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Tales of the Tribe

Modern epic, guerrilla-pastoral and
utopian yeoman-anarchism in
Oswald's Book of Hours and
Englaland

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A thesis submitted in the Faculty of Music, Humanities and Media at the University of Huddersfield, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. April, 2016.

Declaration: this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree at any other educational institution.

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1. Abstract

Oswald's Book of Hours and *Englaland (OBOH&E* — Smokestack Books, 2013 & 2015 respectively) are distinctive works in the context of modern and contemporary English language poetry. Although there are affinities between *OBOH&E* and several modern and contemporary works, *OBOH&E*'s visionary engagement with concepts of England and English identity, their epic expression and novel post-pastoral dimension combine to make them unique. The works' address to England and the English emerges from an ecologically committed, broadly socialist position informed by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as 'imagined community' and Patrick Kavanagh's assertion of the primacy of the 'parochial', coalescing into a literary-political position defined by my coinage *utopian yeoman-anarchism*. The epic dimension of *OBOH&E* is demonstrated in an exposition based on the theoretical writings of Rudyard Kipling, Ezra Pound and M.M. Bakhtin. *OBOH&E*'s characteristic dialogical method — defined by the synchronic and synoptic temporal aspect of the works and their deployments of heteroglossia, polyphony and xenoglossia — leads to a characterisation of the books as novelistic 'modern epics'. Finally, in an analysis informed by Terry Gifford's influential taxonomy, *OBOH&E* is identified as a distinctive subgenre of the post-pastoral (another coinage) — the *guerrilla-pastoral*. The guerrilla-pastoral arises from the transgressive rural praxis of the author and is reflected and expressed via his personae, narrators and protagonists as they assert their rights in the land, in conflict with representatives of the power that seeks to restrict and deny them.

2. *Oswald's Book of Hours & England* — a contextual introduction

Although published as two separate books, *Oswald's Book of Hours* (2013) and *Englaland* (2015) will be treated as a single work in this commentary (abbreviated as *OBOH&E*), because the books share a similar vision and address similar themes. *Oswald's Book of Hours* was originally planned as a section of *Englaland*, but was formed as a second book when it became clear that its length would preclude it from taking its intended place as a section of the larger work.

Oswald's Book of Hours

Oswald's Book of Hours is structured according to the conventions of a mediaeval Book of Hours.¹ The organising conceit of the book is that it is somehow a possession of Oswald (605-642 A.D.) the Northumbrian king, warrior, evangelist and saint — written for and about him and often in his voice. The two elements of the title represent the two major aspects of its argument. The Book of Hours structure — along with the work's appropriation of religious content, themes, and imagery — asserts the ongoing value of pre-Reformation English Catholicism to English identity. The book's 'Oswald dimension' proceeds from the many aspects of the king's attributes and achievements that combine to make him an exemplary *English* leader. Oswald is cast as the presiding spirit of 'the North' — a quasi-Arthurian 'once-and-future-king'.

¹ In the mediaeval period, wealthy pious who wished to pray the Divine Office commissioned their own personal 'Books of Hours'. Often exquisitely illustrated, these books contained a range of devotions – prayers, psalms, antiphons, texts from the Old and New Testaments and so on — to be prayed or sung at the canonical *hours*.

The book begins with ‘Kalendarium’, a sequence of poems about hunting, written in Oswald’s voice (pp. 11-15). The poems are characterised by the book’s signature xenoglossia, with Old English words, phrases and spellings deployed to create an idiom that intends to stress continuity of ‘Englishness’ between the early mediaeval period and the present day.² The book ends with the sonnet sequence ‘Memorials of the Saints’ (pp. 69-83). However, the saints ‘venerated’ in this section include a range of Northern anti-heroes including former National Union of Mineworkers leader Arthur Scargill and footballer ‘Wayne Johnson’.³ In between are poems written in a range of forms and voices: the four-poem sequence ‘Godspel’ (pp. 17-25) includes poems in the voices of Falklands war-hero ‘Scouse’ McLaughlin and Peasants’ Revolt leader John Ball; ‘Prayers to the Virgin’ (pp. 27-30) are poems addressing Mary I; ‘Hours of the Virgin’ (pp. 31-40) is a sequence about hunting with dogs; ‘Hours of the Cross’ (pp. 41-46) narrates the seven ‘crucifixions’ of the English people;⁴ ‘Hours of the Holy Spirit’ (pp. 47-48) celebrates and commemorates a range of Yorkshire-based activists; ‘Septem psalmi paenitentiales’ (pp. 49-57) is a sequence of dramatic monologues in the voice of the highwayman John Nevison and ‘Hours of the Dead’ (pp. 59-68) comprises autobiographically derived poems concerned to recover history and memory from landscape. The synoptic and synchronic presentation of fifteen hundred years of ‘Englishness’ across the panorama of the book is key to the paradoxical — historically aware, Catholic, anti-authoritarian, radical, parochial — nationalism of the book.⁵ Formal

² Xenoglossia: the incorporation into the text of foreign (Old English, Middle English and dialect) words.

³ ‘Wayne Johnson’ is a fictionalised portrayal of Billy Whitehurst, a South Yorkshire born footballer (Hull City, Newcastle United, Sheffield United and Oxford United), whose on-field physicality and penchant for off-field mayhem gained him the reputation as ‘England’s hardest footballer’ during the 1980s and 90s.

⁴ Namely: the Norman Conquest; the Monarchy; Forest Laws, Enclosure and the clearing of the people from the land; the Reformation; the Industrial Revolution; the British Empire; and contemporary (sub)urbanisation and ongoing estrangement from the land and nature.

⁵ Synoptic: ‘seen together’; synchronic: ‘at the same time’. The conceit of *OBOH&E* is that all England and the English are or have been is *simultaneously present* and can be *seen together*. Thus 7th century Oswald, 14th century John Ball, 16th century Mary I, the 19th century Duke of Wellington and 20th century Peter Mandelson are deployed in ensemble and, as noted above, Old and Middle English words and forms are incorporated into modern English to create a distinctive idiom. This aspect of *OBOH&E* is treated at greater length in the third section of this commentary.

diversity, polyphony, heteroglossia, and xenoglossia combine in *Oswald's Book of Hours* to create a highly distinctive expression.⁶

Englaland

Englaland cuts trajectories into varying concepts of England and the English via eight long poems or sequences.⁷ These component parts are discrete and can stand alone. However, they are wired into a unity via interlocking deployments of theme, language, formal and structural techniques and the recurrence of key characters, motifs and symbols. As with *Oswald's Book of Hours*, the book is characterised by a synoptic and synchronic view of the English past and by the deployment of polyphony, heteroglossia and xenoglossia. *Englaland* begins with 'The Battle of Brunanburh' (pp. 9-40) which narrates the rout following the eponymous battle in which the victorious English army pursued their defeated foes across a landscape that included Brierley Common, a place which I have roamed since my childhood and which I know intimately.⁸ The poem adopts the 'verset' form devised by Geoffrey Hill (1971) for *Mercian Hymns* and is explicitly an homage to that work. The verse play 'Scum of the Earth' (pp. 41-59) imagines a future English Civil War in which the rival armies are led by Lord Mandelson and the Duke of Wellington.⁹ The third section of the book, 'Common'

⁶ Polyphony' — the *range* of different voices. 'Heteroglossia' — the *diversity* of voices, styles and points of view.

⁷ *Englaland* — 'Engla-Land', the 'Land of the Angles': the Old English name for the nation. The connotation of 'La-La-Land' noted by some is unintentional, but welcome.

⁸ The Battle of Brunanburh, in which the English king Æthelstan defeated an invading alliance of Scots, Irish, Norse and Welsh, took place in 937 AD. Remembered as the 'Great War' in early English history and celebrated in verse in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the victory was seen as significant because an English king had for the first time established Lordship over the whole realm. J.H. Cockburn (1931) argues that the battle took place at Tinsley Wood, near Rotherham in South Yorkshire, the defeated alliance of invaders subsequently fleeing across southern Yorkshire — including Brierley Common — to their ships on the river Aire near Castleford. Cockburn's detailed reconstructions are problematic, but his general argument has won support from historians, including Michael Wood (2000). Brierley Common, located between the towns of Brierley and South Kirkby, was formerly a huge and important common, replete with several sites of historic, cultural and archaeological significance.

⁹ Mandelson as globalising Whig, Wellington as little-England Tory.

(pp.61-88) is a collection of poems arising from the landscape and history of Brierley Common. The affinity of setting between the ‘Common’ poems and those of ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’ is underscored by the use the same verset form for both sequences. The fourth section of *Englaland*, ‘Big Billy’ (pp. 89-108) is set at Brierley Common’s Good Friday Fair and narrates the exploits of the eponymous Billy, a brawling collier.¹⁰ Written in an approximation to Old English alliterative verse, ‘Big Billy’ adopts the ‘four funerals/three fights’ structure of *Beowulf* and is intended as an ambivalent commentary on the English propensity for violence. Section five, ‘The Harrying of the North’ (pp. 109-151) is a sequence of poems that juxtaposes the destruction of mining communities in Yorkshire in the post-1984 period with William the Conqueror’s scorched earth devastation of Northumbria in the wake of the 1068 insurgency against the Norman occupation. The sixth section, ‘Mongrel Blood Imperium’ (pp. 153-187) explores England and Englishness in the wider context of the British Empire, addressing issues such as the post-imperial legacy, multi-culturalism, globalisation, the nature of the British state and the North-South divide. The seventh section of *Englaland*, ‘The Ballad of Scouse McLaughlin’ (Ely: 2012) addresses issues of class, violence and imperialism via a narration of the life and heroism of Falklands war hero Stewart McLaughlin, who was killed during the battle for Mount Longdon, on 12th June 1982.¹¹ The book closes with the summarising ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’ (pp. 189-199), a panoramic tour of the landscapes of the book. Part elegy, part state of the nation address, part political critique, ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’ is an affirmation of the people in their land.

¹⁰ The tradition of the annual Good Friday Fair on Brierley Common came to an end in the 1970s as changing cultural practices, neglect and agricultural intensification combined to undermine the tradition and its venue.

¹¹ ‘The Ballad of Scouse McLaughlin’ was cut from *Englaland* at the proof stage by the publisher, who was concerned about the length of the book. It nevertheless remains integral to the whole and will be treated as such in this commentary and is appended (p. 65).

3. *Oswald's Book of Hours & Engaland (OBOH&E)* as Epic Poetry: Tales of the Tribe

OBOH&E are epic poems after Ezra Pound's (2010: p. 46) minimalist definition — 'an epic is a poem including history'.¹² Given that the history 'included' in *OBOH&E* is not only explicitly English but is explicitly *addressed to* the English, *OBOH&E* are also epic poems in the sense intended by Rudyard Kipling in the address he gave to a Royal Academy dinner in 1906, appropriated by Pound (1938: p. 204) to describe his own work: 'there is no mystery about the Cantos, they are the *tale of the tribe* [my italics] — give Kipling credit for his use of the phrase'. In his address, Kipling (1928: p. 3-4) relates an 'ancient legend' in which a man who had accomplished a 'most notable deed' was unable to inform his people what he had done and gave up the attempt.¹³ However, another member of the company, who had 'taken no part in the action of his fellow', nevertheless stood up and 'described the merits of the notable deed in such fashion [...] that the words became alive and walked up and down in the hearts of all his hearers' (p. 4).

As a result of the eloquence of the storyteller, the tribe came to realise, in Michael Bernstein's (1980: p. 8) words, that their 'very existence as a coherent society' and the survival of [their] 'shared values' depended on 'the permanent record of the group's decisive achievements' — that is, the 'enduring literature' of the tribe. It is the responsibility of the

¹² The concept of 'epic poetry' has developed and diversified considerably since its first technical exposition in Aristotle's *Poetics*. A full account of the term and its development is beyond the scope of this work. However, this section of my commentary is informed by a number of theorists, including Kipling (1928), Lukacs (1971), Bakhtin (1981) and Moretti (1996). The commentary is also informed by more recent and specific developments of the category such as Montague's 'Global regionalism' (in Frazier, 1978), the 'pocket epic' (Alderman, 2000), the 'local epic' (Kerrigan, 2000) and Kavanagh's (2003) concept of the 'parochial'.

¹³ The man-of-action's folkloric inarticulacy and his lack of an understanding of the full, contextual significance of his actions require the poet to stand *in lieu* for him. Kipling's anecdote of the inarticulate hero and his tale that must be told is actually a metaphor for the historical process as described by E.H Carr (1990). Events ('deeds') are not in themselves history; to become so their significance must be expounded and interpreted in the context of a wider social, cultural and political context.

poet as the ‘teller of this record’ to expound the deeds of the tribe’s ‘warriors, priests, and men of action [...] providing a storehouse of heroic examples [...] by which later generations would measure their own conduct and order the social fabric of their lives’. *OBOH&E* are books in this tradition.

England as ‘imagined community’

Implicit in an understanding of epic poetry as a Kiplingesque ‘tale of the tribe’ is an acceptance of Benedict Anderson’s (2006) concept of the nation as ‘imagined community’, which Kipling’s formulation to some extent anticipates. Anderson debunks essentialist ideas of nation and nationality and argues that nationalism as we currently understand it is a relatively modern development, arising in industrialising Europe at a time when increased levels of vernacular literacy in ‘national’ languages led to the wide circulation and consumption of books, newspapers and broadsheets, thus facilitating a ‘common discourse’. This in turn engendered a sense of affinity between people and groups who had hitherto identified within much narrower occupational, regional, linguistic or class groupings. In this process, certain historical narratives emerged and through a process of reiteration and reinforcement — via the appropriate anniversaries and national holidays, school curricula, novels, poetry and art, the media and so on — became key tropes that informed emergent national identities.

The ‘imagined community’ of England emerges from and is shaped by ‘tales of the tribe’ that include affirmations of historical continuity in the land (Shakespeare’s History Plays, The Clarendon Press Oxford Histories), military and martial prowess, especially as ‘underdog’, (Alfred the Great at Athelney, Agincourt, the Battle of Britain) a ‘we’re-all-in-this-together’

sense of social cohesion and solidarity (the ‘Merrie England’ of Chaucer, Shakespeare’s Prince Hal slumming it in Cheapside, Queen Elizabeth being able to ‘look the East End in the face’ when Buckingham Palace sustained minor bombing damage in World War Two) and a virile spirit of risk taking, entrepreneurialism and adventure (Walter Raleigh, Cecil Rhodes, Richard Branson). The ‘deeds’ of these ‘heroes’ and the records of these events become narratives and texts, which become ‘instrumental in shaping the world view of succeeding ages [demonstrating] perfect interpenetration [between] history and tale’ (Bernstein, 1990: p. 9).

Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic concepts of the ‘imagined community’ of England

The textual recasting of historical events in class-based societies is a highly ideological process. The tropes comprising received versions of the imagined community of England¹⁴ are selected, interpreted and presented under the influence of the dominant ideology of England’s ruling class, the interest of which is to naturalise the constructed nature of the social order they dominate by presenting it as the inevitable outcome of an ongoing process of organic evolution in the time-honoured history of ‘the people’.¹⁵ To naturalise is to justify, which intention is reinforced by the emphasis in the national narratives on achievements, behaviours and qualities that are likely to reinforce the dominant ideology and thus entrench the position of the ruling class. The currently dominant assertions of Englishness in the

¹⁴ Constraints of space do not allow an analysis of the role of England within the British state. I take it as given that England is the dominant power within the residual imperial entity of ‘The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland’. However, in addressing ‘England’ rather than ‘Britain’ I do not conflate the two. My expression is a devolutionary address to England and the English.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams (1977) argues that societies are characterised at any given time by the interplay of three forms of ideology. The *dominant* ideology is the main ideology of the ruling class, which in contemporary Britain might be characterised as a belief in the free-market and Parliamentary democracy. However, this dominant ideology incorporates *residual* ideologies persisting from previous periods, such as monarchism and a commitment to state intervention in certain areas. *Emergent* ideologies are new ideologies which may, in time, become dominant, including in this context globalising trends, ecological politics and decentralising, devolutionary models of democracy.

political sphere are associated with the atavisms of ‘little England’¹⁶ or with overtly right-wing organisations such as the Conservative Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). The programmes of these organisations are characterised by a default commitment to laissez-faire capitalism and various combinations of insularity, racism, xenophobia and reactionary nostalgia. English nationalism is seen by many on the left as the province of shaven-headed ‘white-van-men’, bannered in tattoos and the flag of St. George, fulminating against ‘immigrants’ and being led by the nose by the establishment manipulators of the Bullingdon Club or UKIP’s spiv-Mussolini populist alternative. These associations tend to tarnish in advance any more progressive attempts to politically (and poetically) engage with England and English identity.

The generally reactionary nature of many previous affirmations of England and Englishness in *literary* contexts also casts a shadow on more progressive attempts to address those themes. Roger Scruton’s *England: An Elegy* evokes earlier pastoral evocations of England (including Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, H.V. Morton’s *In Search of England* and T.H White’s *England Have My Bones*) in an anemoiac lament for the passing of ‘the country house’ and its associated pleasures — servanted ease, fox-hunting, breathless knee-tremblers in the muniment room — which is more or less overtly predicated on Edwardian style oligarchy. The England of gentlemen yeoman farmers envisioned by Henry Williamson in his multi-volume *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is explicitly anti-democratic and has

¹⁶ ‘Little England’ stands for that form of English nationalism characterised by deeply rooted conservatism, suspicion of foreigners and ‘abroad’, a distrust of ideas and intellectuals and a stubborn satisfaction with the habituated quotidian of suburban English life.

affinities with the *blut und boden* of Nazi theorist Richard Walther Darré and the back-to-the-land advocacies of the *volkisch* Artaman League.¹⁷

In *OBOH&E*, I address this impasse and attempt to define an alternative way of affirming England and Englishness by deploying a method based on the analysis of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci argued that the ruling class in any given state perpetuates its hegemony (dominance) not merely through violence but also by ideological means — the propagation of narratives, ideas and values that support the state and its modes of exploitation but which are nevertheless plausible enough to be accepted by the working class as a ‘just’ and ‘natural’ part of the established order. Gramsci contended that revolutionary struggle should not confine itself to ‘political’ action, but should also challenge the cultural and ideological aspects of the state’s dominance by developing *counter-hegemonic* narratives, interpretations and values. *OBOH&E* are counter-hegemonic presentations of aspects of England and Englishness that challenge, undermine and usurp dominant narratives in order to imagine a national community very different to that of both the ‘Little England’ right and the globalising Social Democrat ‘left’. I deploy a range of techniques, methods and approaches to execute this intention, including, but by no means limited to:

- The narration of history from below, retelling neglected narratives and giving voice to the ostracised, silenced and voiceless.

¹⁷ ‘Blood and soil’: that is, ‘race and Fatherland’. Richard Walther Darré (1895-1953) was an SS-*Obergruppenführer* and Reichsminister of Food and Agriculture from 1933 to 1942. He was closely associated with *volkisch* ‘back to the land’ movements. *Volkisch* — ‘folkish’: the term given to the movement aimed at reviving the historic traditions and folkways of the German *volk* as a way of re-establishing a more authentic ‘Aryan’ culture. The Artaman League was a Nazi ‘back to the land’ organisation that considered urban civilisation decadent. ‘Artaman’ is a portmanteau word meaning ‘agricultural man’.

- The systematic assertion of the value of the parochial — local history, local topography, local figures. The intention is to wrest control of historical narratives and interpretations from the centres of power in order to assert a decentralised vision of England that is manifest in its myriad parishes.
- The deployment of provocative and counterintuitive presentations in order to challenge the hegemonic consensus shared by both right and left wings of the establishment. For example, in *Oswald's Book of Hours*, the (assumedly) discredited, reactionary, irrational and corrupt Roman Catholic Church is affirmed as the authentic 'church of *England*' and the importance of pre-Reformation Catholicism to the formation of English identity is asserted.
- The exploitation of paradox — in the poems of 'Mongrel Blood Imperium', (2015: pp. 153-188) I address some of the worst excesses of the British Empire yet acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of the men of violence *and their victims* to forming 'our' culture, at the same time using the experience and legacy of Empire to implicitly critique both anti-immigration racists and multicultural ideologues.

These elements of the counter-hegemonic, epic expression of *OBOH&E* are expressed in the systematic deployment four key techniques: the appropriation of events and characters from English history and culture; the synchronic & synoptic vision of the works; the deployment of xenoglossia; (Old English, Middle English, Latin and dialect forms); and, the use of polyphony & heteroglossia.

The appropriation of events and characters from English history and culture

OBOH&E is a sustained engagement with English history and culture and virtually every poem deploys events and characters from national narratives. *Oswald's Book of Hours* narrates vignettes from the Napoleonic Wars (p. 67), reimagines the mystic Richard Rolle in his hermitage (p. 80) and depicts the death of Robin Hood (p. 82). The *Englaland* poems include alternative histories of the Norman Conquest (p. 117) and cut trajectories into the 7/7 'London bombings' (p. 185). Constraints of space preclude a comprehensive exposition of the books' historical engagements. Accordingly, I will exemplify the method in a more limited range of poems.

'Godspel', (2013: p.17), is a sequence of four prose poems laid out in a style intended to invoke the layout of New Testament. Each poem is imagined in the voice of a representative English 'type' (Æthelstan as exemplary monarch, Wat Tyler as peasant revolutionary, Robert Aske as Catholic yeoman and Stewart 'Scouse' McLaughlin as the embodiment of the unruly working class), each giving unsolicited advice to the newly crowned king Oswald. Each poem is given a Latin title modelled on the titles given to the gospels in traditional Catholic Bibles — 'Incipit euangelium secundum ...' ('The gospel according to ...') — appropriating the gravitas of the sacred text in order to provide a kind of tongue-in-cheek sanctification of the speakers and their advice, which, given the irreverent, materialistic, confrontational and sometimes blasphemous sentiments they express, is ironic, provocative and counter-hegemonic — these are subversive gospels. This opening of the sequence exemplifies these characteristics:

Godspel

‘Sithan eastan hider

Engle and Seaxe upp becomon

Ofer brad brimu Britene sohton

Wlance wig-smithas, Wealas ofercomon,

Eorlas ar-hwaete eard begeaton.’

(The Battle of Brunanburh)

Incipit euangelium secundum

Aethelstan Rex

1. How shall I advise an English king who already is a Saint? And how shall I not reflect that his canonical destiny should also have been mine; for did I not fight for the godspelle angyn haelendes criste, against the rage of heathen men? 2. Did I not drive from our borders the pagan Norse, heretic Welsh and traitors of Strathclyde, for which am lauded in the song? 3. And did I not gather the bones of saints, holy blood and holy thorn, establish chapel and chantry for munuc and nunne? 4. I used to curse God that I died in my sleep at Malmesbury and not on the field at Brunanburh, at the edge

of pagan Guthfrith's sword; Papa Leo and Biscop Wulfhelm would have confirmed my cult within the year. 5. The Confessor still rankles with me; no English king, but a cringing stooge, hostage of the Bastard. His saintliness was fear and lack of virility; 6. The kingdom was Godwine's, rihtcynnes englisc, father, and Harald, his son.

The method of the poem is to provoke reflection on the nature of England and Englishness by provocation and paradox. The poem's epigraph is taken from 'The Battle of Brunanburh', a poem preserved in the entry for the year 937A.D in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (1995: p. 122) and might be translated, 'Angles and Saxons came over the broad ocean, seeking Britain. These glorious warriors defeated the foreigners and won a land'. This text, appropriated from one of the foundational texts of the English language, is a direct challenge to obfuscatory hegemonic concepts of the Union as a voluntary partnership or association (the *United Kingdom*), as it makes clear that 'Englishness' in the Britain Isles was from the start a military, imperial and colonial project predicated on the subjection and dispossession of the original *British*, who were of course, 'Welsh' (the word 'Welsh' is derived from the Old English 'wealh', meaning 'foreigner'). The evidence of 'The Battle of Brunanburh' unequivocally demonstrates that almost five hundred years after the original semi-mythic invasion of Hengist and Horsa, the English understood their ongoing expansion in the land as part of their 'manifest destiny'.¹⁸ Moreover, the epigraph's juxtaposition with the titles

¹⁸ 'Manifest destiny' was a term coined by John O' Sullivan in his essay 'Annexation' in the *Democratic Review*, (July/August) 1845, in which he argued for the annexation of the Republic of Texas in to the Union on the quasi-religious grounds that 'Providence' had demonstrated it was the W.A.S.P. United States' 'manifest

‘Godspel’ and ‘euangelium’ (meaning ‘Good News’ in Old English and Latin respectively), allows an interpretation of the epigraph’s deployment as celebratory and triumphalist. The poem apparently endorses Æthelstan’s imperial-nationalist project even as it exposes it, challenging both left and right and containing the implication that the poet might be asserting a ‘third way’.

Æthelstan’s advice to Oswald is framed from the lofty perspective of the monarch and culminates in an exhortation that English Heritage might endorse:

12. Plant your dead around the
belltower in the green turf of the graveyard:
remember them, venerate their memory
and their deeds. (p.19)

However, the following gospel is very much written from below. In ‘Incipit euangelium secundum Wat Tyler’ (p.20-21), the eponymous revolutionary gives an account of his role in the Peasants’ Revolt, in which he regrets that he did not kill the boy-king Richard II (‘I should have [...] stuck the boy’s head on a pole’), contemptuously dismisses the monarchist ruling class (‘purpled pissers into [the] plutocrat pisspot’), asserts that an implicitly ‘just’ king would be obliged to lead his people in a revolution against ‘Westminster’ and concludes by threatening king Oswald with ‘scaffold and hatchet’ should he ‘oppress’ his people or ‘lead them astray’. In *OBOH&E*, historical events and historical characters are re-imagined

destiny’ to continue to expand in the North American continent. The coinage was adopted in mainstream usage and was used to justify the genocidal Indian Wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

to express a counter-hegemonic endorsement of nationalistic, class-conscious revolutionary violence that challenge the orthodoxies of right and the ‘progressive’ left.

The synchronic & synoptic vision of the works

OBOH&E adopts — within and across its various component sections and poems — a synchronic and synoptic vision of England. The conceit of *OBOH&E* is that fifteen hundred years of English history, literature, language and culture in these islands are conflated so that whole period effectively *exists simultaneously* (synchronically) and can be *seen together* (synoptically) as a unity rooted in, but ultimately transcending *linear* time. Thus 7th century Oswald, 14th century John Ball, the 19th century Duke of Wellington and 20th century Peter Mandelson are deployed in ensemble and Old and Middle English words and forms are incorporated into modern English to create a syncretic idiom. *OBOH&E* are excerpts from a reimagined vision of the nation that contains everything that England is and has ever been, with the intention of provoking reflection on the questions, ‘What is England?’ and ‘Who are the English?’ Diachronic divisions of English history (early mediaeval, late mediaeval, early modern) and language (Old English, Middle English, Modern English) are acknowledged, but rejected as organising principles because of their inevitable tendency to alienate the past from the present via fragmentising categorisations that stress distance and discontinuity rather than proximity and continuity.¹⁹ The effect of these taxonomies is to present older historical periods as distant and alien (‘the past is another country’) and therefore irrelevant. The intention of *OBOH&E* is to challenge the selective diachrony of hegemonic narratives by positing a synchronic vision that provides the basis for counter-hegemonic assertions and arguments.

¹⁹ Diachronic — ‘through time’. Diachrony insists on a linear, sequential view in which discrete periods follow each other with the emphasis generally given to the differences between periods rather than similarities.

Another way in which *OBOH&E* challenges overarching national narratives is via a focus on parochial landscapes and local histories, often informed by personal experience. Patrick Kavanagh (2003: p. 237) makes a distinction between ‘provincial’ and ‘parochial’ art:

Parochialism and provincialism are [direct] opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis — towards which his eyes are turned — has to say on any subject. [...] The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism — Greek, Israelite, English [...] Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals.

OBOH&E are parochial books in Kavanagh’s ennobling sense. By cutting trajectories into the defiantly and definitely local — in one case the history and significance of a single *tree* (‘Old Adam’, Ely, 2015: p. 85) — there is a sense in which the local (the ‘parish’) can communicate the living essence of the larger (national) entity and thus stand as synecdoche for it. However, the assertion of the primacy of the parochial is not merely another way of stating the importance of finding the ‘universal in the particular’, but to acknowledge that the larger entities of nationality and nation are always informed, mediated and produced through a lived, local experience which shapes the perception — via imagination and mythopoesy — of that larger entity, which exists in multiple dialectical relationships with its ever-shifting parishes. Of course, there is a counter-hegemonic aspect to the deployment of the parochial — by refusing centrally imposed values, parochial art resists the domination of the metropolis and thus avoids the capitulation of the provincial.

In *OBOH&E*, the dialectic between the parochial and national is enacted via the distinctive synoptic/synchronic point of view, in which local and national events are juxtaposed and interwoven. The opening sequence of *Englaland*, ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’ (pp. 9-40) is perhaps the best example of the technique. Putting its cards firmly on the table with its epigraph from William Faulkner (1996: p. 85) — ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’ — the opening poem (p. 11) narrates a summary of the battle from the point of view of an unnamed English boy who follows the fleeing ‘shipmen’ in the hope of gathering spoil. In this sense (as transgressive ‘moocher’ in a potentially threatening landscape) the boy is a precursor of the quasi-autobiographical voice which emerges in the second poem, in which my teenage persona is imagined roaming the Tinsley landscape (‘We[o]ndune’ – Simeon of Durham’s (Ed. Stevenson, 1987: p. 68) designation of the battlefield, now a golf-course), equipped for poaching, bird-nesting and archaeological ‘nighthawking’:

On Weondune, holy hill, grass-slope greased with
guts, I creep with purse-nets, metal detector,
the Observer’s Book of Bird’s Eggs. I peg and
dig and delve. (2015: p. 12)

Like the boy in the previous poem, this autobiographical persona searches for spoil in a landscape characterised by conflict, but in his case the danger is posed by the representatives of the landed interest — ‘golf club groundsmen’, ‘farmers’ and ‘[game] keepers’ — who chase him from their ‘STRICTLY PRIVATE’ land with ‘shouts’ and ‘torchbeams’. The synchronic and synoptic view of the landscape is further intensified by several allusions to Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* (1971) in which sequence Hill juxtaposes and conflates his own boyish persona with that of the eighth century Mercian king, Offa. Poem XIII of

Mercian Hymns (p. 16) quotes an inscription from a coin minted by Offa — ‘*Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae*’ (‘King of all England’). In poem II of ‘The Battle of Brunanburh’ (Ely, 2015: p. 13), the boy succeeds in making off with a coin of Æthelstan’s that is impressed ‘*Rex totius Britanniae*’ (‘King of all Britain’ — which status Æthelstan’s success at Brunanburh enabled him to claim), a proleptic comment on the dominant role of England within the concept of Britishness. Further allusions to *Mercian Hymns* might be seen in the boy’s triumphant escape from agents of the landed interest at Tinsley, not only with coins, but with poached ‘conies’ and stolen ‘partridge’ eggs, which feat might allow him to be hyperbolically interpreted as a ‘staggeringly gifted child’ (Hill, 1971: p. 29) and in the characterisation of the improvised poacher’s pocket sewn into the lining of boy’s parka as ‘*opus anglicanum*’ (Ely, 2015: p. 13) a tongue-in-cheek reference to the high quality embroidered work of mediaeval England to which Hill alludes in poem XXIII (p. 23).

The deployment of xenoglossia

A distinctive aspect of the synchronic/synoptic deployments of *OBOH&E* is the use of xenoglossia — incorporating different languages, most notably Old English, Middle English, Latin and dialect forms, into ‘Standard English’. Several intentions inform these deployments:

- To reinforce the synoptic/synchronic mode of the presentation of history and culture by incorporating these ‘dead’ or neglected languages into a new idiom that provides lexical and linguistic reinforcement to the books’ historical affirmations.
- To mount a paradoxical counter-hegemonic provocation that alienates the English past from its present, thus challenging the dominant, organicist view of the continuity

of English history, whilst simultaneously affirming the value of that alienated past, weaponising it against hegemonic concepts of England.

- Latin is deployed to signal the importance of pre-Reformation Catholicism to the argument of the books and as a mute argument against the stripping out of classical languages from state schools in this country which has rendered key texts of the English past inaccessible to all but a few privately-educated specialists.
- Dialect is used to affirm the parochial, but also to demonstrate that dialect forms, (often looked down on as uneducated deviations from the ‘Queen’s English’) are often residual forms of earlier languages. Yorkshire dialect, with its flat vowels and emphatic consonants (‘water’ pronounced ‘watter’, ‘night’ as ‘neet’), enunciated diphthongs (‘grease’ as ‘grey-ass’) and distinctive vocabulary (‘wick’, ‘laiking’ — ‘infested with’, ‘playing’) represents the persistence of Old English and Norse forms that entered the language over a thousand years ago. My use of dialect is an affirmation of the deep-rooted continuity of the parochial present with its national past and an act of resistance against the hegemonic language projects of Standard English and Received Pronunciation.

‘Hours of the Cross’, (Ely, 2013: pp. 41-46) exemplifies the use of xenoglossia in *OBOH&E*. The poem’s Latin subtitle, ‘Patris sapientia’ (‘The Wisdom of the Father’) is the first line of a hymn in the liturgical ‘Hours of the Cross’ and signals a triple affirmation of Catholicism in the use of Latin, the deployment of the Book of Hours structure and the implied theistic piety of the content. The first stanza, written in the voice of Robin Hood re-cast as a revolutionary social bandit, incorporates a range of Middle English words and spellings (‘robenhode’, ‘branysdale’, ‘syng’, ‘blode’, ‘grene’), Old English words (‘englisc’) and Latin (‘sicarius’, ‘umbilicus’) in the space of twelve short lines (p. 43):

*i, **robenhode**, englisc of **barnysdale**,
cattle thief, **siccarius**, brigand
of the great north road,
from the dungeons of the empyrean
syng the travails of my people.
swindled from **blode**, exiled
on our own **grene** earth,
severed the dreaming **umbilicus**.
a muzzled bear-whelp
with plier-pulled claws, giddy
on the hotplate. stop dancing
and feel the burn.*

The poem's idiom is a form of outlaw back-slang, resistant to centralising standardisations. The radical intent behind the deployment is signalled by Robin Hood's closing wake-up call to the English — symbolised as a dancing bear, disarmed, tamed, enslaved, humiliated, dancing to their master's tune — 'stop dancing and feel the burn'.

In the third stanza of the same poem, terminology derived from mediaeval Catholic theology, the language of the Wycliffe Bible, Latin and Old English are deployed to critique the monarchy (p. 44):

on the eve of **christes mass**
1167 **joon cyning** was whelped
in the palace at oxford

on seventeen silken mattresses,
each one softer than the last.
yet **marie, jhesu's modir, leide hym**
in a cratche in the shit of beestys.
the **spotless** shall be praised
and **synne's** right is **nout** but work;
adam and his **wijf eue**, delving
and weaving, not less the **cyng**
and his **quene. a deo rex, a rege lex?**
ballocks! the law is from god,
and the king is from the people.

The polemical contrast between the birth-poverty of the 'King of the Universe' and the luxury of the venal king John ('joon cyning') is further reinforced by the reference to 'adam [...] and eve [...] delving and weaving', which alludes to the levelling maxim of the Peasants' Revolt — 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was the gentleman?'. 'A deo rex, a rege lex' ('the king is from God and the law is from the king') was a maxim embodying the belief in the Divine Right of Kings propagated by the Stuart kings James I and Charles I. The execution of the latter is implicitly rehearsed in the abusive Old English 'ballocks!', which is followed by an affirmation of popular democracy ('the king is from the people') rooted in a form of transcendental justice ('the law is from God').

Dialect is deployed more occasionally in *OBOH&E*. 'Big Billy' (2015: pp. 89-108) deploys dialect to signal the time and location (1920, the Yorkshire coalfield), in order to demonstrate the affinity between Yorkshire dialect and Old English and to affirm the

working class communities that still use it. A dead dog is described as ‘**ligged** (lying) lacerate limp’; the eponymous Big Billy is described as ‘**brussen**’ (brash, confident, powerful); Whalehead Jones ‘**chelps** (shouts, usually with a complaining or provocative edge) out a challenge’, is described by Billy as a ‘windy **chuff**’ (a dismissive Yorkshire catch-all, with the connotation of being full of hot air) and is referred to by another character as a ‘**pillock**’ (simpleton or idiot, deriving for the Norse ‘pillicock’, meaning ‘penis’). Dialect terms like these are interwoven with Standard English, slang, archaisms and kennings to create a hybrid idiom that is effectively a ‘modern Old English’:

Big Billy, man-masher, merciless mauler,
straddled the field-flopped fist-fraud
and trumpeted his triumph. ‘This **ten-men**
tough will trade his terror no more.
Give best to Big Billy, bane of **big shots**,
feted **fettler** of the feated feast-field!’
The fight-flushed rabble roared their approval
and **nobbings** rained down for the noble **knuckler**.
Ty’s boy brought a bucket, brimful from the spring:
sponge-swabbed, slash-stitched
collared and cologned, the cobblestone-clobberer,
pockets packed with coined applause,
brought the boys to the brawling beerhall
to hoist and holler, get **hammered**. (pp. 97-98)

In 'Big Billy', dialect is deployed to support a counter-hegemonic endorsement of working class violence — feared and despised by the liberal-left middle classes and feared and manipulated by the right. Further, by its association with *Beowulf*, one of the foundational works of English Literature, Yorkshire dialect and the working class communities that still use it are endorsed and enobled.

The use of polyphony & heteroglossia

M.M. Bakhtin (1981) argues that the novel has superseded poetry as the dominant epic form. In contrast to epic poetry, which he asserts is an ossified genre concerned with the literary memorialisation of past events separated from the time of both author and audience by 'an absolute epic distance', Bakhtin sees the novel as 'the sole genre that continues to develop' (1981: p. 3), characterised by an approach to the past that is not dominated by or separated from it, but which illuminates and transforms it by means of 'experience, knowledge and practice' (p. 15) and as such, reflects and addresses contemporaneity. The novel as 'modern epic',

[...] has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time because it best reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making.

(p. 7)

In Bakhtin's schema, the epic novel addresses and expresses the present by fluid and dynamic appropriations of a past which itself is capable of multiple interpretations. In contrast, the traditional epic poem deploys authorised versions of the past to inform and shape an established present. The epic novel is radical, democratic and dynamic. The traditional epic poem is conservative, autocratic and static. For Bakhtin, a traditional epic poem is

characterised by ‘monology’ — a single voice and point of view which dominates the narrative and which controls and schematises the utterance of characters, limiting them to roles which serve the dominant voice. Characters and alternative points of view never achieve independent expression and the whole piece is monolithic, intending a single meaning and interpretation. In contrast, the epic expression of the novel is characterised by *dialogy*, including the articulation of a range of voices (polyphony, or polyglossia), a variety of registers and forms of expression (heteroglossia) which are each given independent and competing utterance capable of multiple interpretations. Of course, Bahktin’s monologic characterisation of epic poetry is essentially based on pre-modern models and fails to take into account modernist versions of the epic which are indisputably characterised by elements he characterises as novelistic.²⁰ The novelistic epic expression of *OBOH&E* lies within this Modernist tradition.

Polyphony

Oswald’s Book of Hours contains poems written in voices that include Protestant martyr Thomas Haukes, the revolutionary priest John Ball and various quasi-autobiographical personae. In *Englaland*, the myriad voices include those of Peter Mandelson, the Duke of Wellington and the Viking mercenary Egil Skallagrimson. Although some of these voices are monologically shaped to serve my intentionality (for example, Wellington and Mandelson in ‘Scum of the Earth’ are caricatured to represent two equally discredited forms of ‘Englishness’), the majority are given authentic voice, providing a polyphonic interplay which creates *OBOH&E’s* novelistic dialogy.

²⁰ For example, T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1954), Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* (1966), William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (1963) and Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* (2009).

‘Septem psalmi paenitentiales’ (‘The Seven Penitential Psalms’; 2013: pp. 49-57) is a sequence of dramatic monologues — confessions to various Catholic priests — in the voice of the highwayman John Nevison.²¹ The poem’s subversive conceit is that Nevison is a devout Catholic. However, in his confessions he flaunts his criminality and treats the priests with hostility and contempt, ordering one to, ‘Shut up and listen’ before going on to justify his theft of ‘ten pounds and a set of silver spoons’ from his father with the self-serving comment, ‘The old man’ll/be alright./There’s plenty more/where that came from’. After expressing some sentimental regret about the ‘poor horse’ he stole and killed he ends his confession with an apparently heartfelt prayer:

[...]
Lord,
rebuke me not in thine
anger. Blessed Mary,
ever virgin, pray for me. (p. 51)

Nevison’s rejection of priestly authority is signalled not only by the tone and content of his confession, but by the way he directs his confession directly to God and the Virgin.

Confession is traditionally directed to the priest — ‘forgive me Father, for I have sinned’.

Nevison, however, will not submit to any earthly authority. In his confessions he narrates vignettes in which he parades his misogyny, betrays his friends, gloats over a murder he has committed and expresses regret that he didn’t commit another — ‘I’m not sorry./My only

²¹ The Penitential Psalms are: Psalm 6 – ‘Domine, ne in furore tuo arguas me’; Psalm 32 – ‘Beati quorum remissae sunt iniquitates’; Psalm 38 – ‘Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me’; Psalm 51 – ‘Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam’; Psalm 102 – ‘Domine, exaudi orationem meam, et clamor meus ad te veniat’; Psalm 130 – ‘De profundis clamavi ad te’ and Psalm 143 – ‘Domine, exaudi orationem meam: auribus percipe obsecrationem meam in veritate tua’. In Catholicism, these Psalms are used as a liturgical and devotional basis for penitence and contrition.

regret is I didn't finish/the brother' (p. 56). Even as he stands on the scaffold he boasts about his crimes, threatens the justice system with vengeance via his associates, prays for the destruction of his enemies and exults in his self-flattering view of himself as a latter-day Robin Hood, before ending with the manipulative exhortation, 'God save the king and his commons' (p. 57) — an outrageously disingenuous attempt to co-opt the monarch and the public as his supporters over and against an imputedly corrupt justice system.

The voice given to Nevison in this sequence presents him as a cynical, selfish, violent, exhibitionist criminal and murderer, as he was in life. There is no attempt to romanticise him or to mitigate his attitudes, crimes and persona. However, the more 'positive' aspects of his persona — his paradoxical chivalry, embodied in the regret he expresses for the hurt he caused to women, animals and the poor, his apparently genuine Marian piety, his indulgence of children and rejection of authority — combine to characterise him as a social bandit, whose criminality is forgiven, endorsed and celebrated by the class and community to which he belongs, because he challenges and provokes the representatives of power — which they hate and resent. The framing of the sequence with motifs and structures taken from traditional Catholicism effectively co-opts the church into this endorsement — not the church of 'priests' who are likely to be corrupted by power — but the incorruptible, eternal church of symbolised in the person of the Virgin Mary — implicitly 'of the people' and in resistance to the Protestant, capitalist, state.

Heteroglossia

There is overlap between the Bakhtinian categories polyphony and heteroglossia. Both terms refer to the range of expressions, points of view and registers that characterise dialogic expression. However, whilst polyphony indicates the 'many voiced' nature of dialogic

expression, heteroglossia describes the diversity of that expression. It is possible (theoretically at least) for a work of literature to express polyphony that is not fundamentally heteroglossic if that polyphony expresses similar utterance, is couched in similar idioms and acquiesces or submits to the dominant conventions of its context. However, the range of non-standard and oppositional registers deployed in *OBOH&E* include the deployment of challenging epigraphs, xenoglossia, dialect, colloquial and working class idioms, giving expression to criminal, subversive and revolutionary voices, the assertion of the parochial, carnivalesque violence, profanity and obscenity, appropriations of the Bible, Catholic devotional texts and prayers, references to popular culture and various pastiche forms. ‘Irish Blood, English Heart’ (2015: pp. 165-170) provides the basis for an exemplification of the counter-hegemonic uses of heteroglossia in *OBOH&E*. Although narrated and controlled by an omniscient narrator who seems to be an authorial persona, the potential for hierarchical monoglossic expression is undermined from the start by the fact that the title of the poem is appropriated from Morrissey’s song, *Irish Blood, English Heart* (1995) in which the singer condemns British imperialism in Ireland and affirms his Anglo-Irish heritage, implicitly regarding the defining quality of his hybrid identity as a propensity for militancy, self-assertion and violence:

Irish blood, English heart, this I’m made of

There is no one on earth I’m afraid of. (2015: p. 170)

The transgressive aspect of this affirmation is intensified by the poem’s epigraph, a quotation from Thin Lizzy frontman Phil Lynott’s introduction to the band’s nationalistic paean to Ireland, ‘Emerald’, on the *Live and Dangerous* (1978) album:

Is there anybody here with, uh, any Irish in them?

Is there any of the girls'd like a little more Irish in them?

(2015: p. 170)

These two appropriations from popular music prefigure and set up the poem's counter-hegemonic provocations by implicitly endorsing assertions of value based on violence, Irish nationalism, racially defined concepts of identity and leering sexism. Before the poem has even begun, both right and left branches of the British establishment have been goaded. However, the provocation is highly reflexive. It is not easy to characterise Morrissey and Lynott, with their impeccable anti-establishment credentials, as reactionary. Thematically, *Irish Blood, English Heart* is an affirmation of the Irish role in the British (English) imperial project and an exploration of the distinctive contribution of the Irish to England and Englishness. In introducing the poem in this way I seek to frame and shape its reading as it develops.

The first stanza presents excerpts from a thousand years of Anglo-Irish history. High cultural allusions to and quotations from the poetry of Spenser, Yeats and Montague are juxtaposed with references to Sky Sports, Coronation Street and the Wolfe Tones' paeon to Glasgow Celtic Football Club, 'Celtic Symphony'.²² Well-known figures from Anglo-Irish history — Walter Raleigh, Daniel O'Connell, Ian Paisley — are referenced along with lesser known Irish voices — Sinn Fein's Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, IRA volunteer Francis Hughes, and UDA killer Stephen Irwin. The poem's politics are republican and anti-imperialist and in its apparent affirmation of Irish nationalism in general and Sinn Fein/IRA in particular, the poem

²² The Wolfe Tones, (2010). 'Celtic Symphony', from *Celtic Symphony*. Dublin, Celtic Connections.

adopts a posture that implicitly endorses political violence ('terrorism') against the British state and poses the question, 'What kind of Englishness is it that supports the Irish struggle for self-determination?'

The second section is autobiographical, personal and parochial, arising from my experience growing up with the children of Irish immigrants in my natal town of South Kirkby.

Heteroglossia in this stanza is expressed in a variety of ways, including: quotations from posters advertising a boxing match ('this Irishman really comes to fight') and a public meeting hosted by the SWP during the period of the 1981 Hunger Strikes which expressed 'unconditional but critical support' for the IRA; by the colloquial register ('*Irish?* We knew them as 'Catholics' only, each morning as we dawdled to school ...); by the use of slang and Yorkshire dialect ('docs', 'Taig', 'smackhead', 'nonce', '*thee* and *tha* and *Come on England!*'); and via the references to the (Catholic) wedding of my sister to her Anglo-Irish husband and the parallel Yorkshire marriage (in 926AD) of Ealdgyth, the sister of king Æthelstan, to Sihtric, the Dublin-Norse king of York, which quotes from the traditional version of the Catholic marriage ceremony ('*ego conjugo vos in matrimoniam*' — 'I join you in marriage'). The poem ends in a quasi-carnavalesque manner, imagining a working class wedding reception in a hired marquee. Towards the end of the evening, after the drunken revellers have danced absurdly to 'The Birdie Song'²³ and lewdly to the double-entendre laden, 'The Snake',²⁴ Morrissey, imagined as the hired entertainer, sings the song that is the title of the piece. The poem ends with a symbolic representation of the contribution of the Irish to England in the 'blood-dipped rose/efflorescing from emerald sepals' (p. 170).

²³ The Tweets, (1981), 'The Birdie Song'. London, PRT.

²⁴ Wilson, Al, (1974), 'The Snake'. London, Bell.

Heteroglossia in 'Irish Blood, English Heart' is deployed to in order to demonstrate solidarity with the anti-imperialist struggle in Ireland and to affirm the contribution of the Irish working class to the formation of England. In locating my narrative of the Anglo-Irish melting pot in the parochial context of South Kirkby, the mining town in which I grew up, I also affirm and give voice to the unruly class-conscious militancy of that community, linking Irish resistance to imperial exploitation with the historic resistance of mining communities to the British State. Finally, by linking my sister's marriage with that of Sihtric and Ealdgyth, I assert the living contemporaneity of Anglo-Irish hybridity as rooted in a past in which the whole of Yorkshire was once part of an Hiberno-Danish-English state that stood in opposition to the southern-based Wessex dynasty that began with king Alfred and in which the monarchical British state finds its earliest roots, thus affirming a neglected strand of English history and identity which undermines and challenges hegemonic narratives.

4. *Oswald's Book of Hours & England* and the Pastoral Tradition

OBOH&E are set in rural landscapes, are saturated with natural imagery, critique industrialisation and urbanisation and are ultimately predicated on a vision of a socially just, sustainable society in which humans live in harmony with nature and seek to conserve it. Accordingly, the distinctiveness of *OBOH&E* might be demonstrated by an attempt to position the works within the pastoral tradition. A comprehensive review of the pastoral is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead I will inform my exposition by using Terry Gifford's (2011) influential taxonomy. Gifford identifies three distinctive strands of the pastoral (broadly, poetry about 'nature'):

- Traditional *pastoral* poetry embodies and expresses escapist, a-political and a-historical attitudes to nature. Rooted in models derived from classical Greece and Rome, the poet imagines the countryside as a refuge to which the alienated townsman can resort — or for which he yearns. Rural life is presented as idyllic, free from the burdens and cares of urban life — alienated labour, exploitation, work, ambition and so on. However, the wilful escapism of the pastoral masks the actual social conditions that pertain in the countryside, leading Gifford (2011: p. 41) to see the term as a pejorative descriptor.
- *Anti-pastoral* poetry recognises that the pastoral's view of rural life is idealised and challenges both its escapism and its ideological blindness to the actual social conditions of rural life. Poets writing in the anti-pastoral tradition address and express what they see as the 'reality' of life in the countryside, addressing issues such as rural poverty, the grind of agricultural work and the exploitation of the rural poor. Gifford

(p.77) sees the anti-pastoral strand in English poetry as a conscious attempt to challenge and debunk ‘classic’ pastoral, in an attempt to find a voice that ‘does not lose sight of authentic connectedness with nature’ but which is determined to ... ‘[expose] ... the idyll’. He cites George Crabbe’s (Ed. Lucas, 1967: p. 53) ‘The Village’ (a polemical response to Oliver Goldsmith’s (2016, original published in 1770) alleged ‘pastoralisation’ of ‘sweet Auburn’ in ‘The Deserted Village’), as an example of the anti-pastoral:

Yes, the Muses sing of happy swains,
Because the Muses never knew their pains:
They boast their peasant’s pipe; but peasants now
Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough.

- *Post-pastoral*, Gifford’s third category, represents a paradigm shift within the wider genre. Embodying within it aspects of both the pastoral and anti-pastoral (affirming the value of rural life lived in harmony with nature whilst engaging seriously — politically, historically — with the social and economic realities of life in the countryside), the transformational aspect of the post-pastoral lies in a solidarity with nature which is expressed in the discourse of ecology and environmentalism. Post-pastoral poetry not only envisages humanity living in harmony with nature, but asserts the intrinsic value of nature — which must be defended and conserved for its own sake, independent of its interests and utility to human beings.

Although *OBOH&E* contain poetry that might be characterised as *traditional* pastoral (the *apparently* nostalgic sections of the ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’, for example) and anti-pastoral (the narrations of the destruction of lapwing colony and the ploughing up of the

common in the same poem), it is in an exposition of the works' post-pastoral dimensions that their distinctiveness is best demonstrated. In a discussion of Ted Hughes as the paradigmatic post-pastoral poet, Gifford (pp. 138-153) identifies 'six qualities' of his work that 'might provide a definition of ... a post-pastoral poetry':

1. The characterisation of nature as a 'dynamic tension of elemental forces' (p. 138). In this formulation, Gifford seems to be referring to nature's Heraclitean cycles of life and death.
2. The paradoxical recognition that humans are part of nature, but partially estranged from it by virtue of their particular self-consciousness (pp. 140-141).
3. The exploration of the paradoxical affinity/estrangement of 'human nature and external nature' (pp. 141) via *mythic* expression.
4. The affinity between nature's cycles of birth, life, decay and death and the human capacity for "crying" [and] "hope" (p. 142). This rather elusive concept seems to refer to the potential for humanity to overcome its alienation from nature by finding its meaning in the context of 'larger natural processes' (p. 143).
5. The fifth dimension of Hughes's post-pastoral is expressed by Gifford's (p. 145) formulation,

'if culture, individual human life, animal and bird life, and the working of weather on landscape are parts of an interactive whole, then it is possible to express this relationship through interchangeable images'.

By this Gifford seems to intend that Hughes's intuition of the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world is so embedded that it comprises and might be poetically expressed as a kind of cosmic metonymy in which (for example) 'the growth and decay of human activity [can be seen as] enacting long term natural processes' (p. 145).

6. The final dimension of Gifford's definition of the post-pastoral arises from his observation that Hughes's poetry does not simply 'observe' in a detached way the interrelatedness of humanity and nature, but flows from his conscious participation in that interrelatedness, as a farmer, fisherman and environmental campaigner (p. 145-153) — post-pastoral *poetry* arises from post-pastoral *praxis*.

OBOH&E does not easily fit with Gifford's schema, because its epic scope is defined primarily by history — not, as in Hughes's case, by existential and metaphysical concerns with the ontological status of humanity in the context of the 'unaccommodated universe'.²⁵ *OBOH&E* is content to accept its existential lot — its vision, positions, explorations and intentions are essentially political. Consequently, the first dimension of Gifford's Hughesian post-pastoral is barely addressed in *OBOH&E* — but is *assumed*. The estrangements addressed in *OBOH&E* are not the estrangements from cosmological understanding, nature and self with which Hughes generally concerns himself, but multiple estrangements from land, tradition and identity that are culturally defined and rooted in specific social and historical contexts. Accordingly, the post-pastoral dimension of *OBOH&E* is more complex and nuanced than Hughes's post-pastoral as taxonomised by Gifford. Nevertheless — and because of this — Gifford's schema provides a useful framework against which the post-pastoral distinctiveness of *OBOH&E* can be demonstrated.

²⁵ 'Unaccommodated universe' is a coinage of Ekbert Faas (1983) based on Shakespeare's lines in Act 3, Scene 4 of *The Tragedy of King Lear* (Ed. Bate and Rasmussen, 2007, p. 2045), '... unaccommodated man is no more but such a bare forked animal.'

In *OBOH&E* the identity of the English is predicated on their relationship with their land:

You are the people in the land

Know you are the people

Know it is your land. (2015: p. 199)

These assertions imply a renewed national and parochial consciousness, a challenge to centralising power and an implied future redistribution of the land. The poetic address to ecological themes is assumed and subsumed in this political thrust. In 'Looking for a Sign on Brierley Common' (2015: p. 63-64), the quasi-autobiographical narrator roams a degraded natural landscape seeking to connect with the past:

Looking for a sign on Brierley Common, I found
not white-tailed eagle, but black-back gulls,
squalling over ploughland; neither rune nor
gospel, but the hedge-splayed centrefold of
Razzle magazine ...

Chain-ripped sycamores, propped on vermilion
root discs, wigwammed ready to burn; ...
fag ends, beer cans, KFC; looking for a sign

—

On finding a ‘heart-shaped rock’ in a ditch near the site of the effaced megalithic circle at Ringstone Hill, the protagonist convinces himself that it is a fragment of one of the destroyed standing stones. Apparently convinced that Providence (‘a tongue-tied angel’) has led him to the rock, he experiences an epiphany that momentarily overcomes his alienation:

A heart-shaped rock, dumped ditch-side at
Ringstone. Rain-rinsed, ploughshare-
scored, beginning to slime with moss, a
tongue-tied angel from the mute neolithic.
Knees buckling, follicles lifting, a beat of
recognition: *Here am I*. And under the
pouring sky, furze flamed across the hillside:
*the place on which thou standest is holy
ground.*

The epiphany is expressed in Biblical and prophetic terms. The protagonist has been *called* by the landscape. The rain of the ‘pouring sky’ evokes both the rain called down by Elijah after his destruction of the prophets of Ba’al (I Kings, XVIII: 44-45) and the eschatological rain that will accompany the Son of Man as he arrives on ‘the clouds of Heaven’ (Matthew XXVI: 64). The burning bush of the theophany experienced by Moses on Horeb (Exodus III: 2) is represented by the protagonist’s analeptic vision of furze flaming ‘across the hillside’ — as it did before the common was enclosed, when the close-cropped turf was studded with gorse. The protagonist’s response to his ‘call’ — ‘Here am I’ — is understood in rabbinic exegesis as indicating instant, unconditional obedience to God, reflecting Moses’ response in Exodus III:4 and echoing God’s self-description, ‘I AM THAT I AM’ (Exodus III:14). The

final italic phrase of the fourth stanza is appropriated from Exodus III:5, and affirms one of the central messages of the book: that the land, in its natural, historic and peopled aspects is 'holy' — that is, has intrinsic value and should not be despoiled by intensive agriculture, development or pollution. Nor should it be degraded by the evacuation of the people from the land that effectively gives landowners carte blanche to exploit it as they wish, or by the historical amnesia that allows the continuity of the people in the land to be forgotten and thus contributes to diminishing its value. In these affirmations, the poem fulfils Gifford's second, third, fourth and fifth dimensions of the Hughesian post-pastoral in which mythic expression (3) overcomes alienation (2/4) to assert the fundamental unity of humanity, nature and landscape (5).

***OBOH&E* as 'guerrilla-pastoral'**

In the final verse of 'Looking for a Sign on Brierley Common', the epiphany has evaporated. The poem ends on a paradoxical note — at once devotional, quotidian and subversive — as the protagonist 'humps' his stolen relic, as heavy as a 'lamped roebuck' or a 'night-bashed sack of spuds' to the van, 'cradling' it as he would a 'shotgunned lurcher'. However, this verse exemplifies how the poem fulfils the second and sixth dimensions of Gifford's Hughesian post-pastoral, in which the protagonist's alienation from nature (2) is overcome by his praxis (6). The way the protagonist experiences nature is primarily transgressive — he is a trespasser and poacher, whose relationship with the landed power is defined by his defiance of that power and characterised by the conflict that flows from power's response to that defiance. However, the language and context of the poem combine to reframe and effectively sanctify the protagonist's transgressions. In trespassing in order to steal the 'heart-shaped rock', his *spiritual* estrangement from the land is annihilated by the same means he deploys to overcome his *physical* estrangement, imposed upon him by laws against poaching and

trespass — he simply ignores, defies and refuses to accept the authority that imposes that estrangement. Of course, trespass and poaching also provide the means whereby the protagonist overcomes his estrangement from *nature*, enabling him to develop an intimate knowledge and understanding of flora, fauna and landscape. The distinctive post-pastoral dimension of *OBOH&E* arises from the solidarity with nature which arises from this transgressive praxis. I have coined the term *guerilla-pastoral* to more precisely describe the post-pastoral expression of *OBOH&E*.²⁶ A ‘guerilla’ is a member of an organisation conducting irregular and asymmetric warfare against overwhelmingly superior power, initially in a rural context (Ho Chi Minh’s Viet-Minh, which liberated Indochina from Japanese, French and ultimately American domination, and Fidel Castro’s Movimiento 26 de Julio, which overthrew the Batista regime in Cuba, both established their strength in the countryside before taking their revolution to the cities). The militant tone and confrontational rural praxis that is re-presented and re-imagined in *OBOH&E* makes ‘guerilla’ an apt, if hyperbolic, descriptor of the works’ post-pastoral expression. In the final poem of ‘Kalendarium’, (2013: pp. 14-15) Oswald narrates an encounter between himself and a group of poachers:

... in my forest at gefrin we encountered low-born men
of our people, with bows and spears and hairy curs
with broad feet and well-clawed toes, which hackled
and spoiled to fight...

²⁶ I choose to use the term ‘guerilla-pastoral’ rather than ‘guerilla *post*-pastoral’ because the post-pastoral dimension is assumed and signalled in the engaged term ‘guerilla’. ‘Guerilla post-pastoral’ is also an inelegant descriptive term. However, guerilla-pastoral should be understood as a form of the *post*-pastoral — with Gifford (2011) and others I regard the pastoral as essentially escapist.

The defiance and threat posed by the armed trespassers even as they are confronted by royal power is symbolised by the aggression of their lurchers, whose ‘broad feet’ remain defiantly ‘clawed’ in a proleptic reference to the Norman forest laws which demanded that English dogs should be declawed — declawed dogs cannot develop the traction necessary to run and turn at speed and therefore cannot hunt effectively. Further, the trespassers maintain their defiance even when ‘kneeled at sword-edge’ by the king and his cronies, boldly asserting, ‘...it is no synne for an englisc-manne/to take a deer from his own landis forest’ (p. 15). Embodied in this assertion is the rallying call of anti-colonial movements worldwide — *this land is our land and everything in it*. As an ideal leader, king Oswald effectively endorses the revolutionary position of his ‘churls’ with the phrase, ‘i could not fault [them]’ (p 45), allowing an interpretation of him as a revolutionary leader in the mode of a Ho or Castro. Whilst provisionally endorsing Oswald’s leadership, the poem retains a class-conscious suspicion of his arrogant and superior manner (he refers to the poachers as ‘low-born men’, forces them to ‘kneel’ and accuses them of theft and ‘arrogance’). However, the fate of leaders who lord it over their people is explained by one of the ‘Swinish Multitude’ in the last poem of *Englaland’s* ‘Scum of the Earth’ (p. 58):

On Commons and Lords
embezzlers and frauds
shall Ball’s wrath be poured.

Tory and Whig
dancing a jig
from Tyburn’s rude twig.

Labour's arriviste pimps
gargoyled and gimped
by the workers they chimped.

Utopian yeoman-anarchism — ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’

The guerrilla-pastoral dimension of *OBOH&E* coalesces around an implied politics that draws on socialist and environmental traditions, but ultimately transcends them and moves towards visioning an alternative which might be summarised in another coinage — *utopian yeoman-anarchism*. This concept is best illustrated by an analysis of ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’ (pp. 189-199), the final poem of *Englandland*, in which that alternative vision inchoately emerges. Section IV of the poem partly arises from the life and work of the nineteenth century radical poet Ebenezer Elliott, the ‘Corn Law Rhymer’, who achieved European celebrity in the first part of the 19th century with revolutionary poems including the ‘The Peoples’ Anthem’ (Morris & Hearne, 2002: pp. 76-7). ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’ incorporates Elliott’s radical, republican vision — ‘neither thrones/and crowns’ — into its expression and critiques Elliot’s career as a Sheffield iron master (‘...nor masters’ drop hammers/slamming and sparking, exploding men like bombs’), before alluding Elliott’s later, ‘back-to-the-land’ vision. After the failure of his steel-mill, Elliott retired to Hargate House on Brierley Common, where he lived as a small farmer — that is, a *yeoman* — owning his holding and farming enough land to provide for the basic needs of himself and his family. Using Elliott’s implied renunciation of industrial capitalism as a jumping off point, ‘The Song of the Yellowhammer’ visions a more general return to the land in which Langland’s vision of ‘a fair field full of folk’ is established, apparently by the revolutionary means symbolised by ‘Scawsby’ and ‘Mile End’, those topographical markers standing in lieu of the Pilgrimage of Grace and the Peasants’ Revolt respectively. By these means, the

landed power (symbolised in the characterisation of Frickley Hall²⁷ as St.Petersburg's Winter Palace) might be overthrown in the same way as was the Tsarist regime, allowing a re-population and revitalisation of the countryside (2015: p. 197):

Cut the vines
from the hoary crabtree;
plank the pens against the fox;
birth milk and mutton
in backyard barn and byre.
To each man his allotment.
With plough-turned fieldstone
gentled hands will build
once more, and lift the lintels of long tumbled halls.

The yeoman community is to be characterised by the abolition of class society — ‘to each man his allotment’. As such, the envisioned polity is *anarchist* in the Kropotkinian sense — small scale, co-operative, decentralised and self-governing.²⁸ However, pessimism about the potential of violence to achieve the desired end seems to undermine the vision. Those who storm Frickley's ‘Winter Palace’ are ‘blasted bloodless’ like ‘driven hares’ by the current yeomanry (landowners and their agents, the forces of the state). The failures of Orgreave and Peterloo alluded to underline that pessimism, and the following verse expresses not merely pessimism about the potential of revolutionary violence to effect change, but what looks like an objection in principle. Unlike ‘Stalin’, ‘Mao’, ‘Hitler’, ‘Truman’ and ‘buck-toothed

²⁷ Frickley Hall is the seat of a large country estate adjacent to Brierley Common.

²⁸ Peter Kropotkin's book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (2006) and several other works, many of which are collected in *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (2002) outline his particular anarchist vision.

Saloth Sar' (Pol Pot) the narrator shrinks from mass killing as *political* means — 'Too much blood, I can't commit' (p. 198). This unwillingness to follow the logic of the position through to its conclusion represents a kind of bad faith. The self-deprecation that closes the section — 'Not Samuel, but Jeremy, cursed of God: a prophet' (p. 198) —allows an alternative characterisation of the form of post-pastoral embodied in *OBOH&E*; not guerrilla-pastoral, but *prophetic-pastoral* — an engagement with the past with the aim of presenting a vision of the future which is nevertheless unable to identify or embrace the methods (the 'politics') that have the potential to make the vision a reality. The prophetic mode adopted is that of the 'latter prophet' Jeremiah whose curse was to be 'right' but ineffective, and not that of the 'former prophet' Samuel, whose clear-sighted and uncompromising willingness to use violence founded a civilisation.²⁹ It is this apparent lack of means that makes the *anarchist-yeoman* vision *utopian*. It also provides a further affinity with the political thought of Antonio Gramsci (Ed. Rosengarten, 2011: p. 365) who in a letter from prison to his brother Carlo wrote:

The challenge of modernity is to live without illusions and without becoming disillusioned ... I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will.

Imprisoned by Mussolini's fascist regime in a Europe dominated by totalitarian barbarism and soon to erupt into the savagery of World War Two, Gramsci's 'intelligence' told him that

²⁹ The term 'latter prophet' is given to the prophets with books of the Hebrew Bible attributed to and named after them. In English translations, the sixteen latter prophets are published consecutively, beginning with the Book of Isaiah and ending with the Book of Malachi. The 'former prophets' are characters from the 'historical' books of the Hebrew Bible who were called by God and played key roles in the foundation of Israel/Judah and the Israelite religion. Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha and others are counted among the former prophets.

the objective conditions for the socialist revolution he sought simply did not exist.

However, he (1971: p. 171) believed that,

..reality [is] a product of the human will [and] the man who wills something strongly can identify the elements which are necessary to the realisation of his will.

Even in the depths of despair, ‘optimism of the will’ allows humanity to identify the solutions to their malaise — even if the precise steps to realising those solutions are unclear or the obstacles seem insurmountable. The inchoate utopian yeoman-anarchism that is the underlying vision of *OBOH&E* embodies something of that Gramscian optimism.

5. Conclusion: the distinctiveness of *Oswald's Book of Hours & England*

I have demonstrated the distinctiveness of *OBOH&E* as politically engaged, epic explorations and affirmations of England and the English. However, all literary expression grows out of contexts and traditions that influence and shape it. This is reflected in the affinities *OBOH&E* have with several modern works. The address to England and the English, the deployment of popular forms such as the ballad and the use of dialect reflects Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack Room Ballads*. The sustained mythic engagement with the Anglo-Danish North and the clipped, assertive tone of some poems echoes Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*. The synoptic and synchronic vision of the books and their deployment of xenoglossia are also present in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*. John Montague's use of bricolage, sequencing, juxtaposition and the use of epigraphs in order to frame and shape his dialogic engagement with contemporary Ireland in the *The Rough Field* has many affinities with *OBOH&E*. Seamus Heaney's *North* shares many of the preoccupations of *OBOH&E*, most visible in its explorations of identity, nationhood and nationalism in the context of conflict, its rootedness in history and its complex relationship to the pastoral. Tony Harrison's subversion of the sonnet to provide vehicles for his poems about class in the 'School of Eloquence' and the class-conscious aggression of *V* are similarly congenial with *OBOH&E*.

Contemporary works that have affinities with *OBOH&E* include J.O. Morgan's *At Maldon*, which like 'The Battle of Brunanburh' evokes and investigates a tenth century battle. Paul Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake* deploys a comprehensive xenoglossia in his attempt to describe the English resistance to the Norman Conquest, as does Bob Beagrie's visionary Teeside epic, *Leasungspell*. The religious pre-occupations, mediaeval settings and formal diversity of Toby Martinez de las Rivas's *Terror* reflects similar qualities in *Oswald's Book of Hours*.

Finally, *The Sins of the Leopard* by James Brookes cuts a range of mythic trajectories into English history, politics and culture using techniques including xenoglossia, heteroglossia and synchrony.

However, the critical reception of *OBOH&E* clearly recognised that the books represented a new and distinctive voice in English poetry. Reviewing *Oswald's Book of Hours* in *The Yorkshire Post*, Ian McMillan described it as, 'a remarkable firework of a book ... amazingly elemental ... creating a new literary landscape' (2013: p.2). Writing in *Tribune*, Keith Richmond noted the 'passionately political, positively partisan' nature of the book and noted the emergence of a 'major talent' (2014: p.12). Sheenagh Pugh (2013) found the book 'mesmerising, [with] more power, energy, conviction, and sheer verbal exuberance ... than ... any other first collection I've read this year.' In *The Fortnightly Review* Peter Riley (2015) wrote:

Ely is foremost a poet in the sense of craftsman, of an unusual and possibly unique kind and it is his craft which coheres the outrageousness and cold beauty of this book [...] with scenarios at his command the likes of which you will not locate elsewhere.

Englaland received similar praise and recognition. Reviewing the work in *Magma*, Katy Evans-Bush described the writing as 'one of the richest languages currently at work in current UK poetry.' In *The Poetry Review*, David Wheatley (2015: pp. 113-15) characterised *Englaland* as a 'berserker's yawp of a long poem', containing 'lovely' writing despite its sustained engagement with 'history's cycles of violence'. Penny Boxall (2015) commented on the book's 'spellbinding effect' and Ian Parks (2015) wrote, 'in *Englaland* [...] Steve Ely

has done something remarkable'. Peter Riley (2015a) wrote that *Englaland* 'confirms impressively the unique position [Ely] has established for himself,' a viewpoint endorsed by Andrew McMillan (2015) who simply commented, 'No one else is writing like this'.

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