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Sounding Lines: The Art of Translating Poetry

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SOUNDING LINES  
THE ART OF TRANSLATING POETRY

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SEAMUS HEANEY  
ROBERT HASS



# Sounding Lines



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, lectures, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities, arts, and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History and Italian Studies. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

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SOUNDING LINES: THE ART OF TRANSLATING POETRY was one of several important events scheduled by the Townsend Center in celebration of Seamus Heaney's residency as Visiting Avenali Professor for 1999. Invited in conjunction with "When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland," an exhibit organized by the Berkeley Art Museum, Seamus Heaney here turns from the visual arts to the arts of poetry and translation, with particular attention to his work in translating *Beowulf*. The Townsend Center was further pleased and honored that Robert Hass, Professor of English and Poet Laureate of the United States in 1995-96, and also translator of five volumes of poetry by Nobel poet Czeslaw Milosz, could join Seamus Heaney in a conversation that so eloquently demonstrated the power of "sounding lines."

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## Preface

Despite (or because of) Berkeley's imitation of soggy Irish weather, listeners and interlocutors attended to overflowing the occasion that this Occasional Paper records. It was the second event during the week of Seamus Heaney's Berkeley visit in February 1999 as Avenali Professor in the Humanities. The Avenali Chair was endowed by Peter and Joan Avenali in memory of family members, in the confidence that the Townsend Center would invite distinguished visitors across the whole range of the humanities for a time of productive conversation and encounter. In his 1995 Nobel Prize lecture, Heaney referred to "times when a deeper need arises, when we want the poem to be not only pleasurably right but compellingly wise, not only a surprising variation played upon the world, but a returning of the world itself." His craft and humanity met the need and fulfilled that desire many times over in Berkeley.

The conversation with American poet Laureate Robert Hass that you will be reading is specifically about translation but actually came between translations. On the night before, Seamus Heaney, in his Avenali lecture, had talked about translations, from images to words to history, the things between them, behind them, and from one to another. This was his reflection on the Berkeley Art Museum's exhibit of Irish painting in the twentieth century. On the following day he talked about his translation of *Beowulf*, which has since been much discussed and has become a best seller besides.

At the beginning of a year's programs on international perspectives, the Townsend Center organized a panel discussion entitled "How Do the Humanities Cross Cultures?" I remember Robert Alter citing a Hebrew word in Yehuda Amichai,

the Israeli poet, which can be rendered as “rough” and “wanton” at the same time. Alter used this as an example of what he called the mystique and the distance of another language. The Hebrew word wouldn’t translate simply; it came from a religious prohibition against two kinds of textures being put one next to the other. And yet Alter’s translation made the meaning shimmeringly clear.

When two eminent poets and translators come together, they translate for one another and for the audience, raising questions for us along the way. Where does translation begin and end? If the accompanying notes are very full, has the translation failed? Is silence a kind of best translation? What accounts for the click of understanding when a translation rings true? It is a pleasure to think that readers of this Occasional Paper will have the translation into text of a memorable exchange about the translators’ art.

—Randolph Starn  
Marian E. Koshland Distinguished Professor and  
Director, Townsend Center for the Humanities



# Sounding Lines

## The Art of Translating Poetry

### Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass in Conversation

**Robert Hass:** So, Mr. Heaney, do you have a theory of translation? [laughter]

**Seamus Heaney:** I don't have a theory of it, no. I have done it different ways, and I know that there are different motives. One motive is the writerly motive, slightly predatorish. The writer hears something in the other language and says "I would like that, that sounds right, I need that."

I have not a theory but a metaphor for it. It's based upon the Viking relationship with the island of Ireland and the island of Britain. There was a historical period known as the Raids and then there was a period known as the Settlements. Now, a very good motive for translation is the Raid. You go in—it is the Lowell method—and you raid Italian, you raid German, you raid Greek, and you end up with booty that you call *Imitations*.

Then there is the Settlement approach: you enter an oeuvre, colonize it, take it over—but you stay with it, and you change it and it changes you a little bit. Robert Fitzgerald stayed with Homer, Lattimore stayed with him, Bob Hass has stayed with Czeslaw Milosz. I stayed with *Beowulf*. But I also raided Dante in the late 70s, when there were people on what they called the "Dirty" protest in the H-blocks in Long Kesh. There was an intense and violent intimate atmosphere not only in the prison but in Northern Ireland in general. At the time, I was

reading *The Inferno* in translation, not a very good translation maybe, but one that I liked. Anyway, I came upon the Ugolino section and I thought, “This is cannibalism.” There’s an almost sexual intimacy between the two people, between Ugolino and Archbishop Roger, which seemed cognate with the violence and intimacy of Ulster. So I raided that section. I was thinking of dedicating it to the people in the prison until I met a Sinn Fein fellow who said “You never write anything for us,” and I said, “That’s right.” What I meant as a gift was suddenly being levied, so I didn’t do the dedication.

Anyway, I interfered with it a bit, I did a Lowell-esque translation. I put in a couple of images, and thickened the texture of the Italian up, and then somebody said to me “You should try the whole thing.” But when I thought of trying the whole thing, I realized I didn’t know Italian well enough, although I did do a version of the first three cantos. I raided for Ugolino, but could not manage to establish a settlement. But I settled with *Beowulf* and stayed with it, formed a kind of conjugal relation for years.

**Robert Hass:** You don’t have the Ugolino here?

**Seamus Heaney:** I don’t know. It’s a bit long. It’s in a book called *Field Work*. I’m sorry, I forgot it. Oh, someone in the audience has it! Are you sure you want to do this so early?

**Robert Hass:** Do some if it, yes.

**Seamus Heaney:** Well, you know the situation: Dante is walking, down on the ice of the ninth circle of hell, and comes upon these two characters in the ice. Incidentally, the beginning of this echoes the beginning of the Old English poem “The Battle of Maldon.” The early part of the English poem is lost, so it starts with a strange, floating half-line, one of my favorite openings. It says: “it was broken.” Then the poem proceeds. So “Ugolino” begins as Dante breaks off a previous encounter:

We had already left him. I walked the ice  
And saw two soldered in a frozen hole

On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,  
Gnawing at him where the neck and head  
Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain  
Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread.  
So the berserk Tydeus gnashed and fed  
Upon the severed head of Menalippus  
As if it were some spattered carnal melon.  
'You,' I shouted, 'you on top, what hate  
Makes you so ravenous and insatiable?  
What keeps you so monstrously at rut?  
Is there any story I can tell  
For you in the world above, against him?  
If my tongue by then's not withered in my throat  
I will report the truth and clear your name.'

That sinner eased his mouth up off his meal  
To answer me, and wiped it with the hair  
Left growing on his victim's ravaged skull,  
Then said, 'Even before I speak  
The thought of having to relive all that  
Desperate time makes my heart sick;  
Yet while I weep to say them, I would sow  
My words like curses—that they might increase  
And multiply upon this head I gnaw.  
I know you come from Florence by your accent  
But I have no idea who you are  
Nor how you ever managed your descent.  
Still, you should know my name, for I was Count  
Ugolino, this was Archbishop Roger,  
And why I act the jockey to his mount  
Is surely common knowledge; how my good faith  
Was easy prey to his malignancy,  
How I was taken, held and put to death....'

Some things I added: the melon image. And the phrase, “Why I act the jockey to his mount,” I don’t think is in the original. Also, the whole movement of the lines is different. The Italian swims. But my translation is sluggish. I liked it like that. I’ve often said that Dante’s movement is Chianti-pour, but that mine is poured concrete. I thickened it up. But I think there is a different covenant with a work if you do the whole thing.

The translation I like of Dante is Dorothy Sayers’, which is in *terza rima*. It has no pretensions to decorum. There is a touch of Gilbert and Sullivan in the rhyming—she’s just sketching it out. The feeling is that she is saying to you: “It goes more or less like this, and it rhymes more or less like this.” Its swiftness makes it very readable.

**Robert Hass:** So how did you come to the *Beowulf*?

**Seamus Heaney:** Well one simple answer is that an editor wrote to me and said “We would like you to translate *Beowulf*.” I had done Anglo-Saxon at University. I dwelled with it for three years on and off, from about 1958-61; it was part of the course. I gradually realized that I really got something from it. I liked, as I mentioned, *The Battle of Maldon*, I liked *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*. The grey-ness attracted me, I think. The sleet and the rock in it. At the same time, there is something tender at the center of it. And then, when I began to write as an undergraduate, I was animated originally by Gerard Manley Hopkins, who is basically an Anglo-Saxon poet writing naturally in the stressed English of the native pre-Conquest tradition.

Anyway, when this offer came I thought it would be good for me to translate *Beowulf*, to steady myself, to go back to that language, to my original stressed speech. When I began to write I had wanted the verse to thump and the language to be thick and so on.

In the 1970s I did an essay and I quoted a Northern Irish poet called W.R. Rodgers, Bertie Rodgers. What interested me was Bertie’s description of the Northern Irish speech—a speech which really equips Northern Irish people to translate *Beowulf*. He says:

my people an abrupt people  
Who like the spiky consonants of speech  
And think the softy one cissy; who dig  
The *k* and *t* in orchestra, detect sin  
In synfonia, get a kick out of  
Tin cans, fricatives, fornication, staccato talk,  
Anything that gives or takes attack,  
Like Micks, Tagues, tinkers' gets, Vatican.

And I've often said that if you gave Anglo-Saxon poetry to the Reverend Ian Paisley, he could speak it perfectly. It's really big-voiced... *Hwæt, we Gar-dena in geardagum, fleodcyninga flrym gefrunon*. Seriously, I think this has to do with the nature of the stress in the Northern Irish accent. Anyhow, I did about 150 lines of *Beowulf* in 1984/5 and then said, "I can't do anymore, it's too difficult." The words of the original are so big and the alliterative principle so strong. In Anglo-Saxon you have these huge monkey wrenches which are sort of welded together. All you have in modern English are little words like spanners to hang on the line. So I said I wouldn't proceed with the commission.

And then eventually—this has less to do with translation than with the psychology of poets—about ten years later, the editor wrote and said, "I know you don't want to do it, but could you give me the names of two other people you think *could* do it." [laughter] And at that point I knew exactly who should do it.

But basically, I took it on because of the language. I felt it was in me, I felt there was some trace element of it in my own first speech, the dialect of Northern Ireland. And there was an Anglo-Saxon growth-ring in my ear from having studied it at university.

**Robert Hass:** You had one hundred and fifty lines that you were more or less satisfied with, and then when you sat down to the task, did you know what you wanted to do, or did you have to invent it all over again?

**Seamus Heaney:** From the start, I realized I couldn't do anything unless I found a way of getting started. OK, that's a truism, but how do you enter Anglo-Saxon,

how is your own English going to move and sound? You know there are four stresses to the line, you know it can be linked together with alliteration, but how will it be paced? And then I thought of a voice—a voice that belonged to a cousin of my father's. One of three old country-men who lived together in a house in a very quiet lakeshore district. When I was a youngster we used to go down there; I would be with my father—five males on a summer evening, no lights on in the house, twilight darkening slowly. Not much spoken, but occasionally one of them would break the silence and say something, like “We were at the corn today” or “We'll be at the corn tomorrow.” [laughter]

Still, there was a terrific verity about everything they said, and that chimed perfectly with that aspect of Anglo-Saxon poetry which is gnomic, that can say “water is wet,” and get away with it. [laughter] You need some way of echoing this. And so when I thought of this voice, Peter Scullion's voice, I thought, “That is the way.” In *Beowulf*, there is a kind of proverbial wisdom-speaking which is matched by that country-speak they had. In the opening lines of the poem, for example, the young son is commended for helping and fighting for other people because then, in the end, when he becomes king, those people will stand by him. And then comes a gnomic observation—it's an Anglo-Saxon line, but in my version it belongs entirely to Ulster country-speak, in cadence and attitude—“Behavior that is admired/is the path to power among people everywhere.” That could be said by an old farmer at the gable, you know, nodding and repeating it.

**Robert Hass:** Did you have a sharp sense after a while of what you weren't getting, of what you had to let go, to do what you could do?

**Seamus Heaney:** Yes. I didn't get enough of the Anglo-Saxon weather, I mean the weather of feeling, of diction, the weather of the language. Pound manages it in his “Seafarer.” Pound writes wonderful Anglo-Saxon, modern Anglo-Saxon poetry. I may as well come out and say that the people who were asking me to do the translation were the Norton Anthology, and since I had been teaching for years myself, that kind of affected my covenant, not only with the text but with the commission. I felt it should be line-for-line, what the original said. No “spattered

carnal melons” allowed. [laughter] Yes. No Lowell-izing of the text, you know? Which is a great pity.

The example I have used to show how correctness won out over pleasure is a line very early on, when the big funeral is taking place and the poet tells us how the ship is ready to go out with the body of Scyld Scefing on it. The funeral ship is in the harbor, and it is *ut-fus*, a wonderful Anglo-Saxon word, out and *fus*-ing to go, eager to go, *ut-fus*, *æflelingas fæas*, fit for a prince, *isig*, icy.

In my original version, I had a line which I was delighted with, which I would have wished to keep. The boat, it said, stood in the harbor, “clad with ice, its cables tightening.” There are no cables in the Anglo-Saxon of course, but I felt that this is *ut-fus*, you know, ready to move. Then my censor came at me and said, “Come on, take that out, kill your darling. Take out the cables. Lose your lovely tight alliteration.” So I did. I mean it was a sin against the gift, against the grace of the line, but in order to be faithful to the literal sense, I ended up with “Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince”—fine, it’s what’s in the line, but it’s not as alive, as eager, as *ut-fus*.

**Robert Hass:** It’s worse when your censor is alive. [laughter] Robert Pinsky and I were collaborating on a translation of a very great poem written by Czeslaw Milosz in the middle of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw, called “The World.” Everyone was writing protest poems and Milosz wrote a poem in a series of short song-like quatrains, almost like children’s verse, about a family in a Lithuanian village. And in one section of the poem, the mother tells the children a parable, and the poem is called “Parable of a Poppy Seed.” The poem had never been translated because Milosz was convinced that it had to rhyme and sound like children’s verse if it was going to be translated. And so we said, “Let us give it a try.” I think a literal translation of the Polish would go something like this:

On a poppy seed there was a tiny house.  
Inside the house were people and a cat.  
Outside poppy-seed dogs bark at the moon,  
Never imagining that somewhere is a world much larger.

In my first effort to try to write a naive-sounding poem and make it rhyme I gave myself some latitude. I think it went like this:

On a seed of poppy is a tiny house.  
Inside are people, a cat and a mouse.  
Outside in the yard, a dog barks at the moon.  
Then, in his world, he sleeps until noon.

I thought, “not bad, I’m on my way.” I showed it to Czeslaw Milosz, who would sometimes come around late in the afternoon to see what we were doing. He read it and he said, “Mouse?” [laughter] Back to the drawing board.

• • •

**Robert Hass:** I thought that it might be interesting for you to hear a little bit of the beginning of *Beowulf* in a couple of the available translations. This one was done in 1957 by David Wright, who says “my aim in translating [this poem] has been to produce, if I could, a readable version in contemporary English prose. It begins:

Hear! We know of the bygone glory of the Danish kings, and the heroic exploits of those princes. Scyld Scefing, in the face of hostile armies, used often to bring nations into subjection, and strike terror in the hearts of their leaders. In the beginning he had been picked up as a castaway; but he afterwards found consolation for his misfortune. For his power and fame increased until each of his overseas neighbors was forced to submit and pay tribute. He was an excellent king.

This translation by Constance Hieatt says that in this version of *Beowulf* readability was a primary objective; literal translation was out of the question. “I wanted to bring out the intense qualities of ornamentation” in Anglo-Saxon verse, she says. And this begins:



Indeed, we have heard of the great Danish kings in days of old and the noble deeds of the princes. Scyld Scefing often drove troops of enemies from their mead-hall seats; he terrified the lords of many tribes, although he had once been a destitute foundling. He found consolation for that: he prospered under the heavens, and grew in glory, until every one of his neighbors over the sea had to obey him and pay tribute. He was a good king.

Jack, would you like to read a bit?

*Professor John Niles reads:*

*Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum,  
fleodcyninga flrym gefrunon,  
hu ʒa æflelingas ellen fremedon!  
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaflena flreatum,  
monegum mægflum meodosetla ofteah,  
egsode eorl[as], sy ʒan ærest wear  
feasceaft funden; he flæs frofre gebad,  
weox under wolcnum weor ʒmyndum flah,  
o flæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra  
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,  
gomban gylðan; flæt wæs god cyning!*

**Robert Hass:** Do you want to follow that? [laughter] Did you look at other translations?

**Seamus Heaney:** I looked early on at some verse translations, but I worked with scholarly prose. What I used as a crib was the Donaldson translation, the one in the Norton Anthology, and it could be said of it (in a negative way) that it is no language. Ben Jonson said that of somebody: “He writ no language.” At the same time you could also say that Donaldson’s work has the complete otherness of the Anglo-Saxon. It is faithful to the kennings, it keeps the appositional style, you are

in the midst of a different way of making sense. And it certainly has no cajolement for a contemporary reader, it doesn't set out to write contemporary English prose and it doesn't set out to attract the undergraduate. So you begin and you think, ah well, at least I'll be writing in clearer English. Then you finish your work and you think, there's a lot to be said for Donaldson, you know, that strangeness.

So I used the Donaldson and I used the Tolkien and Barber, the Oxford school's version. Then I came across a translation that Bill Alfred had done for the Modern Library in prose, and I had to beware of it because the word choice was very good, the diction was excellent, and I found myself attracted to Bill's solutions, so I schooled myself to keep away from it. But I read it afterwards for a reward.

Still, I couldn't start until I had translated the first word, *hwæt*. So I translated it into Irish English, with the word "so," a particle which obliterates all previous narrative and announces your intention to proceed with your own. [laughter]

The first time around I imitated more or less what Peter Scullion would say. And I liked another phrase which was still used in the country, about people who were famous or in control. It was said that "they held sway." I thought that was good for a warrior culture, so I began the poem,

So, the Spear-Danes held sway once.  
The kings of that clan are heroes to us  
because of their bravery. Those were princes who dared.

And then I began to get a conscience: *Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum*—there is a nice alliteration in that but also a kind of cajolement between the vowels, and eventually I got, "So the spear-Danes in days gone by..." There you get the alliteration and the "a"'s and the same word order. I wish I could find similar equivalents for the other 3,181 lines. Anyway my version went:

So the Spear-Danes in days gone by  
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.  
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

There was Scyld Scefing, scourge of many tribes,  
a wrecker of mead benches, rampaging among foes.  
This terror of the hall troops had come far.  
A foundling to start with, he flourished later on  
as his powers waxed and his worth was proved.  
In the end, each sept on the outlying coasts  
beyond the whale road gave in and obeyed him  
and began to pay tribute. That was one good king.

And then there is scansion. One of my favorite lines occurs in the description of Beowulf’s boat journey across into Denmark from Geatland. It says, “the boat was on water/in close, under the cliffs.” A couple of people who have read it have questioned “in close under the cliffs” as a line—they don’t get the Ulster stress; that to me is a spondee, *in* close. And I want to stick to my own cadence even if standard English dictates otherwise.

What about your difficulty with cadences? I know you are translating another strictly metrical Polish work.

**Robert Hass:** Well, yeah. It is a different set of problems, compounded, for me, by the fact that over the years of doing this I’ve never really learned Polish. I work directly with Milosz. I can now pick my way through a newspaper but I’ve never lived in Poland, I’ve heard Polish speech only rarely. So my sense of it is a book-sense. Milosz wrote a poem—almost the only major work of his now that hasn’t been translated into English—that is in a rather strict meter that is maybe the Polish equivalent of blank verse. It is an eleven syllable line for the most part—it depends a lot on the way the pause moves around; sometimes it is five syllables and then six, sometimes it is six syllables and then five. The Polish scansion system—which they call syllabotonic—they say, is not really quite so metrically regular as English. There is a little more freedom with non-accented vowel sounds. So this is again a poem that probably should be translated—it is very long—into something like blank verse. I don’t know if that slight tightening up would represent the sound of the poem accurately. I have only just begun working on it; we did a section of it.

We start with making a literal translation and what happens, really, is that Czeslaw frames the terms of the rhythmic conversion into English and the grammar may be quite rough. Sometimes the lines are just wonderful, they don't have to be touched, but the whole thing has to be articulated. Before I was working with him directly, when I started on this project, my friend Renata Gorczynski would tape the poems so I could hear them. And then I would try to find an English equivalent. Sometimes you hear one and sometimes you don't.

The difference with this project is that in one way my job is to get this work that people are interested in into English, period. Later on, people are going to sort through this body of work and someone who knows Polish very well is going to decide, as someone might with a Baudelaire poem, "I want to make it better." Some of these works will be retranslated and retranslated. So my work is to get the word out, in a way. I was saying to Seamus the other night that for Milosz the poem is in Polish, so one of the things that happens when we work is that "good enough" is good enough for him, whereas I want to say, "Let me work on this line for a couple of weeks." He says, "No, let's get this done." Because it is after all a poem in Polish, not a poem in English. "This is pretty good, it sounds all right." So this quite pragmatic attitude qualifies my task.

• • •

**Robert Hass:** Do you have a sense of people looking over your shoulder when you're dealing with Irish material?

**Seamus Heaney:** Absolutely. First of all, the dead generations of previous translators. Many of the poems have been translated before, famously, and some versions are canonical. It's like translating Dante except it's not as big a deal and usually they are shorter poems. But you are aware of how the lines have been translated by earlier poets.

**Robert Hass:** What about your translation of Raftery? Did he compose orally?

**Seamus Heaney:** Yes, I think so. There is a famous one, an unusually perfected little thing, an unexpected, apparently *extempore* lyric.

**Robert Hass:** Are you going to read it?

**Seamus Heaney:**

I am Raftery the poet,  
full of hope and love,  
my eyes without eyesight,  
my spirit untroubled.  
Tramping west  
by the light of my heart,  
worn down, worn out,  
to the end of the road.

Take a look at me now,  
my back to a wall,  
playing the music  
to empty pockets.

The question arises with lots of work, especially traditional work: what do you do about the meter? Do you translate metrical verse metrically? There is no one answer, there are only the choices people make. Does it rhyme, and if so do you translate it into rhyme? A sonnet, for example, a sonnet is partly its movement. It is whatever tension and checks and balances are in the movement of it. And after all there is a turn in a sonnet, in an 8 and 6 sonnet, it should shift itself, move within itself and the rhyme is part of the gear system, as it were, even though it may not be noticed that much. I found myself thinking more about these things when people were translating my own poems into other languages, like into French. Some sonnets of mine were being translated into French with no rhymes in them and no meter, just a free verse crib, and I thought, “Well, why bother?” It doesn’t move. And then I thought, “What happens when these poems go into Japanese?” [laughter]

In Russian, it would probably be O.K. Seeing Bob Tracy here reminds me of his work on Mandelstam. I had read with delight W.S. Merwin and Clarence

Brown's translations. Then in between I met Joseph Brodsky, who said what he usually said about anything: "No, no, no! When you are listening to Mandelstam in Russian you have to think something like late Yeats. This is sturdy quatrain metrical stuff." And indeed when Bob Tracy's versions came out, you felt the four-squareness, the architectural, stone principle working in them. The meter and the rhyme gave the poem a different kind of verity. The virtue of Merwin's work was in making the poems available—getting Mandelstam into the ear, saying, "Listen to this." He said it in Merwin-speak, naturally. The original became slightly more beguiling and more sinuous. The Tracy versions were more plonked down à la Mandelstam. I suppose it is inevitable that people speak in their own voice in translation. But the older I get the more obedient I tend to become.

**Robert Hass:** I set my students the task of translating a poem from the Oglala Sioux of Sitting Bull as recorded by Francis Denmore who heard it sung in about 1899 by someone who had known Sitting Bull, and it goes something like—a literal translation would be (this was after Little Big Horn, after he had taken his people into Canada, they had starved through two winters, and he then brought them back to the United States and saw them herded into reservations):

"A warrior I have known how to be, hey. Now that is all over, hey. Now I know how to crash against hard things."

That is the whole poem, sung. There are two puns in the Sioux on the word for "bear," because "to know" has the same root as "bear." So, in the song, a warrior is a bearish person and also a knower. To get that, you would have to put in a couple of puns on bearishness that carried some of its meaning for the Oglalas. To make matters worse Francis Denmore (who was basically an ethnomusicologist) records that as sung, in a series of descending sevenths, it basically imitated the song of the midwestern plains meadowlark which was the bird that Sitting Bull had encountered as a young man on his first vision quest. So in order to demonstrate how easy translation was, I gave my students a word for word version of this poem and told them to, if they could, include two puns on bear and make it sound like the song of a plains meadowlark. [laughter]

There is a good part of translation that in that way is just impossible. Another Milosz story: I was working with my friend Renata Gorczynski and there was a line in a poem that Milosz wrote in Berkeley in the mid-70s—he had been

here twenty years—when he felt that except for the friendship of Peter Scott and their translations together he was writing poems about the sun going down over San Francisco Bay for about six people. His poems could not be published in Poland and were published by a small emigré press in Paris. Very few American poets knew who he was, though a number of them would show up to audit his classes. And he began a long poem called “The Separate Notebooks” that begins “Now you have nothing to lose. My cunning, my cautious, my hyper-selfish cat. Now you can make a confession into the void because nobody cares. You are an echo,” and, as Renata translated it for me, “You are an echo that runs tippy toe through an amfilade of rooms.” And I thought, “Well, we’re going to have to work on that line.” [laughter]

*Amfilade* it turns out, is a French architectural term meaning a series of rooms of French doors opening one to another, and we were able to work this one out by looking up *amfilade*, the Polish word in the French dictionary and then going to the English dictionary and finding that the English word was *amfilade*. And you don’t want it to sound like a translation, but it is not such an unusual term in Polish as it is in English. So what do you do?

The next word, the word that she had rendered tippy-toe, was *tupotcem*, an adverb. I said, “what does *tupotcem* mean?”, and she said, “well, it’s an onomatopoeic word and the best way to tell you what it means is the typical name in eastern Poland for a pet hedgehog is *tupotcya*.” So *tupotcem* is like the sound of a hedgehog running across a hardwood floor. [laughter] That’s like the meadowlark. There are things that you just give up on.

**Seamus Heaney:** What did you do?

**Robert Hass:** Skittering.

**Seamus Heaney:** Ah!

**Robert Hass:** And I changed *amfilade* to train and then decided to stay with *amfilade*. Sometimes it is better to have the recalcitrant strangeness and accuracy.



**Robert Hass:** I want to ask you about Virgil and “Seeing Things”—another raid?

**Seamus Heaney:** Yes. When I was at boarding school, the Virgil that was set when I was doing my exam was *The Aenied*, Book Nine, Nisus and Euryalus and all that. But the teacher was a wonderful teacher. He taught obliquely, because he kept saying, “Oh boys, I wish it were Book Six.” [laughter] All through my life, then, I thought, “Book Six.” And of course it’s irresistible, once you read it. The journey into the underworld, the golden bough, and so on.

When I met Robert Fitzgerald, who was at Harvard and had translated *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, he was translating *The Aeneid*. We spent an afternoon playing with “How could you translate the first three or four words?”: *Arma virumque cano*. Robert was faced with that. Do you just say: I sing of arms and a man? Do people still sing? He said he might just begin with *Arma virumque cano* and then proceed with the English, but in the end, without triumph or pleasure he settled for “I sing of warfare and a man at war.”

Then when Robert died, there was a memorial reading held for him. And I thought, “Book Six.” I thought of the bit where Aeneas meets his father in the underworld, because Robert had been a father figure in my life at Harvard, so I read this and then thought more about the underground journey, going down, getting back. I’d been translating the opening sections of *The Inferno*, and was interested in the whole theme of descent. And I had been thinking of the finding of the golden bough and of being given the branch as symbolic of being given the right to speak. Then my father died, and I had a number of poems about him, and next thing someone asked me to contribute a piece to an Irish issue of *Translation* magazine, and I thought, “I’ll go and get permission to go down to the underground to see him.” So I began to translate the bit where Aeneas goes to see the Sybil and she tells him that in order to go down to see Anchises he has to find the golden bough. It is a perfect little narrative in itself and it ends with that moment of discovery and triumph when Aeneas finds the bough and the bough comes away in his hand and he has been given the right of way. It’s like finding a voice, the beginning and end at once. So that was a raid, and it led into a book where I met my father in a poem called “Seeing Things.”



As ever in the raid system, there was something out there in the other language that I needed. For vague reasons. My favorite raid is the sonnet by Wyatt: “Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,” a translation of Petrarch. I think it may be one of the very first sonnets in English. I actually prefer it to any other Renaissance sonnet.

**Robert Hass:** Can you say it?

**Seamus Heaney:** Yeah.... But this is not an exact translation. In the original the speaker meets a bejeweled type of deer, and Petrarch clearly has some class of allegorical deer in mind. But next thing Wyatt comes along and the deer comes physically to life. This is a hunter who has been after actual deer. The tradition, as you may know, says that this poem is about Ann Boleyn, after she had been married to Henry VIII. Because after the marriage history records that Sir Thomas Wyatt was locked up in the Tower of London for a little while. Just to keep him, probably, out of the chamber.

**Robert Hass:** I remember one of my teachers remarking that falling in love with Ann Boleyn in early Tudor England was a little bit like taking a shine to Stalin’s girlfriend. [laughter] Not a safe thing to do.

**Seamus Heaney:** That’s right. But in the poem the woman certainly is untouched. *Noli me tangere* is in the Petrarch original, and so is the general shape of the thing. But the wild energy isn’t there.

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,  
But as for me, alas, I may no more.  
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,  
I am of them that furthest come behind.  
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind  
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore,  
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore  
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,  
As well as I may spend his time in vain.  
And graven in diamonds, in letters plain,  
There is written her fair neck round about:  
*Noli me tangere* for Caesar's I am,  
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

It is quite wonderful, the full rhyme of “wind” with “behind,” the movement.

**Robert Hass:** Maybe it is time to see if there are any questions from the house.

## Audience Comment Section

**Audience Comment:** At what point and to what extent in a translation do you allow yourself to think “this is my thing”? “I’m translating and now this is my thing.” Can you always do that?

**Seamus Heaney:** No, I don’t think so.

**Robert Hass:** I think it’s a very bad idea. One way of dealing with this problem is a distinction that I guess Robert Lowell resurrected. A lot of renaissance poets who translated classical poems called their poems “imitations.” And the more casual way of saying that now is “versions.” You announce that you have given yourself a little freedom, as Ezra Pound did in his great version of Li Po, “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter.” It’s one of the remarkable poems in English in the early part of this century. It is very beautiful.

But I think, mostly, for the practice of translation it is a really bad idea to think it is “yours.” According to Seamus’ principle, whether you settle down or whether you are raiding, you’ve seen something that you want to bring into English and you are trying to bring it over, even if you may know you are losing other things. I think there is some obligation not to alter what’s there if you are saying “here’s a translation of this poem.”

**Audience Comment:** Are you saying “don’t Lowellize”? Is that what you’re saying?

**Robert Hass:** Well, no, I’m not against doing it, but there are other ways. I’ve never asked Seamus the question, “Why didn’t you do the whole Dante?”, because I thought I knew the answer, which was that he wrote “Station Island.” For those of you who haven’t read it, it is a poem that is written in a *terza rima* stanza similar to the one used by Yeats in one of his very last poems, about the Irish hero Cuchulain. In “Station Island” the protagonist is doing the Stations of the Cross on this sacred island off the Irish coast and he’s visited by many spirits of the dead, some public and some private figures, from Irish history. He didn’t persist in Dante’s Italian. He made his own poem instead. But, back to translation.

How much departure do you allow yourself? I don’t know if this is a good example but it is an example of my moral issue around this—there is this poem in Pasternak’s “My Sister Life” that contains an image of a summer storm. It contains a line that goes something like “Raindrops like collar studs blind the garden.” And I read the versions of a friend of mine, and the last line said “raindrops—like cufflinks—blind the garden,” and I said, “Mouse?” [laughter] “What the hell?” And he said, “Well I didn’t think people would know what collar studs are.” And I said, “That’s too bad.” I think that you don’t want to change the image in that way.

In the versions of haiku that I did—another language that I don’t know—I made a point of making sure that I understood the word-for-word meaning of each poem I was dealing with and I made some choices to play loosely with things because I was raiding. I didn’t publish them for years, and when I did I called them versions of Basho, Buson and Issa.—though I tried to read as much scholarship as I could and in some cases be as literal as I could. But sometimes it wasn’t what I wanted, what I saw and was trying to bring over. I wasn’t trying to do scholarly translations.

Robert Lowell published this book called *Imitations* in which he would basically start with a well-known European poem and kind of take off on it. Stay in it, wander away from it, come back, as Ben Johnson did. Nabokov was outraged

with one of Lowell's translations and said, "How would you feel if someone took your phrase 'leathery love' and translated it into Russian as 'the great football of passion?'" [laughter]

**Audience Comment:** In the 1970s I went to see Robert Fitzgerald at Amherst College, and he was reading his translation of Rimbaud's "*Le Bateau Ivre*," which is usually translated as "The Drunken Boat," and—bear in mind it was the 70s—Fitzgerald's title was "The High Boat." [laughter] Would that be an example of someone changing something just to change it?

**Seamus Heaney:** No. That's quite Rimbaud-ish, I think.

**Audience Comment:** Given the openness of the possibilities, I mean, if you haven't got an absolutely intractable publisher's deadline, how do you ever know that you are done?

**Seamus Heaney:** Well, you don't, actually. That is the problem. And I am now adopting a Milosz attitude to *Beowulf*, saying, get it out, get it out, get it out. But to go back to the question about the "yourness" of it. When you feel that the thing is completed, it's not necessarily a "*moi*" feeling, it's a "Thank God" feeling, a general sense of gratitude. But sometimes, you just have to wait. That is the thing about translations. There are bits that are nagging. But if you are blessed and you wait, sooner or later, something will come up in the middle of the night or the morning. And yet you can't wait for all of them—that is the realistic position. Sometimes the obvious and the simple withholds itself for a long time. In *Beowulf*, for example, there is a line about the monster Grendel which I rendered first as "he began to pursue his evil endeavors." It took me a couple of years to say "began to work his evil in the world."

**Robert Hass:** I was working on a little haiku by Basho that occurs in one of his travel journals, and, in the translations I had seen, I had not been particularly attracted to the poem. It went something like "Ah the Rose of Sharon at the road's edge eaten by horse." And I thought, "Oh this is one of those the-crude-

horse-eats-the-beautiful-Rose-of-Sharon, woe for the passing of things” poems. I looked at the word-for-word translation of the Japanese and it was very swift and there was something there. He’s not a moralizing poet. One day I decided to go over to the botanical library and look up Rose of Sharon. And it turned out it was a wild hibiscus. And then I went out of the Japanese section into the California section to see if there were any wild hibiscus in California, and there is one, and its early folk name was “flower-of-an-hour,” because it blooms very briefly and closes as soon as it is not in sunlight. So I came back, went to sleep, woke up and looked again and did a completely literal translation adding one word that wasn’t there: “As for the hibiscus by the roadside my horse ate it.” I saw what the poem was about. The “my horse” was possible because it was in a travel journal—you know he is on horseback. He doesn’t say it in the poem. But sometimes, just for what you want, for what I want—which is “am I getting closer to Basho’s mind, is this a fantasy that I am?”—you take chances. There is a famous story about Ezra Pound’s *Cathay* and this poem “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter.” He got a gloss on it from an American in Japan named Ernest Fenollosa, who got it from a Japanese scholar who had translated the original poem by Li Po into Japanese. Fenollosa then translated his Japanese into English for Pound. And Pound made “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter.” And when Pound was writing that poem, he intuitively, changing the poem to get it right for himself as a poem, corrected several mistakes made by the guy translating it from Chinese into Japanese. It gives you dangerous faith in intuition, that the poem will somehow tell you what it’s about.

**Seamus Heaney:** That’s terrific. Say the one, my favorite, the one about the farmer with the radishes.

**Robert Hass:** Oh yes. Sometimes you think “oh I get this because...” This poem I thought I got because it is like something out of Dickens. It’s by Issa and it goes: “The man pulling radishes pointed my way with a radish.” Those long skinny daikon radishes. But it is about someone mulling over, a walker mulling over an experience afterwards. That is really the center of the poem, past tense. It’s about how everything is subsumed to its element. “The man pulling radishes pointed my way with a radish.”

**Audience Comment:** What about “The Cure of Troy,” the *Philoctetes* play? What drew you to it and how much greed did you bring to it?

**Seamus Heaney:** This is a question about Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, which I translated as “The Cure of Troy.” First of all, I declined to do versions of Greek plays for the Oxford University Press series that William Arrowsmith was editing because I didn’t know the Greek language. So I didn’t feel I should enter the canonical territory. But the *Philoctetes* was for a theater company I was involved with in Derry, and I felt free to tackle it in that context.

Actually the relationship to the Sophocles goes back to Edmund Wilson’s “Wound and the Bow” essay which I read as an undergraduate. What attracted me to *Philoctetes* was the central conflict. Philoctetes is a wounded man on an island, but the Greeks need to lure him back to Troy because he is a magical archer and never fails, and there’s a prophecy that says “Unless you get him you won’t win at Troy.” However, there is a problem for the Greeks, because they betrayed Philoctetes ten years earlier, dumping him on the island, leaving him marooned, and he is still there, seething with rage, resentment and betrayal. So Odysseus comes along and proposes to solve the problem by telling him a few lies. Odysseus is the wily elder, the politician, interested in results, unbothered by moral or emotional scruple. But Philoctetes knows Odysseus and his character, so Odysseus needs the cooperation of his young comrade, Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles: honorable, principled, vividly true. The whole deception strategy goes against Neoptolemus’ nature, but, for the sake of the Greek cause, he cooperates. He lies to Philoctetes, but in the end he cannot sustain the lie.... Anyhow, the moral crunch of the play connects up with E.M. Forster’s famous declaration that if it came to a choice between betraying his country and betraying his friend, he hoped he would not betray his friend. But that is not a Greek position. Nor an Ulster one, indeed. In the Northern Ireland situation, you feel stress constantly, a tension between your habitual solidarity with your group and a command to be true to your individual, confused and solitary self. But in crisis situations, as Odysseus knows, there is little room for the tender conscience. If your side wants to win politically, you all have to bond together. And that bonding can strangle truth-to-self. So it was the overall situation of the play that I translated. I even

wrote in a couple of extra choruses, because the Greek chorus allows you to lay down the law, to speak with a public voice. Things you might not get away with in your own voice, *in propria persona*, become definite and allowable pronouncements on the lips of the chorus.

**Audience Comment:** Brodsky said that poetry’s language is servant. When I was working with Greg Foxworth, one of the things that came up again and again was trying to find the voice of the poem and going beyond the limitations of one’s own voice. Do you have anything to say on pushing those walls?

**Seamus Heaney:** Yes, there is a lot to be said for it. That is one of the delights of translation. I’ve been doing Irish poems now and again because I have a notion that I would like to indulge myself in ten years or so with a book of miscellaneous translations from Irish, done just for pleasure. I do things now metrically that I wouldn’t have done twenty-five years ago because in those days I thought some meters were too folksy. So yes, doing things that you wouldn’t usually do, like writing in a very song-like meter, is definitely a motive. There is a very famous, very wonderful, very potent Irish language poem of the seventeenth/early eighteenth century “*Gile na Gile*,” a vision poem, and it is about meeting a woman on the road who is the figure of Ireland, an apparition. And it is terrific, a kind of galloping rhythm. I gave myself great pleasure in doing that. I was pushing the walls, definitely.

**Robert Hass:** Do you have it?

**Seamus Heaney:** I’ll read a bit of it, yes.

Brightening brightness, alone in the road, she appears,  
Crystalline crystal and sparkle of blue in green eyes,  
Sweetness of sweetness in her unembittered young voice  
And a high color dawning behind the pearl of her face.

Ringlets and ringlets, a curl in every tress  
Of her fair hair trailing and brushing the dew in the grass;  
And a gem from her birthplace far in the high universe  
Outglittering glass and gracing the groove of her breasts.

News that was secret she whispered to soothe her aloneness,  
News of one due to return and claim its true place,  
News of the ruin of those who had cast him in darkness,  
News that was awesome, too awesome to utter in verse.

And so on. You wouldn't allow yourself to swing like that in your own work.

**Robert Hass:** Start a Swinburne revival....

**Seamus Heaney:** Yes. But it's true to the meter.

**Audience Comment:** There's a difference between translating contemporary poetry like Milosz or Irish poetry from the seventeenth/eighteenth/nineteenth century and Anglo-Saxon which is very remote from us in time. My experience of something analogous is that words get lost, their meanings lost, and I wonder what you did—that's a very technical question—what do you do with words whose meaning we no longer have the key to when you are working with things like the Anglo-Saxon?

**Robert Hass:** Chana [Bloch, translated the Song of Solomon with her husband, Ariel Bloch, a scholar of Hebrew], since you did that great translation of the Song of Solomon, maybe you could answer. What did you do?

**Chana Bloch:** I make an educated guess, but often it's [Ariel's] guess against mine. So what we did was look for other places that might give us a clue, sometimes syntactically, sometimes within the meaning of the word. There isn't an answer. But I know you must have run up against that.



**Seamus Heaney:** Bob was asking what was missing. With Latinate diction and also with the cadencing of modern speech you lose the tension and difference of whatever Anglo-Saxon diction gives you. There's always a problem with words like *wergild*, you know, the man price, that which you pay when you pay compensation to the kin of someone who is killed. Maybe "man price" is good—"compensation" doesn't quite capture it. That word is gone, the culture that supported it is gone; how do you get an equivalent? Maybe you should just say "man price." For me, however, names for pieces of armor are a curse. [laughter] There is this thing that Beowulf and most Anglo-Saxon warriors are dressed in called a "byrnie"—it is a chain-mail shirt. And I use "mail-shirt." But some people use the word "corselet." Somehow, once you say "corselet," it suggests the age of chivalry not to mention the age of the foundation garment. [laughter] And the different words for sword. The different words for warrior. The word "warrior" is still with us, but it is associated now with road warrior or space warrior. And if you use the word "fighter," it doesn't have the real fighting, battling sense. It's more like "boxer."

**Audience Comment:** What do you make of the function of the harp in the recitation/translation of Anglo-Saxon poetry?

**Seamus Heaney:** It was done, clearly, it was struck. There's an account of it in a very beautiful section in the early part of the poem where it says:

Then a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark,  
nursed a hard grievance. It harrowed him  
to hear the din of the loud banquet  
every day in the hall, the harp being struck  
and the clear song of the skilled poet  
telling with mastery of man's beginnings.

You just can hear it, the harp being struck. No wonder the poetic kenning for "harp" was "glee-wood." Everything quickened when it was plucked. I translated

it as “the tuned timber.” But you’ll have to ask Jack or the Anglo-Saxonists about how exactly it was used—I don’t know.

**Audience Comment:** To what extent does the age of the text you are translating affect the type of voice that you strive for in English?

**Seamus Heaney:** The only thing I’ve translated is *Beowulf* and some Irish and some Dante. The age does affect it, yes.... You want two things at once: you want some sense that “Yes, that’s the language speaking as we speak it now,” and at the same time “Yes, that’s true to something further away.”

**Robert Hass:** The decorums make me think that the obvious rule would be that you don’t commit anachronisms of various kinds, and since it’s a rule it was just waiting for a poet to break it as Ezra Pound did in “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” in which the present and past are sometimes fused to suggest that he was feeling the same way about the poetry of World War One that Propertius was feeling about the poetry of Roman campaigns. All rules are opportunities, if they are broken.

**Seamus Heaney:** To go back to Peter’s question. What I’ve done sometimes is to put in words that the standard English reader won’t know but which still belong, I think. The hall, the Anglo-Saxon hall, the place where the troop of the retainers and the king live is a kind of fort, an enclosed area with a building inside it, and the word I used for it, partly because I needed a “b” in alliteration every now and again, the word I used was “bawn,” which you get in Spenser. It is an Irish-English word, meaning “a fortified dwelling.” When the English planters came to Ireland, they built these fortified farmhouses with walls around them, bawns. The word comes from the Irish, it means a *bo dun*, *bo* meaning cow, and *dun* meaning a fortress. So it is a cow fort or an Ox Fort. [laughter] Sometimes words like that give a slight strangeness.

**Audience Comment:** I was reading some Southeast Asian poets a few months ago, and some of the symbols in their texts struck me as foreign. I was wondering,

does the translator take on the job of elucidating the meanings of these symbols which would be otherwise completely foreign, or is that a job left to critics and scholars?

**Robert Hass:** Well, it is a choice. I mean, I think it is usually not a good idea to do that. There are passages in Milosz's poems in which with a word or two about a situation, say, under which someone would inspect your papers, during the war years, you could amplify the translation slightly in a way that would clarify it. As a matter of fact, we have occasionally done that. But the force of symbols in a way comes from mystery, so explaining them seems.... there are a couple of translations of *The Duino Elegies* that are really Englished interpretations of the poems, and that seems to me a very bad idea.

**Seamus Heaney:** I would, as Yeats says, leave the thing like "a stone in the midst of all."

**Audience Comment:** I am thinking about the kinds of exercises we might do in a poetry workshop where we read or translate from another language in order that the elements of that language burn through to our own. And I'm curious—if you were teaching a seminar to Japanese poets or Russian or French poets and would assign contemporary American poetry for some quality that you hoped would burn into other languages, who might be some people you would assign?

**Seamus Heaney:** Frank O'Hara. That would be a great corrective to the haiku tradition.

**Robert Hass:** Well, the younger poets in Poland who for the first time are finding themselves surrounded by shops in which to buy lots of things have turned to O'Hara with great passion. They didn't have a shopping tradition so they didn't need shopping poems, and now.... There is an article in *Krakow* magazine complaining about what they call the O'Hara-ization of Polish poetry.

**Audience Comment:** I'm wondering to which extent you've tried to get involved with or had to get involved with the people who are translating you into other languages, and what some of those experiences might have been like.

**Seamus Heaney:** It depends on the translator. Most people just go ahead and do it, for which I am grateful in a way, because there is nothing much I can do anyway. I usually don't know the language. But on one occasion I had a Finnish translator, a young poet from Finland.... He had spent a year in Dublin doing a post-graduate course. He had grown up in the countryside in Finland. So he shared with me that first experience of being from the rural outback and his Finnish was outback farm Finnish from the start. I just knew by the way he approached the thing that he was the right person. He was at home a little bit in Ireland, and that was because of the general cultural—or agricultural—situation. And so that was very successful. But I was mentioning earlier the French translator. She was not a poet and she translated lexically and as far as I could see hadn't much interest in rhythm so this was an uneasy exchange. But mostly, I haven't been involved. I think you have to let the person be, as a matter of trust and hope.

**Robert Hass:** We were translated into Spanish by the same poet, a wonderful Mexican poet named Pura Lopez Colome. And she came to Berkeley with her entire translation and wanted to go through it with me. She didn't have to do it, and I'm not sure how useful it was, because my Spanish is also not good enough. But she explained when she changed things why she did so. I don't know if you submitted to this interrogation.

**Seamus Heaney:** No.

**Robert Hass:** It was really fascinating to me. I learned a lot from it.

**Seamus Heaney:** Luckily there was a larger distance between us. [laughter] But she is indeed a very good translator. She has just translated a book of mine called *Seeing Things*, and the cadencing of the thing seems right to me.

**Audience Comment:** You have a great story that you tell in Bill Moyers' book about translating the "crying in the saucepan." Could you tell that again?

**Robert Hass:** There is a poem by Issa. Issa was a Pure Land Buddhist; part of his religious convictions had to do with treating all living creatures with great tenderness, so he has grumbling sectarian haiku about other Buddhists that says "the whole time they are praying to Buddha they keep on swatting mosquitoes." There is a poem of his called "Hell," and it goes, roughly, "Bright autumn moon pond snails crying in a saucepan." He gives us in his particular iconography the roundness of the moon and the roundness of the saucepan and all of us being, as Alan Ginsburg said, "in the animal soup of time." This is what's at the heart of that poem. The verb that I translated "crying" is an onomatopoeic verb and it has to do with the sound of the air escaping as the snails are being sautéed as a kind of crying or whimpering or something, and as I was working on these poems, living in the Berkeley hills, my main informant was a professor of computer engineering from Stanford, a Korean, who lived across the street and had a great passion for haiku. I would ask him about some words, and he would not quit. After a while, I didn't want to think every minute of the day about what sound that snail was making in the saucepan. [laughter] And he would come back and say, "whimpering" and I said, "No, that's too pathetic." "Moaning." "No, that's too..." "Mewling." "Enough!" Mewling seemed like the perfect word but it also seemed too special. I felt that I didn't know Japanese well enough to earn it.

**Seamus Heaney:** "Squealing."

**Robert Hass:** You see, it's irresistible.

**Audience Comment:** Back to the question about ego ownership of a translation, particularly of the older epic poetry. I don't know if it is fair or not, but it seems that if we take older work that has an oral tradition and then a written tradition and then we try to bring it into the 20th century, to deal with all the versions, etc., I guess I feel there is less of a problem taking liberties with something so inexact.

**Seamus Heaney:** Well I think taking liberties is usually a problem. Everything that has been said here acknowledges that. I think with verse—whether it is ten thousand years old or ten years old—verse sets out to be a thing, a set-up in language. It sets itself up in words. It’s made. It separates itself off from the rest of language and says, “Treat me as separated off.” And I think verse translation can be therefore approached as a task, something to be taken on and separated off and completed. I think of the usual analogy for completing a piece of writing, saying that it is like a piece of carpentry. For all the satisfaction that a cabinetmaker gets from the wood and all that, he still probably feels, “It’s not really mine when I finish it, it belongs to *it*, to the wood,” it is *it* again. And I think that in a verse translation there is a similar attempt at restitution. It is an homage, an attempt to redo the cabinet. You are given a shape and you try to shape up.

**Robert Hass:** I want to remind you that Seamus will be reading from his *Beowulf* translation tomorrow at noon in Wheeler in the Maude Fife room, 315 Wheeler Hall. Let’s finish with a poem.

**Seamus Heaney:** This is a translation of a poem that has been translated many times also. It is twelve lines long, about a scribe being tired of writing. The images in it are in the original; this is a faithful translation. The poet, for example, has a wonderful image of a beetle, being like ink, sparkling. This poem was printed in the *Irish Times* in June 1997. It is supposed to be written by St. Colmcille, who died on the seventh of June 597, so it was his 1400th anniversary and I thought, “OK, now we can do another translation.” Anyhow, there was a line in it that I was pleased with, “a beetle-sparkle of ink”—and they printed it “beetle-spark.” That really shows you how much can be lost in one syllable. I think it is proper to read the poem here because it is about writing. It wasn’t actually written in the sixth century, by the way—it was written around the twelfth century, but it pretends to have been written by Colmcille. Certainly it was written by a scribe:

My hand is cramped from penwork.  
My quill has a tapered point.  
Its birdmouth issues a blue-dark

Beetle sparkle of ink.  
Wisdom keeps welling in streams  
From my fine drawn, sallow hand:  
Riverrun on the vellum  
Of ink from green-skinned holly.  
My small runny pen keeps going  
Through books, through thick and thin  
To enrich the scholars' holdings:  
Penwork that cramps my hand.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, SEAMUS HEANEY is one of the most widely read poets writing in English today. Born in County Derry, Ireland, he took a degree in English at Queen's College, Belfast, in 1961 and became a lecturer in modern English literature at Queen's College in 1966. In the same year he published *Death of a Naturalist*, a volume honored with four major poetry prizes. Through the decades of the 1970's and 1980's Heaney published *Field Work*, *Selected Poems*, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose*, *Station Island*, and *The Haw Lantern*, the latter a sonnet sequence memorializing his mother. The body of Heaney's work to date includes more than ten volumes of poetry, three collections of prose, a play, and numerous chapbooks, translations, and lectures. His most recent volume of poetry, *The Spirit Level*, appeared in 1996.

ROBERT HASS, Professor of English at Berkeley since 1989, was Poet Laureate of the United States and Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1995-96. His published volumes of poetry include *Field Guide*, (1973); *Praise* (1979); *Human Wishes*, (1989); and *Sun Under Wood*, which was published in 1996 and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for that year. In addition to editing several works of poetry and translating and editing *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, and Issa*, Robert Hass has translated, in cooperation with the author, five volumes of poems by Nobel prize-winning poet Czesław Miłosz.