

Recycling Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Richard Wilbur's 'Junk' and a Self Study

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Ever since scraps, both literal and metaphorical, of Anglo-Saxon (also called Old English) verse began to be recovered and edited in more systematic fashion, modern poets have tried to imagine and recreate its sounds in their own work.¹ Often the manuscript materials in which Anglo-Saxon poetry survives show signs of having been uncared for and even mistreated; the tenth-century *Exeter Book* of poetry, for example, which preserves many of the texts now taught in universities as canonical, is scarred with the stains of having had some kind of vessel laid on it, as if it were a drinks mat, with knife-scores, as if it were a chopping board, and with singe marks, as if some red-hot object was temporarily rested on its back (Muir 2000: II, 2). Such treatment is scarce wonder, given that changes in both language and handwriting must have made such manuscripts unintelligible to all but a few until the studies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century antiquarians began to render them legible again. But it is salutary to remember that fragments of the past which we hold valuable now have often been the junk of intervening ages, waste materials for which only some alternative function might save them from disposal. Recycled, however, fresh uses may be found for Anglo-Saxon poetry, uses that generate for it new currency, in addition to whatever independent value its stock possesses. This essay sets out to examine some of the generative possibilities of recycling Anglo-Saxon poetry, both from a critic's perspective and a practitioner's. To this end I will begin with a brief survey of modern poets who have imagined the sound of Anglo-Saxon verse, before illustrating the general trend with a more detailed examination of a mid-twentieth-century example, and then setting this alongside one of my own poems, in order to reflect on the process of writing from recycled Anglo-Saxon materials.

From the beginning of the revival of interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry, contemporary poets have imagined the performance of Anglo-Saxon as loud,

¹ As a sustained project, this recovery began in the early nineteenth century. Some of the more significant publications in this respect include Turner (1799-1805), Thorkelin (1815), Conybeare (1826), Kemble (1833-37) and Thorpe (1834).

boisterous, primitive, vigorous, and even violent, as if the supposed orality of Anglo-Saxon poetry necessitated the raised voice, rather than a whisper. Probably the first poet to compose verse according to this imagined sound was Walter Scott, who had learned from the historian Sharon Turner that ‘clamorous’ Anglo-Saxon poetry originated in the ‘rude exclamations’ of the people, and was characterised by violent, abrupt transitions, and repetitive phrasing (Turner 1807: II, 282-85). In the war-song which he has the Saxon Ulrica chant during the siege of Castle Torquilstone in *Ivanhoe* (first published in 1819), one can hear these opinions noisily playing themselves out:

All must perish!
 The sword cleaveth the helmet;
 The strong armour is pierced by the lance;
 Fire devoureth the dwelling of princes,
 Engines break down the fences of the battle.
 All must perish! (Scott 1996: 340-41)

Over twenty years later, Longfellow, who knew Anglo-Saxon poetry in the original, even translated a section of *Beowulf* (Longfellow 1838: 104-06). He too would imagine the performance of Anglo-Saxon oral poets (‘Gleemen’, from Anglo-Saxon *glīw*, meaning mirth or entertainment) as characterised chiefly by their volume:

And so loud these Saxon gleemen
 Sang to slaves the songs of freemen,
 That the storm was heard but faintly,
 Knocking at the castle-gates.²

Tennyson, who translated *The Battle of Brunanburh* (Tennyson 1987: III, 18-23), had a surer grasp of the phonetic patterns that constituted the Anglo-Saxon half-line than did Longfellow, with whom he corresponded on the subject. Therefore, when he has one of the Saxon characters of his verse play *Harold* perform a poem, he approximates the predominately falling rhythms of Anglo-Saxon verse with dactyls and trochees, and allows the half stresses of compound words to strike against full stresses more repeatedly and insistently than is typical in his own verse. Tennyson’s staging of Anglo-Saxon is highly emphatic, and exaggerates the effects it detects in poems like *Brunanburh*, in order to create a music so strident and percussive that it is almost possible to mistake the acoustic properties of the poetry itself, rather than battle, as the subject matter that is ‘mark’d’ by the poem:

² Stanza six from ‘The Norman Baron’, first published in 1845 (Longfellow 1909: 318).

Mark'd how the war-axe swang,
 Heard how the war-horn-sang,
 Mark'd how the spear-head sprang,
 Heard how the shield-wall rang,
 Iron on iron clang,
 Anvil on hammer bang— (Tennyson 1913: 682)

In Tennyson, then, we see an attempt to preserve and recycle the phonetic materials of Anglo-Saxon poetry, sound patterns which had been long discarded, in order to effect an audible simulacrum of Anglo-Saxon in contemporary English.

Ezra Pound, in many ways the inventor of Anglo-Saxon poetry for the modern age, is not wholly removed from this tradition, but as the first poet of stature to have formally studied Anglo-Saxon (at Hamilton College, New York), he is more aware than his nineteenth-century predecessors of the rhythmic complexity of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Nor does Pound imagine the music of the verse as primitive, or consisting solely of exclamatory repetitiveness, but in his 1911 translation of *The Seafarer*, he allows for a more nuanced variety of rhythms than did Tennyson:

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
 Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
 Hardship endured oft.
 Bitter breast-cares have I abided,
 Known on my keel many a care's hold,
 And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent
 Narrow nightwatch night the ship's head
 While she tossed close to cliffs. (Pound 1984: 64)

By Pound's time, scholars had conceptually reconfigured the aural structure of Anglo-Saxon poetry as a rhythmic period (now visually depicted as the line), built from two, shorter 'half-line' blocks of two, or sometimes three, stressed syllables each (Tennyson's short line), and linked by one of a limited number of different possible alliterative patterns. Pound is probably also the first significant poet to use such recycled acoustic materials to shape verse compositions which are not direct translations, or staged voicings of Anglo-Saxon poems, as in the first section of *The Cantos*, for example (1987: 3-5).

Pound inaugurates something of a fashion for recycling and reusing Anglo-Saxon sound patterns in original twentieth-century verse compositions, a minor, though influential tradition which includes poets such as W.H. Auden, Edwin Morgan, W.S. Graham, Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney, and one which is only

now beginning to be understood more clearly.³ One poet whose salvaging of Anglo-Saxon sounds has not yet received sustained attention is Richard Wilbur, the 1987-1988 US laureate; his poem 'Junk' (1961) explicitly deploys as its primary trope the same conceit that unifies this essay: recycling (Wilbur 2004: 261-62). Wilbur studied Anglo-Saxon at Harvard Graduate School under the distinguished scholar Francis Peabody Magoun and has remarked on his attraction to the language and to the 'catchy' rhythms of the alliterative line.⁴

Typographically the poem signals its kinship with Anglo-Saxon; it opens with an epigraph sourced to the fragmentary Anglo-Saxon poem *Waldere*, set out in staggered, indented half-lines, so that the two and half lines quoted (lines 2-4a), occupy five lines of space on Wilbur's page. This distinctive lay-out is then replicated in the main body of the text:

Huru Welandes

worc ne geswinceð

monna ænigum

ðara ðe Mimming can

heardne gehealdan.

— Waldere

An axe angles

from my neighbor's ashcan;

It is hell's handiwork,

the wood not hickory;

The flow of the grain

not faithfully followed.

Both the oddity of the mise-en-page, and the fact that the quotation, with its two alien-looking characters, 'eth' (ð) and 'ash' (æ), is not translated or even identified as Anglo-Saxon, will be disorienting for most readers.⁵ The verse angles across the page, as dislocated from its expected siting as the axe that dangles from the trash,

³ For examples of recent trends, see Jones (2006, 2009), McCarthy (2008) and the essays in Clark and Perkins (2010).

⁴ See Butts (1990: 56). 'Junk' is not the only poem that bears witness to Wilbur's knowledge and love of Anglo-Saxon: his 1950 poem 'Beowulf' re-narrates the entire plot of the Anglo-Saxon epic in seven rhyming sestets (Wilbur 2004: 388-89); the 1969 'The Lilacs' is written in the same Anglo-Saxonist soundscape as Junk (2004: 195-96); in 1976 Wilbur published translations of two Latin riddles by the Anglo-Saxon poet Aldhelm (2004: 168); and in 1987 the poem 'Gnomons' takes the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede as its subject (2004: 80).

⁵ An endnote later translates the passage: 'Truly, Wayland's handiwork—the sword Mimming which he made—will never fail any man who knows how to use it bravely' (Wilbur 2004: 302).

or-so-line sections of the presumably once much longer Anglo-Saxon poem we call by that name exist only in two loose-leaf fragments, which were discovered in 1860 in the Royal Library of Copenhagen (Hill 1987: 5). These are slightly creased, and may have been cut from their parent manuscript and re-used in the binding or covers of a more recent book after the poem had ceased to be easily legible, the rest of the parchment (and poem) presumably then being discarded, as was the case with many medieval manuscripts, particularly after the dissolution of the monasteries in England. *Waldere* itself, then, is a manifest material performance of the theme of 'Junk'; the work of a craftsman (here a scribe) is discarded, recycled with an alternative use, and eventually its raw materials come to be appreciated as 'the things themselves' once again.

'Junk' extends this recycling of material from the bibliographical dimension—the sense in which the manuscript fragments are rediscovered, edited and presented visually in typographic page-space—not only through thematic development, but by enacting this recycling in sound, the poem contouring its own rhythmic performance according to the model provided by Anglo-Saxon verse as Wilbur understands it to have sounded. Old patterns can be fashioned into new ones; this is the meaning of those 'catchy' alliterative Anglo-Saxon rhythms, at least in this specific context. That these recycled rhythms are integral to the poem's operation is signalled by the way in which Wilbur visually foregrounds his sound structure, placing the two-stress unit of each verse (or 'half-line') on a new line of its own, while simultaneously indenting the second half line several tabulations to the right, so that the same 'medial caesura', or gap, that occurs in standard twentieth-century editions of Anglo-Saxon poetry also opens up in the middle of Wilbur's page.⁶ In this way Wilbur manages to present some sort of visual compromise between the earlier nineteenth-century system for setting out the rhythmic periods of Anglo-Saxon poetry (in a thin column of 'half-lines', like Tennyson's embedded dramatic poem) and the twentieth-century convention (of two verses to the line, interrupted by a gap). In orthodox Anglo-Saxon verse, one or other, or both, of the stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterates with the first stressed syllable of the second half-line. 'Yet the things themselves/ in thoughtless honor' is a line that conforms to this principle. In fact, rather than observe this 'authentic' pattern, it is far more common that Wilbur alliteratively links the first half-line to the second stressed syllable of the second half-line ('It is hell's handiwork,/ the wood not hickory'),

⁶ This medial caesura is, however, entirely the typographic invention of modern editors; it corresponds to nothing in Anglo-Saxon poetry for which we have any historical evidence. One of the effects of this is that, recycled as they are in Wilbur's 'Junk', the rhythmic patterns of Anglo-Saxon are altered by pauses not present in the earlier poetry.

or even distributes alliteration across all four stressed syllables in the line ('Talk under torture./ Tossed from a tailgate'). Nevertheless, the phonetic surface of the poem is patterned closely enough according to the sounds of Anglo-Saxon verse, as to be suggestive of that poetry. That the discrete sense-groups of noun phrases and verb phrases coincide with the rhythmic units of the half lines, rather than cut across them, further draws attention to their insistent cadences, so unlike those of accentual syllabic English tradition. Typographically as well as aurally it is impossible to miss the textures of the poem's recycling of Anglo-Saxon.

To recycle is, of course, to preserve and conserve. In effect, Wilbur's poem sets out to protect a fragile and rather endangered eco-system of phonetic patterning in verse. It is an eco-system of sound that had become quite extinct in the natural, 'live' tradition, and only comparatively recently revived, at first through the process of translation, before being gradually reintroduced into the wilds of English verse composition, as the opening paragraphs of this essay have outlined. Be this as it may, in forcing us to encounter from its start a fossilised specimen of English poetry unreadable to much of its audience, and in what is likely to be described as a 'dead' language, 'Junk' is not blithe to the precariousness of all such projects of what we would now call environmentalism. Rather the poem carefully balances a fatalist acceptance of the transience of material things (that a poem as rare as an Anglo-Saxon epic may become the rubbish of the cutting-room floor, the legendary smith Weland, an obscure and alien name in need of a scholarly footnote), against a more optimistic faith in the possibility of recuperation and redemption of such fallen nature (that a fragment may be recovered and reconstructed, or an ancient system of patterning poetic sound may be revived and adapted). This is indeed a poem truly reconciled to the consoling philosophy of Boethius, an abiding presence in much Anglo-Saxon poetry, and whose Wheel of Fortune teaches us not to over-invest in the cycles of material rise and fall (Boethius 1999: 24). 'Junk' is a poem aware that its own fate is poised in the balance between oblivion and recovery, disregard and appreciation, just as perilously as that of *Waldere*, or any now-lost Anglo-Saxon poem. It is a poem aware that its now transparent contemporary idiom is the dead language of the future, in need of gloss and explication.

One such poem, now in need of gloss and explication, is the runic text carved on the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon stone monument in Dumfriesshire (southwest Scotland) now known as the Ruthwell Cross. Worn by the elements, and in many places illegible, the runic characters inscribed on this cross speak, to those with the skill and training necessary to hear them, four sentences of a poem on the crucifixion of Christ. In this poem the cross itself speaks in the first person, declaring how it bore high the King of Heaven in his moment of death, and relating

what it then observed at the deposition. Most of the twenty or so half-line verses (many of them fragmentary) that make up this poem have close correspondences with verses in a longer Anglo-Saxon poem in manuscript, called *The Dream of the Rood*, so much so that the two texts have often been treated as if they are witnesses of the same poem (though this is far from certain).⁷ In that longer poem the cross continues its narration beyond the deposition to describe how it was subsequently felled by enemies (the Roman soldiery), buried in a pit, and much later found, dug up and restored by its friends, the thanes of the Lord (an allusion to the mission of St Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, to the Holy Lands, and to the invention of the Cross). In *The Dream of the Rood* of course, this narrative of being felled, interred and restored is allegorical of Christ's death and resurrection. But by a curious turn of events it was also paralleled by what later happened to the Ruthwell Cross, the 'text' of the shorter, speaking-cross poem, and with which the interpretation of *The Dream of the Rood*, rightly or wrongly, has been intimately bound up. For in 1642 the monument was pulled down by Church of Scotland iconoclasts, and its defaced and dismembered pieces were scattered haphazardly throughout the grounds of Ruthwell parish church, several pieces being buried both inside and outside the church building. In the early nineteenth century, a considerably more enlightened parish minister, the Reverend Henry Duncan, began to piece together and reassemble the surviving pieces, a process that was completed by his successors in 1887, when as much of the cross as could be erected was given a permanent home in a purpose-built apse in the north wall. Unbeknown to the Anglo-Saxon poets, scribes and stonemasons responsible for 'The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem' and *The Dream of the Rood* then, the 'text' of the shorter poem would come to enact and embody the same series of processes that the voice of the speaking cross in the longer poem claims to have undergone. Like the pages of *Waldere*, the material of the Ruthwell text comes to be treated as junk, then salvaged, recycled, and reinterpreted.

To turn this essay now in a more personal direction, those several sets of circumstances, the congruence between the story in a text, and the story of a (stone) text, had long made the Ruthwell Cross an object of fascination for me before I finally came to use it as subject material for a poem (published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 2005). One of the earliest decisions made in writing that poem was not to recycle the sound patterns of Anglo-Saxon poetry by approximating the

⁷ Swanton believes the runic text of the Ruthwell Cross 'quotes' from a longer poem which The Vercelli Book text represents. See Swanton (1987, esp. 9, 38-42). Ó Carragáin (2005: 7) sees the poems as separate, but 'related narratives' within an Old English tradition. Keefer (2006) argues that *The Dream of the Rood* is an interpretation and amplification of the sign of the Ruthwell Cross. See also Foys (2007: 20-21), and Orton, Wood and Lees (2007: 144-69).

metres and alliterative patterns of its verse stichs. This was in part because of the pre-existing success of poems like Wilbur's 'Junk', but also because it seemed to me that such second-phase assimilation of Anglo-Saxon poetry (I regard the romantic, pre-philological Anglo-Saxonisms of a poet like Scott as a first phase) could only go on for so long in its more obviously atavistic phase before its shock value was lost and its own set of, sometimes slightly gothic, conventions began to be reified as clichés. Nor did I want to 'translate' the runic poem on the Ruthwell Cross in the sense in which that word is most commonly understood, although the conceit of being an interpreter for the cross, of translating on its behalf, was one that I wanted to develop, being itself a very Anglo-Saxon trope; the riddles of *The Exeter Book* for example are populated by dozens of inanimate objects, all voicing themselves into song.

Rather, I wanted to start again the process of reimagining and recycling the sounds of Anglo-Saxon poems, as if from scratch. Using the riddles' 'I'-narrating rhetorical figure of *prosopopoeia*, the poem would have the Ruthwell Cross narrate its own story—its journey to junk and salvage, its harrowing passage to the underworld and subsequent resurrection—just as Christ's cross does in *The Dream of the Rood*. The first word of *The Dream of the Rood* is *hwæt*, the notoriously untranslatable interjection that also opens *Beowulf*, and which demands attentive silence, signalling that the speaker is ready to begin. I took this injunction to 'listen' as my poem's point of departure, an invitation to consider what the stones themselves might say if I were able to hear their story. As the activity of listening must be accompanied by quiet to be successful, I also let *hwæt* suggest the kind of music I wanted this poem to have: not the insistent, exclamatory percussion of the Anglo-Saxonist tradition outlined earlier in this essay, and which has sometimes been over-identified with Anglo-Saxon poetry, but a quieter, hushed tone that could also animate Anglo-Saxon verse, a hush which I incorporated into the poem's first line.

As the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* describes not only its destruction, but also its genesis, its previous life as a tree, growing at the edge of a forest until cut down to be transformed into an instrument of execution, so I wanted to imagine a parallel origin story to be told by my ventriloquising Ruthwell Cross. Its 'Song', therefore, tells of the transport of its building materials by boat to the spot where it was to be constructed on the Dumfriesshire coast: one of the possible scenarios that would explain the provenance of the monument's sandstone blocks (Orton, Wood and Lees (2007): 40-42). In writing this poem, I realized that, as an Anglo-Welshman, who has lived longer in Scotland than anywhere else in my life, part of the personal attraction the Ruthwell Cross had held for me was probably that it is a linguistically hybridised monument, sited in a geography of complex cultural cross-affinities: an

Anglo-Saxon object whose iconography shows allegiance to the Roman model of Christianity, sited in an area heavily influenced by the rival Irish Church, carved in two different character sets (the Roman alphabet and the runic 'futhork'), inscribed with Latin as well as Northumbrian Anglian text, both of which were foreign tongues to an area now in Scotland but in the early Middle Ages probably affiliated with the northern 'Welsh' Kingdom of Strathclyde. The Ruthwell Cross is itself a kind of liminal boundary marker, bearing traces of all kinds of cultural and linguistic competition and negotiations. The sense of Anglo-Saxon as an alien, immigrant tongue, gaining a foothold by seaborne passage and gradually establishing itself and spreading in growth (as it had done once before, during the migration from the continent, and would again in the New World colonies, centuries later), was also a theme I wanted to explore in the Ruthwell Cross's song of itself. Indeed, once upon a time, standard histories of the English language used exactly such a narrative pattern of origin (the Anglo-Saxon migrations), crisis (the Norman Conquest) and subsequent revival of fortunes, as the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* uses to tell its story.⁸ At some level I identified the song of the Ruthwell Cross with the song of English.

Finally, while some Anglo-Saxonist writing of the past has been associated with the desire to 'purify' the language, and has sought to use only words of 'native' stock, homogenising the verbal resources of English, Anglo-Saxon never policed its own linguistic borders in such a fashion, admitting Latin words and making calque forms based on that language without prejudice. Indeed, cultural capaciousness seemed to me the very being of the Ruthwell Cross. This, and the sense in which English has been a foreign incomer in all the territories where it is now naturalised, were the aspects of Anglo-Saxonism with which I wished to disturb simplistic versions of nativism and triumphalism. To this end, I chose to place a small number of conspicuously 'foreign-sounding' loans words within a lexical gauze of otherwise quite familiar, 'homey' vocabulary, mostly of Anglo-Saxon derivation, or fully naturalised borrowings. A word such as *ballata* is as dislocated in this poem as the Anglian speakers who were to raise the Ruthwell Cross when they first arrived in what is now Dumfriesshire. My recycling of Anglo-Saxon poetry then, of what the Scottish Reformation regarded as junk, is of a different kind to that of Wilbur's poem. I hope that difference will suffice to prevent their qualitative comparison, but perhaps the pairing will at least indicate the varied range of creative responses to Anglo-Saxon that are possible even within one medium. The Anglo-Saxon past provides rich opportunities for salvage.

⁸ See, for example, Emerson (1894). Outdated narratives of triumphalism are still common in non-scholarly histories, e.g. Bragg (2003).

Song of the Ruthwell Cross

Listen. I came across hushed darkness,
a ballast of hope carried in the cargo
hold of incomers who spoke
as with stones in their mouths.

I grew from a chipping
a splintered sliver of rock
grafted to gravel and sand
I took root in shallow soil
sprouting a sandstone trunk
and out-branched lintel-arms.
A *ballata* of script pricked
its tongue into my rough skin.

Not even the dour haters
of lush stone and carved flesh
could obliterate or scour
smooth my lapidary tattoos.

Thrown down and split like logs
I lay pavement-hid, 'til invented,
I rose, resurrected and whole,
singing praise from the entrails of earth.

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