

books **Lost in Translation**

review by Robert DiNapoli

The Wake, by Paul Kingsnorth (Unbound, 2014)

a gret man i was in my ham all cnawan me a seat i had on the wapentac and free I was from the work of other men. this was my land it was my fathers land i will not spec of my father. geld wolde i gif but only to the cyng not to the thegn for this was how things was but no man was ofer me no man will be ofer me

I was a great man; in my home all knew me. A seat I had on the wapentake, and I was free from the work of other men. This was my land. It was my father's land—I will not speak about my father. Fees would I pay but only to the king, not to the thane, for this was how things were. But no man was over me. No man will be over me.¹

Thus the protagonist and narrator of *The Wake* introduces himself. The novel has attracted wide notice,² particularly for Kingsnorth's attempt to create what he calls a 'shadow language' to represent the speech of his eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon narrator, who lives through and takes bloody part in the resistance to the advancing Norman hegemony after William the Conqueror's³ victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In a note, Kingsnorth describes the dilemma he faced in writing *The Wake*. The Old English spoken then would be mostly unintelligible to modern readers, but to put modern English dialogue into the mouths of Anglo-Saxon speakers would wholly misrepresent them and their world. What to do then? His solution, which combines lightly modernised Old English vocabulary with a 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' pidgin-like modern syntax, varies the example of other modern novels that pursue a similar strategy. Russell Hoban's *Riddly Walker* gets cited in many a review, and you could also name Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and even, at a further remove, Orwell's 1984 and Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale*. All these titles share as well a common thread of bleak dystopian vision. Kingsnorth calls his novel a 'future dystopia' set a thousand years ago. In a queer parallax, the book's episodes of up-close bloodletting in an ideologically driven insurgency take on uncomfortable resemblances to the events of the last decade in the Middle East. They also recall Cormac McCarthy's more sanguinary moments in the American old West. At points Kingsnorth's Normans come across as eleventh-century equivalents of twenty-first-century buccaneer capitalists and slash-and-burn corporate managers. The narrator is appalled by how they plunder the land with total disregard for its deeply woven integuments of biosphere and deity, in an evocation of present-day neo-pagan and green sensibilities. These are some of the novel's most deeply felt and effective resonances. Thus the good news; the bad news, alas, is very bad.

On websites, readers and reviewers have reported being beguiled by Kingsnorth's linguistic re-invention of a distant past, an enchantment I cannot share, and not out of mere scholarly nicety. It is possible to grow used to

the odd spellings and vocabulary, but his attempt to represent anything you could call 'Anglo-Saxon' by these means fails wretchedly. Old English is a highly developed language with a magnificent literature to its credit, of which Kingsnorth cannot have read much in the original. Even allowing for his narrator's lack of education, literacy and social eminence, his narration thuds far too often with a kind of 'Grok want eat' ersatz caveman-speak. Just as the novel's heart is fundamentally modern, so too its language is just modern English in primitivist drag. Even Kingsnorth's attempts at Anglo-Saxon profanity, where you might hope for a little light relief, fail to rise above (as one previous reviewer has noted) football-hooligan abuse. If I had to read 'thū fuccan cunt' or 'this is scyt'⁴ one more time, I would have called Mrs Grundy to complain, not about the rude words but about their dreary and endless repetition. Okay, the monks who copied the manuscripts that have brought us all we know about Old English would not have preserved common expletives, but it would not have demanded great invention to vary the vocabulary of abuse with the odd 'dicwit', 'cnobhed' or 'riht tossa' every so often.

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This small question of profanity adumbrates a far larger problem with Kingsnorth's invented language and narrator. The flat, inflectionless (and largely charmless) tone of my quotation above drones relentlessly on through the whole length of the novel. The protagonist talks like an unlovable thug and, for the most part, acts like one too. He speaks in the tones of a pub bore, the nightmare obsessive in seat 34B who's got you pinned against the window and won't shut up. Just not good company for a whole novel. The same flatness afflicts the novel's awareness of Anglo-Saxon culture. The narrator hates the 'frenc', of course, and desires to recover his lost status and property, but Kingsnorth's attempts to lend his actions a degree of psychological depth fare little better than his invented language. Over the course of the whole narrative, a family drama emerges in flashback, in which the narrator's grandfather instructs him in his youth about the lost gods of their people, to whom grandfather and grandson maintain a covert allegiance. The father, however, holds with the 'new' Christian faith, which, with extreme prejudice, he seeks to impose on his son. I put 'new' in scare-quotes for

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Robert DiNapoli

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the good reason that, in actual fact, the Anglo-Saxons had been converted to Christianity over four centuries before the events of *The Wake*. That conversion was swift and thorough, so that we know literally nothing about pre-Christian beliefs in Anglo-Saxon England from any direct source. Kingsnorth is thus forced to import all his pagan lore from Scandinavian myth, a fair enough move, on the one hand, since the two cultures have deep historical affinities, but to imagine that some sort of active crypto-paganism might have survived into the eleventh century among the Anglo-Saxons, or that anyone would think the Normans' victory to be the result of the Anglo-Saxons' abandonment of their old gods, defies any possible suspension of disbelief. More problematically, it fundamentally falsifies the very culture Kingsnorth seeks to evoke. A full century and a half before the events narrated in *The Wake*, Anglo-Saxon culture had found ways to reconcile its pagan, heroic past with its Christian present. Two poems, from the late ninth and late tenth centuries respectively, *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*, commemorate a victory over and a defeat by invading Vikings. Both poems sound a powerful and wholly Christian sensibility wedded seamlessly to an equally hearty embodiment of the pre-Christian heroic spirit with no tension or conflict.

Thus anachronistically, the narrator of *The Wake* regularly communes with the gods and other mythical personae from northern Germanic myth, but Kingsnorth leaves unresolved the question of whether in his interior dialogues he is truly inspired or merely unhinged, in a kind of post-modern indeterminacy that also undermines his attempts to achieve any kind of compelling verisimilitude. Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter or serial killer? You make the call. In fact, all Kingsnorth's evocations of Anglo-Saxon culture lurch from such distractingly modern touches to a kind of earnest Germanic Myth and Culture 101 textbook-plundering. And even here his evocations can misfire badly. One of the narrator's band of not-so-merry men is a wandering minstrel, whom he characterises indifferently as a 'gleoman' and a 'scop'. Those two Old English terms refer to very different sorts of performer: the scop was a court bard who produced high-register poetry of heroic temper. The *gleomann* was a much less aspiring figure, a wandering entertainer akin to today's stand-up comics, if the disapproving notices of him we find in a few sermons of that time are anything to go by. The scop, in contrast, gets no such censorious reviews. Kingsnorth's poet is clearly a *gleomann* and most emphatically *not* a scop. When he tries to give us Old English poetry in action, he has this figure deliver prose paraphrases of two of the so-called 'double entendre' riddles from the collection of verse riddles in the Exeter Book.⁵ Down and dirty, and honest fun, but one great clanger of a false note if you're going to call this performer a scop. I am more than willing to allow Kingsnorth a degree of literary license in his 'evocation' of Anglo-Saxon culture, but that evocation too often betrays his only glancing acquaintance with its basic character. Granted, only readers with specialist knowledge will be able to identify and grumble at such lapses, which thus needn't impair

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the pleasure of those less familiar with the Anglo-Saxons and their world.

But it's hard to imagine such readers deriving much pleasure from Kingsnorth's performance in the first place, given all the work he's set them in simply reading it. Even with my long familiarity with Old English, I found the narrator's barely punctuated syntax hard to fathom at more than one point. As a narrative strategy, it will stand or fall on whether it delivers a result worth its demands. I fear it doesn't. Kingsnorth has worked very hard toward a higher-order 'translation', in which he seeks earnestly to 'carry over'⁶ one particular culture's distinctive qualities into a text accessible to readers of another. What he has delivered smacks too sharply of ersatz tourist-tat for my taste, and, more critically, fundamentally misconstrues and misrepresents the very culture it seeks to communicate, without any great reading pleasure as compensation. Give me the less earnest but more inspired loopiness of Monty Python, *Braveheart* or Errol Flynn's you-know-who any day. 'Welcome to Sherwood!' Game on. **E**

Endnotes

- 1 My 'translation'.
- 2 Including a place on the Man Booker long list and on the short lists for the Gordon Burn and Goldsmiths Prizes.
- 3 'geeyom' in the novel, more usually just 'the bastard'.
- 4 'You fucking cunt' and 'this is shit' respectively, and literally the height and breadth of the narrator's capacity for malediction. Very much a wasted opportunity.
- 5 A compendium of Old English poetry compiled in the early eleventh century. The two riddles' solutions sound as though they ought to be 'a penis' but turn out to be 'a leek' and 'a butter churn' respectively. Boom boom.
- 6 The literal meaning of the word 'translation'.

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