THE FUTURE OF OLD ENGLISH: A PERSONAL ESSAY WITH AN ADDITIONAL NOTE[1]

Not long ago, I was invited to dinner at a Cambridge College. When we changed places for dessert I went to sit with a group of English literature students and their teachers (or "supervisors"). I turned to the woman on my right and began to make conversation. "What do you do?," she asked me. "I'm an Anglo-Saxonist." "Hard luck," she replied (quite kindly). "I've never known anyone who does that."

This comment, doubtless well-meant, has often recurred to me as I have gone about my work for this article, for it is all together typical of the blend of incomprehension and faint amusement with which the study of Old English is sometimes viewed, even by students and scholars in similar fields who ought to be its friends. As such, it may not be an irrelevant opening to a discussion of a controversy in which the place of those studies has been under attack -in particular their inclusion on the English degree course syllabus at Oxford University. Some account of that controversy may be of value to readers of the *Old English Newsletter,* most of whom live in North America and who thus may have heard of it only at second hand; for, as will be seen, the dispute has implications for the study of the subject that raise it far above the level of a merely local argument.

A few preliminary words are necessary. The English course at Oxford is divided into two parts.[1] In the first ("Moderations"), which is examined after

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one year, every student is required to take six papers, including one each in Victorian and modern literature, and two in Old English -one a general survey paper, the other a selection of prescribed texts for translation. A further two papers must also be taken, one of which may be in Old English. For its second part ("Finals"), examined after a further two years' study, the course bifurcates once more, and all candidates are required to take eight papers (five of them compulsory, three chosen from a range of others) drawn *either* from a general course in English language and literature (including an optional paper in Old English) *or* from a more specialized course in medieval, early modern and linguistic topics (including one optional and two compulsory papers in Old English). It will be obvious, then, that there is a large element of compulsion in the course throughout; that Old English is, however, a required subject for all students only in the first year of three; and that the whole of the syllabus is constructed by historical period.

But at Oxford, as at any university, syllabus reform is a subject never far below the surface. Generous though the current provision for Old English may seem, at one point it was greater still, and it was only as the result of prolonged campaigning early this century (led by the late F. W. Bateson) that the number of medieval and linguistic papers was reduced even to its present level.[2] Now, having lain dormant for nearly twenty-five years, the cause has been reopened by Bateson's successor at Corpus Christi College, Valentine Cunningham, a critic whose special field of expertise is the poetry of the

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[1] The course requirements are set out fully in the University's *Examination Decrees and Regulations 1991* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 39-41 and 171-82.

[2] See F. W. Bateson, "*Beowulf* and All That," reprinted from *Oxford Magazine,* Michaelmas 5 (1966), 81, in *Essays in Critical Dissent* (London, 1972), pp. 221-23 and F. W. Bateson and Harrison T. Meserole, *A Guide to English and American Literature,* 3rd ed. (London and New York, 1976), pp. 11-15: "When Does English Literature Begin?" See also an unsigned article by Valentine Cunningham, "A Bateson Birthday," *Times Literary Supplement* 7 March 1975, 250: "notorious as willing enrager and waspish nuisance to cant and establishments … [n]o no other man can have been on the side of the angels so consistently as Bateson turns out to have been … The amount of compulsory Anglo-Saxon for Oxford students of English literature is much diminished."

1930's,[1] and a prolific reviewer and talented polemicist, with a fine command of pungent English and a rare gift of caricature.

There had been a good deal of more-or-less subterranean agitation in Oxford, including an attempt to suppress the Rawlinson and Bosworth Chair of Anglo-Saxon and instead fund one in critical theory or contemporary literature (33, 41),[2] for some years before the present controversy broke out in an article by Cunningham in the *Oxford Magazine* in May 1991 (1). There the matter might have remained, as none of the readers of the *Magazine* showed any great interest in replying.[3] But after a long and unexplained silence, a news report about the article (with quotations from interviews with Cunningham and his sympathizers) appeared in the national daily newspaper the *Guardian* (18 July 1991: 3), and sparked off a short though lively correspondence there (including the tribute of a leading article; 4-9). The dispute was then taken up by England's main literary weekly, the *Times Literary Supplement,* which published opposing articles by Cunningham and John Burrow (31 August 1991: 11-12) and a prolonged correspondence (13-23). But though this was the main forum of discussion, other newspapers were not silent: comments and letters in the *Daily Telegraph* (25-30) and the *Spectator* (31) maintained the reputation of those journals for solid conservatism (see below); just when it seemed at the point of death, the dispute was revived by a long and vigorous review by Richard North of the Godden / Lapidge *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* in the *London Review of Books* (10 October 1991: 35); and there was even a report on the late-night BBC television progamme *Newsnight* (17 September 1991: 33). The last word (so far) has gone to the Anglo-Saxonists, with articles by Malcolm Godden in

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[1] He is the author of *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988) and editor of *The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1980).

[2] References are to the items in the bibliography at the end of this article.

[3] Cunningham's article appeared in the issue for fourth week, Trinity Term. The only reply printed by the journal (by A. W. Barnett) was not published until three issues -and several months- later (noughth week, Michaelmas Term).

a new Oxford student newspaper, *Babel* (Hilary Term, January-March, 1992). The debate was at times bitter and, in the English fashion, occasionally rich in absurdity. Writing in the *Spectator,* Paul Johnson declared, "take away Anglo-Saxon (from English studies) and there is nothing left but idleness and an increasing clutter of nonsense, such as deconstruction, post-deconstruction and the like, all expressed in hideous jargon" (31), while the Education Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* characterized Old English literature as "epics such as *Beowulf,* the *Battle of Maldon* and the *Dream of the Rood,* many of which begin with the exhortation 'Hwæt!,' meaning Hark!" (25).

But for the most part the argument was conducted at a higher level than this. Indeed, the point of departure -the survival of Old English at Oxford- at times became forgotten, as the debate rapidly (and quite rightly) widened into a discussion of the distinctive place and value of Old English studies in the English curriculum as a whole. For example, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and Jeremy Smith discussed feminist approaches to Anglo-Saxon studies and the importance of new linguistic tools such as the *Old English Thesaurus* and the Toronto *Dictionary* (40), while Marilyn Deegan and Smith advertized Patrick Conner's "*Beowulf* Workstation" and other computer-based teaching aids (39).[1] Other scholars rejected attempts to isolate or "ghettoize" Old English and argued for its central importance for the study of English literature. It is these broader aspects of the debate that I will be concerned with here; and if in what follows I appear to quote at some length Valentine Cunningham's arguments against Old English to the exclusion of anyone else's, it is not in order to pillory one scholar's opinions, but simply because so few others were willing to go into print on his side -principally a recent Oxford graduate writing in the *Guardian* (6), and an editorial leader in the same paper (4). Of the eleven letters printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*

[1] Compare Georgina Ferry, "*Beowulf* in Bytes," *Oxford Today* 4.2 (Hilary, 1992), 20-21.

(13-23) ten were in favour of the study of Old English, the single exception being one by Cunningham himself (22).

Of course, some potential supporters may have been deterred by the unexpected conservatism of some of Cunningham's argument. For example, he has always been careful to say that his main quarrel is not with the inclusion on the syllabus of compulsory courses *per se,* but with the priviledged position given to Old English within it. Old English (or "Anglo-Saxon") he regards as a linguistic and literary blind alley, "educationally, linguistically, historically,… a cul-de sac' (11), a wearisome philological diversion from the broad current of English literature rather than a central part of it. In Cunningham's argument, the language (*pace* Tolkien) has no "essential kinship with our own,"[1] the themes and concerns of the literature have left no trace on ours, and the very term "Old English," implying that such a connection exits, is deeply spurious. It is an engaging curiousity, no more. But even on these terms, Cunningham has little faith in the literary value of Old English texts. The *Battle of Maldon* is "some little old alliterative poem about a last stand against the Danish invader" and the *Dream of the Rood,* "lovely, spiritual though it be, is a very minor work, insubstantial in extent and depth, thin on readerly pleasure, only marginal historically" (11). Is it fair (Cunningham asks) to impose the study of such "bloody stuff"[2] on "bored and scrimshanking pressed women and men" (1) when *Hamlet* and *Middlemarch* are not similarly prescribed? Its place on the Oxford syllabus, like its place in

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[1] J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1936), pp. 245-95, at p. 278.

[2] Here Cunningham quotes Philip Larkin's opinion in a letter to Kingsley Amis, as cited in Amis' *Memoirs* (London, 1991), p. 53. But Larkin adopted the same pose of disgruntled philistinism towards other canonical texts in a way that Cunningham could scarcely approve. Amis prints a note written by Larkin in the St. John's College, Oxford, library copy of *The Faerie Queene:* "First I thought Troilus and Criseyde was the most *boring* poem in English. Then I thought Beowulf was. Then I thought Paradise Lost was. Now I *know* that the Faerie Queene is *the dullest thing out. Blast* it" (Amis 54).

the canon itself, is an historical anachronism. When Oxford English was a "magnificently organic philological tree or fluvial system" (11), Old English, naturally found an honoured place. But at a University where women's writing and postmodernism are recognized subjects of study and where a Marxist (Terry Eagleton) holds a Chair of English, "Anglo-Saxon" now resembles nothing so much as an excrescence of vestigial organ, in John Carey's words, "a little appendix... which needs to be removed [by] a simple surgical operation" (33, cf. 41).[1] The survival of compulsory Old English on the course feeds a "German and English, northern European, male, Aryan-suprematist myth" (21) about the origins of the language and culture which ignores the contribution of other peoples and literatures: Latin, French, Italian, Welsh. Its continued study says more about the obscure fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis *et al.* than it does about very much written in English since.

There is at least some of this with which (one suspects) some Anglo-Saxonists will have a little sympathy. Overblown as his rhetoric sometimes is, at his best Cunningham writes with infectuous evangelical fervour. And such recent work as Allen Frantzen's *Desire for Origins,*[2] or the article by Roberta Frank on "Germanic Legend in Old English Literature" in the Godden / Lapidge *Companion*[3] (singled out for praise by Cunningham himself in a letter in the *London Review of Books* (36) and by Eric Stanley in his review of the *Companion* in *Notes and Queries*[4]) have made many of us examine the nature of the discipline and our own reasons for studying it in much the way that Cunningham commends. Nonetheless, there was much in Cunningham's

[1] Compare Zoë Heller's comments: "his (Carey's) vigorous support for reforming the Oxford English syllabus and getting rid of Anglo-Saxon returns him to the lefty corner where the dangerous new breed of dons is supposed to stand." (44)

[2] Aleen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brumswick and London, 1990).

[3] Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, eds., *The English Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 88-106.

[4] 237 (1992), 75-79, at 78.

broadside that could not be allowed to pass without reply, particularly as his attack on the subject raised questions far larger than merely its continuance - in whatever form- at Oxford. Three main counter-arguments were put forward. First, continuity. No one attempted to argue that there was much organic literary connection between the worlds of the *Beowulf* -poet and (say) Chaucer -let alone later authors. But several writers (in particular Edward Wilson, Malcolm Godden, and Richard North [13, 17, 33, 35, 41]) pointed to the appeal of Old English literature (and metre) on Hopkins, Auden, and Geoffrey Hill (and, it might have been added, Pound and Seamus Heaney[1]). Cunningham dismissed Auden as a "loony witness" (21), and of course it is perfectly fair to argue that it is precisely those writers with eccentric or adventurous intellectual interests that Old English is likely to attract. But as for linguistic continuity, there can surely be less dispute: in Stephen Medcalf's words, "to know Anglo-Saxon is to have as part of one's conciousness the semantic richness of a large part of the language we speak" (15). In particular, Cunningham made much of the claim that "the *OED* editors quite rightly decided on 1150 as the starting day of English" (11) -as if that meant they regarded Old English as a foreign tongue. But as Edward Wilson pointed out, what the editors had in fact done was to exclude words which were *obsolete* by 1150, while including full entries (with supporting citations) for words which had been in circulation at any point since then, however early their first appearance (13).[2]

Second, there was the argument about literary merit. Here Cunningham made things easier for his opponents by his teasing admission that he had occasionally overstated his own case in order to provoke: "I myself exaggerated the feebleness of Anglo-Saxon writing. Of course I did. That's

[1] See Hugh Magennis, "Some Modern Writers and their *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici,*" *OEN* 24.3 (Spring 1991), 14-18.

[2] J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary,* second edition, 20 vols. (Oxford, 1989) I: xxv. The *OED* editiors have no doubt that Old English marks "the beginning" of the language (xxv).

polemics… Of course some Anglo-Saxon, or rather West Saxon, vernacular texts are good, even great" (21). The forum of most of the debate (the correspondence columns of national newspapers) left little room for detailed literary exposition. Yet in reply to Cunningham's dismissal of the *Dream of the Rood* cited above, Edward Wilson praised "its density of reference to the Bible, the liturgy, patristic works, contemporary econography and heroic life, as well as its metaphysical wit unparalleled in English literature until the end of the sixteenth century" (13), while Stephen Medcalf aptly commented that "that man is little to be envied who does not feel that the *Wanderer,* the *Seafarer,* the *Dream of the Rood,* parts of the *Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf,* are profound poetry, or who does not, reading the kennings and riddles of lesser Anglo-Saxon verse, experience a deep excitement and illumination" (14). John Burrow made the obvious point that "set texts" were prescribed for Old English, but not for later periods, not because the Oxford examiners believed in the qualitative superiority of Old English literature to all other, but for practical reasons: the linguistic difficulties of these texts were such that there was simply no time for students to read as widely as in later periods (12, cf. 13). It might have been added that there is sound logic in prescribing texts in this fashion where only a few are available for study anyway. For the limited purpose of an examination, *King Lear* is a fair alternative to *Hamlet, Bleak House to Our Mutual Friend.* What alternatives are there to *Beowulf* or the *Dream of the Rood?*

But the third and most telling point to emerge from the discussion was the frequently expressed conviction that one studies Old English, not for its linguistic connection with the modern language (though that is undeniable), nor even for its literary value (great though that is), but to extend one's experience in time, to gain an insight into a way of thinking and feeling and viewing the world that is different from one's own. Cunningham is right to emphasize the diversity of influences at work in the history of English literature: Christian, Latin, French, Italian, as well as the often neglected Celtic strain. But none of these disciplines has the unique pertinence of Old English, pre-

cisely because it was only that language that was both spoken and written in England over centuries, and yet requires an intellectual and imaginative leap for us to comprehend today. It is "our own, and not our own."[1] It would be hard to find more persuasive witnesses to this truth than these: "I was given … the *Wanderer* to study and not only my attitude to the course but my whole internal life was changed" (an Oxford English graduate of thirty years ago; 9); "Old English … remains one of the great experiences of my life" (a medical professor who studied the language with Charles W. Kennedy at Princeton; 19); "it is absurd to have to argue the merits of the work of this period. Anyone who has a sensitivity towards literature recognizes the quality and beauty of Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose. There are simply no real grounds for debate" (an undergraduate at Goldsmiths' College, London University, "part of one of the largest Old English groups ever to take this subject as an option"; 22). A graduate student at Cambridge, who read English at Oxford 1985-88, told me of the fascination of studying Old English in his first term, and then later periods in chronological order, so that his own intellectual and emotional maturing mirrored the growth and development of the literature. Nor is this experience at all unusual. Last year the English Faculty's consultative committee circulated a questionnaire to all Oxford undergraduates reading English asking their opinion on the place of compulsory Old English in the course. Of 218 who responded, no fewer than 135 were in favour and 59 against, with 28 indifferent (14, 33, 37, 41). The percentage of third-year undergraduates in favour was particularly high (71%). As reported by Helen Cooper, one common rider was that "if the subject had not been compulsory they would not have taken it, but it was a good thing they had had to do so" (14). On this evidence, Cunningham's "multitudes of bored and scrimshanking pressed women amd men" simply do not exist.

Cunningham's case, however, isn't simply about compulsory Old English, at Oxford or elsewhere. His original article made it clear that his quarrel was as

[1] *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* IV. i. 191 (adapted).

much with Middle English literature -at least pre-Chaucer- as with Old English. These quotations are representative: “the Old English and Medieval bailywick”; “that quaint medieval religious text *The Pearl”;* “the Anglo-Saxonists and Medievalists … move across Faculty business in the tight Germanic wedge formation they’ve learned about in their favourite texts”; ”there is no justification for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s being a required text when *Hamlet* or *Paradise Lost* or *Tristram Shandy* is not …. It’s surely time that Anglo-Saxon and much currently compulsory Middle English literature felt the wind of competition” (1). After their initial airing in the *Oxford Magazine,* these arguments against Middle English were quietly allowed to drop, Cunningham even using the example of later medieval literature to support his claim that Old English has no place in the canon (“nor does it lead on to second-year Middle English and its great texts” (11)). But the point was not missed by Richard North (35) or Malcolm Godden. In Godden’s words: “All that would happen if Anglo-Saxon went is that … (there) would be pressure to get rid of later medieval literature or the history of the English language …. And after that … there’d be pressure to get rid of Shakespeare or … the eighteenth century. It’s only against Anglo-Saxon now because that’s, as it were, the oldest bit” (33).

Perhaps Professor Godden exaggerated here. No one who has read Cunningham’s arguments with attention could accuse him of trying to make the English syllabus less difficult. Indeed, one of the most striking features of his polemic has been his insistence throughout that he favours greater rigour and comprehensiveness in the syllabus, not less (see esp. 36). The point at issue is not how intellectually demanding the syllabus should be, but whether the five hundred years of writing in English before Chaucer are deemed to form any part of “English literature” at all - whether one who studies it ought to be the subject of the sort of commiseration that I received from my dinner-table companion.

These large issues can merely be touched on here. The more immediate disagreement at Oxford that gave rise to them has now once more retreated

below the surface. There are reports of a survey of opinion among university officers teaching English at the University and of the circulation of various alternative proposals for a thorough revision of the syllabus in the coming academic year. "Bloody stuff" or "one of the great experiences of my life"? The outcome of this dispute will be awaited by Old English scholars everywhere.[1]

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[1] I am grateful to several colleagues and friends for advice and assistance: Valentine Cunningham, Malcolm Godden, Richard Marsden, Andy Orchard, Gary Percival, James Simpson and Jeremy Smith.

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ADDITIONAL NOTE

This article was first published in *Old English Newsletter* for Spring 1992. I am very grateful to Antonio Bravo not only for offering it a second home in *SELIM,* but also for giving me the opportunity to make a few revisions and

corrections to the original and to bring the story up to date for a new readership.

In particular, I am able to amplify the necessarily rather vague remarks in my last paragraph. By the time my article appeared in print, the English Faculty at Oxford had already set up a 'Syllabus Reform Committee', part of whose brief was to consider the position of Old English within the curriculum, especially in the first year of the degree course, where its position has always been strong. University English teachers and undergraduates were polled separately on several options. The most radical of these -from the Anglo-Saxonist's point of view- which removed Old English altogether, came bottom of both polls. Three other alternatives are now under consideration, two allowing for one compulsory Old English paper in the first year (as against the present two), and a third, which proposes to make no change at all. Academic committees, however, move slowly, and so far nothing more has been done, so that the syllabus, and the position of Old English within it, remain the same for the current academic year (1993-94) as they were when my article was written.

One point I might have made more of was how much the disputants on both sides had in common, for all their apparent disagreements. Valentine Cunningham's perceptions of the canon of English literature, with its view that some early texts must be jettisoned if they are 'marginal historically', or in other words do not 'lead on' to later ones, are -as he frankly admits- if anything more conservative than those of his opponents. Both sides talked of sources and influences, of continuities and blind alleys, though Cunningham would wish to stress Romance and Christian influences rather than Germanic and pagan. Moreover, if some arguments had the ring of familiarity, perhaps that is because the matter had been debated at least twice before -in the 1930s and the 1960s- in the same forums and often in the same terms. And after all, both sides were wedded to a notion of a literary canon constructed by historical period that has come increasingly under threat elsewhere.

For this reason, many teachers of Old English outside Oxford may still envy the lot of their colleagues there, for on the present showing, no proposal to remove the subject from the curriculum has any chance of success. But at the same time, many of them, especially those in the British Isles and in North America, must face a more urgent question: the survival of Old English in a *really* revised syllabus, whether deconstructionist, new historicist, feminist, psychoanalytical, or other. That battle has still to be won.

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