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Reading Old English Texts is a collection of essays by renowned Anglo-Saxonists on the diversity of hermeneutic theories and practices that have guided the interpretation of Old English texts, both throughout history and in recent times. I think that a book of these characteristics has come out at the most opportune time. For the last decades, the classical philological approaches to Old English texts, that were the single methods of the past, have coexisted with new critical theories in a mutually illuminating way (Liuzza 1994). Fortunately, some voices which complained about the intrusion of new critical methods are progressively convinced that the multiplicity of current hermeneutic practices is a positive way of keeping this field of studies alive and of enlightening "the ways we read the texts of the past, the way we gain access to them and the uses they may be put to" (1). In this sense, once the debate on the application of "new" and "classical" methods of interpretation to the Old English corpus is seen to be unfruitful and the modern critical perspectives have gained the right to shed light on the philological tradition, I think that we are ready for this type of book.

In the "Introduction" (1-19) Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe offers a brief overview of the positivist philological stance that was the basic tenet guiding research in former times. In contrast to nineteenth-century philological aims at "a transparent readability of the past", some modern theories have questioned the possibility of bridging the gap between the past and the
present and have understood the limitations of representing the former through the reconstruction of authorial intentions, as well as the difficulties of an unmediated access to its textual constructs (5-7). O’Keeffe explores how formalist and exegetical approaches in the 50s and 60s attempted to tame the objectivist excesses of the philological method. In this sense, Anglo-American "new criticism" avoided the search for pure reconstructions of the past by submitting to an interest in the "artistic" qualities of texts considered as "well-wrought icons" - a further essentialist proposition. Patristic scholarship intended to place Old English texts in their historical context, but forced scholars into an excessive allegorical reading in the light of Augustine’s doctrine of charity. These are complementary versions of the early twentieth-century efforts to cope with medieval English texts. Their critical perspective may have been "wrong" or too "simplistic", but it must be acknowledged that they promoted the academic interest in Old English and prepared the ground for renewed scholarship. In a sense, they are still active, although polished and refined by the recent advances in comparatism, source study, historicism, the "new philology" and the linguistic methods of literary interpretation.

Saying that medieval literary culture was partly based on the reception of the classical loci, which were most often reinterpreted in the light of Christian dogma, is not a novelty. Similarly, the idea that European vernacular traditions cannot be seen in isolation from one another has also become a basic tenet in the study of the early Middle Ages. These two reasons should be enough to make "The Comparative Approach" compulsory in any attempt at interpreting Old English texts. Michael Lapidge in the pages devoted to this critical perspective (20-38) gives further arguments, particularly the debts that different traditions within the history of Western literature have had with the beginnings of literate culture in Europe, and the prominent necessity to interpret the present in the light of the past. Comparative approaches have been prevalent in Old English studies since the nineteenth century and have become a well-established practice with a variety of purposes: from the study of literary
movements and trends (like the so called "hermeutic style" or the "cynewulfian canon"), to the analysis of analogues, motifs, themes and genres (to borrow some modern terminology, in case it fits the Old English corpus). All these sides of comparatism are covered by Professor Lapidge. The chapter closes with a couple of examples on how comparative research can be applied "backwards" and "forwards", by, respectively, connecting the passage on Grendel's descent into fear at the recognition of Beowulf's grip with Turnus' realization in the Aeneid that he is about to lose the battle with Aeneas, and by tracing evocations of the Old English lyric "The Wife's Lament" in Tennyson's "Mariana" (1830).

"Source Study" (39-58) can be seen as an extension of comparatism, although, according to O'Keeffe's introductory words, the former concentrates on differences and the latter tends to observe similarities (9). For the same reasons stated above, this should be another compulsory approach to the interpretation of medieval material, which was composed at a time when the idea of authorship was not wholly developed and intertextuality was a dominant intellectual practice. Donald G. Scruggs provides a comprehensive survey of the subject. He does not skip over the difficulties inherent in the identification of sources for Old English materials, specially the problems of establishing accurate chronologies. He clarifies the technical distinctions between "immediate source", "antecedent source" and "analogue" and provides the reader with a list of recent computerized tools for the study of Old English literature. The most interesting section of this chapter, at least for this reviewer, is the one devoted to the uses of source study. Leaving aside the analysis of style and the search for authorship, which are often fruitless in the case of Old English, source study is basic for determining the education and reading available to the Anglo-Saxons, for tracing the history of ideas in northern medieval Europe and noticing the impact that the Anglo-Saxons had on that intellectual development (56). This analysis of the dissemination of thoughts and ideas can also be extended to the ideological level when the close scrutiny of sources allows the scholar to distinguish those texts which
adopted and supported the dominant ideologies from those that transgressed against them. In this respect, source study can be connected to some of the practices of modern cultural studies. All these issues are adequately exemplified in the practical section of this chapter by the analysis of the biblical sources of Judith and the vernacular and patristic sources that lie behind some of Aelfric's homilies.

The chapter on "Language Matters" (59-78) by Daniel Donogue returns to the question of philological approaches to Old English texts. The author clearly distinguishes pure linguistic studies from those enmeshed in the wider cultural context of the "new philology": a renewed method of interpretation that has moved away from the nineteenth-century essentialist and positivistic orientation into the interdisciplinary field of a linguistic analysis wholly conscious of the culturally-constructed character of any text. As a matter of fact, the "new philology" can be taken as the "paradigm" which has led to the launching of this book, whose purpose is to show that the classical approaches to Old English studies and the modern hermeneutic practices are complementary and can mutually enlighten each other. In different sections, Donogue explores how the return to the manuscript culture promoted by the "new philology" can enrich certain areas of Old English language studies. He also examines how the compilation of computerized corpora can help future research on the subject -possibly extending its findings to the areas of sociolinguistic inquiry and discourse analysis. Finally, the author predicts that these "new" philological methods can be enriched by an alliance with historical linguistics, as proved in the practical discussion of Khun's laws that closes the chapter.

"Historicist Approaches" (79-100) by Nicholas Howe is also a culturally oriented view of critical practices in that it emphasizes the necessity to recognize the interaction between the historical period when one writes as a critic and the historical moment about which one writes. In other words, the assumption that the contingencies of the critic's historical moment impinge on his or her critical practices, as advanced, among others, by Foucault, seem to lie behind relevant parts of this chapter, just as it has also been the foundation
of some recent studies on Old English culture and literature (Frantzen 1990, 1991; Irvine 1994). This tenet has also imprinted a certain relativism on practitioners of historicist criticism who "... must guard against the danger of being too certain that they know what the Anglo-Saxons thought and felt about their lives and their world" (85). In fact, this was Tolkien's own position in his seminal article "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics" (1936), where he consciously avoided the search for historical or theological "veracities" in the poem. On the contrary, he attempted to trace new areas of inquiry, like the sense of history that the text transmitted, or the way it participated in medieval cultural formation (86). In this way, Howe's chapter aligns itself with the others in the book, insofar as they all seem to assume that contemporary approaches must necessarily be moulded by previous centuries of critical interpretation and that the study of Old English texts cannot be an end in itself, but should be contextualized within the wider field of medieval studies. This is shown in the practical section, where Aelfric's Colloquy is read within the medieval context of monastic didacticism and the modern linguistic analysis of power negotiations is extended backwards to the social dynamics of late Anglo-Saxon England. In this context, leaving the Germanic vernacular to learn Latin is seen as a step in the process whereby novices abandoned lower-class membership to become literate clerics.

Two other sections in this collection deal with long-standing approaches to Old English that have been illuminated by contemporary theory and research. The chapter on "Oral Tradition" by Andy Orchard (101-23) examines how the "oral-formulaic" hypothesis, prevalent in the 50s and 60s, has been recently moderated when applied to the Old English corpus. Old English literature is currently seen within the transition from an illiterate secular society, whose texts were orally composed and passed on in memory, to a literate Christian one, whose authority relied on reading the written words of the Book. This implies that orality and literacy were not dichotomous states in Anglo-Saxon England but interacted in very subtle ways, so that many literary products of the period may be seen as
interfaces between oral production and writing, as written spaces where different stages of oral composition coexist (Doane 1991; Schaefer 1991; Conde Silvestre 1995). This has further consequences for the comprehension of how Old English texts originated and implies the replacement of formulism by intertextuality/intervocality as the basic principles behind the creation of Old English poetry and most prose. Orchard opportunely compares this method of composition with the one used by present-day African-American preachers, and matches Wulftan's sermons with Luther King's speeches. This exercise raises the question of "performance" and takes the whole issue from the perspective of the addressee to that of the addressee: an sphere where all forms of discourse (oral and written) prevalent in Anglo-Saxon England are expected to form "a communal vehicle for interpretation" (114).

Paul E. Szarmach in "The Recovery of Texts" (124-45) explores the subject of textual criticism and how new research methods have affected the edition of Old English texts. The author summarizes the difficulties to achieve the optimistic aim of traditional editions which searched for the best version of a given work on the basis of chronology, genealogy or by reconstructing an eclectic version from various sources. This, in most cases, is simply inapplicable to Old English, since the existence of more than one copy of a text is the exception rather than the rule, and exact chronologies are impossible to reconstruct. Professor Szarmach also deals with the two poles in the debate on editorial intervention: providing the reader with a rounded version by reconstructing damaged sections of manuscripts and correcting difficult passages on the light of secondary evidence, or rejecting this practice in favour of "diplomatic" reproductions of whatever scribes copied. The author believes that computers may solve this dichotomy by offering readers all versions and variants of a text, as well as the relevant secondary material necessary for the interpretation of difficult or damaged passages. Would this lead to the redundancy of editors, which may become in the near future mere collectors of information?

Possibly a major breakthrough in the application of modern scholarship to Old English studies was initiated
by feminist critics and Clare E. Lees in the section entitled "At the Crossroads: Old English and Feminist Criticism" (146-69) provides a detailed history of this approach. In doing so she also covers the main areas of interest of the discipline and raises relevant methodological questions. Particularly four fields seem to have attracted the attention of feminist critics in the last decades: a) the general reconceptualization of the meanings of history and culture so that they take account of gender relations in their formation; b) the review of the history of the discipline to notice the function of female scholars; c) the evaluation of the role of women in the Anglo-Saxon period itself; and d) the study of representations of masculine warrior culture in the surviving texts, as a means to detect "the constructed and gendered aesthetics of the canon of Old English writings" (156). These areas of feminist criticism and research are illustrated with stimulating applications, like the assessment of female roles in the nurturing of Anglo-Saxon culture, or their agency on nature and the construction of family units, as well as a reading of Elene in the light of some of the above lines of research.

"Post-Structuralist Theories: the Subject and the Text" (170-91) by Carol Braun Pasternack is a medley of contemporary approaches that tend to look at Old English materials "not as direct representations of culture, but as participants in the construction of meaning for Anglo-Saxon culture and society and thereby in the construction of culture and society themselves" (170). In this sense, the deconstructive principle that the structure of thought and reality is textual and can only be defined as such is close to the "actual reality" of Anglo-Saxon culture, which survives only through texts. This textual basis can be approached through several post-structuralist prisms. Post-structuralist semiotics, for instance, considers intertextuality in conjunction with the "implied tradition" on which medieval texts rely as a means to free Old English scholarship from the compulsory and often illusory search for precise meanings (Pasternack 1995). On the contrary, "[t]he ambiguity ... that derives from the use of a previously uttered expression ... need not be resolved into the correct meaning for a present author or work, but can
remain in play insofar as both texts are perceived as participating in the tradition" (176). Post-structuralist definitions of the "self" through language and the linguistic systems of culture, in the tradition of Lacan, may also have application to Old English and Pasternack hints at some possible uses of this methodology. Finally, the recognition that individuals and their products are constructed within different discursive formations is another successful application of Foucault's ideas. It has given rise to a variety of new approaches, ranging from a new view of the manuscript contexts in which Old English texts are preserved (O'Keefe 1990), to an analysis of the processes whereby critics become aware of how academic institutions have affected our present view of Anglo-Saxon culture (Frantzen 1990, 1991). Specially interesting is Pasternack's recommendation to investigate the "political unconscious" behind the Christian producers of Anglo-Saxon textual culture and, following Jameson (1981), to analyse how the imaginary productions of this society may have been attempts to solve the contradictions that troubled them or to spread the dominant ideology (181-82). Some of these trends are put together by the author and applied to a new reading of the heroic past textually represented in Beowulf.

This trip around the "old" and the "new" hermeneutic approaches to Old English texts would not keep up to date without a survey of the tools that computing has afforded Anglo-Saxonists. This is provided by Peter Baker in the final chapter -"Old English and Computing: a Guided Tour" (192-215)- where he reports on progress in the construction of ambitious corpora and databases (the Dictionary of Old English or the Electronic Beowulf projects, among others) and lists a number of useful and interesting websites.

WORKS CITED


