

Afterword: Old things with new things to say

This book has shown that things could talk in diverse ways in Anglo-Saxon culture and the interpretations of literary and material artefacts presented in this study illustrate the validity of ‘thing theory’ as a critical focus for our understanding of this period. My aim has been to offer a model of how we can record, reflect on, amplify and interact with nonhuman voices without distorting them. Instead of looking through the early medieval things treated in this study, as if they are windows into a distant time and place, I have demonstrated how swords, ships, pens, boxes, books, bodies, trees, crosses, columns and so on mesh meaning with matter and with acts of making and breaking. These things do not simply carry human voices across the ages but change them, sometimes reshaping or even subverting the messages intended by their original makers. By assembling words, ideas, bodies, materials and technologies together into a distinct whole, a *þing* develops a means of communicating independent of, but not entirely divorced from, the human voice. The concept of voice emerges from Anglo-Saxon culture as an attribute that is not simply imposed upon nonhumans but which inheres in their ways of existing and being in the world. Taken together, these five chapters have established that, in Anglo-Saxon England, humans at once used and relied on things to carry their voices. Early medieval patrons, craftsmen, owners, handlers and viewers did not talk over or about or for things, but talked *with* things. This was a human–nonhuman dialogue, a dialogue that did not end in 1066 but which has continued in the afterlives of Anglo-Saxon texts and artefacts and in the scholarship that has circled those lives. At the same time, this is not a conversation that can be easily contained by human discourse; when we talk with things, *something* always has eluded, and always will elude us. The fact that Anglo-Saxon writers and craftsmen so often employed riddling forms or enigmatic language balances an attempt to speak

and listen to things with a tacit recognition that these nonhuman *wihtu* often elude, defy and withdraw from us.

What are the outcomes of this study of thingness and what directions might further work take? What possibilities are opened up by continuing to connect thing theory with medieval studies and what problems could arise? By progressing from issues of time and change, to movement and assemblage, and, finally, breakage and failure, this book highlights both the potentiality and difficulty of taking a project such as this forward. While the final part of this book looked at how *things* break, how they fail to do what humans want them to do, the brokenness and failure of *theory* should not escape our attention either. Key theoretical concepts – agency, autonomy, subjectivity, objectivity, self, other, voice, body, age, gender, genre – have all been put under strain. These concepts have all played their part in the various branches of critical theory since the latter half of the twentieth century, but by applying them to things, mere things, we take such concepts to the limit of their meaning – that is, we stretch them almost to breaking point.

This is especially true when applying theory to early medieval things, where the gaps in our knowledge of this period prevent us from fully knowing our objects of study, making it difficult to say with absolute certainty how this thing was made, or what that thing was made from, or for whom it was made, or what it was made for, how it functioned, how it might function now, if at all. By claiming animacy or agency, vibrancy or voice, on behalf of things that, from a commonsensical human perspective, seem so inanimate and inert, so still and silent, we not only gain a new understanding of the things themselves but are forced to rethink the concepts we apply to them. This has implications for further, theoretically informed work in medieval studies. For instance, critics in the field of gender studies might be provoked into asking new questions about how women and men assert agency in medieval literature and culture; while those applying postcolonial theories to the Middle Ages might develop new takes on the voice of the subaltern in parallel with ideas about the voice or voicelessness of things; and proponents of critical animal theory may find rich areas of overlap in the treatment of nonhuman animals and the treatment of nonhuman artefacts (or indeed artefacts that used to be, or in some sense still are, animals) in the medieval world.

There is also a risk inherent in this sort of work; a risk that, once stretched to breaking point, these theoretical concepts may no longer work for us as they once did. In the face of such failure, how

should critics and scholars respond? Can we adopt new approaches? I have suggested throughout this book that the time we take to get to know things – and the time taken by things to reveal themselves to us – is of central importance. In the midst of an information age, driven by revolutions in digital technologies, knowledge can be created and shared rapidly, global communication made possible in a heartbeat, networks expanded beyond all comprehension. Such advances facilitate very fast styles of learning and teaching – from the immediate reproduction of images to the use of social media in classrooms – but they can also lead to reassessments of the merits of slower forms of scholarship and pedagogy. Our understanding of the ‘voice’ or ‘agency’ or ‘otherness’ of things will inevitably be shaped by the relative speed or slowness of our encounters with them. Multiple two-dimensional digital images, which can be summoned up, switched between and compared simultaneously, or computer programmes that speed up the processes of creation and decay, will provide us with very different concepts of activity and autonomy, life and death, speech and silence, than, say, prolonged or repetitive looking at an artefact in a museum, or a transcription made by eye and hand. Ongoing discussions of how we practise scholarship in the digital age, and the ways in which these practices enhance or obscure the lives of nonhumans, offer one way of taking theories of medieval things forward.¹

Underlying the idea of a ‘slow scholarship’ is the rising challenge to the frantic pace of contemporary academia. In *The Slow Professor* (2016), Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber argue that ‘approaching our professional practice from a perspective influenced by the Slow movement has the potential to disrupt the corporate ethos of speed’. More than a simple matter of slowing down, this manifesto is fundamentally an issue of agency. Slow Professors act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection and dialogue, and cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience.² There is an overlap, then, between the ‘agonizingly slow’ time that it takes for us to trace, follow, recognise and record the agency of things that at first seem stubbornly inert to our senses, and the kinds of agency we might need to cultivate as Slow Professors working in a fast-paced age.³ Like thing-power, this agency becomes a form of resistance, the ability to impede or redirect forces, changing our relationship with temporality by decelerating or even being still or silent and refusing to act.

The age in which we live and work also raises the question of what the things left behind by the distant, early medieval past

still mean today, in our own time, especially when academics are increasingly being asked to consider (and defend) the impact and relevance of our work. New materialists such as Coole and Frost have highlighted the pressing concerns that ‘accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter and, in particular, of living matter’. In addressing these concerns, we ‘unavoidably find ourselves having to think in new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature; about the elements of life, the resilience of the planet, and the distinctiveness of the human’.⁴ But what does this mean for critically and theoretically engaged medievalists? As I have made clear throughout this book, recent trends in thing theory – especially those taken up by medievalists – have drawn heavily upon Latour’s controversial argument that the dividing line between human subjects and nonhuman objects was more porous prior to the seventeenth century, meaning that medieval animals and objects were endowed with an autonomy that was largely misrecognised in the wake of Enlightenment empiricism. As we move forward, this and similar claims need to be weighed carefully against the fact that medieval cultures, even early medieval cultures like that of the Anglo-Saxons, did possess scientific ways of knowing – they contemplated the nature of the world, observed natural phenomena and tried to fit their observations into models of how the universe worked.⁵ I would argue that there is value in taking a long view and re-examining older, premodern models of how human beings studied and interacted with the rest of the nonhuman world because, from this vantage point, we might ask questions that address imperative environmental, geopolitical and technological challenges. If the boundary between human and nonhuman is more fluid, how can a ‘scientific’ observation and analysis of nature take place? Must human subjects always remain completely detached from, and in control of, nonhuman objects in order to ‘know’ them? Might we develop a more nuanced understanding of *scientia* – one that would help us to grasp pre-Enlightenment modes of cognition? Such research would not only be concerned with understanding the past; it also connects with important twenty-first-century concerns about how we, as humans, use and abuse the nonhuman world in our pursuit of knowledge and technological advancement.⁶

Nonhuman things embroiled in ongoing processes of creation or alteration, things that may be fragile or broken, accidental or malfunctioning things, things with a life and a voice independent of

their human makers or owners – things of the talkative kind challenge what we can say about them, what we can call them or classify them as. They challenge our very ways and means of knowing the world, the universe. One way forward is to take our cue from the riddles, which speak about a multitude of things – from the littlest bookworm to the light of the sun and moon – in a poetic language that tries to capture something of the beauty inherent in the fragility, life, death and revival of things while, at the same time, allowing for ambiguity and elusiveness. Indeed, I have shown in this book that Old English literary voices shape our conceptions of Anglo-Saxon things; in turn, these voices assume the shape of the things onto which they have been inscribed. It is this shape or half-shape, hovering between the shape of the speaking subject and that of the object speaking back, a shape always in the midst, however fast or slow, of reshaping, that provokes a response in us – that stirs our speech. We sense that there is something not yet dead, not yet still, not yet silent, not yet past, and this sense makes us talk – makes us want to talk – with Anglo-Saxon things.

Notes

- 1 Some of these practices were discussed and debated in the two panels on 'Slow Scholarship in the Digital Age' at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, 2014. I am grateful to Catherine Karkov for organising these panels and inviting me to participate.
- 2 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p. 11.
- 3 Bruno Latour describes the process of 'slowciology' in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Lowell Duckert, 'Speaking Stones, John Muir, and a Slower (Non)Humanities', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), pp. 273–9.
- 4 Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, p. 6.
- 5 For an accessible overview of Anglo-Saxon science, see R. M. Liuzza, 'In Measure, and Number, and Weight: Writing Science', in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 475–98.
- 6 I have started to address some of these research questions in my own scholarship of late. See, for example, James Paz, 'Magic that Works: Performing *Scientia* in the Old English Metrical Charms and Poetic Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 45:2 (Spring 2015), 219–43.