FURTHER OBSERVATIONS CONCERNING THE TRANSLATION OF ANGLO-SAXON VERSE

In an earlier article[1] I had outlined some of the problems facing Modern English verse translators of *The Ruin*. In this one I extend the discussion to include prose, selecting for my purpose *The Dream of the Rood* (lines 28-56). Two examples of each type of translation, from out of the vast number available for examination, should suffice.

> Long ago was it — I still remember it — that I was cut down at the edge of the forest, moved from my trunk. Strong foes took me there, fashioned me to be a spectacle for them, bade me raise up their felons. Men bore me on their shoulders there, till they set me on a hill; many foes made me fast there. I saw then the Lord of mankind haste with great zeal that He might be raised upon me. Then I durst not there bow or break against the Lord's behest, when I saw the surface of the earth shake; I could have felled all the foes, yet I stood firm.
>
> Then the young Hero — He was God almighty — firm and unflinching, stripped Himself; He mounted on the high cross, brave in the sight of many, when He was minded to redeem mankind. Then I trembled when the Hero clasped me; yet I durst not bow to the earth, fall to the level of the ground, but I must needs stand firm.
>
> 'As a rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King, the Lord of Heaven; I durst not stoop. They pierced me with dark nails; the wounds are still plain to view in me, gaping gashes of malice; I durst not do hurt to

[1] 'Some Modern English Verse renderings of *The Ruin*', Paper read at the Sixth SELIM Congress Valladolid (1993), published as an Appendix to *Anglo-Saxon Elegiac Verse*, Llanerch, 1994.

Louis J. Rodrigues, *Selim* 4 (1994): 124-132

any of them. They bemocked us both together. I was all bedewed with blood, shed from the Man's side, after He had sent forth His Spirit. I have endured many stern trials on the hill; I saw the God of hosts violently stretched out; darkness with its clouds had covered the Lord's corpse, the fair radiance; a shadow went forth, dark beneath the clouds. All creation wept, lamented the King's death; Christ was on the cross. (R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, pp. 235-6).

'Years ago it was — I still recall it — that I was cut down at the forest edge, removed from my root. Strong enemies seized me there, fashioned me as a spectacle for themselves and required me to hoist up their felons. There men carried me upon their shoulders until they set me up on a hill. Abundant enemies secured me there.

'Then I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with much fortitude, for he meant to climb upon me. I did not dare then, against the word of the Lord, to give way there or break when I saw the earth's surfaces quake. All the enemies I could have felled; nonetheless I stood firm. The young man, who was almighty God, stripped himself, strong and unflinching. He climbed upon the despised gallows, courageous under the scrutiny of many, since he willed to redeem mankind. I quaked then, when the man embraced me; nonetheless I did not dare to collapse to the ground and fall to the surfaces of the earth, but I had to stand fast. I was reared up as a cross; I raised up the powerful King, Lord of the heavens. I did not dare to topple over. They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are visible upon me, gaping malicious gashes. I did not dare to harm any of them. They humiliated us both together. I was all soaked with blood issuing from the man's side after he had sent forth his spirit. Many cruel happenings I have experienced on that hill. I saw the God of hosts violently racked. Darkness with its clouds had covered the corpse of the Ruler; a gloom, murky beneath the clouds, overwhelmed its pure

splendour. All creation wept; they lamented the King's death: Christ was on the Cross. (S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 161).

«Long years ago (well yet I remember)
They hewed me down on the edge of the holt,
Severed my trunk; strong foemen took me,
For a spectacle wrought me, a gallows for rogues.
High on their shoulders they bore me to hilltop,
Fastened me firmly, an army of foes!
«Then I saw the King of all mankind
In brave mood hasting to mount upon me.
Refuse I dare not, nor bow nor break,
Though I felt earth's confines shudder in fear;
All foes I might fell, yet still I stood fast.
«Then the young Warrior, God, the All-Wielder,
Put off His raiment, steadfast and strong;
With lordly mood in the sight of many
He mounted the Cross to redeem mankind.
When the Hero clasped me I trembled in terror,
But I dared not bow! With black nails driven
Those sinners pierced me; the prints are clear,
The open wounds. I dared injure none.
They mocked us both. I was wet with blood
From the Hero's side when He sent forth His spirit.
«Many a bale I bore on that hill-side
Seeing the Lord in agony outstretched.
Black darkness covered with clouds God's body,
That radiant splendour. Shadow went forth
Wan under heaven; all creation wept
Bewailing the King's death. Christ was on the Cross.»
(C. W. Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry*, pp. 93-4)

‘It was long past — I still remember it —
That I was cut down at the copse’s end,
Moved from my roots. Strong enemies there took me,
Told me to hold aloft their criminals,
Made me a spectacle. Men carried me
Upon their shoulders, set me on a hill,
A host of enemies there fastened me.
And then I saw the Lord of all mankind
Hasten with eager zeal that He might mount
Upon me. I durst not against God’s word
Bend down or break, when I saw tremble all
The surface of the earth. Although I might
Have struck down all the foes, yet I stood fast.
Then the young hero (who was God Almighty)
Got ready, resolute and strong in heart.
He climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree,
Bold in the sight of many watching men,
When He intended to redeem mankind.
I trembled as the warrior embraced me.
But still I dared not bend down to the earth,
Fall to the ground. Upright I had to stand.
A rood I was raised up; and I held high
The noble King, the Lord of heaven above.
I dared not stoop. They pierced me with dark nails;
The scars can still be clearly seen on me,
The open wounds of malice. Yet might I
Not harm them. they reviled us both together.
I was made wet all over with the blood
Which poured out from His side, after He had
Sent forth His spirit. And I underwent

Full many a dire experience on that hill.
I saw the God of Hosts stretched grimly out.
Darkness covered the Ruler's corpse with clouds,
His shining beauty; shadows passed across,
Black in the darkness. All creation wept,
Bewailed the King's death; Christ was on the cross.
(R. F. Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, pp. 163-5)

This short passage marks the first part of the Tree's account to the poet in his dream of how it had been selected from among others of its companions in the forest to be the means of Christ's death; and it describes, in highly emotive language, its unwilling involvement in that event and the universal lamentation of all created things for the fall of their King. There is an unusually high proportion of hypermetric lines here; and, here, too, occur some of those lines that the carver of the runes on the Ruthwell Cross had considered appropriate to his decorative, iconographic and instructive purposes. It is of considerable importance, then, that any rendering of this passage must not only endeavour to convey the fervour with which the poet composed these lines but also reflect its imagery and its style.

The four translations selected are 'academic' in that they are directed at an audience familiar with the original Anglo-Saxon text, although none of them have been published by presses solely dedicated to the distribution of academic literature.[1] A greater likelihood of faithfulness to the text is therefore inevitable as is a corresponding proneness to the commission of just such mistakes for which this type of translation is criticized as being

[1] R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Everyman), London, 1962; S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Everyman), London, 1982; C. W. Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry* (Oxford University Press), New York, 1963; R. Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (Faber and Faber), 1970.

either unnatural or dull.[1] Their evaluation that follows is intended to be objective.

Gordon's prose translation, from his deliberate use of archaic lexis and unusual syntactical patterns, signals his intention of keeping as close as possible to his original. This is by no means reprehensible as long as it is consistent. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Thus, for instance, he has an inversion where the text does not: line 28 'Long ago was it' *(Íæt was geara iu*: it was years / long ago); but no inversion where it has: line 42 'Then I durst not' (*ne dorste ic hwæĺre*: Nor durst I then), line 47 'I durst not do hurt to any of them' (*Ne dorste ic hie nænigum sceĺĺan*: Nor durst I injure any of them); although, he keeps the inversion where he considers it atmospherically effective: line 44 'As a rood was I raised up' (*Rod wæs ic aræred*: As a rood was I raised / erected).

There is inconsistency too in his use of lexis — a mixture of archaisms and modernisms instead of a preference for either the one or the other. Moreover, where genuinely effective Anglo-Saxon words have survived into the Modern period, there seems to be no reason why they have been avoided. Archaic is his use of 'bade' (= commanded), 'durst' (= dared), 'behest' (= word), 'minded' (= determined), 'must needs' (= had to), 'do hurt' (= injure), 'bemocked' (= reviled), 'bedewed' (= drenched), and 'sent forth' (= given up); and inexplicable, if he wanted to maintain the flavour of the past, his preference for 'cut down' (= hewn), 'forest' (= holt), 'fashioned' (= wrought), 'cross' (= gallows), 'shed' (= begotten), 'dark' (= wan), and 'clouds' (= welkin). This vacillation is disturbing since it detracts from the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from a text that is stylistically pure.

And, some of his constructions are questionable: line 31 'fashioned me to be a spectacle to them' (*geworhton him Íær to wæfersyne*: made of me a

[1] T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (Hutchinson University Library), 1972, Chapter 3: 'Language and Style', for a fuller discussion.

spectacle unto themselves), line 34 'that he might be raised upon me' *(Íæt he me wolde on gestigan*: when he wished to mount me). Inevitably, his translation of 'gallows' (line 4) as 'cross', has led to his use of 'raise' here instead of 'mount' which collocates more naturally with 'cross' at both lines 34 and 40. With the additional mistake of rendering the original in the passive instead of the active voice he succeeds in destroying an otherwise compelling image of a hero willingly going to meet his fate. Almost banal is that of line 43 'fall to the level of the ground' *(feallan to foldan sceatum*: fall to earth's surface). Both banal and ambiguous is that of line 44 'As a rood was I raised up' in its use of a verb with a range of connotations that includes 'brought up/reared' as well as 'erected'.

Gordon's translation, more or less a pioneer in its field, continues to remain popular because it attempts to re-create the past; and, for that very reason, its minor inaccuracies may be readily forgiven.

Bradley's translation, by comparison with Gordon's, is consistent in its choice of lexis, its faithful rendering of the original, and its uncomplicated syntax. He seems not to have erred seriously in his imitation of the poem's style and manages to retain much of its dignity of tone.

Insofar as he prefers to write in perfectly natural Modern English without the unwholesome intrusion of archaisms, there is no reason for complaint. It is the extent to which he is prepared to go, in order to achieve his objective, that is reprehensible. So, 'hoist up' (= raise), 'abundant' (= many) in its collocation with 'enemies', 'collapse' (= fall), and 'topple over' (= bend) are unfortunate. On the other hand, 'felons', 'fortitude', 'unflinching', 'despised', and 'malicious' are all suited to the contexts in which they occur; though, not quite so, at line 41, is his 'under the scrutiny of many' (*on manigra gesyhŕe*: in the sight of many).

Kennedy's verse translations continue to remain popular today, despite the fact that a number of them are dated. The reason is not far to seek: in its

close, or reasonably close, approximation to the alliterative patterns, rhythms, diction, and curtness of style of Anglo-Saxon verse, he succeeds in re-creating the atmosphere of the original. But, it also takes a poet's imagination to make a Modern English poem out of an Anglo-Saxon one; and, it is because he possesses this perceptive faculty, that the poetic licence he sometimes allows himself with his original is pardonable.

By opting, however, to produce a rendering within these strict limitations, he most naturally succumbs to the temptation to use words he might otherwise have considered inappropriate, such as 'rogues' — the result of the exigencies of alliteration. This is an isolated instance, since his lexis is otherwise exactly what is required and often quite original. He seems unafraid to create new words out of old ones and his capacity for devising 'word-compounds' to suit his needs matches that of any Anglo-Saxon *scop*. So, we have 'foemen' (= foes), 'hasting' (= hastening), and the not unusual compound 'All-Wielder' (= God, exactly translating the Anglo-Saxon *alwealda*). In his use of original Anglo-Saxon words that have come down into Modern English with no substantial change in meaning, such as 'hewed', 'holt', 'wrought', 'fell' (= slay), 'bale', and 'wan', he was undoubtedly aided by both the original text as well as a need to adhere to an alliterative pattern. There is a sense of drama conveyed in his 'severed my trunk', 'high on their shoulders', 'army of foes', 'shudder in fear', 'trembled in terror', and 'in agony outstretched'; and his avoidance of the article in 'Shadow went forth'.

The unexpected inversion of 'Refuse I dared not' has no merit whatever, coming where it does amid a series of clauses/sentences with the normal word order; neither would it have disturbed the rhythm, had it remained unchanged. 'All foes I might fell' is another weak construction. Apart from these minor flaws, there is no serious criticism, however, that can be levelled against it.

Hamer's translation, by comparison with Kennedy's, suffers from the most serious defect of all — dullness. Instead of the rapidity of movement of

Kennedy's translation, its innate rhythms, its diction and curtness of style, we have here the heavy plodding of the iambic pentameters of blank verse. The decision to render the poem in an anachronistic form, unadorned by the other graces of imagery and diction (although there is a faint effort made at alliteration) was an unwise one. Blank verse can be effective in the hands of a Marlowe, or a Shakespeare, who instinctively senses the varying rhythms of such a measure and who would not, therefore, deliberately destroy its beauty by chopping up a series of lines almost in quick succession, as happens here. Thus, within the space of twenty-eight lines, he begins a new sentence in the middle of ten of them: his lines 3, 5, 10, 12, 21, 24, 26, 27, 30 and 35. Had he, on the other hand, either rendered this passage in a loosely alliterative form such as that of Langland's *Piers Plowman* or, for that matter, in free verse, as in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, it might have allowed him more scope and greater freedom.

His undistinguished choice of lexis and style of expression is more than likely due to the nature of his verse form, and it is not surprising to encounter the occasional solecism. Examples of these are the following: his lines 1 'It was long past'; 2 'cut down at the copse's end'; 3 'enemies there took me'; 4 'told me to hold aloft'; 5 'Made me a spectacle'; 9 'hasten with eager zeal'; 15 'the young hero ® got ready'; 21 'upright I had to stand'; and, 30 'I underwent / Full many a dire experience'.

Much of the dignity of this passage is consequently lost; and, except for the inversions that suggest its poetic origin, the rhythms are those of prose, and not rhetorical prose either.

Despite these serious flaws, however, he has not failed to put across the Tree's message, prosaic though the translation might sound.

Louis J. Rodrigues
Cambridge

* † *