Anatoly Liberman’s response

My remarks will be brief, because all I wanted to say I said in the review and because Professor Beekes and I agree on a number of points, whereas the matters on which we disagree are of such fundamental importance that a few more lines in a journal polemic will not change anything.

Professor Beekes evidently believes that language creativity has for centuries and even for millennia been limited to the processes of derivation and borrowing. If he is right, it follows that there was a period when all the words or roots were coined and that once that period came to an end, the source ran dry, except in the area of sound imitative complexes. I called such a picture unrealistic, and nothing I have read in the rejoinder made me change my opinion. We are flooded with slang and words created for the nonce, and, although in most cases their origin remains undiscovered, there is no reason to suspect every neologism of being an import. Even from a theoretical point of view, the idea that at one time people invented more and more words and then stopped doing so carries little conviction.

The Leiden school of Indo-European studies is deservedly famous. Its practitioners base their conclusions on certain assumptions. The danger (here and elsewhere) consists in applying even the best principles dogmatically, in turning a sensitive violin bow into an all-too-efficient ax. So little is known about the spread of Proto-Indo-European and the ethnogenesis of Germanic tribes that at least a certain measure of flexibility is needed in reconstructing and rejecting asterisked forms. It is the lack of such flexibility, typical of young scholars, that, in my opinion, marred the dictionary.

No one denies the existence of substrates, but God is in the details. In principle, any word for any concept may be borrowed, but Boutkan posited such a huge mass of loanwords designating the most basic concepts of human life, from body parts to social institutions, that, to be persuasive, he should have discussed the pro and contra in each case, rather than referring to general considerations. Professor Beekes mentions the names of plants, and so forth. The trouble is that in the dictionary exactly such words hardly appear at all. Reference to the pre-Greek substrate and all things “Pelasgian” does not go far, for here we again find ourselves in the realm of the unknown and are made to invoke the idea of obscurnum per obscurius.

My objection to the status of i is more serious than it seemed to my opponent. Did Old Frisian have two phonemically distinct îs? If not, are we allowed to say that assimilation is possible regardless of a phoneme’s distinctive features? This, however, is a minor point, and I would not have mentioned it if Boutkan had not used slants. It also seems that Professor Beekes did not quite understand what I said about languages in contact. I was wondering how the speakers of early Indo-European managed to borrow words containing phonemes (or “sounds”) that did not exist in their system without altering the phonetic makeup of the loanwords (/al/, geminates, etc.). Most of us, regardless of how well we have learned foreign languages, cannot get rid of our native accent. Are we to assume the existence of multiple new generations of children forgetting their language and adopting non-Indo-European vowels and consonants?

And finally a short remark on style. While commenting on my doubts about borrowing phonemes and phonotactic rules en masse, Professor Beekes says that I get “excited about the subject.” Our common goal is to obtain the best reconstruction possible. Emotions play no part in the process. He also says that I ridicule one of Boutkan’s etymologies. My italicized slight expressed only my surprise; it was a sign of incredulity. It would never occur to me to mock anyone who does not share my views, least of all those who can no longer defend themselves. We all agree that Boutkan’s death was a tragedy and an irreparable loss to philology. If his dictionary happens to contribute to Germanic and Indo-European studies in a more fundamental way than I predicted, I will be the first to congratulate its users.