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Edited by Michael O'Neill

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Introduction

MICHAEL O'NEILL

Scope and approach

'And Question five is, God help us, what is my definition of Poetry?' So Dylan Thomas wrote in 1951 in response to conundrums posed by a student. Among his answers is a reminder of 'the mystery of having been moved by words',¹ a 'mystery', not a mystification, to which subsequent pages in this volume bear witness, and which coexists with poetry's ability to provide greater clarification of the human condition. The poet, writes Yeats, 'is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power'.² The phrasing here may be consciously on its stilts, its affirmations unashamedly ready to disconcert, even to embarrass, but Yeats comes close to smoking out the essence of the hold possessed by poets over their readers.

The poets discussed in this *Cambridge History of English Poetry* often exercise ways of making 'nature . . . intelligible' that add to their readers' sense of 'creative power'. Milton using word-play, paradox and affecting rhythmic intensity to overcome mortality in *Lycidas* as he describes his drowned fellow poet as having 'sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of him that walked the waves' (lines 172–3); Coleridge making personification a means of mesmerically conveying tragic futility at the close of the reversed sonnet 'Work without Hope'; Ted Hughes inventively exploiting rhyme and line-endings to evoke how 'a black- / Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly' in 'Wind' (lines 15–16): the three examples give a taste of how English poetry embodies and irradiates 'creative power'.³

The present book is, in one of its central aspects, a robust if never simply uncritical celebration of that 'creative power'. It provides a literary-historical account of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon writings to the present. Principally the *History* deals with narrative and lyric poetry and does not include poetic drama written for the stage. Thus, Shakespeare's sonnets and

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narrative poems are included, but not his plays, except briefly. However, English poetry contains many fine poems which exploit possibilities associated with drama, even though they are not intended primarily for the stage: again, there are other dramatic works, which, though intended for the stage, have ended up mainly as texts experienced through private reading. Works such as Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, therefore, as well as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, are discussed.

Some guiding principles are at work. First, contributors have been asked to highlight the formal and aesthetic features of poetry. 'Formal and aesthetic' is meant to draw attention to the fact that this is a history of poetry, and that 'poetry' involves artistic uses of language, as, indeed, many of the poets discussed in the volume insist. One subsidiary topic running through the volume is the discussion by poets in their poems of the nature of poetry. Contributors have been asked to explore ways in which poets use form, taking that term in its widest sense to include all aspects of poetry considered as an art: uses of genres; handling of metre, structure, image, metaphor, echo and allusion; deployment of diction, idiom, ambiguity; tone and mood. Multiple threads run through the volume as a consequence. If one stays solely with the question of echoes and allusions, one might note how subtle resonances link poets as various as Pope, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Hill with Milton; how Yeats's *ottava rima* stanzas connect to and contrast with the same verse form's function in Byron; and how T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a mosaic of generic fragments and owes its power partly to the way in which it summons up, in however frustrated or ironic a manner, previous poetic styles.

Second, contributors have been asked to write in terms that are historical as well as literary, though it is *literary* history that is placed to the fore. There will be many occasions where literary history requires reference to the political and social history of the period in which poets are composing, and due attention is given to the intersection between these histories. That formal choices may reflect political, social, historical and gender preoccupations is clear.

The fifty-three chapters are centred on authors: sometimes on single authors, sometimes on authors considered as groups. The *History* departs from the practice of many literary histories⁴ by singling out in a few chapters particular works at the heart of an understanding of English poetry. Sympathetic though the *History* is to the claims of the non-canonical, the purpose of the *History* is less to offer a critique of a supposedly inflexible canon than to give an overview of English poetry that is alert to continuity and

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change. Since the work is a 'history', it often considers works that many readers of poetry in their own and succeeding ages have regarded as particularly significant. But it is alive to the argument that what makes a text canonical is precisely its openness to various modes of reading, and it is aware of the fact that the notion of the 'canonical' is always shifting, always provisional. 'Literary history' is always a contentious and contested enterprise, raising questions about the validity of groupings and periodisation. The notion of 'transition', the passage from one era to another, is crucial for the *History* and is continually explored in its pages.

Above all, contributors have been asked to write with first-hand consideration and depth. The watchword for contributors and the volume has been 'attention': sustained, unrelenting attention to the implications and meanings of verbal structures artistically shaped by poets. The poems themselves have been allowed to generate through their language appropriate frames of reference. So the *History* has much sympathy with Paul Muldoon's dual view that 'We know that no poem may be read as a completely discrete construct ... but we also know that part of the function of the poem is to present a construct that is *relatively* free-standing, to create a *relatively* squared-off stand of timber on the plain.'⁵ Contributors have been invited to demonstrate, implicitly or explicitly, knowledge of relevant reception history, but never at the expense of independent response.

The *History* is a history of 'English' rather than 'British' or 'Irish' poetry: it focuses on poets writing in English in the political structure currently termed the United Kingdom, though there has been some fluidity here and a recognition of the shifting political definitions of 'English' and 'British' over the centuries. The *History* certainly makes no attempt to cover all poetry written in English. In practice, purity of principle has been hard to follow and may not, for good reasons, be wholly desirable. Thus, there is a chapter on Imagism in which the American poet Ezra Pound features, because of his centrality to English poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; a similar reason explains the inclusion of Sylvia Plath.

An evident principle of structure is chronological, tracking the time-line that runs from *Beowulf* through to, say, Alice Oswald. Closely linked with that principle is a geographical emphasis, stronger in some chapters than others, that attends to the importance of place and space in English poetry: the regionality of 'English' poetry features throughout the volume, including questions thrown up by what John Kerrigan calls 'the current devolutionary process'.⁶

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Contents: brief description

Chapter 1 describes major trends and achievements in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The legacy of Anglo-Saxon poetry (in, for example, Pound's *Cantos*, the early work of Auden or Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*) indicates its continuing relevance, and anticipates the volume's emphasis on patterns of continuity and discontinuity. Chapter 2 discusses the productions of the *Gawain*-poet, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in relation to the Alliterative Revival of the late fourteenth century, the significance of courtly poetry and the awareness and use of French Arthurian romances. Chapter 3 maps and contextualises poetry written around and during the reign of Richard II (1377–99), an era which has been central to the development of subsequent English poetry. Chapter 4 is the first chapter to explore a single work, here *Piers Plowman*, a major poem of medieval English literature. Chapter 5 also explores in detail individual works, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, two of the finest poems in the language. Chapter 6 discusses the literary phenomenon of medieval literature in Scotland, literature written in Scots English in the Lowlands of Scotland.

Chapter 7 considers major poets of the sixteenth century, writing during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), and studies, in particular, the work of three poets: Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey. Chapter 8 concentrates on the literary productions of Spenser, especially *The Faerie Queene*. Chapter 9 takes up the story of the sonnet begun in chapter 7, focusing principally on sonnet sequences by Sidney and Shakespeare, though it also considers other major Elizabethan sonnet-writers (especially Spenser and Drayton) and explores lyrics written by poets such as Campion. Chapter 10 examines the narrative verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Chapter 11 considers the major poets writing in the first part of the seventeenth century, during the reign of James I (1603–25): John Donne and Ben Jonson. Discussion of the work of Wroth, Lanyer, Drummond, Herrick, Carew and King is also offered. The basis for the chapter division between this and the following chapter is essentially chronological (though Herbert is placed in the next chapter because of his influence on Vaughan). Chapter 12 examines the poetry of other major lyric poets of the seventeenth century, focusing, in particular, on religious poetry produced in the period. Figures considered include Herbert, Vaughan, Cowley, Marvell, Crashaw and Philips. Chapters 13 and 14 are devoted to the career of one of the greatest poets in the language, Milton. The first considers his shorter poems, the second *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

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Chapter 15 addresses the generation of poets associated with the period following the Restoration of Charles II, especially Dryden, Behn and others. Chapter 16 is given over to readings of three major poems by Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*, to allow the contributor to dwell more fully than was possible in chapter 15 on Dryden's poetic achievement as exemplified by three of his major works. Chapter 17 focuses on Swift; chapter 18 on Pope and Samuel Johnson; chapter 19 on eighteenth-century women poets; chapter 20 on the longer eighteenth-century poem (by Akenside, Thomson, Young, Cowper and others); and chapter 21 on eighteenth-century lyric poetry (written by such authors as Gray, Collins, Smart, Joseph Warton, Thomas Warton, Macpherson, Chatterton and Burns).

Chapter 22 offers an overview of English Romantic poetry. Chapter 23 looks at Blake's major lyric poems, especially in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and his prophetic poems. Chapter 24 studies shorter poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, especially *Lyrical Ballads*. Chapter 25 focuses on Wordsworth's two major long poems, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. Chapter 26 examines the work of Hunt, Byron and Moore, and chapter 27 looks at Byron's *Don Juan*, one of the greatest (and funniest) long poems in the language. Chapter 28 analyses the work of Shelley and Keats. Chapter 29 looks at 'third-generation Romantic poetry', in particular the poetry of Beddoes, Clare, Darley, Hemans and Landon. Chapter 30 looks more specifically at poetry by Romantic-era women poets.

Chapter 31 provides an overview of Victorian poetry, before subsequent chapters address the work of individual poets (32 on Tennyson, 33 on Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 34 on Emily Brontë, Arnold and Clough, 35 on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne and 36 on Christina Rossetti and Hopkins). Chapter 37 looks at later Victorian poets (including James Thomson, Symonds, Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Housman) and chapter 38 looks at a further grouping of such poets (including Davidson, Kipling, 'Michael Field' [Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Cooper], Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Augusta Webster and May Kendall).

Chapter 39 supplies an overview of Modernist and Modern poetry; chapter 40 explores the work of Hardy and Mew. Chapter 41 is on Yeats, chapter 42 is on Imagism and chapter 43 is on T. S. Eliot. Chapter 44 looks at the achievement of First World War poets, including Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, while chapter 45 explores the thirties poetry produced by Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice and Spender. Chapter 46 investigates the work of Dylan Thomas and other poets of the 1940s.

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Consideration of poetry after 1945 begins with a chapter (47) on Larkin and the Movement, which is followed by a discussion of three twentieth-century women poets – Riding, Stevie Smith and Plath (chapter 48) – and by accounts of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney (49), Geoffrey Hill (50), poets from Northern Ireland (Mahon, Muldoon, McGuckian and Carson) and from the Republic of Ireland (Boland and others) (51), and by two chapters on poetry since 1980 (52 and 53).

Inevitably there will be lacunae, but the volume as a whole is intended to stimulate renewed interest in the history of English poetry, to narrate its developments and changes, to trace and explore its linguistic, generic and formal achievements and transformations and to offer illuminating accounts of a multitude of significant poems and poets.

Notes

1. Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', in James Scully (ed.), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London: Fontana, 1966), pp. 201, 202.
2. 'A General Introduction for My Work', *The Oxford Authors: W.B. Yeats*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 379.
3. These poems are quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, seventh edition, general ed. M. H. Abrams, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 2000).
4. Valuable predecessors of the present volume include George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1923) and Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, in association with Chatto and Windus, 1962). Many notable anthologies of English poetry have also undoubtedly shaped the editorial decisions informing this book.
5. Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 171.
6. John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1717* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2.

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Chapter 1

Old English poetry

BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

Old English poetry is a somewhat improbable recent success story, in an era when formal study of classical literature and even the study of modern languages have been in decline in England. The most prominent success was Seamus Heaney's verse translation of *Beowulf* in 1999, a volume which won prizes in competition not only with other poetry books but with books in all literary categories. Important as the positive reception of Heaney's marvellous translation was, it was not a sole cause of the new popularity of Old English poetry. His book was also a confirmation of the popularity of this poetry with English poets dating back to the Victorian period and strengthening amongst Modernist poets in the earlier twentieth century.¹ Heaney's predecessors here include Longfellow, Hopkins, Auden, Pound and Edwin Morgan. Some Old English poems, such as *The Wanderer*,² *The Seafarer* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are amongst the most widely translated items in the twentieth century. There have been a number of attempts to identify what quality it was that commended these poems so much to the modern taste, in particular to that of the Modernists; a recurrent phrase is 'the power of the half-stated'. Auden's enthusiasm is much quoted: 'I was spellbound. This poetry, I knew, was going to be my dish ... Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences.'³ In the main part of this essay I want to concentrate on what Auden might mean by 'influences', trying to describe what qualities in Old English poetry were found useful and expressive for writers in English of later periods.

Hopkins had famously said in 1882 that the Anglo-Saxon language 'is a vastly superior thing to what we have now', and another crucial part of my intention here will be to suggest what it was in the poetry that Hopkins thought was superior.⁴ The popularity of the poetry amongst modern writers is all the more notable when we recall how precarious its survival was. Chaucer could not read Old English; when the language and literature began to be studied again in the late sixteenth century, it all had to be done

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more or less from scratch.⁵ The first attested reference to *Beowulf*, by George Hickes in 1700, is to tell his collaborator Humfrey Wanley that he can't find any trace of it.⁶ It would be hard to exaggerate how precarious this survival was, and how spectacular its scholarly recuperation. One of the most effective introductions to the condition of that literature bears the ominous title 'The Lost Literature of Medieval England',⁷ in which R. W. Chambers argued that the relative lack of overlap in the surviving texts (very little of the poetry is attested in more than one manuscript) suggests that what we have is the tip of a generic iceberg.

Yet, despite this paucity (there are only about 30,000 lines of Old English poetry altogether: some single Middle English poems have as many) and the precariousness of its survival, in one of the most authoritative accounts of the literature Stanley Greenfield says, 'Anglo-Saxon prose and poetry are the major literary achievement of the early Middle Ages. In no other medieval vernacular language does such a hoard of verbal treasures exist for such an extended period (c.700–1100) . . . If we had more of what must have been an even greater original creation, our wonder would grow in proportion.'⁸ Naturally, in this chapter my attention will be on the principal surviving texts, but the fact that they occur in a major literary and cultural corpus must be emphasised first, if only because of the discredited but not quite forgotten notion of 'the Dark Ages'.⁹ Greenfield's grand claim is even more remarkable in view of the late development of scholarly attention to the literature after its beginnings in the late sixteenth century. Tom Shippey's authoritative introduction to the Critical Heritage volume on *Beowulf* gives striking evidence of the late development of any kind of understanding of even this most canonical of Old English poetic works.¹⁰

The survival of Old English poetry, precarious as it was, is mostly owed to its preservation in four great manuscript collections (for which the neutral word 'codex' is usually used because at least some of them are gatherings of separate materials). When the general project of editing the poetry was undertaken for Columbia University Press by G. P. Krapp and E. V. Dobbie in the 1930s, these four codices were supplemented by two other volumes, *The Paris Psalter* and *The Meters of Boethius*, as *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (hereafter *ASPR*) volume v, and a sixth volume of *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, containing items (including the historically based poems *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*) which did not occur in the four principal codices.¹¹ Outside of the four major volumes of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* then, there are some poems, including *Maldon*, whose survival was even more fortuitous. The major four codices are the Junius manuscript

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(ASPR 1 – sometimes called ‘the Caedmon manuscript’), the Vercelli Book (ASPR 2), the Exeter Book (ASPR 3) and *Beowulf* and *Judith* (ASPR 4 – sometimes called ‘the *Beowulf* manuscript’ or ‘the *Judith* manuscript’). The six monumental editions of the ASPR, published between 1931 and 1953, are beyond the scholarly and economic compass of general poetry readers, but as a method of referencing the major manuscripts and their contents they remain definitive, so I will begin by describing their contents, as an introduction to the subjects and themes of the poetry, and as a way of embracing the principal texts. After using these major collections as an introduction to the poetry, I will end by summarising briefly the texts and techniques which led modern writers like Hopkins and Auden to make such high claims for this poetry and its language.

Considering the contents of the first four codices one by one is not an entirely satisfactory way of introducing their poetic materials; it will become obvious that there are more logical thematic and generic ways of looking at them. For example, Greenfield and Calder (*A New Critical History of Old English Literature*) have separate chapters devoted to poems dealing with Christ and to those dealing with Old Testament subjects, though this cuts across the four collections. Godden and Lapidge¹² assign chapters to their contributors along the same lines. Wrenn¹³ gives prominence to the one named poet, Cynewulf, and thereafter organises the poems on thematic and generic grounds: lyric, heroic, elegiac. Alexander¹⁴ does something similar, foregrounding what he sees (not unpersuasively) as the most attractive genres for the modern reader: riddle, elegy and heroic poetry – the last category in order to accommodate *Beowulf* and *Maldon*. Swanton,¹⁵ in the rather quaint fashion of his era, uses impressionistic rather than descriptive chapter titles: ‘Until the Dragon Comes’, and ‘The Ruin of Time’, for example. O’Brien O’Keeffe¹⁶ breaks away from both the codex-defined corpus and the attempts to define by subject or theme, by assigning to her contributors a series of critical approaches. Pulsiano and Treharne¹⁷ and their team of contributors organise the material on grounds of theme and provenance. Shippey remains a good, critically alert introduction to the poetic corpus as a whole.

Before outlining the contents of the four codices, one wider general issue of categorisation should be raised. There has been some vigorous debate as to whether the corpus of Old English poetry is entirely religious. An important, and unusual, feature of the history of Old English poetry and its survival arises here. If any of the surviving poetry can be seen as secular and pre-Christian, its distant historical content is ‘the fund of common narrative material associated with the Teutonic Migration Period (fourth to sixth centuries)’.¹⁸ The

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complicating factor is that all the major surviving manuscript evidence dates from around the year 1000, long after the events (if we can call them anything so concrete) they deal with. It goes without saying that any poetry worthy of the name, religious or not, will draw on the natural world for its imagery, and Old English poetry often does so with unforgettable success. But was the objective of this poetry invariably to promote religious – and therefore, in its era, Christian – feeling and understanding? The question is pointedly raised by the different emphases in two major discussions: Greenfield's chapter 6 is called 'Secular Heroic Poetry', but in his important book *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (1975), Eric Stanley argued that the corpus's only religious or ethical perspective is Christian. The poems which are solely heroic (*Deor* and *Widsith* for example) are not founded on some alternative 'pagan' morality. Stanley suggests that the old view that there was some pre-Christian secular heroic ethic in the literature was largely attributable to nineteenth-century German antiquaries, intent on constructing textual evidence for a distinctive Germanic-Teutonic past.

But to return to the corpus as included in the first four *ASPR* volumes: the first is an edition of Oxford Bodleian Library, Junius 11, assembled in the 1650s by the German-Dutch antiquary Franciscus Junius and given by him to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where it still is. The principal poetic items in that manuscript are *Genesis A* and *B*, *Exodus*, *Daniel* and *Christ and Satan*. The Old Testament predominance is evident and earlier scholars thought – and hoped – that these poems might be the very poems written by the first attested English poet, the monk Caedmon, whose miraculous receiving of the poetic vocation was so spellbindingly described by Bede in his *History of the English Church and People*. After an angel had prompted this Whitby cowherd to sing, 'he sang of the creation of the world and of the origin of the human race and the whole narrative of Genesis, concerning the going out from Egypt of the Israelites and their entry into the land of promise'.¹⁹ In fact the poems in the manuscript are very different both from each other and from the suggestion of Biblical paraphrase in this story. Although *Exodus* has attracted a good deal of modern scholarly attention, prompted by an impressive modern edition by Peter Lucas (1994), the subject of most critical discussion here has been *Genesis B*, lines 235–851 of the original poem traditionally called *Genesis*.²⁰ This section, dated to the mid ninth century rather than the (speculative) date of 700 for the rest of the poem (thereafter called *Genesis A*), is thought to be based on a Continental Saxon original. Most strikingly it features a vivid presentation of Satan which has provoked comparison with Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, a comparison which was reinforced by the speculation that Milton might have