, becoming an object as many of Hamilton Finlay's poems did; they were made in glass or wood or stone or metal of some kind and you might have seen something that was literally an object, even a concrete poem. Finlay, who had the reputation of being a great experimenter, wanted to place his works where people could see them, possibly in the streets. One of his poems is called "Acrobats" and its letters are arranged in such a way that you get an image in your mind of acrobats on each other's shoulders forming a pyramid.[3] We get concrete poetry in a book, on a postcard, also on the wall of a house, so that children of the school nearby could see it. One of the aims is that the poem

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[2]Edwin Morgan, *Essays* (Manchester, 1974), p. 25.

[3]"Acrobats," in Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London, 1992), p. 184.

can go out somewhere and people will not feel that a poem is something that is not for them. This has not really happened to any great extent but when it has people seemed to like it.

F: *In your essay "The Poet and the Particle," before discussing Robert Garioch's "The Muir," you suggest that "if it is not the duty, it should at least be the delight, of poets to contemplate the world of science."[4] Could you say which fields of science you have tried to describe in your poetry?*

M: I have never felt this split between science and the artist that many people feel. Nowadays one comes up against the sheer problem of specialization, of mathematics, of very technical vocabulary. I admired Hugh MacDiarmid for his attempts to deal with this problem of how to bring scientific and technological words into poetry. I found these poems very interesting. In my own poetry it was not so much the problem of bringing into it a lot of technological words as of taking certain themes which seemed to be pressing—this was in the 1950s and 1960s. It was partly with regard to biology, but I think astronomy and space explorations were also two of my early scientific interests.

I think that when space explorations began to be possible, when they began to be part of human experience and not just science fictions as they had been when I was a boy, I started to write about these things. I did it in such a way that actually the scientific content in my own science fiction poems, the "Particle Poems," try to say something about the particle. I also like to imagine projection into the future. In "In Sobieski's Shield," which is a kind of heroic poem, I go back to Anglo-Saxon poetry, and although it is a science-fiction poem where people are pushed into a very difficult situation in a far future, it still revolves around human experience, it says something about survival and heroes.

F: *And what can you say about your personal experience of the gestation of a poem?*

M: Very often gestation is a kind of physiological thing. I cannot find the exact words to define these strange feelings but I am disturbed in some kind of way, troubled or worried and become bad tempered to my nearest and dearest. I learned to read the signals that this is going to be a poem but it may be something that is so vague that I could not even say what it is going to be about. But when I get this feeling I usually find that it does relate to something and it is very often a phrase or a line, not so much an idea, that comes into my head. I am not quite sure whether I might relate it to a landscape, to a city or to people but it comes into my head very strongly and instantly. It seems to fix itself to these vague feelings of discontent and then I know I have to get going otherwise I feel as if I have let myself down.

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[4]*Essays*, p. 17.

The process of getting into a poem is one of the great anxieties of composition but I have to put up with it somehow.   There is an invisible strange command which tells the poet to produce a poem and he cannot neglect it even if he has to sacrifice himself.

F: *Looking back over all your work what do you think is its most characteristic feature?*

M: I think it is a difficult question because I have written quite different kinds of poems.   Maybe it is easier for others to answer but, personally, I think it is probably something to do with that heroic hope that I talked about in "In Sobieski's Shield" that we also find in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

I very often like to have poems about people facing difficult and crucial situations but not going under.   I like to think of people surviving very difficult things, like the old man in "In the Snack-bar" or the people in "In Sobieski's Shield."   I think the characteristic of these people is that they accept real challenges or real problems but they do manage somehow to come through.   There is a kind of stoic note about it but it is hopeful rather than despairing.   I like to think about the idea of overcoming something desperate.

F: *Would you expect to keep writing regularly?*

M: Writing is not regular for a poet because poetry is the most precarious of all arts.   If you are a novelist or a writer of short stories you have the chance to have a regular task every day, a certain amount of pages or words.   I know many fiction writers who can really do that.   In poetry it is very hard to plan things and one must wait.   Obviously I try to write something every day even though I am not writing poetry, just to get myself in touch with language.   But it cannot be made regular.   Even with long things like *Paradise Lost* in which you ought to keep a great deal in your mind, the poet did not write regularly.   He had bad moments too.

F: *Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet writing in the United Kingdom or a British poet?*

M: A Scottish poet.   For me the word "British" does not mean very much and I feel I am Scottish as Geoffrey Hill is English and Seamus Heaney is Irish.   I think the United Kingdom, or dis-United Kingdom, is a strange body.   It must be very strange to an outsider to understand what we are in this island.   That is why we do not use the word "British" very much.   But if your work possesses any international appeal   you are just a poet even though there is the local flavor.   For me it was more Glasgow than Scotland.

Glasgow, August 1988

F: *The translator has always to face the problem of faithfulness. A crucial question which arises for the translator is: "What does it mean to be faithful? Do I have to be faithful to the formal and linguistic structures of the original or to its literary beauty?" And again: "If it is true that it is impossible to produce a perfect translation, what should I sacrifice in this work, meaning or music?" How do you react against these theoretical problems?*

M: This is the central problem of translation and it seems nearly unanswerable. I try to get both kinds of faithfulness, as far as I can. If it is not possible to reproduce the exact form of the original, then there must be an equivalent form the translator can use. When I was doing *Cyrano*[5] I was conscious of the difficulty of reproducing the original French rhyming alexandrines. I thought that rhyming pentameter couplets in English would be the closest equivalent form for it. It seemed to work quite well on the stage, but you cannot always find a metrical equivalent for the original form. If it is a sonnet, well, in Italian it would be relatively easy to reproduce the rhymes, but that is very difficult in English. Sometimes I do not reproduce the exact rhyme patterns of the original, especially if it is a poem in Portuguese, Spanish or Italian. I like to try, anyway.

As for Anglo-Saxon poetry, it seemed to me that they were relatively straightforward poems. Occasionally I was not sure if I could identify some creatures like the seagull, the cuckoo. Apart from that, the poems seem to contain few details about things which would be very different from one culture to another. There are some common elements like storms, sea, darkness, birds' crying which I could easily transfer into a modern English version.

F: *Did you decide to translate* The Wanderer *and* The Seafarer *because you were unsatisfied with the previous translations or did those two elegies contain any hidden clues to the art of your own creative writing?*

M: When I was writing *The Seafarer* in particular, I knew Pound's version and I disliked it so much that I felt it had to be done again. When I started to study Anglo-Saxon language I found it very hard to enjoy Pound's version so I felt I had to do it differently. I could see that Pound's translation was important in his development but looking at it as a contemporary person I thought it was a strange old-fashioned kind of translation, full of archaic words which I thought not right for that poem. For a man who was supposed to be re-vitalizing or re-modernizing English poetry that was a strange work. Of course I understood that he wanted to

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[5]Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac. A New Verse Translation*, by Edwin Morgan (Manchester, 1992).

reproduce the flavor of the Old English poetry but I am still convinced that there are better ways of doing that; you can still use the contemporary language and yet suggest a great deal of what that old poetry was like.

When war broke out I had to join the Army and during the five years I spent in the Middle-East I could not write poetry at all. I felt very bad about that, I felt guilty about it. When I went back to Glasgow to finish my University courses and get my degree I felt that I had to get back into poetry somehow, and one of the ways was through translation. I wanted to write something in verse, even though it was not my own. I probably found Anglo-Saxon versions useful in that kind of way and they also reflect something of my own feelings, especially *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

F: *Introducing his translations from the French poets, the Italian poet, critic, and translator Mario Luzi observes that he has never thought about constructing a theory about an object which is eminently empirical. Distinguishing between theatrical translations, which are intended for performance, and lyrical translations, which contain a certain arbitrary element, the poet stresses the aesthetic and creative prerogatives of the latter. There is no need, he says, to require a performative verification for lyrical translation because its quality lies in the unpredictability of its creative work and in its being a moral and linguistic appropriation or estrangement of the original text.[6]   Don't you think that in the case of Anglo-Saxon poetry we are half-way between the lyrical and the performative, the written and the oral, the personally confessional and the objective historical?*

M: Yes, very much so. It is an arguable point how much of the oral element was in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Some of the poetry we think is quite difficult would be able to be enjoyed by people gathered to listen to it at a recital, probably in a hall and with a musical accompaniment, even though we do not know much of it. So I think the performative element is there, but the Anglo-Saxon poet wanted to get both effects: he/she wanted to have something that could be seen on the page, something to be meditated and appreciated for its aesthetic elements and, at the same time, something which could be performed and delivered to an audience. The translation from Anglo-Saxon poetry has to reproduce these two effects, these two functions. I was very much conscious of this double task for the translator. One of my friends was a good guitarist at that time and he tried to accompany a piece of my translations. It seemed to be possible to have that for the actual metrical effects of the English texts. You can also get a way of accommodating the words to a regular beat if you want to. Obviously, some of the lines in Anglo-Saxon poetry have a lot of small words so that they appear as long lines. But

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[6]Mario Luzi, *La cordigliera delle Ande* (Torino, 1983), pp. v-ix.

when you speak them aloud there is necessarily elision so that poetry can be adapted for a public and oral performance.

F: *Accepting what Francis Newman has to say in his study of Homeric translation, literary assessment is "culture-bound," and any evaluation of the intrinsic values of a work relies on the particular audience it confronts.[7] Would you comment on this statement? And did you think about an audience in particular when you translated Anglo-Saxon poetry?*

M: I do not think I was primarily concerned with an audience when I was doing translations from Anglo-Saxon poetry. I did it just because I liked it so much that I wanted to make new versions of some of the best poems of that period. I was probably also thinking about a general audience interested in poetry and able to enjoy that particular archaic style. I suppose there was also the feeling that what I was writing had, educationally, some kind of interest for academies and schools. At that time, the study of Anglo-Saxon was almost everywhere a compulsory part of English courses. I thought it would be useful to people actually studying Anglo-Saxon to have a new translation of that literature, especially *Beowulf.* But this didactic purpose of my translations was almost unconscious because the whole work mainly came out of my enthusiasm. Anyway, my *Beowulf* is still in print in the USA and it seems to be a standard text for college students. From what I can recollect *The Seafarer* was translated in May 1947 and revised in February 1950. The translation of the poem was first published in the magazine called *The European.*[8] *The Wanderer* was translated in June 1947 and revised in February 1950. It first appeared in an anthology called *Medieval Age.*[9] I started translating *Beowulf* in the same period.

F: *Renato Poggioli, in an essay published in 1959, follows André Gide's concept of "disponibilité" and he states:*

> *At any rate what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him.*[10]

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[7]Cf. Francis Newman, "Homeric Translation in Theory and Practice," in Matthew Arnold, *Essays Literary and Critical* (London, 1914), pp. 313-76.

[8]No. 14 (April 1947).

[9]Angel Flores, ed., *Medieval Age* (New York, 1963). It also included the translation of *The Seafarer.*

[10]Renato Poggioli, "The Added Artificer," in Reuben Brower, ed., *On Translation* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), p. 141.

Do you believe in what Goethe called "elective affinity"?

M: Yes, I think I do. I think it is an important idea! I have done transla-
tions in different ways. Sometimes it started off because I felt an affinity with the
other poet and other times I was asked for translations. I prefer if I discover some
poet for myself and particularly if that poet has not been translated, or has been
translated badly, before. It is a big challenge to do a new version of it. The life
and the feelings of the poet I translate seem to be things I can be very close to.
With Montale that started by being suggested to me by somebody else, as I said
before. In the case of Anglo-Saxon poetry the reader can feel that the atmosphere
of the poems reflects the society of the period, obviously, even though it is difficult
to know who the poet was. In particular, in the case of *The Wanderer* it is fairly
clear that he/she is somebody that was put into exile, somebody who is not part of
the society he enjoyed so much. The state of mind of this isolated figure (maybe a
historical figure?) is probably related to some of the themes recurring in my poems.
I think there is something in this. There is something similar in *Beowulf* too. The
hero does his job, helps others, goes to a different country, kills monsters but he
does not really belong to a particular social group. It is quite like the two figures
in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Now that I carefully try to look at the period
in which I translated the two elegies, it occurs to me that there was a kind of un-
conscious substratum in my mind. I did them in the late 1940s, just after the war
when I came back from the Army. I was myself a kind of "wanderer," or a
"seafarer." (I think I identified with the piece far more than I realized at that time.)
Both figures in the elegies were concerned with death, war, cities being destroyed,
sense of loss. That was exactly what I had to experience in Palestine, Lebanon and
Egypt during the war.

F: *In a recent book on translation written by Hatim and Mason[11] the two
writers see the text as a social event and they suggest that the reader and the
translator must study the three main elements in a text: the text producer, the
meaning, and the text expression. Would you speak of your ideas about:*
> *a)   the text producer of the two main Anglo-Saxon elegies, that is your
> idea about the period of composition, the possible interpolator or mo-
> nastic editor;*
> *b)   your opinion about the most important meaning or cluster of
> meanings in the two elegies;*
> *c)   their mode of expression?*

M: The texts of the two main Anglo-Saxon elegies are of course open to
discussion. When I was doing the translations there was not much discussion
about the possibility of the texts being unstable. I took them as they were, as they
had been printed. I tried to see the poems as wholes. I do not think that the

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[11]Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, *Discourse and the Translator* (London and New York, 1990).

Christian elements at the end were added. They seem to me to emerge logically from the poems. I took the opposite point of view of Ezra Pound. He said that there must be an interpolator in the poems, so he cut the Christian references out. If you stress the metaphorical function of the language of the two elegies you obviously try to get at a Christian interpretation of the images contained. In that case it is not just a man who is away from his family and his retinue but he becomes a kind of spiritual pilgrim. It seems to me that the spiritual sense of exile and longing was something that could very easily be part of the original poems. I would like to know more about those two poems. It is hard to see exactly where the background of the elegies comes from. There must be some Scandinavian influences and references. That was the period of the great voyages in the cold latitudes. Even so, it is not easy to place the poems geographically. I think that at the end it is more a mental than a geographical landscape that is being described.

The term "elegy" we use as a label to define these poems is a very rough kind of description. I do not think that the strict meaning of elegy as a lament for a dead person can be applied here. It is a lament for a previous state of existence and the man who wanders is thinking about that lost, stable society I was speaking of before. If the poems were written in England when the Danes were looking for incursions, that would increase the writer's sense of the uncertainty of life. I think you can always describe them as dramatic monologues or dramatic meditations.

F: *Endeavoring, sometimes, by the choice of the prose medium, to avoid infidelity to the meaning of the original or super-translation, the translator should hope to move the reader towards the author, to reproduce the author's manner and matter in the spirit of what Rolfe Humphries has to say in his essay on translating Latin into English verse:*

> *A good translation . . . ought, for the sake of the contemporary reader, to sound, on the whole, more familiar than strange; yet in justice to the original, some hint, at least, of his quality, some soupçon of his foreign accent, must be kept.*[12]

Would you like to speak about your achievements?

M: I did not, myself, follow the alliteration. I used it but I did not follow it as a system. Perhaps if I had to do the translation again I might add more alliteration, but what I did want to retain was the rhythm and the music of the original poem, more than Pound himself did. So I wanted that my version should have a good sense of the rhythm so that the sounds could move well in a four-beat line. I did attempt sometimes to use rhymes more than alliteration, especially internal rhymes. There is a large difference between Old English and Modern English but on the whole it is quite possible to have similar rhythmical effects. I tried to make it as modern as possible without using too many archaic words. I wanted my

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[12]Rolfe Humphries, "Latin and English Verse—Some Practical Considerations," Brower, p. 60.

translations to be accessible to the modern reader from both a musical and a linguistic point of view.

F: *J. R. R. Tolkien, speaking about the problems of translating* Beowulf *into English, observes that "For many Old English poetical words there are (naturally) no precise modern equivalents of the same scope and tone: they come down to us bearing echoes of ancient days beyond the shadowy borders of Northern History."*[13]   *Do you agree that the modern writer lacks modern   lexical equivalents?   If you do, how did you treat these particular problematic words?*

M: I do not have a theory about the translation and the transition that some old terms require. It depends on the context and, as Mario Luzi states in the passage you quoted, translation is a very pragmatic thing. You must decide if you want to be totally modern or if you want to remain half-way between the old and the new. But there are, of course, problematic words. When in *The Seafarer*, the speaker says that his mind's desires again urge his "soul" to set out, I was not really sure what the word *hyge* means there. You can call it the man's senses and memory rather than "soul" if you try to imagine that man traveling over the waves and recollecting his past life. It is a poem about memory in the past and he re-creates his memories in his mind so strongly that they seem present. I took that image not to be metaphorical. The image contains an almost erotic feeling. I think you would not get an emotional charge if it was only a spiritual voyage. If that line had been written by an ecclesiastic or a priest or a monk you would not have got that emotion of senses.

Other problematic words were *goldgiefa* which I translated "gold-giver," *byrne* (I say "mail-coat"), *duguth* (I say "retinue"), and *beorh* (I say "barrow"). As for *meoduheall* I thought that "mead-hall" was the best translation because it suggests a kind of gathering place. You can keep the phrase "mead-hall" as meaning "wine-hall." We have the modern word "wine-bar" today and perhaps mead-hall sounds a little bit strange because we do not very often drink mead, even though you can buy mead.

F: *As Wilhelm von Humboldt states, there is a basic human sensibility of a sort and it is possible to find a non-linguistic and ultimately universal "deep structure" underlying all languages. Translation can thus be considered as a "recoding" or change of surface structure, in which nearly everything in Text 1— the original Anglo-Saxon text, in this case—can be understood by the readers of Text 2—the English translations. According to this view, almost everything is translatable because all languages are integrated in the totality of their*

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[13]J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Translating *Beowulf*," *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London, 1983), p. 50.

"Intentions," that is "pure language" as Walter Benjamin has defined it.[14]
Would you comment on this?

M: The idea of the existence of a "pure language" in poetry, as described by Walter Benjamin, did attract me. I used that idea in one of the articles I dedicated to the translation of poetry[15] and what I was saying in that article was that when you translate a poem that is important to you, you want to stay very close to the text so that the task of the translator becomes a very hard task. You get to a stage where you feel that the poem exists in your mind, almost without language, and you have a sense of it as a non-verbal object. You feel its presence in an almost physical way so that the poem seems to be reduced to some basic universals. The American poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg has tried to translate American Indian poetry and he has some recordings of American Indian poetry (Navajo poetry) which is extraordinarily different from anything we know. He got some recordings of Navajo poetry which involve very strange sound effects, sometimes trying to imitate the neighing of horses and things of that kind—half verbal, half sound-poetry. How do you translate that, how do you ever get a sense of that as an American Indian would feel it? But he did try. He would possibly argue that, even there, there may be something that is universal. But there must be some kind of difference between the two very remote languages and it would be very hard to get towards that deep structure. But I think with a European poetry that probably is quite possible.

Glasgow, August 1994

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[14]Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1973), p. 77

[15]Edwin Morgan, "The Translation of Poetry," *Nothing Not Giving Messages: Reflections on His Work and Life*, ed. Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 232-5.