

should have, suggesting patristic writing, Revelation, and Vergil (105 [1990]: 1127)—makes the task of keeping *Beowulf* as the focus more difficult and more suspect. There is no clear evidence, for instance, for the influence on *Beowulf* of patristic literature or even Revelation, much less Vergil; only at the risk of special pleading can an argument about the vision of choice in *Beowulf* depend on such putative sources. Nor should such an argument depend on the more carefully substantiated linguistic connection between *ceosan* and *gustare* that Knowlton offers. As I have shown (and as Knowlton would no doubt agree), the linguistic basis is only a relatively small part of the picture with which I am concerned.

There is certainly a need for a monograph documenting and explaining the intermingling of “choosing” and “perceiving” in medieval languages, if this subject is treated in its own right. There is also a clear need for a study of early patristic visions of choice, not as a determining “background” to *Beowulf* but as an important topic in a rich body of material, which certainly lies behind Anglo-Saxon homiletic literature and also a large proportion of late-medieval vernacular poetry, with its explicit concern with such learned traditions. In my opinion, elucidating *Beowulf* should not be the “reason” for either kind of study. I would be pleased indeed not only to have helped open up new ways of looking at *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon poetry but also to have stimulated new questions to be put to other kinds of material that have come down to us from medieval culture.

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### Interpreting a Pronoun in Mörike

To the Editor:

What if a factual premise of a great literary debate is found to be flawed? Because such disputes tend to take place somewhat above the reality of simple folk, the splendid writings are likely to survive the loss of their grounding, for great is the power of theory over proof and common sense.

This reflection is caused by the reappearance, in translation, of the forty-year-old exchange about Eduard Mörike’s poem “Auf eine Lampe” (“A 1951 Dialogue on Interpretation: Emil Staiger, Martin Heidegger, Leo Spitzer,” 105 [1990]: 409–35). The original debate did not end with the three opinions shown there. For two decades, numerous scholars had their say about

this cause célèbre; virtually every student of German literature learned about it, and from it. With the exception of perhaps one (Sigurd Burckhardt at Ohio State), all the participants relied on a few crucial assumptions made by the first. A thousand pages of commentary were perched atop ten lines of insufficiently inspected poetry.

I have no quarrel with Herbert Lindenberger’s introduction (105 [1990]: 398–408) or with the translation by Berel Lang and Christine Ebel. The rendering of a few lines may have to be changed, but not because the translators missed the intent of their sources. The English text accurately presents the scholarly consensus. My case against that common view starts from the reading of a single pronoun but does not end there. The full argument is laid out in an essay scheduled to appear in *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*.

The poem ends with the famous line “Was aber schön ist, selig scheint es in ihm selbst.” Staiger, Heidegger, Spitzer, and their successors expend remarkable amounts of energy on explanations of the curious form “ihm,” found in place of the expected “sich.” All agree that “ihm” is a Swabian dialect alternative to the reflexive pronoun and that Mörike uses it to stress a particular type of reflexivity or to enhance a sound pattern; they differ on the details.

Inspection of the poet’s works, however, shows that Mörike does not use Swabian forms in his classical poetry; that in about five hundred poems “sich” occurs roughly 450 times, but reflexive “ihm” appears at most twice, for unrelated reasons; that where “ihm” might serve one of the purposes assumed in the various explanations, Mörike retains “sich” and forgoes the supposed dialect option. Finally, “ihm” as a Swabian reflexive is not permissible in prepositional phrases.

If “ihm” is not reflexive, it must refer to a different antecedent. The text offers four possibilities: “Geist,” “Ernst,” “Kunstgebild,” and “wer.” All can be supported, but the likeliest and most powerful is the last, and it causes a profound change in the poem’s final message. Who pays attention to the artwork of the true kind? The speaker of the poem does and, through his verbal art, so does his audience. The work of art seems blissful or shines blissfully not in itself but in the contemplating human.

Perhaps the exegetes could not see the way out of their predicament because they were bound to the ideology of an independent, divine beauty of art. The commentaries on the Mörike poem profess an elitist disdain for vulgar inattention: beauty is blissful in itself and can do without observers. One could shrug that off as the higher nonsense of classical aesthetics (does the piece of stone or metal rejoice in itself?) were it not for the

unspoken corollary: we are the high priests of divine beauty, and we stand apart from the masses.

That faith causes misreadings of supporting sources as well, the two most important ones being a line by Goethe and one by Mörike himself. In *Faust*, part 2, Goethe says: “Die Schöne bleibt sich selber selig” (7403; translated in *PMLA* as “The beautiful remains blissful in itself” [418]). Our disputants quickly agree that “die Schöne” is a rare synonym for “Schönheit” (“beauty”), and then they become entangled in explanations why Mörike, in paraphrasing the line, changes “sich” to the supposedly synonymous “ihm.” Yet when Goethe means “Schönheit,” he uses the same word as everybody else, as could have been seen a mere four lines earlier: “Frauensönheit will nichts heißen” (7399; “Female beauty means nothing”). “Die Schöne” is a beautiful woman. The speaker holds a negative view of her self-contentment and instead praises grace that pleases others. Goethe points to the contemplating other—just like Mörike, who, for this very reason, replaces “sich” with “ihm.” In English, the Goethe line might read: “A beauty gives bliss merely to herself.”

In the Mörike reference, quoted by Spitzer, a speaker admires an innocently graceful dancer, and he wishes that one could be like her, “Sich selber so zu seliger Genüge” (“Thus blissfully contented in oneself” or, in *PMLA*, “It itself to such blissful satisfaction” [432]). That line appears to support Spitzer’s opinion, until one sees the very next line, which he suppresses: “Und alle Welt zu letzen, zu erbaun!” (*Sämtliche Werke*, 1964, 264; “And to regale and edify all humankind!”). That poem as a whole should leave no doubt that Mörike is thinking of the audience, but his concern for human beings is quashed by the interpreters.

And what about the old bone of contention, the reading of “scheint”? Mörike’s usage (which nobody checked) clearly favors Staiger’s position (“seems”), but when one accepts an observer as the locus for that which is beautiful, the whole famous dispute becomes virtually pointless, explaining why the poet did not foresee and prevent it. Within a contemplating mind, the beautiful object seems, appears, shines, or possibly even sparkles (Spitzer)—what’s the difference? The translation might be changed from

A work of art of the true kind. Who notices it?  
Yet what is beautiful seems blissful within itself.

(413)

to

A work of art of the true kind. Who pays it heed?  
Yet what is beautiful looks blissful within her or him.

or, more pointedly, albeit with some distortion,

A work of art of the true kind. Who pays it heed?  
Yet if you do, its beauty will turn blissful within you.

No longer can the final line be quoted by itself, in defense of antisocial views on art.

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### Replies:

Well, maybe. Albrecht Holschuh himself suggests that if “ihm” in the last line of “Auf eine Lampe” is not reflexive (substituting for “sich”), its reference would be to one of four other antecedents. Among these he favors “wer”—but plausible accounts can be given for the three alternative possibilities as well, and all this comes without mention of the literary cost of giving up the reflexive meaning of “ihm” in the first place, with a strained reach backward required for any of the other antecedents.

Still, Holschuh’s reading has its attractions, and not only because it catches a large number of learned heads nodding (the translators of “Auf eine Lampe,” he gently suggests, are in these ranks hardly more than an epiphenomenon). But to assess the evidence in conflict here requires that we also assess the means of assessing the evidence (and so on), and some relief from this infinite regress may be found in an incidental (perhaps unwanted) implication of his proposal. This is the fact that the question of what “ihm” refers to—and to this question might be added the problem of whether “scheint” means “videtur” or “lucet,” which occasioned the disagreement between Staiger and Heidegger (and between Spitzer and himself)—persists as a question *only* because Mörike cannot be asked what he intended when he wrote the poem.

Admittedly, even if Mörike could be confronted with these questions, we might learn that he was himself uncertain how to answer one or both of them (or perhaps that he had meant to leave them undecided). But it is much more likely that he had something definite in mind for both terms or at least that when questioned he would *make* them definite. And his answers on either of these grounds—there might be no way of determining which Mörike used—would have settled the referents of “ihm” and of “scheint,” and so the issues of interpretation depending on them. Not because more compelling possibilities could not be imagined but because decisions on syntax or linguistic reference come