

On 'sweg' in *Beowulf* line 782b

『ベーオウルフ』782b の 'sweg' の役割

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『ベーオウルフ』の中には詩人の意図を反映し、単語が本来持っているのとは異なる意味で使われている場合がある。その一つの例として、本論では 'sweg' をとりあげている。この英雄詩の782bと129aにあらわれる 'sweg' は古英語の他の文献には見られない“悲鳴”と言う意味で使われている。この特別の意味で使われている二つの箇所が、隣接する酒宴の場面に現れる本来の意味での 'sweg' と対比的に使われることで、描かれている場面をどれほど劇的にする効果を持っているのかを本論では論じている。

キーワード : sweg, sound, cry, wop, contrasting use,

Little attention has been given to the meaning of 'sweg' in line 782b. How we read 'sweg' makes a great difference in appreciating the scene where the hero, Beowulf, and the monster, Grendel, fall into a fierce fight. The word must be defined more exactly, and in that process I hope to demonstrate a technique the *Beowulf* poet uses, that is, the use of a word 'sweg' in contrasting situations.

At the beginning I will briefly review the established opinion of the meaning of 'sweg' from the historical point of view, because my reading of 'sweg' in line 782b differs from the meaning which the dictionaries give. According to Bosworth-Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*¹, the word is mainly used in three meanings: "noise," "voice," and "music." *Middle English Dictionary*² shows that all those meanings are preserved in Middle English period, though most

of the examples given in it come from the border period between Old English and Middle English, and no example is given from secular literature. Since there is no later instance than *Body and Soul* dated at c. 1250, it is assumed that the ME word 'sweg' might not be popular in Middle English period.

Then, 'sweg' in *Beowulf* lines 782b and 129a comes into question. It is regarded as commonplace among the translators and the commentators that 'sweg' has two meanings: "music" and "noise." There is no alternative but to choose "noise" for the translation of 'sweg' in line 782b³. The problem this gloss of *Beowulf* includes is that Modern English 'noise' can mean both "din" and "cry." At line 782b "noise" for the translation of 'sweg' is ambiguous. When we consider "noise" to be the sound made by the fight of Beowulf with Grendel, it stands for "din." On the other hand, the word can refer to the sound made by Grendel due to Beowulf's grip: this could be Grendel's cry of pain.

Surveying four translations below concerning line 782b in *Beowulf* will help to see how precisely they reflect the poet's intention.

Again and again/ clang and clatter shattered the night's si-
lence;/ dread numbed the North-Danes, seized all/ who heard
the shrieking from the wall,/ the enemy of God's grisly lay
of terror,/ his song of defeat, heard hell's captive/ keening
over his wound. (93)

It will be clear from the translation "clang and clatter" that Kevin Crossley-Holland⁴ considers the word 'sweg' to be "din." He regards the noise as a sign of a severe fight, and does not see any connections with the following five lines where Grendel's cry of pain is depicted.

Although Constance B. Heatt⁵ interprets the sound as "strange

noise," this translation is still obscure as to what the "strange noise" means.

Strange noise rose again and again; a dreadful terror stirred the Danes and seized every man who heard through the wall the lamentation of God's adversary, singing his terrible dirge....(38-9)

Judging from the context, it is possible to take "strange noise" for the cry of Grendel. If the noise is, otherwise, regarded as "din," this translation may express not only the vagueness of the noise by the modifier "strange" but also how deep the anxiety of the Danes is about things that happen in the hall.

Kennedy translates 'sweg' in question as follows:

Continuously tumult filled the hall;/A terror fell on the Danish folk/
As they heard through the wall the horrible wailing,/ The groans of Grendel, the foe of God/
Howling his hideous hymn of pain,/ The hell-thane shrieking in sore defeat. (27)⁶

As Crossley-Holland, Kennedy translates 'sweg' into "tumult" and his translation shows that he does not consider the noise to be Grendel's wailing.

Ruth P. M. Lehmann's following translation reflects the most clear and plausible interpretation: "Then a swelling scream, startling, arose" (42)⁷. By choosing the word "scream" Lehmann intends to show that 'sweg' is Grendel's cry of pain.

Keeping these different translations in mind, I would like to take a look at the original text: "sweg up astag/ niwe geneahhe; Norp-De-num stod/ atelic egesa, anra gehwylcum/ para þe of wealle wop gehyrdon,/ gryreleoþ galan Godes andsacan,/ sigeleasne sang, sar wanigean/helle hæfton" (782b-8a)⁸. The scene depicted at line 782b begins at

line 750. After devouring a Danish warrior Grendel fights with Beowulf in Heorot. Beowulf possesses an incomparable strength, and, as a result of their fight, Grendel loses his arm while he is struggling to escape from Beowulf's grip.

How to read the word 'sweg' determines where to put an emphasis in appreciating this scene. If the noise which the Danes hear through the wall is the sound of the fighting between Beowulf and Grendel, the emphasis is put on the indestructibility of Heorot, and this is the reading based upon the traditional interpretation of the word 'sweg' in line 782b, as we have seen in some translations and glossaries of *Beowulf*. On the other hand, the noise can be made by the suffering monster, Grendel, because of Beowulf's hard grip as Lehmann's translation shows. The contrasting use of the word 'sweg' at lines 642-63 on one side and at lines 778-88a on the other side gives a key to the second reading. Heorot is focused upon as a place of joy until the night comes. The noise of the banquet fills the hall and then Grendel's cry fills the hall. Thus the word 'sweg' bridges between the scene where Hroþgar welcomes Beowulf with banquet and the scene where Beowulf fights with Grendel. The use of the same word in the conflicting situations contributes to the contrast between happiness and sorrow.

The decisive factor in defining the meaning of 'sweg' in 782b is the appearance of 'wop' in line 785b. What 'sweg' signifies is clarified when the Danes hear 'wop' through the wall. As in 782b, 'morgensweg' in line 129a is defined by the apposed word 'wop' in the preceding line⁹.

In addition to the effect of contrast, the poet exploits the shifting perspective from inside Heorot to outside of it, and describes the

emotional reaction of the Danes to the sound of an unseen occurrence, the fight of Grendel and Beowulf. With mixture of these narrative techniques, the poet achieves an impressive effect on the strangeness of the monster's cry.

When we consider to what extent Anglo-Saxons associate merriness with the word 'sweg,' the description of heaven in religious poems provides a good example. In addition to the elements which constitute the typical description of heaven such as good odour, everlasting joy, and light, 'sweg' is mentioned in the description.

What the poets of religious poems mean by this word is hinted by *Apocalypsis Ioannis*¹⁰. The sounds of the trumpet and the angels' and saints' voice of praising God echo in heaven.

Post haec audivi quasi vocem magnam turbae multae in caelo
dicentium... (19:1)

Et quintus angelus tuba cecinit. (9:1)

Et cum accepisset librum, quattuor animalia et viginti quatuor
seniores ceciderunt coram Agno, habentes singuli citharas
et phialas aureas plenas incensorum, quae sunt orationes
sanctorum. (5:8)

In fact, the Old English poets use 'sweg' in both meanings: hymn or men's and angels' voice. In *Phoenix*, 'sweg' stands for the voice of the souls in heaven.

Hælend hergaþ

meahte mærsiaþ,

Swinsað sibgedryht

hædre ymb þæt halge

bliþe blessiaþ.

Þær gæsta gedryht

ond Heofoncyniges

singað Metude lof.

swega mæste

heahseld Godes,

Bregu selestan

eadge mid englum

efenleopre þus.

(*Phoenix*615b-21)¹¹

As the *Phoenix* poet, the *Gublac* poet uses 'sweg' in a merry situation in heaven when *Gublac*'s soul departs for heaven. Firstly, an essential element to describe heaven such as 'leoht,' which implies God's grace, is mentioned. Then the joy in heaven is depicted with 'sweg' and 'sigeleop.'

sigeleop sungon,

gehyred under heofonum

Swa se burgstede wæs

swetum stencum

eedges yrfestol

eal innanweard

7 wynsumra

stefn areccan,

heofonlic hleopor,

gehyred wæs,

breahem æfter breahme. (*Gublac* B1314b-25a)¹²

Engla þreatas

sweg wæs on lyfte,

haligra dream.

blissum gefylled,

7 sweglwundrum,

engla hleopres;

þær wæs ænlicra

þonne hit in worulde mæge

hu se stenc 7 se sweg,

7 se halga song

heahþrym Godes,

As it is apposed with 'sigeleop,' the word 'sweg' in *Gublac* line 1315 obviously refers to the hymn of the angels to God.

Sounds of the trumpet are also represented by 'sweg.'

wunodon on wynnum,

beman stefne. (*Christ and Satan* 234b-6a)¹³

Da we þær wæron,

geherdon wuldres sweg.

In *Seafarer*, the word 'sweg' is used in combination with the musical instruments. Five of seven examples in *Beowulf* coincide with the usage in religious and secular poems. Among the audience of the

Old English poems the word 'sweg' must have stirred happy feelings.

No example of 'sweg' in the sense of "cry" is attested in Old English. This fact tells that the wording in *Beowulf* is peculiar. It leads to the conclusion that the *Beowulf* poet gives a special meaning to 'sweg' in lines 129a and 782b for some reason. It is often said that the poet uses the technique of contrast in order to distinguish between the light side and the dark side of the transitory world¹⁴. The word is used to produce the dramatic effect based upon this world view.

For example, the joyous banquet scene after the death of Grendel follows the terrible banquet scene of Grendel's mother; she devours the Danish warrior Æschere, an old friend of Hroþgar's.

A similar contrast is designed by using the word 'sweg.' The word is normally connected with the musical instruments and often appears in the banquet scenes at lines 89, 644, 1063, 2458, 3023, where the poet describes the joyous feast or mentions former happy days filled with harp sounds. Its use in 782b is different from that in 644. The lamentable scene is expressed by the word 'sweg' as in *Beowulf* line 129a. As concerns line 129a, all the translators and commentators seem to accept the meaning "cry" as the second element of 'morgensweg.' This word is contrasted with 'sweg' in line 89. At line 129a the Danes experience Grendel's attack for the first time after their joyous days since they built Heorot as a symbol of their prosperity. The acme of the prosperity is turned into the abyss of the disaster by Grendel's visit. Their joy is expressed by the word 'dream,' which is an ordinary word to represent the joyous situation, and also by 'hearpan sweg.' The contrast of 'hearpan sweg' with 'morgensweg' is a skillful technique of the *Beowulf* poet which dramatizes the moment of the change of fortune.

In the same manner, the poet makes an effective use of the word 'sweg.' At line 644 he uses 'sweg' in order to describe the hall full of joy, while he uses the same word in the description of Grendel's cry of pain at line 782b. Both in line 129a and in line 782b, 'wop,' which represents a mournful situation, appears in the vicinity of 'sweg,' and suggests the meaning of 'sweg.' Even if 'sweg' does not signify lamentation, the existence of 'wop' supports my reading of 'sweg' as "cry" in both passages.

As the brief survey of 'sweg' in the Old English religious texts shows, the word is used to describe the joyous occasions, especially to portray heaven; the pious Christians are promised everlasting joy in the presence of God there. The *Beowulf* poet has in common with other Old English poets the use of the word 'sweg' in this meaning. He, however, differs from them in the use of 'sweg' in tragic occasions. Though the word is seldom associated with an unhappy human condition, he uses it twice in horrible occasions. No trace of its use in horrible occasions is observable in Old English literature (except *Beowulf*) and Middle English literature, so that it is fair to say that this use is peculiar to the *Beowulf* poet. The interpretation of 'sweg' in 782b as "cry, lamentation" is buttressed by the compound 'morgensweg' in line 129a. As further evidence, the word 'wop' which appears near 'sweg' suggests the meaning of 'sweg.' Though the evidence is scarce that 'sweg' means "cry," the contrasting narrative technique in 129a and 782b shows that the poet intentionally uses 'sweg' in the unusual meaning, i. e. "cry, lamentation." The word plays a central role in both scenes and makes a vivid impression on the audience.

- 1 Bosworth-Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. T. Norcote Toller (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1898) see under 'sweg.'
- 2 *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) see under 'swei.'
- 3 Some examples of the gloss are given below:
George Jack "sound" ; Heyne-Schücking "Getön, Klang, Schall, Lärm" ;
F. Klaeber "sound, noise, music" ; C. L. Wrenn "sound, noise, music."
- 4 *The Anglo-Saxon World*, trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 5 *Beowulf*, trans. Constance B. Hieatt (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1967).
- 6 *Beowulf*, trans. Charles W. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
- 7 *Beowulf*, trans. Ruth P. M. Lehmann (Austin: University of Texas, 1988).
- 8 *Beowulf*, ed. George Jack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
- 9 These are some of the examples where 'wop' is used in the sorrowful situation, accompanied by scream :
Forþon wæs in wicum wop up ahafen, / atol æfenleoþ... (*Exodus* 200-1a).
Wop wæs wide, worulddreama lyt, / wæron hleatorsmiþum handa belocene.
(*Exodus* 42-3).
Næs seo stund latu/...þæt þa wrohtsmiþas wop ahofun, /hreoþun hreþlease,
hleoþrum brugdon. (*Guplac* 903b-6).
The *Exodus* text from which I quote passages is *Exodus*, ed. Peter J. Lucas (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).
- 10 *Novum Testamentum Latine*, ed. Kurt Aland (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992).
- 11 *Phoenix*, ed. N. Blake (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1990).
- 12 *The Guplac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).
- 13 *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. George P. Krapp (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD., 1931).
- 14 Theodore Andersson, "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*," in *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. John Niles (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1980).