Tradition in Translation: Locating Seamus Heaney’s Watchman in “Mycenae Lookout.”

In his pivotal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot claims “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” Indeed, all Classical Reception study is grounded in the understanding that the past and the present are interconnected. As Charles Martindale says, “present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue— to understand either one, you need to think in terms of other.” For this reason, the past and present is always a relationship that needs to be interpreted, and Reception focuses on the moment, or rather, “the event” of this interpretation, when the past and present intersect into an individual’s interpretative creation of a text. This essay will use Classical Reception Theory to further address how Classical translations become a liaison between the Classical Literary Tradition and modern re-writings of Classical texts. And more specifically, analyze how Seamus Heaney uses various Agamemnon translations in his lyrical adaptation of the Watchman’s monologue in “The Watchman’s War”. The two objectives of this analysis are to examine to what extent Heaney is conscious of the Literary Tradition he is taking from, and how the decisions made in Heaney’s creative process depicts his relationship with Tradition.

Firstly, it is important to understand just how translation fits into Classical Reception. Translations are an important aspect of Literary Classical Reception in that the act of translating a Classic text is simultaneously an act of reception, because one’s decisions in translation are

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This was a helpful source in articulating the specific direction within Classical Reception to take.
indicative of how they understand the language, author, and cultural context. For no matter how well a text is translated, it cannot maintain all of the integrities of the original language. As Eugenio Benitez says, “any translation is already a seriously altered version in which countless decisions have been made on behalf of the reader.” Thus, translation is not a systematic act, but a creative one. And the creative nature of translation is further realized when translations are made by other translations. Indeed, Heaney’s Oeuvre of translation, from Beowulf, to The Cure at Troy, to The Burial at Thebes to “Mycenae Lookout,” exemplify the various shapes translation can take. Heaney further clarifies translation in two ways, either as a “raid” of or “settlement” in, the original text. Where Heaney’s Beowulf exemplifies settlement in a text, “Mycenae Lookout” is perhaps Heaney’s most extreme raid of a text. Neil Cocoran describes this raid as “a meditative version-translation, a literary gloss” of The Oresteia.

I analyze Heaney’s use of Agamemnon translations attempting to answer whether or not Heaney was influenced by a specific Agamemnon translation. According to J. Michael Walton, there are over fifty different English translations of Agamemnon to choose from, but Heaney probably did not read half of these translations in preparation for “Mycenae Lookout.” Heaney claims to have read translations by Louis MacNeice (1960), Robert Lowell (1978) Richard Lattimore (1953) and the Loeb edition is by Herbert Weir Smyth (1926). Additionally, from the epigraph of “Mycenae Lookout” it is clear Heaney was particularly interested by Robert Fagles’ translation (1984). These five are the only definitive translations Heaney looked at. However,

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4 L. Hardwick op. cit., pp. 4-5
upon further research, Robert Browning (1877), Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish (1979) and Tony Harrison’s (1981) will all be included as possible influences on Heaney.

I. Case Study: Rhythm and Rhyme

The rhythm and rhyme scheme of “The Watchman’s War” is primarily iambic couplets. Heaney compares the rhythm to that of a “pneumatic drill,” most recognizable in the opening lines, “Some people wept, and not for sorrow—joy / That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy.” Immediately, the reader is brought into a strict rhythmic lyric. Whereas, no translation attempts such a specific rhythm, let alone in couplets. Heaney says he gets the iambic couplets from Andrew Marvell’s “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland." This decision is interesting in its own right, showing that Heaney hears the Watchman in the rhythm of a seventeenth century British poet. And furthermore, this is also a unique decision, for no translation takes on a similar iambic couplet style. Granted, Browning’s translation does rely on an iambic rhythm. For instance, it begins, “[One more, once more, and once again once more] / I crave the God’s compassion, and release.” But to what extent Heaney would have even consulted Browning’s all too “literal” translation is suspect. However, we do know Heaney consulted Lattimore’s translations, which maintains consistent hexameter lines throughout the Watchman’s monologue. He begins, “I ask the gods some respite form the weariness / of this watch time measured by years I lie awake.” But where Heaney’s Watchman speaks primarily

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Heaney says, “what I needed was the kind of poem Andrew Marvell wrote on Cromwell's return from Ireland.”
in flowing iambic pentameter, and Browning and Lattimore have at least a consistent meter, most others opt against a structured meter. Lowell for instance employs a choppy prose. He begins,

“I’ve lain here a year, / crouching like a dog on one elbow, and begged the gods to end my watch. I’ve watched the stars. I know their comings and goings.”\textsuperscript{12} In contrast, Smyth opts for flowing, more prose-like lines: “Release from this weary task of mine has been my / cry unto the gods throughout my long year’s watch.”\textsuperscript{13} The structured lines of Browning and Lattimores’ Watchman may have influenced Heaney to some extent; but it is still Marvell’s iambic couplets, rather than the rhythms of any other Agamemnon translation that Heaney employs in his own Watchman.

II. Voice and Technique

Where Heaney’s choice of rhythm is not traceable to any specific translation, his use of voice in “The Watchman’s War” can be traced to Harrison’s translation. This is most realized in the lines about the ox and the tongue. Where Fagles’ most popular translation reads,

“The ox is on my tongue,”\textsuperscript{14} Harrison’s reads, “an ox ground my gob into silence.”\textsuperscript{15} Where all translations remain quite similar to Fagles’, Harrison implements his own British voice into the phrase. For one cannot read, “ground my gob” without hearing Harrison’s Yorkshire accent. And this is not uncharacteristic of Harrison, for as Oliver Taplin notes, “Harrison has made it a special mission to prove the poetic worth of his local Yorkshire speech.”\textsuperscript{16} And furthermore, Heaney echoes Harrison’s Yorkshire voice with his Northern Irish tone. “the ox would lurch

\textsuperscript{16} O. Taplin op. cit., pp. 12
against the gong / And deaden it and I would feel my tongue / Like the dropped gangplank of a
cattle truck, / Trampled and rattled, running piss and muck, / All swimmy-trembly as the lick of
fire.”

Though Harrison’s translation is not specifically realized in Heaney’s own version of the
ox and the tongue, Heaney nonetheless follows Harrison’s use of his own dialectical voice in
translation.

Furthermore, this connection is primarily because Harrison’s translation of *Agamemnon*
is concerned with a poetic portrayal of the Watchman. Not to say Fagles’ translation is void of
poetic concerns; however, in Harrisons’ translation, like Heaney’s, the voice of the author is
more overtly heard. Harrison even says, “Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or
for the National Theatre, or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV.”

Further hints of Harrison’s voice appear throughout his translation, in lines such as “Come on, blasted beacon,
blaze out of the blackness” or “Put down your palliasse” or “My master’s struck lucky.”

Similar to Heaney, the poetic aspects of Harrison’s translation are working to harness the
author’s specific voice, *not* Aeschylus’ voice.

Yet, Harrison is not the only one to focus on the poetic elements of their translation.

Lowell’s translation in particular is a stripped down, poetic version of *The Oresteia*. One
example of this is when Lowell’s Watchman says, “I’m rotted by mildew, / I can’t sleep, I can’t
dream, my only vision / is bodiless fear.” Lowell even says that he uses Lattimore’s translation,
but has, “aimed at something else: to trim, cut, and be direst enough to satisfy *my own mind* and
at a first hearing the ears of a theater audience.”

Akin to Heaney and Harrison, Lowell’s

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17 S. Heaney op. cit., pp. 29
18 T. Harrison op. cit., pp. 9
19 Ibid., pp. 3–4
20 R. Lowell op. cit., pp. 3
21 Ibid., preface (my emphasis)
translation is grounded in his own response to Aeschylus. Where Lowell’s use of translation reveals both his “own mind” and flexibility with the original Greek, Lattimore’s is an “elaborately exact”\(^{22}\) translation, that hides his voice in the specificity of the translation. In this way, Harrison and Lowells’ approach to translating Aeschylus echoes Heaney’s own poetic approach to *Agamemnon* in “The Watchman’s War,” for Harrison is specifically present in Heaney’s use of his Irish voice, Lowell is present in Heaney’s willingness to “trim” and “cut” translations to “satisfy [his] own mind”\(^{23}\) as well.

However, it important to note that the separation of Harrison and Lowell from the likes of Browning, Lattimore, Fagles, and MacNeice etc., may appear a broad categorization; for someone like MacNeice in particular is far more concerned with the poetic aspects of their translation than Browning’s staunch literal translation would have been.\(^{24}\) Nevertheless, MacNeice still approached translation line for line, from the original Greek, and more importantly, with an academic agenda in mind. Taplin notes that even though MacNeice was a poet at heart, his “training was so strong that, faced with an actual classical text, exactitude proved stronger than the poetry.”\(^{25}\) In contrast, Harrison and Lowell are two examples of figures uninterested with the scholarly approach to translation. Thus, it is Harrison and Lowells’ approach to *Agamemnon* specifically that influences Heaney’s voice in translation.

III. Diction and Punctuation

Heaney may echo aspects of Harrison and Lowells’ translation, but it is also important to address specifically what phrases and punctuation appear in “The Watchman’s War” that can be directly linked to Heaney’s use of translation. For instance, Heaney’s Watchman uses the phrase,

\(^{22}\) Ibid., preface  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., preface  
\(^{24}\) E. Benitez op. cit.  
\(^{25}\) O. Taplin op. cit., pp. 9
“day in, day out” to express the length of time he has spent on watch. This specifically echoes Tony Harrison’s Watchman, who expresses the length of time as “night in and night out.” Also, Heaney uses the phrase, “Up on my elbows” twice in the poem. And the only translations to mention elbows in describing the Watchman’s positions are MacNeice: “Watching on my elbow,” Lowell: “on one elbow,” and Smyth: “upon my bended arm.” A majority of translations ignore the image of the elbow altogether, or substitute it with a different description. Though these first two examples may seem a bit pedantic in their specificity, the point is that Heaney’s language is affected by various Agamemnon translations. And furthermore, analyzing the moments Heaney is influenced by specific translations is further insightful in how Heaney alters the translations to mesh previous translation with his own Watchman’s voice.

Heaney’s use of ellipses is perhaps the most noticeable influence of translation on Heaney’s lyric. Heaney uses three ellipses in all of “Mycenae Lookout,” and all of them come in “The Watchman’s War.” Ellipses are specifically important for Heaney’s Watchman because they evoke a literal silence, alluding to the image of the ox and the tongue and the overarching “in-between” situation of the Watchman that initially drew Heaney to The Oresteia. Furthermore, the translations of Fagles, Harrison, and Raphael/Mcleish are the only versions of Agamemnon that readily implement ellipses. One specific moment where all use ellipses to convey silence are in the lines when the Watchman envisions taking the hand of Agamemnon. Fagles reads: “I’ll take your loving hand in mine an then…the rest is silence.” Harrisons’,

28 R. Lowell op. cit., pp. 3
29 H. Smyth op. cit., pp. 7
30 R. Fagles op. cit., pp. 104
“Soon I’ll be grasping his hand, Agamemnon’s… Let him come home to us, whole unharmed!”

Raphael/Mcleish’s, “I’ll clasp his dear hand… / And then?” Similarly, Heaney evokes silence in the lines, “In my outpost on the roof… What was to come / Out of the ten years’ wait that was the war.” Here, ellipses are used to imply the Watchman is contemplating the unknown of future events, namely when Agamemnon returns. However, Heaney also reverses the role of ellipses, to make room for noise rather than silence. In the previous quote, the Watchman contemplates the arrival of Agamemnon, but in the part of the poem when the Watchman is supposed to imagine holding Agamemnon’s hand, he is rather clapping his own ears. “bearing down/ Like lava on a fleeing population… Up on my elbows, head back, shutting out / The agony of Clytemnestra’s love-shout.” Here Heaney demonstrates his knowledge of other translations’ use of ellipses, by using ellipses to evoke both silence, and noise.

Thus far, Harrison’s translation is presumably the most noticeable translation in “The Watchman’s War.” However, the focus has primarily been on how Heaney implements elements of past Agamemnon translations, but now I shift to demonstrate how Heaney’s Watchman is noticeably other than any other translator’s Watchman. For Heaney’s Watchman not only echoes the voice of Heaney, as Harrison’s does, but the Watchman in “The Watchman’s War” actually becomes Heaney.

IV. Heaney as the Watchman

Heaney began writing “Mycenae Lookout” in 1994, just after the IRA ceasefire in Ireland. And the Watchman is particularly interesting to Heaney because the Watchman’s “responsibilities and inner conflicts” are precisely Heaney’s as well. Where the Watchman is

31 T. Harrison op. cit., pp. 3
33 S. Heaney op. cit., pp. 30
caught between words or silence in relation to Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, so Heaney, as a poet, is caught in between writing poetry or being silent in response to the political turbulence of Ireland. In this way, the Watchman’s monologue becomes not only a reflection of the Trojan War, but also Ireland’s political war. And this is realized throughout “The Watchman’s War” in the way Heaney takes imagery from Agamemnon and consciously re-works them to fit into a Twentieth Century Irish context. For instance, Heaney’s use of Fagles’ epigraph is re-worked to depict an image of “a byre in Mossbawn.” And similarly, rather than the beacon shining in the distance, it is “A victory beacon in an abbatoir.” And instead of the Watchman being “head down like a bloodhound” or “crouching like a dog” he is “a sheepdog stretched in grass.” For Heaney, the Watchman is not just any dog, but one that presumably fits into the Irish farming theme. Additionally, when Heaney’s Watchman reflects on the time spent on the watch, he uses a distinctly agrarian image. Presumably, Heaney gets this agrarian idea from Fagles, who writes, “the ones that bring us snow or the crops of summer” But Heaney expands on this single word into a robust image of rural living, “when the mist would start / To lift off fields and inlets, when morning light / Would open like the grain of light being split.” Undoubtedly, Heaney deliberately projects his own consciousness onto the Watchman making him just as much Irish as he is Greek.

Considering the analysis of Heaney’s uses of translation, it is clear Heaney was not influenced by one specific translation. In fact, the analysis demonstrates just how fragmented Heaney’s use of translation is. In brief, the rhythm of “The Watchman’s War” was taken from

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34 B. O’Driscoll pp. 350
35 R. Lowell op. cit., pp. 3
36 T. Harrison op. cit., pp. 3
37 R. Fagles op. cit., pp. 103 (my emphasis)
38 S. Heaney op. cit., pp. 30
Andrew Marvel, but was perhaps inspired by Browning and Lattimores’ concise meter. The way Heaney implements his Irish voice primarily resembles Harrison, but also elements of Lowell. And his use of punctuation and diction can likewise be traced to Harrison, but also Fagles, Raphael/McLeish and Smyth. For these reasons, it is safe to say Heaney is not attempting to be loyal to Aeschylus’ original Watchman. As Elizabeth Lunday concludes, “For ‘Mycenae Lookout’ only a raid approach is appropriate or even possible.” A more traditional Classicist, such as Paul Turner, would most likely conclude that Heaney uses Aeschylus as a “Literary knackers yard, a handy source of raw material for a modern Muse.” For this was his response to Heaney’s The Cure At Troy (1990), and Heaney spends even less time in Aeschylus for “Mycenae Lookout” as he did in Sophocles for The Cure At Troy. However, the point of this research is not to ascribe literary value to Heaney’s reception, but rather to address literary scholar and former colleague of Heaney, Helen Vendler’s question of “how much is left of tradition” after a poem such as “Myceneae Lookout”? Unarguably, a first reading of “The Watchman’s War” makes it clear Heaney has made a “knackers yard” of Aeschylus’ Watchman. However, what this analysis has shown is not to what extent Heaney has raided Aeschylus; a reading of Lowell or Harrisons’ translation would suffice for this. What “The Watchman’s War” demonstrates is the creative desire to move Greek Tragedy from a drama to a lyric, from the stage to real life. This does not mean that Greek Tragedy has to move from drama to lyric to be personal; Ted Hughes’ Oresteia keenly demonstrates the ability of drama in translation to be

39 E. Lunday op. cit., pp. 115
personal. Nevertheless, for Heaney, an entire *Oresteia* was too much of “art trying to shake hands with life,” whereas, a lyrical re-making of the Watchman was how Heaney found Aeschylus to be a suitable voice.

Indeed, Cocoran is generous in calling “Mycenae Lookout” a “meditative version translation,” for Heaney translates from a conglomerate of sources, some that attempt to remain loyal to Aeschylus, some that are in conversation with Aeschylus, but even some that are wholly unrelated to Aeschylus. In fact, Heaney re-writes the entire monologue, from that of a Greek sentry, to a Twentieth Century rural Irishman. Yet, such drastic alterations do not negate its merit as a translation, nor does it allude to Heaney’s lack of respect for the Classical Literary Tradition. Such alterations of the Watchman resemble Heaney’s attempt to further understand where he fits into Tradition as a whole. Heaney re-writes the Watchman, not to dismiss or over-write Aeschylus’ Watchman, but rather, in attempts to reconcile his present imagination of the Watchman with the Watchman of Harrison, Fagles, Browning, and even Aeschylus himself. In fact, Heaney’s wide use of translation demonstrates just how conscious he is of the rich Tradition of Greek Tragedy. This is the Tradition that Heaney is attempting to drill into with his iambic couplets, trying to find what Vendler calls the “bedrock that’s under ‘Mycenae Outlook.’”

Thus, Heaney’s imitations of the Watchman are his attempts to be in conversation with that Tradition, or as Vendler says, to maintain a “continual interrogation” with Tradition. Similarly, Cocoran astutely notes, Heaney’s “self intrication” with *Agamemnon* is a “figurative projection” where Heaney can “measure... present and past” and bring “new clarity” to both.

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42 H. Vendler op. cit., pp. 127  
43 H. Cole op. cit., *Online*  
44 N. Cocoran op. cit., pp. 200
Heaney’s use of translation in “The Watchman’s War” demonstrates how modern translation does not silence voices of the past, but rather, livens them through continued contemplation and creation.
Works Cited


