SIMON ARMITAGE – INTRODUCTION TO HIS TRANSLATION OF SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

We know next to nothing about the author of the poem that has come to be called Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It was probably written around 1400. In the early seventeenth century the manuscript was recorded as belonging to a Yorkshireman, Henry Saville of Bank. It was later acquired by Sir Robert Cotton, whose collection also included the Lindisfarrie Gospels and the only exist­ing manuscript of Beowulf .

The poem then lay dormant for over two hundred years, not coming to light until Queen Victoria was on the throne, thus leapfrogging the attentions of some of our greatest writers and critics. The manuscript, a small, unprepossessing thing, would fit comfortably into an average-size hand, were anyone actu­ally allowed to rouch it. Now referred to as Cotton Nero A.x., it is considered not only a most brilliant example of Middle English poetry but one of the jewels in the crown of English Literature, and sits in the British Library under conditions of high security and con­trolled humidity.

To cast eyes on the manuscript, or even to shuffle the unbound pages of the Early English Text Society's facsimile edition, is to be intrigued by the handwriting; stern, stylish letters, like crusading chess pieces, fall into orderly ranks along faintly ruled lines. But the man whose calligraphy we ponder, a jobbing scribe, probably, was not the author. The person who has become known as the Gawain poet remains as shadowy as the pages themselves. Among many other reasons, it is partly this anonymity that has made the poem so attractive to latter-day translators. The lack of authorship seems to serve as an invitation, opening up a space within the poem for a new writer to occupy. Its comparatively recent rediscovery acts as a further draw; if Milton or Pope had put their stamp on it, or if Dr. Johnson had offered an opinion, or if Keats or Coleridge or Wordsworth had drawn it into their orbit, such an invitation might now appear less forthcoming.

The diction of the original tells us that its author was, broadly speaking, a northerner. Or we might say a midlander. The linguis­tic epicenter is thought to be located somewhere between north Staffordshire and south Lancashire. Some researchers claim to have identified Swythamley Grange as the Castle of Hautdesert, or the jagged peaks of The Roaches as those "rughe knokled knarres with knorned stones," (2 166). Lud's Church, a natural fissure in the rocks near the village of Flash, in Debyshire, has been proposed as the site of the Green Chapel. "Hit hade a hole on the ende and on ayther syde, I And overgrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere; I And a! was holw inwith, nobot an olde cave I Or a crevisse of an olde cragge" (2 180-2183). It may or may not be the place, but to stand in that mossy cleft that cannot have changed much over the centuries is to believe that the author had an actual landscape in mind when he conceived the poem, and lured his young protagonist into a northern region to legitimize his vocabulary and to make good use of his surrounding geography.

A similar strategy has informed this translation; although my own part of England is separated from Lud's Church by the swol­len uplands of The Peak District, coaxing Gawain and his poem back into the Pennines was always part of the plan. Of course, to the trained medievalist the poem is perfectly read­able in its original form; no translation necessary. And even for the nonspecialist, certain lines, such as, "Bot Arthure wolde not ete til a! were served," (85), especially when placed within the context of the action narrative, present little problem. Conversely, lines such as "Forthi, iwysse, bi yowre wylle, wende me bihoves," (1065) are incompre­hensible to the general reader. But it is the lines that fall somewhere between those extremes-the majority of lines, in fact-which fas­cinate the most. They seem to make sense, though not quite. To the untrained eye, it is as if the poem is lying beneath a thin coat of ice, tantalizingly near yet frustratingly blurred. To a contemporary poet, one interested in narrative and form, the urge to blow a little warm breath across that layer of frosting eventually proved irresistible. And even more so to a northerner who not only recognizes plenty of the poem's dialect but who detects an echo of his own speech within the original. Words such as "bide" (wait), "nobut" (nothing but), "childer" (children), "layke" (play), "karp" (talk), "bout" (with­out), "brid" (bird), "sam" (gather up), and "barlay" (truce) are still in usage in these parts, though mainly (and sadly) among members of the older generation.

Not all poems are stories, but Sir Gawain and the Green Knight most certainly is. After briefly anchoring its historical credentials in the siege of Troy, the poem quickly delivers us into Arthurian Britain, at Christmastime, with the knights of the Round Table in good humor and full voice. But the festivities at Camelot are to be disrupted by the astonishing appearance of a green knight. Not just a knight wear­ing green clothes, but a weird being whose skin and hair is green, and whose horse is green as well. The gate-crasher lays down a seem­ingly absurd challenge, involving beheading and revenge. Alert to the opportunity, a young knight, Gawain, Arthur's nephew, rises from the table. What follows is a test of his courage and a test of his heart, and during the ensuing episodes, which span an entire calen­dar year, Gawain must steel himself against fear and temptation.

The poem is also a ghost story, a thriller, a romance, an adventure story, and a morality tale. For want of a better word, it is also a myth, and like all great myths of the past its meanings seem to have adapted and evolved, proving itself eerily relevant six hundred years later. As one example, certain aspects of Gawain's situation seem oddly redolent of a more contemporary predicament, namely our complex and deli­cate relationship with the natural world. The Gawain poet had never heard of climate change and was not a prophet anticipating the onset of global warming. But medieval society lived hand in hand with nature, and nature was as much an enemy as a friend. It is not just for decoration that the poem includes passages relating to the turn­ing of the seasons, or detailed accounts of the landscape, or graphic descriptions of our dealings with the animal kingdom. The knight who throws down the challenge at Camelot is both ghostly and real. Supernatural, yes, but also flesh and blood. He is something in the likeness of ourselves, and he is not purple or orange or blue with yel­low stripes. Gawain must negotiate a deal with a man who wears the colors of the leaves and the fields. He must strike an honest bargain with this manifestation of nature, and his future depends on it.

ON THE TRANSLATION ITSELF

Over the years there have been dozens, possibly hundreds of trans­lations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ranging from important scholarly restorations, to freehanded poetic or prose versions, to exer­cises in form and technique by students of Middle English, many of them posted on the Internet: Some translators, for perfectly valid reasons and with great success, have chosen not to imitate its highly alliterative form. But to me, alliteration is the warp and weft of the poem, without which it is just so many fine threads. In some very elemental way, the story and the sense of the poem is directly located within its sound. The percussive patterning of the words serves to reinforce their meaning and to countersink them within the memory. So in trying to harmonize with the original rather than transcribe every last word of it, certain liberties have been taken. This is not an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history; the intention has always been to produce a living, inclusive, and readable piece of work in its own right. Readers of this parallel text edition are offered the opportunity of allowing their eye to travel across the gutter of the book from an orig­inal line to its corresponding translation. Occasionally they will be presented with something like a mirror image, or at least a striking resemblance. The first line of the poem, for example, aside for the odd bit of touching-up, is a fairly honest reproduction. Other lines, how­ever, will be less recognizable in their altered state. There is plenty to argue with here, and for some commentators, this kind of approach will always be unacceptable.

But this is a poem, not a crib or a glos­sary, and in imitating the alliterative style of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight it is inevitable that the translator will be led away from the words of the original and their direct contemporary equivalents. Take the much discussed issue of the Gawain poet's many words fo r "knight" or "man." Te rms at his disposal included "freke," "hathel," "burne," "tulk," "segge," "schalk," and "gome." In a literal translation, with the use of a dictionary, each of those obsolete words could be replaced by a modern word of the same meaning, without too much agonizing over its acoustic properties or pronunciation. But in an alliterative transla­tion those agonies must be experienced; in trawling fo r appropriate substitute words the net must be cast wider. In the "bob and wheel" sections where meter and rhyme also enter the equation, further devi­ations are inevitable. Lines 81-82 read: "The comlokest to discrye I Ther glent with yyen gray" (Broadly speaking, the fairest to behold I looked on with gray eyes). A literal translation gives us the cold facts of Guinevere's beauty, yet the unspoken poetic intelligence suggests that her eyes are precious-stones, more priceless than the "best gemmes" mentioned in the previous line. Of all the jewels that surround her, it is her own eyes that glint and gleam the most. My own poetic response has been to introduce "quartz" and "queen," despite neither of those words being present in the original lines. I hope that readers will be able to see this as a kind of controlled and necessary flirtation, rather than carefree unfaithfulness or mindless infidelity.

Aside from the technical requirements of the poem, there are other reasons for departing from the literal, and those reasons are to do with the very nature of poetry itself. Poetry is not just meaning and infor­mation. Poetry is about manner as much as it is about matter-the manner in which words behave under certain conditions and in par­ticular surroundings. Such behaviors give poems their unique char­acter. Over time these behaviors change, or come to signify different things, and their latter-day counterparts are more likely to be found in the imagination than in the dictionary or the encyclopedia. For this reason, the poet who works as a translator will rarely be content with a tit-for-tat exchange of one language into another, no matter how scrupulous the transfer. Here is line 113 7: By that any daylight lemed upon erthe "By the time that some daylight shone upon earth" would be a rea­sonable literal translation. At first sight this not a particularly appeal­ing line. To begin with, it is one of the moments in the poem when the alliteration falters. Also, for a description of the life-bringing dawn, and as a curtain-raiser to one of the greatest hunting scenes in all literature, it ·seems pretty tame. But there is power. here, and much of that power is invested in that single word "lemed," from an Old Norse word, "lj6ma," meaning "to shine." It is not a word used in English these days, which is a pity, because as a verb it has much to recommend it. The. mouth opens to announce this word, and the tongue pushes forward, launching that first "l." Then something is projected outward, from the breathed "e" to the agreeable, humming "m," all the way through to that final "d," like a soft landing, the laying down of light "upon" the ground. If it is onomatopoeic it is also metaphorical, magical even, a one word image. It signals to me that poetry is at work here, and it seems to demand a poetic response. My own, "So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land" introduces words and concepts that are fo reign to the original line, but not, I hope, out of keeping with its ambitions or intentions. Neither does it derail the story line or contradict the basic fa cts. Ornamentation has happened here, but hopefully the structural integrity has not been compromised. Returning to the subject of alliteration, it should be mentioned that within each line it is the stressed syllables char count. A trans­Jared line like, "and retrieves the intestines in rime-honored style," (1612) might appear nor to alliterate ar first glance. Bur read it out loud, and the repetition of that "t" sound-the rut-rutting, the spit of revulsion, the squirming of the warm, wet tongue as it makes con­tact with the roof of the mouth-seems to suggest a physical rela­tionship with the action being described. If the technique is effective, as well as understanding what we are being told we take a step closer co acrmilly experiencing it. It is an attempt co combine meaning with feeling. This is a translation nor only fo r the eye, bur fo r the ear and rhe voice as well. Further co char, ir is worth noting that the pro­nunciation of our hero's very name is not universally agreed upon. To many he is Gawain. The original author clearly alliterated on the "G," suggesting he also stressed the first syllable of the word. Bur there are other moments in the rext, such as the perfectly iambic qua­train at 1948, where the rhythm suggests the opposite, as in Gawain, which is the way I have always referred to him. For the convenience of having my cake and eating it, sometimes I have allowed the tough­ looking "G" to perform a visual alliteration, and sometimes I have required the "w" to act as the load bearer.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem that succeeds through a series of vivid contrasts: standard English contrasting with collo­quial speech; the devotion and virtue of the young knight contrast­ing with the growling threats of his green foe; exchanges of courtly love contrasting with none-too-subtle sexual innuendo; exquisite

robes and priceless crowns contrasting with spurting blood and the steaming organs of butchered deer; polite, indoor society contrast­ing with the untamed, unpredictable outdoors ... and so on. Those contrasts stretch the imaginative universe of the poem and make it three dimensional. Without the space they open up, there would be no poem to speak of. The same contrasts can be observed in the form of the poem as well as its tone, with elements of order and disorder at work throughout, often operating simultaneously. On the side of order we have the carefully crafted form, the very particular number of verses, and the rhyme and rhythm of the bob and wheel sections. On the side of disorder we have the unequal line lengths, the vari­able verse lengths, and the wildly fluctuating pace of the story. Even the alliteration, a constant and insistent heartbeat for the most part, misses a beat every now and again and flatlines completely on at least one occasion. So within the strictures and confines of this very for­mal piece we detect a human presence, the Gawain poet, a disciplined craftsman who also liked to run risks and rake liberties. He would appear to have set himself a series of rules, then consciously and con­spicuously gone about bending them. As his translator, I hope to have been guided by his example.