New Old English: The Place of Old English in Twentieth- and Twenty-first-Century Poetry

Abstract
This article begins by noting that the narrative coherence of literary history as a genre, and the inclusions and exclusions that it is forced to make, depend on the often unacknowledged metaphors that attend its practice. Literary history which is conceived as an unbroken continuity ('the living stream of English') has found the incorporation of Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon) to be problematic and an issue of contention. After surveying the kind of arguments that are made about the place of Old English as being within or without English literary tradition, this article notes that a vast body of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry, oblivious to those turf-wars, has concerned itself with Old English as a compositional resource. It is proposed that this poetry, a disparate and varied body of work, could be recognized as part of a cultural phenomenon: 'The New Old English'. Academic research in this area is surveyed, from the 1970s to the present, noting that the rate of production and level of interest in New Old English has been rapidly escalating in the last decade. A range of poets and poems that display knowledge and use of Old English largely overlooked by criticism to date is then catalogued, with minimal critical discussion, in order to facilitate further investigation by other scholars. This essay argues that the widespread and large-scale reincorporation of an early phase of English poetic tradition, not in contiguous contact with contemporary writing for so many centuries, is such an unprecedented episode in the history of any vernacular that it challenges many of the metaphors through which we attempt to pattern texts into literary historical narrative. It is suggested that the weight of evidence in this area strongly suggests that in recent decades we have been living through 'The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Renaissance'.

As it has been practised in English for at least the last two hundred years, literary history is grounded in notions of continuity and contiguity. Historians of literature in English have sought to identify the origin of specific forms and genres, and then to chart their evolution from origin to current usage.[1] Traditional literary history locates analogues for contemporary themes, subjects and modes of expression in earlier literature, and thereby establishes and isolates certain qualities as typically, or even essentially English: in effect, as unchanging. In this way unities and 'lines' of Englishness, whether linguistic or national, are constructed in the present, but projected back into the past (perhaps one should say 'retro-jected'). From there they are then represented as proceeding in a rational and progressive order back towards the present, the inevitability of which they seem to explain. Etymologically the very notion of 'tradition' implies direct contact; literally it is what is handed down (Latin *traditio*), as from one generation to the next. Where contiguity and continuity cannot be established, and where a literary mode has no successors, it is pronounced to have 'died out', or to represent a 'blind alley' or a 'dead-end' of literary history. The model underpinning traditional literary history then is Darwinian, and relies heavily on metaphors of evolution, of organic growth, and of confluence, such as the idea of tradition as a 'stream', for example. These are rarely examined or even understood to be metaphors by many of the critics who use them. In this way the metaphoric fiction comes to assume primacy over the objects it has transformed; the narrative reifies itself *as* the events out of which it has been formed, instead of a way of seeing those events.

Thus, in his introduction to Thomas Ward's anthology *The English Poets* (1880), we find Matthew Arnold locating the origin of English poetry in that of twelfth-century France. His

argument for doing so is that Chaucer 'derived immediately' his language and forms from Italian poets whose own writing had adopted the spirit and patterns of mediaeval French verse. For Arnold, Chaucer is 'a genuine *source* of joy and strength which is *flowing still for us* and will flow always' (my emphasis). Arnold has already approvingly quoted Chretien de Troyes to suggest that the 'chivalry and letters' of France had been passed to his native country directly from Rome, and to Rome in turn from Greece (Ward, I, xxix – xxxi). A series of direct links is set up then, from antiquity to Arnold's contemporaries, and which Arnold is prepared to call 'English' at least as far back as twelfth-century France, on the grounds that the continuity of forms is unbroken from that moment. This Arnoldian sense of literary history as describing that which is in direct and continuous use is a powerful one and persists to the present day. It is what underwrites James Fenton's conviction that Old English is not part of English literary history: 'I can't accept that there is any continuity between the traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry and those established in English poetry by the time of say, Shakespeare.' (Fenton, 1) For Fenton, it is simply self-evident that to be called 'English', poetry must exhibit continuities of tradition with Shakespeare or his contemporaries. What Arnold had to earn through observation, Fenton has inherited as an unquestionable assumption, the logic of which needs no justification, and accordingly Old English (called 'Anglo-Saxon' to alienate it further) can be excluded from the formation of the category 'English literary history'.

Indeed, while our sense of literary history remains one of continuity of form and tradition, it is hard to see why poetry from before the twelfth century ('Old English' or 'Anglo-Saxon') would deserve a place in the pageant of English literary history. For as long as 'Language' had equal status with 'Literature' as an object of academic study in English departments across the United Kingdom, the arguments for including *Beowulf*, Caedmon's Hymn and other pre-Conquest poems within English literary history were clearer. The English language has been in unbroken use for at least as long as we have had written records of it (the earliest versions of Caedmon's Hymn survive in manuscripts dated to the 730s). The influential Victorian literary critic Stopford Brooke used precisely this argument, and a metaphor of growth, to place Old English at the beginning of his school primer to English literature, arguing that the language has remained the same 'just as much as the tree planted a hundred years ago is the same tree to-day. It is this sameness of language, as well as the sameness of national spirit, which makes our literature one literature for 1, 200 years.' (Brooke, 4) It is much easier to demonstrate the linguistic continuities from early to modern English than it is literary continuities; our distinction between subject and object pronouns derives directly from the Old English case system: rhyming iambic pentameter couplets do not. But during the last two decades of the twentieth century, as 'History of the Language' courses began to be displaced from the university-level English Studies syllabus to make room for other, exciting new fields within the discipline, it became less and less obvious to students, whose interests were increasingly literary rather than linguistic, that Old English poetry *was* English poetry. Strictly within the parameters it sets for itself, Valentine Cunningham's argument that Old English literature was 'a cul-de-sac' is not easy to refute. (Jackson, 158)

The French literary historian of English, Emile Legouis, presciently summarized these arguments for and against pre-Conquest literature as *English* literature in the introduction to his *A History of English Literature*, first translated into English in 1926. While acknowledging that philology 'found nowhere a break in continuity, and concluded that there was a hidden unity behind the slow changes' in the English language (Legouis, 5), Legouis comes down on the side of assigning 'Anglo-Saxon' the role of progenitor of English, and

therefore deserving not the first chapter of an English literary history, but rather a prologue, on the grounds that it is 'at the approach' to English literature, for:

> The true unity of a literature is constituted by the persistence of a language which remains fairly intelligible from one age to another, and by the succeeding and more or less active influences, sometimes manifest and sometimes hidden, but none the less continuous, of the works which are literary landmarks. If this be so, Anglo-Saxon literature cannot be an integral part of English literature. (Legouis, 6)

Nevertheless, Michael Swanton's *English Poetry before Chaucer* manages to tell a coherent narrative of literary tradition from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries that 'emphasizes the evolutionary rather than the revolutionary aspects of this period' (Swanton, vii), and which links the Old English *Widsith* to the Middle English *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a poem close enough to Chaucer's milieu to secure the case Swanton wishes to make for 'English' poetry before Chaucer, and he finishes by noting that 'literary history continued unbroken', in effect refuting an argument like that of Legouis. (Swanton, 304)

However, it is not at all inevitable that we should think of a national literary history as consisting entirely of a series of lines of filiation, unbroken or otherwise. Christopher Cannon has recently reminded us that literary histories, like all histories, are constructed to comfort us with their resulting pattern of coherence (Cannon, 23) and encourages us not to approach the objects of late Anglo-Saxon and early Middle English poetic culture bringing the interpretative frame, 'The Unbroken Tradition'. For through that frame, Swanton not withstanding, we might find only fragments of the desired-for narrative. Moreover, while Old English poetry has shared its forms and themes with modern English poetry, as recent scholarship amply demonstrates, it has not done so in unbroken tradition. Although oblique, its relationship to dozens of practitioners of English poetry over the last hundred or so years, some of them among the most influential and significant of their generation, is nevertheless clear. Such a rich and diverse body of writing might well be termed 'The New Old English'. This essay attempts to summarise the work that has been done to date on identifying and accounting for this non-linear influence within English poetic culture – work that has only come to a head in the last five years or so – before going on to scope further work that remains to be done on the place of Old English within twentieth-century and contemporary poetry. At the same time it aims to suggest that the existing scholarship in this growing sub-field, although not explicitly setting out to do so, in effect has argued for a new kind of English literary history, one which is not predicated solely on models of continuity, but finds ways to incorporate rupture and recovery within its narrative.

Until recently literary criticism had only attended to the role of Old English in modern poetry in cases of single author-centred scholarship, and even then usually only with reference to a specific text; there was little sense of the range and scope of the New Old English as an important new development in modern poetry. In part, of course, this was an effect of the tendency towards period specialisation as a mark of scholarly rigour and professionalism in Anglo-American university English departments in the very last decades of the twentieth century. Anglo-Saxonists and modernists did not much bother each other, often to their mutual detriment. As a consequence no one had gone looking for a phenomenon that fell between two specialisms, and so the extent of the phenomenon had not been discovered. A few prominent New Old English texts, however, had been studied in isolation from each other.

An obvious case in point is Ezra Pound's translation of *The Seafarer*. Often derided earlier in its reception for its 'schoolboy errors' (Sisam, 409), Pound's version has nevertheless proved to be very influential on subsequent poets for its demonstration of the rhythmical possibilities for composition that Old English offered; in many ways it is the portal through which Old English enters modern poetry. Notorious as it is, Pound's performance (arguably a less misleading term for this poem than 'translation') of Old English received two important studies within the space of a few years. Michael Alexander's *The Poetic Achievement of Ezra Pound* (first published in 1979) includes an extended consideration of 'The Seafarer', arguing that to fetishize the poem's semantic accuracy, or lack thereof, is to miss its point; Pound's 'Seafarer' is not a crib, but an approximation of the sounds of the Old English poem, translated for those who cannot read the original. (Alexander, 67-79) Three years later Fred Robinson went on to demonstrate that Pound's poem was, in any case, semantically accurate within the limits of the best contemporary scholarship of the time. (Robinson, 'Might of the North') Robinson also discovered a number of unpublished poems and fragments among Pound's juvenilia that display clear signs of engagement with Old English. In effect Robinson demonstrated that Pound's interest in the field was long standing and that it pre-dated by several years his 'Seafarer', which could no longer been seen as a solitary experiment in Pound's oeuvre. As a translator of medieval poetry, Alexander clearly recognised many of the issues Pound encountered in the Old English *Seafarer* as familiar from his own work. As a scholar of Anglo-Saxon fully conversant with the history of his own field, Robinson could easily locate Pound's place within it. Here was a case then, of medievalists being able to inform Poundians about the process of composition of one of their author's (and modern poetry's) most important foundational texts.

In W. H. Auden's case the ground work was done not by medievalists, but by Auden scholars, perhaps not surprisingly, as Auden had signalled his long-standing interest in Old English himself, remarking in 1962 that 'Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences' (Auden, *Dyer's Hand*, 42) and placing Michael Alexander's translation of *Deor* ('one of my favourites') in his commonplace book, under an entry for 'Anglo-Saxon Poetry'. (Auden, *A Certain World*, 22-4) John Fuller's *Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden* (1970, later expanded to the monumental *Commentary*) clarified just how liberal the allusions to Old English are in Auden's early work, indentifying quotations, translations and echoes of *Beowulf*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Battle of Maldon* in a large number of Auden's shorter poems in the 1930s, as well as in the longer works 'Paid on Both Sides' and *The Orators*. This is all the more remarkable given that Fuller's area of specialisation is not Anglo-Saxon, or even medieval literature more generally, and that his work is simultaneously concerned with identifying and explicating references to Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and the rest of English literature, as well as the Bible, authors of classical antiquity, works of psychology, musical form, historical events, and biographical details of Auden's own life.[2] In 1981 Edward Mendelson, another major Auden scholar, expanded on the nature of the allusions to Old English in Auden's poem 'The Wanderer' with insight. For while Pound was primarily interested in translating forms, rhythms and techniques from Old English, Auden, although not disinterested in such matters, was more concerned, Mendelson argued, with translating the apparent social experience of Old English speakers into terms familiar from the discourse twentieth-century psychology. (Mendelson, 46)

A tranche, therefore, of good work happened to be done on the use of Old English in these two important poets in the 1970s and very early 1980s by both medievalists and twentieth-century experts, although from the perspective of single-author studies. This was almost

certainly a consequence of those scholars belonging to a generation when range was still valued in undergraduate education, and when English studies was still commonly thought of as one field, rather than a home to a collection of discrete sub-fields. That a new generation of scholars, having had to 'professionalize' themselves by concentrating with more focus on a single historical period, came into the academy during the 1980s probably explains why little new work was done to make connections between these disparate areas for some time. One exception was a short article by Hugh Magennis (1991), addressed to other Anglo-Saxon scholars, noting the range of modern writers who drew on Old English sources in their work. Magennis' brief but richly suggestive tour took in Wordsworth, MacNeice, Ezra Pound, Richard Wilbur, Seamus Heaney and the Argentinean poet Borges. Aware that his was by no means an exhaustive catalogue, Magennis ended by inviting others to expand his preliminary survey. First, however, Auden was to receive further attention before academic investigation would turn towards the wider phenomenon of New Old English. In 1998 two important articles on Auden and Old English appeared, this time by Anglo-Saxonists, who also belonged to an earlier generation of scholars. Paul Szarmach's work focussed on a single poem by Auden, 'Anthem', finding an analogue for it in *Caedmon's Hymn*, while Nicholas Howe placed Auden alongside Geoffrey Hill and Thom Gunn, suggesting that the three poets' use of Old English literature indicated its 'afterlife' (borrowing and adapting that term from its earlier use by Fred Robinson).[3]

With hindsight the millennium now appears to mark something of a shift in the academic fortunes of New Old English poetry, with an ever increasing flow of research being published in this area. Undoubtedly the catalyst for some of this work was the 1999 publication of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, much fanfared in broadsheet press, rather than any millennialist disposition among Anglo-Saxon scholars, determined to reveal the apocalyptic presence of ancient texts in the contemporary world. With Heaney's translation renewing or even awakening interest in Old English among the general public, as well among scholars and students of contemporary literature, it was both desirable and inevitable that more work should be produced on the intersection between the oldest and newest literary productions in English. Daniel Donoghue led the way in 2000, showing how through acts of 'philological faithfulness' the language of Anglo-Saxon had shaped that of Heaney, not only in the task of translating *Beowulf*, but also in original compositions pre-dating his *Beowulf*. Donoghue's was the first extended piece of work to argue successfully that Heaney's *Beowulf* deserved to be seen as a free-standing, independent work, coherent with and within the poet's whole oeuvre.

In 2001 Helen Phillips shrewdly considered the postcolonial and sexual politics of Heaney's *Beowulf*, investigating the 'wealth of relevant contradictions' that the Old English text offered to Heaney's own set of contested circumstances, as well as noting that the female characters of the poem, and therefore the nature of the feud motif, were somewhat slighted by Heaney's performance of the work. (Phillips, 269) In the same year Conor McCarthy paid close linguistic and historical attention to the Irish elements in Heaney's *Beowulf*, seeing it both as a multiculturalist poem, and, in part, a Troubles poem. (McCarthy, 'Language and History') John Corbett noted the several different strategies employed by poet-translators of *The Seafarer* (namely Pound and Scottish poets Edwin Morgan, Tom Scott and Alexander Scott) in terms of domesticating the strangeness of Old English in their work, or letting it colour the quality of their medium, noting along the way the rich tradition of Old English translation into Scots, as well as English. And Chris Jones considered Pound's uses of *The Wanderer* and of a poetic idiom derived from Old English, in order to construct a mode of contemporary elegy in Cantos 2, 27 and 28. (Jones, 'One a Bird Bore Off')

In 2002 the putative postcolonialism of Heaney's *Beowulf* again received sustained investigation, with Loren Gruber critical of its Irishing of Old English. Chris Jones published two articles on Auden and Old English, one explicating the Old English sources and allusions in *Paid on Both Sides* ('"The 'Barbaric" Poetry of the North'), the other doing similar work on *The Orators*, and arguing that a complex textual pun is being set up by the work's deployment of Old English. ('"One Can Emend a Mutilated Text"') In 2004 M. J. Toswell detailed a number of Old English effects in several poems by the Canadian writer Earle Birney ('Earle Birney as Anglo-Saxon *Scop*), and Carl Phelpstead skilfully analyzed the prosody of several Auden poems influenced by Old English, as well as those by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, to argue convincingly that a form of 'alliterative revival' had taken place in early twentieth-century English poetry.

Following Phelpstead's observation that the return to Old English by various authors did not occur as isolated incidents of literary history, but as part of a more coherent and widespread phenomenon, the first book-length study of New Old English came out in 2006. Chris Jones argued in *Strange Likeness* that for each of four of the most influential twentieth-century practitioners of poetry in four different nations of the English-speaking diaspora (America, England, Scotland and Ireland), Old English had contributed in significant part to their characteristic style and voice. Calling Pound 'the inventor of Old English for our time' (19), Jones examined in detail Pound's syntactic and prosodic debts to Old English, and contextualized them within terms of the modernist break from accentual syllabic tradition. Auden's varied and at times obscure uses of Old English were plotted from his early works into *The Age of Anxiety*. In particular Jones developed an extended reading of Auden's 'The Wanderer', suggesting that it deploys Old English allusion as part of a queer poetics, the poem disclosing its partially hidden sources at the same time as it establishes a narrative of homosexual coming-out, in 'an aesthetic of simultaneous disguise and display' (89-97). This reading is, however, mistaken in its assertion that the speaker, by recourse to images of homosocial intimacy in Old English poetry, courageously outs himself; rather the speaker clearly considers such a move, but retreats from making it, returning instead to a rather more timid position by the end of the poem.[4] Edwin Morgan's use of Old English was shown to have pre-empted some of the issues of 'postcolonial Anglo-Saxon' that later attached themselves to Heaney's work, and Morgan's use of Old English was aligned with his futurist-inspired language experiments, rather than being seen as a nostalgic or conservative impulse. Heaney's career-long engagement with Old English was emphasized, with the volume *North* receiving particular attention as a sustained deployment of Old English tropes and techniques in order to set up strongly political contemporary resonances.[5]

Work continued and continues to work this rich seam, with Robert Hampson in 2007 drawing attention to the highly experimental use of Old English in the work of one of the leading proponents of the British avant-garde in late twentieth-century poetry, Bill Griffiths. Also that year Joe Moffett sketched out the place of Old English in the work of several twentieth-century Anglophone modernist poets, before focussing more closely on Geoffrey Hill's use of the Anglian king Offa (not an Anglo-Saxon, nor a king of England) in *Mercian Hymns*, oddly suggesting that Hill interrogates Offa's status as an origin myth for 'the modern British state', a position Offa has never occupied in British historiography or popular culture. (Moffett, 18-22 & 91-112) In 2008 McCarthy followed up his early work on Heaney's *Beowulf* with an excellent book-length study of the importance of medieval poetry in a variety of languages to the notion of vernacularity that is so central to Heaney's work; naturally there is extended treatment of Heaney's use of Old English properly contextualized

in this respect. (McCarthy, *Seamus Heaney*) Norse scholar Heather O'Donoghue demonstrated that Heaney's 'idea of the north', which informs both the volume *North* and the *Beowulf* translation, draws equally on a conflation of Old Norse and Old English literatures (2009). O'Donoghue's is also one of the best reading's of Heaney's *Beowulf* as 'an act of literary and linguistic politics'. Finally, in 2010, Jones studied the soundscape of poems by W. S. Graham and Edwin Morgan, to argue that aural allusions were being invoked, not to specific Old English poems, but to the network of poems constructed as canonical by a number of teaching texts in order to trigger metonymic reference to a notion of the whole of Old English poetic tradition. (Jones, 'Where now the harp?')

More work on New Old English is in the pipeline at the time of writing. Late 2010 will see two important relevant publications. The first, a collection of essays on *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination*, edited by David Clark and Nicholas Perkins, will include new research investigating, among other topics: Pound's use of Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* in his own work (Mark Atherton); the image of Wayland the Smith in, among other writings, the poetry of Rudyard Kipling (Maria Cecire); Tolkien's own verse compositions in Old English (Maria Artamanova); the intersection between Old English and Old Norse and their joint place in Auden's poetics (Heather O'Donoghue); the deployment of Old English images, verbal and visual, in David Jones's work (Anna Johnson); Anglo-Saxon interlace art as an analogue for narrative pattern in Basil Bunting's masterpiece *Briggflatts* (Clare Lees); Anglo-Saxon absence in Ted Hughes' and Godwin Fay's *The Remains of Elmet* (Joshua Davies); the idea of Anglo-Saxon sovereignty at play in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (Hannah Crawforth); the almost literal textual instability of Peter Reading's anti-elegiac, fragmentary Old English (Rebecca Anne Barr); and Heaney's poem 'The Helmet' as an engagement with Old English in order to find a way of addressing the events of 9/11, and to find a contemporary, yet unironic, heroic mode for doing so (Chris Jones). The second publication is Norton's forthcoming anthology *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*, edited by Greg Delanty and Michael Matto: a project in which poets as varied as Eavan Boland, Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, Matthew Hollis, Jane Hirshfield, Billy Collins, Ciaran Carson, Seamus Heaney and Edwin Morgan were each paired with a scholar of Anglo-Saxon to produce versions of Old English poetry, including many non-canonical texts such as the charms, and late poems like *Durham*. Such a wide-ranging anthology, featuring so many prominent poets will only stimulate fresh consideration of the place of Old English in modern poetry, as well as perhaps provide the catalyst for poets to further their own investigation of Old English as a resource.[6]

There are still many poets and poems whose relationships with Old English have been largely or wholly unexplored by researchers, even before the forthcoming Norton anthology widens the corpus yet further. At this stage of the charting of New Old English a provisional catalogue of relevant work may be desirable to aid other scholars in mapping this vibrant new field of English poetic history. Such a stock-taking might include, in addition to the names already mentioned above: W. S. Merwin's early poem 'Leviathan', written in a prosody derived from Old English (Merwin, 11-12); Richard Wilbur's work, which includes several Old English-inspired riddles, and the alliterative, stress-based, rhythmically imitative poem 'Junk' (1961), which also alludes to the Old English *Waldere*; (Wilbur, 261-2);[7] Peter Russell's, long Pound-inspired poem *Visions and Ruins*, which echoes and incorporates the Old English *Ruin*; Harold Massingham's taut verse, often employing Old English alliterative stress-based prosody and incorporating translation from Old English; Thomas Kinsella's extended act of sympathetic imagination with the figure of Grendel in the 1968 collection *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, especially the sequence 'Wormwood' (Kinsella, 55-94); some

of Kevin Crossley-Holland's work, such as 'The Wall' (1972), clearly written in the tradition of prosopopoeic Old English riddles (*Poems from East Anglia*, 9);[8] Alan Halsey's innovative 'Saxon Ghost Songs' (Halsey, 7-8); Bill Manhire's performances of Old English riddles, charms and *Wulf and Eadwacer* in the 1982 collection *Good Looks* (Manhire, 97-102); Bill Griffiths' use of Old English as material for experiment, throughout his work, including a re-writing in Old English, and supplied self-translation, of Bede's account of the poet Caedmon (*A Tract Against the Giants*, 117), the terse, short-line re-performance of *Guthlac B*, a very funny pastiche of the Old English rune poem, ('The Literal Answer'. *Book of Spilt Cities*, 66-8), and the hyper-compounding of 'Steps to recover the face of Cuthbert' (*Durham*, 26-7); Canadian poet Jon Furberg's collection *Anhaga*, which grew out of an abandoned attempt to translate *The Wanderer*, and draws on Old English language, literary technique and subject matter; Craig Raine's re-writing of the Old English *Wulf and Eadwacer* (Raine, 27); Denise Levertov's rewriting of Bede's account of the poet Caedmon from a first-person perspective (Levertov, 65); Christopher Middleton's 1985 poem 'Sea fog', punctuated with a variety of Old English words and phrases, such as 'nicorhusa fela' (Middleton, 170-4); Bernard O'Donoghue's colloquial reinvention of *Wulf and Eadwacer* (*The Weakness*, 51) and his witty riffing on the gnomic catalogue poems of Old English in 'The Pleasures of the Circus' (*Here Nor There*, 205); Tony Harrison's meditation on Lindisfarne and the Anglo-Saxon Gospels produced there as a way of approaching the subject of the first Gulf War ('Initial Illumination'. *The Gaze of the Gorgon*, 46-7); Bruce Gorrie's translation of *The Wanderer* into Glasgow dialect; Stephen Glosecki's arresting translations from *Beowulf*, modulating between sections of lineated verse and highly rhythmical prose paragraphs; Graham Holderness' collection *Craeft*, which combines translations of, and poems 'based on' Old English, as well as new compositions; John Niles' *Chapman's Pack*, which includes several exquisite riddles newly composed 'with a tip of the hat to the anonymous poets who composed the literary riddles of the Exeter Book'; Giles Goodland's hilarious Jabberwocky-esque monster poem, 'From: The Brimston Worm'; Jane Holland's imaginative re-writing of *The Wife's Lament* (*Boudicca & Co.*, 23) and her re-gendered version of *The Wanderer* ('Lament of the Wanderer', *Camper Van Blues*, 33-37); John Haynes' highly acclaimed sequence *Letter to Patience*, one canto of which considers the cultural political meanings of Old English half remembered from Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* when placed in epistolary dialogue between rural England and rural Nigeria; (Haynes, 63-5); the work of Chris McCully, an exceptionally talented translator of Old English, on which literature he draws for some of his own compositions, such as 'After Beowulf' (*Polder*, 56);[9] and finally, Jane Draycott's moving poem on the fire that devastated the Cotton collection of manuscripts at Ashburnham House in 1731, which incorporates allusions to *Beowulf* within its depiction of the event (Draycott, 17).

Such a body of work, in addition to that produced by those poets who have already received sustained critical attention as writers of New Old English, is ample demonstration of the fact that Old English, however disconnected it once may have been from the bulk of English literary tradition, is now firmly a part of contemporary poetic practice in English, where its forms, themes, preoccupations, tone and technique have become almost commonplace. New Old English represents a surprising and unusual turn in the history of a vernacular, perhaps even a unique turn. For what was once an example of the extinction, rather than evolution, of a branch of English literary tradition, has been reanimated and reincorporated within the burgeoning gene pool of contemporary English poetics. Such an occurrence challenges us to think of literary history in different terms, and through different metaphors, not perhaps as unbroken lines of descent flowing from the past into the present, but as sedimentary layers that can lie undisturbed, or be brought into simultaneous contact with other periods at the

open-cast surface of contemporary practice. At any rate, we need metaphors that do not imply that literary history is received passively by a present unable to exert agency over it. The New Old English proves that literary history does not consist of 'the facts' assembled and marshalled in order, but as an argument, made not only by critics, but also by poets, who choose their own literary history. And English, and Englishness, are proven not timeless, fixed values, but always changing, and changed radically in our lifetime by what we might now recognise as 'The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Renaissance'.

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[1] I am describing, in general terms, that aspect of literary history which Lee Patterson, has termed 'intrinsic', that is to say, the history of literary forms, rather than what he terms 'extrinsic' literary history - that which specifies the forces that caused or were expressed by literary texts. Extrinsic literary history is, no doubt, also told according to narratives of continuity, but it is not the primary concern of this essay. Patterson, 'Literary History'.

[2] Medievalists had not, at that stage, done much groundwork that would have helped Fuller. Bloomfield had written an early article on Auden's use of the Middle English text *The Sawles Warde* in a poem which has had several titles, but is now usually called 'The Wanderer'. (Auden, *Collected Poems*, 62-3. Bloomfield, 548-52) In 1979 Peter Salus identified several of the mediaeval English textbooks Auden used, too late for Fuller to use for his *Guide*, but available for the *Commentary*. (Salus, 141-52)

[3] Howe made the case more convincingly for Auden and Hill than he perhaps did for Gunn. The year before M. J. Toswell had also written on Auden's use of the Old English *Maxims* poems. (Toswell, 'Auden and Anglo-Saxon'). See also Robinson. 'The Afterlife of Old English'.

[4] Jones is grateful to John Fuller for correcting him on this point during a very gracious private communication.

[5] In the same year Thomas McGuire claimed that critics had overlooked that the language of Heaney's *Beowulf* employs speech-patterns which are distinctively those of Ulster, although this assertion is unsupported by linguistic evidence and analysis.

[6] Edwin Morgan and Seamus Heaney's translations from Old English are also set to receive more detailed attention in Magennis, *Translating Beowulf*. Forthcoming.

[7] See also 'Lilacs', 195-6, 'Beowulf', 388-9, and Jones, 'Recycling Anglo-Saxon Poetry'.

[8] Crossley-Holland is also a translator of Old English (*The Anglo-Saxon World*) and co-edited a collection of new riddles commissioned from one hundred contemporary poets, including Alan Brownjohn, Gillian Clarke, Vicki Feaver, Michael Longley, Roger McGough and Kit Wright, in response to the Old English riddle tradition as represented by *The Exeter Book*: (*New Exeter Book of Riddles*).

[9] See also *Old English Poems and Riddles*. McCully has a gift for capturing an echo of the sound of Old English in modern English better than has any other translator of recent decades.