

## Conference Report

*Tom Birkett and Kirsty March*

CONFERENCE TITLE: FROM *EALD* TO NEW: TRANSLATING EARLY MEDIEVAL POETRY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

**DATE AND LOCATION:** 5-7 JUNE 2014, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, IRELAND

**SPONSORED BY:** THE IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL ('NEW FOUNDATIONS' GRANT); THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE (SSMLL); THE SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK AND UCC'S INFORMATION SERVICES STRATEGIC FUND; AND THE FORUM FOR MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES IN IRELAND (FMRSI). MORE INFORMATION ON THE PROJECT CAN BE FOUND AT [WWW.EALDTONEW.ORG](http://WWW.EALDTONEW.ORG).

FROM *EALD* TO NEW: TRANSLATING EARLY MEDIEVAL POETRY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Translation, in its broadest sense, can be defined as an act of cultural transference that bridges languages and communities. From the outset the organisers wanted this gathering to be about bridging several disciplines and practices in order to better understand translation as a creative process and as an ideologically constituted act. In particular, the conference aimed to bring poets and literary translators into a dialogue with those who teach medieval languages and who study these translations' effects. The idea of fostering connections between poets and academics working with

medieval texts was particularly exciting in the context of University College Cork, due to the number of poets involved with translation in the Munster area. Furthermore, we wanted to make this a dialogue between three early medieval vernacular traditions – Old Irish, Old English, and Old Norse – that are united in more ways than they are separated, but that also have their own unique histories of translation and cultural appropriation. The idea was to learn from different perspectives and ways of approaching early medieval poetry, to share best practices, and to address questions that impact directly on the teaching of early medieval languages in the modern academy. As this is an area of particular interest to students, we also wanted to include as many emerging voices as possible in the proceedings, and to give undergraduates the opportunity to participate in a workshop and poetry event involving our invited speakers.

With these aims in mind, we accepted a range of proposals from senior academics, postgraduate students and creative practitioners, and included papers dealing with both the technicalities of the languages under discussion, and the historical and cultural conditions that make translation possible. The ways in which we undertake, theorize and teach translation in the modern academy impacts on every aspect of our engagement with early medieval poetry. Of all literary critics, the poet Jorge Luis Borges perhaps expressed this most eloquently with the statement: ‘No problem is as consubstantial with literature and its modest mystery as the one posed by translation’. The organisers are of the firm belief that translation must be something we actively promote as an essential part of a student’s education in the humanities in order to effectively bridge the gap between the present and the past.

The three-day ‘*Eald to New*’ conference comprised a graduate workshop, a poetry reading and the conference proper, which focused on Old Irish and Old Norse on the first day and Old English and teaching translation on the second day. The graduate workshop focused on the creative translation of Old English and Old Irish poetry, and the ways in which medieval poetry can serve as a pathway to creative expression. It was led by internationally renowned poet **Greg Delanty** and medievalist **Michael Matto** (Adelphi University), editors of *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*, and also **Lahney Preston-Matto** (Adelphi University), translator of *The Vision of Mac Conglinne*. Ten internationally and locally acclaimed poets read at the poetry evening held in the Glucksman Gallery, which was opened by Greg Delanty reading his version of *The Wanderer*, and compèred by UCC’s writer in residence, **Leanne O’Sullivan**. A number of poets read from translations they had produced for *The Word Exchange*, whilst some of the emerging poets read pieces responding directly or indirectly to the themes of Old English poetry.

The three-day conference launched by this poetry evening consisted of four plenary lectures and twenty-five papers, divided into eight separate sessions. There were no parallel sessions, as we wanted to encourage delegates to attend all papers, including those outside their disciplinary focus.

## SESSION 1 - OLD NORSE

### Networks and Neighbours

Following an excellent opening plenary address by **Carolyn Larrington** (Oxford University) on her retranslation of the *Poetic Edda* for the *Oxford World's Classics* series, the first panel focused on Old Norse translations. The opening paper from **Hannah Burrows** (Durham University) addressed the translation and adaptation history of 'The Waking of Angantýr'. She also briefly discussed her participation in the AHRC-funded project *Modern Poets on Viking Poetry*, for which she produced a literal translation of 'Angantýr'. **Edel Porter** (University of Castilla-La Mancha) examined the knotty question of whether to translate mistakes made by the original author of *Gísla saga*, caused by their misunderstanding of a term used in an incorporated skaldic stanza. **Katelin Parsons** (University of Iceland) surveyed early attempts to translate what William Morris referred to as the 'quite untranslatable' verses of *Egils saga*, an issue of particular relevance as these are the open access translations that students are most likely to encounter.

## SESSION 2 - OLD IRISH

The dearth of translations of Old Irish material was a common theme across this panel. **Colmán Ó Raghallaigh**, the author of the Irish-language graphic novel *An Táin*, explained the creative and production processes involved in producing his version of the Irish epic, and discussed the importance of keeping the essence of the epic language. **Lahney Preston-Matto** (Adelphi University) offered a paper on the difficulties she encountered while translating *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, focusing especially on the problems posed by obscure terms for food and drink and the difficulty of replicating the meter. **Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh** (University College Cork) discussed adaptations of the Old Irish loric 'St Patrick's Breastplate', demonstrating that translations of the same text can reflect differing theologies.

## SESSION 3 - POETS ON TRANSLATION

A plenary address delivered by **Heather O'Donoghue** (University of Oxford) got the afternoon off to a good start with a discussion of contemporary engagements with Old Norse myth, focusing on the poets Pauline Stainer, Kathleen Jamie, Ian Duhig and Don Patterson. A unique panel followed this as the two presenters drew upon their own experience as poets to inform their readings of medieval texts. **Miller Oberman** (University of Connecticut) focused on the Old English poem *The Ruin*, examining how different translators approach the 'gaps' in the texts and questioning whether it is legitimate to close them in our interpretations. Poet **Adam Wyeth** followed this with a close reading of Seamus Heaney's 'Helmet' from his 2006 collection *District and Circle*, discussing his conscious use of Old English language and poetic tropes.

## SESSION 4 - VERNACULAR CONTEXTS

Although this panel focused on later Middle English and Provençal troubadour traditions, it also returned us to the difficulties of translating later skaldic verse and followed naturally from the previous panel by including a paper from renowned poet and UCC adjunct professor **Bernard O'Donoghue**. Bernard discussed his forthcoming translation of the Middle English *Piers Plowman* for Faber, and how it compared to translating the more unwieldy language of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. **Howard Needler** (Wesleyan University) talked about the experience of translating Provençal troubadour poetry and the necessity of finding a middle way between creative exuberance and reflection of the metrical structures of the original. **John Shafer** (University of Nottingham) spoke about Earl Rögnvaldr of Orkney, and suggested which aspects of this difficult verse form can be retained in modern English, drawing on his own experiences of translating these verses using.

## SESSION 5 - OLD ENGLISH: TRANSLATION CRUCES

The second day was opened by **Chris Jones** (University of St Andrews) with a plenary paper which examined the use of Old English by twenty-first century poets and briefly raised the very interesting question of what constitutes Old English poetry and whether the corpus itself should be considered a narrative fiction. An early career panel followed this chaired by postgraduate **Niamh Kehoe**. **Richard Hawtree** (University College Cork) talked about the role of meditative translation in the Old English Exeter Book, which provides something of a unifying character to the collection as a whole. **Axton Dylan Crolley** (University of Cambridge) discussed the use of Old English prepositional anastrophe, and stressed the fact that even the placement of a preposition can be an act of literary interpretation. **Alison Killilea** (University College Cork) addressed the issue of how translators of *Beowulf* treat Grendel's mother, and the implications of literary precedent and gendered translation on her portrayal, arguing for a translation of *ides aglæcwif* as 'female warrior' rather than 'monstrous ogress'.

## SESSION 6 - OLD ENGLISH: TEACHING AND TRANSLATION

This panel discussed approaches to teaching Old English poetry in translation. **Rory McTurk** (University of Leeds) addressed the translations of Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* and *Beowulf* by Seamus Heaney, and drew attention to a number of stylistic effects that are missed in the so-called 'Heaney-wulf', suggesting that a translation truer to the structures of the original poem should be given to students. **Roberta Bassi** (Université Stendhal Grenoble 3) treated the different approaches that non-specialist anthologies take to representing and translating *Cædmon's Hymn*, especially the lack of explanation of the relationship between Bede's Latin text and the Old English version. **Michael Matto** (Adelphi University) discussed the merits of a comparative approach to

teaching Old English poetry in translation, using multiple translations to highlight the choices of individual scholars and triangulate student responses to the interpretation of the text.

## SESSION 7 - OLD ENGLISH INTO WORLD LANGUAGES

The final plenary paper was delivered by **Hugh Magennis** (Queen's University Belfast), author of *Translating Beowulf*, and focused on the translations of Old English poems by Edwin Morgan in a style characterized by 'energy in order', including his reworking of selected riddles for *The Word Exchange*. The following session examined the translation of Old English into world languages. **Denis Ferhatović** (Connecticut College) focused on a Turkish translation of Seamus Heaney's version of *Beowulf*, and how the translator Nazmi Ağıl replicated certain effects, including through the use of Ottoman vocabulary. **Jane Toswell** (University of Western Ontario) discussed the modernist Jorge Luis Borges as translator of Old English and the pervasive influence of Germanic poetry on his literary output and poetic identity.

## SESSION 8 - PROJECT REPORTS

The final panel focused on three ongoing projects dealing with translation. **Bob Hasenfratz** (University of Connecticut) recently launched 'The Old English Poetry Project' which is led by Hasenfratz himself and Miller Oberman. It will consist of an online database that allows interaction between the translators and the reader through a comments feature, (<http://oepoetryproject.org/>) and the overall aim of the project is to 'remake poems new'. **Olivia Robinson** (University of Oxford) and **Helen Brookman** (University College London) discussed the results of their pedagogic research project at the University of Oxford on creative translation as a tool for teaching Old English, discussing how this affects students' views of the original text. **Gareth Evans** (University of Oxford) closed the final session of the conference with a presentation on the AHRC-funded project 'Medieval Storytelling: Engaging the Next Generation', which he is co-leading with **Hannah Ryley** (<http://www.medievalstorytelling.co.uk/>). This project seeks to give postgraduates and ECRs the skills to bring medieval stories alive for school children.

The conference concluded with a brief closing address from the organisers, who thanked the participants for two days of papers which had been very much in the spirit of what translation is all about: a stimulating conversation between cultures, languages and practices. They highlighted the range of topics covered during the conference – from the intricacies of preposition placement to translation as a subversive political act – but also remarked on several ideas and issues that had reoccurred with unexpected frequency. These included the extent to which both practicing poets and students are drawn to the gaps in medieval poetry – particularly the physical damage of a poem like

*The Ruin*, as well as to texts on the margins of traditions. Several speakers remarked on the responsibility that students felt when asked to translate creatively, and the possibilities afforded by teaching through more than one translation. The issue of finding a consistent voice as a translator was often raised, as was the idea of poetry as a 'discursive formation', both in the original language and in the matrix of responses to an older tradition. The Borges quote offered at the beginning of this report became something of a touchstone during the conference, with all the papers reaffirming that translation lies not only at the heart of reading and transmitting literature, but also of creating poetry anew. The organisers hope that the 'Eald to New' website ([www.ealdtonew.org](http://www.ealdtonew.org)) will act as a forum for maintaining the cross-disciplinary connections made during this productive forum, and that the stimulating conversation initiated at the conference will continue via the blog and conference proceedings.