Old English Poetry and the Later Tradition

þæt yrfe   ēacencræftig,
iūmonna gold   (*Beowulf* ll. 3051-2)
(that heirloom immense/ of past men the gold)

<div align="right">Jacqueline Banerjee</div>

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot insisted on the poet's realizing that "the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route.*"[1]   Encouraged by Eliot's own ability (as well as Ezra Pound's) to look at large tracts of literary history from a wide perspective, few people of any literary inclinations would now disagree with him in principle.   Yet despite Pound's efforts in translating the Old English poem *The Seafarer,* from which we "can see more or less where English poetry starts,"[2] the first period of our poetic past is generally seen as an exception, and, in being treated increasingly as the preserve of highly specialized linguists and philologists, is becoming cut off from the mainstream of English literature.   Even those critics who seek to further our appreciation of the Old English works as poetry suggest that they require their own "critical framework,"[3] effectively isolating them all the more completely from the works of subsequent periods.   There seems to have been little change in critical attitudes, in fact, since W. P. Ker's pronouncement that "Anglo-Saxon poetry grows to a rich maturity, and past it; then, with the new forms of language and under new influences, the poetical education has to start again,"[4] and T. A. Shippey's more recent remark that "our modern tradition is totally alien to it."[5]   If anything, modern critics are more adamant on this point: Stanley B. Greenfield, for one, has expressed some scepticism about "attempts to find a continuous thread between our earliest English poems and those of later origin."[6]   However, to apply Eliot's proposition even to the very beginnings of our literature, to take up Pound's hint and look here for the first source of its development, would seem to be an eminently worthwhile challenge, giving the Old English poems themselves a new value, and helping us to have a better understanding of our literature as a whole.

The difficulties are obvious enough.   In the first place, as literary historians are apt to point out, the "hero and setting" of the longest and by far the most important of the Old English poems, *Beowulf,* "have nothing to do with England."[7]   Recent opinion seems to have settled on the first part of the eighth century as its approximate date of composition,[8] but it deals with a period about two or three centuries before, when the Anglo-Saxon migration into England was not yet complete; and it deals not with the Anglo-Saxons themselves, but with their Germanic ancestors, especially the Danes and the Geats, which were both South Scandinavian tribes.   It has been argued

<div align="right">1</div>

that the Geats are identifiable with the Jutes, who, according to Bede, invaded England in the fifth century along with the Angles and Saxons, but this has not actually been established.[9]   The warrior who is the hero of the poem and gives it its title was a King of the Geats, and the story of the epic therefore turns on the history of two dynasties which (supposing the Geats to be in fact distinct from the Jutes) have no place in the records of the English past.   On the contrary, it contains many references to feuds which are described in Scandinavian sources, and also to folklore and legendary of the Scandinavian and Icelandic past.   This material was doubtless handed down over the years by word of mouth, by wandering court minstrels like Widsiþ and Deor, whose stories are told in the two shorter Old English poems which bear their names, and which also relate to the Germanic past.

The claims for the oral-formulaic composition of Old English poetry put forward by some critics, and the claims for single authorship put forward by others, are to some extent reconcilable by the theory that the strongly stressed alliterative lines in which this oral material was carried eventually reached a certain man who was gifted enough to weave them together into one poem, and put this down in writing for posterity.   That a single author gave us *Beowulf* as we have it today is not much in dispute now, and it is powerfully urged by W. F. Bolton, who finds in the poem a definite shaping of the past "so as to point a moral meaning."[10]   And this of course is when the material ceased to be entirely foreign and became relevant to the English reader: for, as is the case with most of this early poetry, the textual evidence points to its Anglian origin, and its subsequent transcription into West Saxon, the dialect of the Saxon tribes who had occupied most of England south of the Thames, and which became standard Old English. Moreover, the *Beowulf* poet would not only have been an English poet writing in an early form of our language, with a number of the words and literary techniques which we still use today, but also a Christian, concerned to adapt his material to a culture already becoming recognizably our own.   Once this is understood, it becomes easier to see in this and the other Old English poems which hark back to the Germanic past, as well as those which relate more fully to the Christian present, the beginnings of English literature.

Language and style must be our first consideration, since these are common factors in Old English poetry, as well as the first impediments to appreciating its place in the tradition.[11]   Editors like to retain the þ and ð symbols, which the Anglo-Saxons took from the ancient Germanic characters or 'runes', and which they used more or less interchangeably for the 'th' sound.   (Some grammarians, like E. E. Wardale, like to use þ for the voiceless 'th', and ð for the voiced, but the scribes themselves did not make any such clear distinction.)   The æ ligature is another peculiarity of the script as we see it in our texts: it represented two vowel sounds, depending on whether it was long or short, which gradual sound changes later made it possible to write with a simple 'a' or 'e'.   For instance, in Old English the singular of *dagas*, 'days', was *dæg*, 'day'; the second person singular of the past tense of *eom*, 'am', was *wǣre*, 'were'.   And some editors also retain the symbol ȝ which represented altogether four sounds related to our

modern 'g'. Less noticeable perhaps is the absence of the modern letters 'j', 'k' (except as it is sometimes found at the beginning of *cyning*, 'king', and associated words), 'q', 'v' and 'z'. However, these few variations from the modern English script provide nothing like the obstacle to reading Old English that the early Japanese way of writing characters provides to reading early Japanese literature in the original.

As for vocabulary, here are some of the Old English regular verbs: *bītan*, 'to bite'; *rīdan*, 'to ride'; *rīsan*, 'to rise'; *wrītan*, 'to write'. The words for such basic activities survived the influx of French vocabulary at the time of the Norman Conquest, and so did many other important classes of words. Spelling may differ, partly because of the adoption of the remaining letters of the modern alphabet during subsequent years, partly because Old English was more of a phonetic script than our own, and partly because of the sound changes which have taken place since the Old English period. Thus we find *hwæþer*, not at first recognizable as 'whether', *cwicu* instead of the modern 'quick' (in the sense of 'alive') and *eal* instead of 'all'. Meaning may also have changed somewhat, so that *sculan*, which is the ancestor of the modern 'shall', implied a stronger sense of necessity and obligation then. And of course, a large number of the words which we find in Old English poetry have since dropped out of the language, or still appear in it only in unexpected forms. The need for the self-explanatory compound *lāstword*, for instance, was later obviated by the introduction of the Greek-derived 'epitaph', while *gār*, often found on its own or in compounds in Old English poetry, is no longer used to mean 'spear', but has come down to us as the first element of 'garlic'— literally, 'spearleek'. Looking up such words is not such a problem though, and can be fascinating.

The real problem lies in the major grammatical difference between Old and modern English—the inflection not only of personal pronouns and verbs, but of other types of words too. The Authorized Version of the Bible has familiarized us with the old-fashioned endings of verbs in the present indicative (*drīfan*, 'to drive', is conjugated [singular 1–3] *drīfe*, *drīf(e)st*, *drīf(e)ð*; [plurals]*drīfað*), and, moreover, past tenses like [singular 1] *drāf* and [participle] *gedrifen* survive in the present day 'drove' and 'driven'. But the nouns are more difficult, with three genders as in Latin, and altogether ten declensions. With these of course the adjectives agreed. Thus, even if the root of the word is recognized, its full meaning may be missed. When the Anglo-Saxon poet wanted to say that someone was a good king—as the *Beowulf* poet did about King Scyld of the Danes at the beginning of his epic (1. 11) and Beowulf himself near the end (1. 2390), he would write *þæt wæs gōd cyning*, using the masculine noun *cyning* in its nominative case along with the adjective *gōd* in its strong declension.[12] This is clear enough. But when the same poet wrote about the exploits of kings in days gone by, as he did in his opening lines, he used *cyning* in a different case (genitive plural *cyninga*) as well as *dæg* in the Dative plural (*dagum*) after the preposition *in*:

> HWÆT, WĒ GĀR-DEna   in gēardagum
> þeodcyninga   þrym gefrūnon . . . .
> (Lo! We of the Spear-Danes in days gone by/nation-kings' glory have

3

heard . . . .)

Obviously, changes in script and vocabulary, and even word order (which is closer to modern German or, for that matter, Japanese, than modern English) are less significant than the presence of inflections which carry important elements of the meaning.

Nevertheless, the amount of preparation required to read the Old English poems in the original is not as prohibitive as it looks at first. And the effort is well worthwhile. Bede, the great scholar and historian of this period, himself wrote that "verses, though never so well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing much of their beauty and loftiness."[13] This can be illustrated by setting a passage from *Beowulf* alongside a respected modern translation of it. It is a description of a sword used by Beowulf:

> þæt [wæs] wǣpena cyst,—
> > būton hit wæs māre   ðonne ǣnig mon ōðer
> > tō beadulāce   ætberan meahte,
> > gōd ond geatolīc,   gīganta geweorc.   (ll. 1559–62)
> > (that was of weapons the choicest,—/ except it was greater than any
> > man other/ to battle-play could carry,/ good and noble, the work of
> > giants.)

The modern version runs:

> Choicest of weapons worthy and strong,
> The work of giants, a warrior's joy,
> So heavy no hand but his own could hold it,
> Bear to battle or wield in war.[14]

This is close to the Old English in meaning, and transfers the Old English alliterative long-lines into lively modern rhythms; yet the very quality which makes it fresh and appealing, its jaunty energy, removes it from the earnest spirit of endeavour and the stark simplicity of feeling and action in the original. Besides, it is not through such translations that we can make contact with the language, of which the eloquence has now been acknowledged, and which, as one of my earlier remarks will already have suggested, "supplies the main stuff and substance of all English speech."[15]

Many a later writer consciously or unconsciously finds a special value in those tough (O.E. *tōh*) and telling (O.E. *tellan*) elements of the language which were its core at the beginning. As early as the fourteenth century it was clearly possible for the poets to make a deliberate choice between the old and the new in matters of language, and Langland, in his *Vision of Piers Plowman*, often preferred the old—although he would probably have been as well acquainted with the new as his contemporary, Chaucer. Down the ages some poets have used noticeably old-fashioned words for certain purposes, Spenser, for instance, to give medieval flavour to his romantic epic, *The Faerie Queene*; Keats, to associate his "Eve of St. Agnes" with the legendary 'long ago' with words like 'mickle' (O.E. *micel*, 'great'); Hopkins, to suggest the unchanging human condition when, in "The Caged Skylark," he uses the word 'bone-house' (straight out of *Beowulf*—*bān-loca*, literally 'bone-locker') to describe the restraints imposed by man's

physical body; and Hardy, to show his faith in the continuity of life, when he uses the word 'wight' (O.E. *wiht*, 'being') in his " 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'." The eighteenth century poets in general found the Old English stock an aid in managing the parallelisms of the heroic couplet without repetition: in three consecutive lines Pope could use three different words for 'horse'—not only 'horse' itself (O.E. *hors*) but also 'steed' (O.E. *stēda*), as well as 'courser' (O. French *corsier*).[16]

But apart from, and perhaps more important than, such specific occasions for calling on the Old English linguistic past, there is the tendency of our greatest writers to turn instinctively to the native stock at their most deeply felt moments. The resonance of some of Shakespeare's most memorable lines comes from an utter simplicity which stands out in the richness of his language: Lear's repeated 'never' (O.E. *nǣfre*), for instance, when Cordelia dies. Milton, the learned scholar whose style is so often Latinized, also used simple words derived from Old English for the climax of his great epic, *Paradise Lost:* "She plucked (O.E. *ploccian*); she eat (O.E. *etan*)./ Earth (O.E. *eorðe*) felt the wound (O.E. *felan, wund*)," 1X. 781–2. This is true of prose no less than poetry, and a good example here is the well-known passage at the end of David's account of the storm at Yarmouth, in *David Copperfield:*

> But he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I
> had looked for shells, two children—on that part of it where some
> lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been
> scattered by the wind—among the ruins of the home he had wronged
> —I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him
> lie at school.[17]

David's deep and complex feelings as he looks down at the body of his school-boy hero, who had gone on to cause so much misery to his own first childhood sweetheart, are movingly conveyed in words almost exclusively of Old English origin.[18]

Of course, the English language has been immeasurably enriched by its foreign borrowings: the Anglo-Saxons themselves set the trend by bringing in a number of words, mostly from the Latin (like *scōl*, 'school', seen above) with which they came into contact. Subsequent borrowing on a much larger scale, notably from the French, has given us the linguistic potential for the subtlety, nuances and variety of expression on which we pride ourselves today. Yet in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Constable Dogberry's attempts to cope with recent foreign borrowings like 'odious'—he says 'odorous' instead (III. v. 18)—are made fun of, and seen as affectations. What they show about Dogberry is correctly evaluated in plain Anglo-Saxon in his own final words in the play, "I am an ass" (V. i. 269). Shakespeare of all people could not have wanted to deny the great debt which English owes to French, Latin and other linguistic sources, but here as elsewhere he clearly expresses the writer's awareness of distinctions in the language between native simplicity and the imported material, and the fact that there are times when the former is to be preferred.

<p style="text-align:center">*　　*　　*</p>

Looking at Old English alliterative verse, we are bound to feel some doubt as to

whether the techniques of these unknown poets provided the same sort of vital source for later writers as their language did. But without insisting that English verse is "heir, at all costs and in all points, to Anglo-Saxon,"[19] it is nevertheless possible to show that Old English prosody (along with Latin, French, and perhaps indirectly Scandinavian and Celtic influences) was an important element in the development of modern English versification.

At first glance the metrical structure of *Beowulf* and the other poems of the period seems quite unlike that of later verse, except the verse of the so-called 'alliterative revival' of the Middle Ages: it appears to be very rigid and uncompromising, with its basic line divided by a cæsura or pause into two halves, each built around two strongly stressed syllables which would be alliterated in three out of the four cases. Since the opening formula makes use of more complex double alliteration, lines 4 and 5 are the first in *Beowulf* to fulfil this normal requirement. They describe how the Danish King Scyld (who, according to mythology, was found as a child floating in a boat, with a sheaf of corn at his head) came to power by subduing the nobles:

> Oft Scyld Scēfing   sceaþena þrēatum,
> monegum mægþum   meodosetla oftēah
> (Often Scyld with the sheaf with bands of damagers,/ with many
> kinsmen took away the meadbenches)

These lines seem regular enough, but, according to my reading,[20] they are comprised of nine and eleven syllables respectively, and elsewhere, lines may contain as few as eight, or as many as twenty or (although this would be unusual) twenty-one syllables. In fact, "substitution of equivalenced groups of syllables instead of rigid syllabic uniformity"[21] has been shown to be an important aspect of Old English verse. This is because, along with the strongly stressed syllables in each line, may be one or two more lightly stressed ones, and a more widely varying number of unstressed ones. Here, for instance, there is a lightly stressed syllable in the last half-line, since the first part of *setla* has only a secondary stress—such compounds with a short vowel in the second element would naturally take the strong stress on the first element—and three unstressed ones; this helps it to balance not only the first half of the line, but also the first half of the preceding line (which, syntactically, it completes), although not as precisely, of course, as *monegum mægþum* balances the stylistic variation *sceaþena þrēatum*.

There are two schools of thought as to whether the variation of unstressed syllables is meaningful: some scholars, like Robert Kispert, feel that the large number of such variations simply suggests "that half-lines were ordered unconsciously and at random"[22]; while others draw the opposite conclusion "that the combinations are not the result of mere chance."[23] To accept such variation as intentional, and to see how it contributes to the patterns of sound and sense in the poetry, leaves the way wide open for finding traces of modern metrical arrangements in the Old English poems. In the lines given above, for instance, we can find several potentially trochaic feet (*Scēfing, þrēatum, mægþum, meado*) and two dactylic (*sceaþena, monegum*). There are even the potentially iambic

feet, *Ȏft Scyld* and *ȏfteah* (since we know that *ea* before *h* was becoming simple *e* in Late West Saxon, we do not need to find a drop at the end of the latter).   But these do not seem to stand out, and it must be admitted that, since there were simply less words in Old English which were stressed on the last syllable (many of these came to us later from the French), there is little hint yet of the lilting iambic rhythm of later verse.   Nevertheless, there is surely something here (and little enough elsewhere) to account for the fact that the English poets, for all the influence which rhyme exerted on them in the following age, did not adopt the French system of versifying in which the number of syllables alone was counted, and the concept of metrical feet with different patterns and numbers of unstressed syllables was unnecessary.   Instead, the English poets continued to base their metre firmly on stressed syllables, and felt free to vary the number of unstressed syllables—to give us our characteristic modern English mixture, accentual-syllabic verse.

Of course, even though it was used for the two most important works of the fourteenth century, apart from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*—William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and the best of the medieval romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—the use of alliteration as the basic technique of sound-patterning in verse was gradually overtaken during the Middle Ages by the continental practice of rhyme; and while alliteration continued to be a favourite poetic device, only in a few cases have later poets been directly influenced by Old English metrics.   Curiously, these are among the poets who have been most important in shaping the trends of modern poetry.   Gerard Manley Hopkins, who greatly emphasized stress at the expense of uniformity of poetic feet, was the first.   He believed that his Sprung Rhythm was "the most natural of things" and linked it to the alliterative tradition in remarking that it went back to "the Old English verse seen in 'Pierce Ploughman'."[24]   Herbert Reed, the poet and critic, also made such a connection when discussing Hopkins's work, suggesting that "it is the virtue of most of our poets that they instinctively reject Italianate rhythms, and other foreign impositions, and fall into this natural rhythm."[25]   At any rate, Hopkins used it together with alliteration to produce effects which are sometimes strikingly similar to those of the Old English poets:

> Hím, after an hóur of wíntry wáves
> A schóoner síghts, with anóther, and sáves, ...
>   ("The Loss of the Eurydice")

Hopkins was most directly influenced by his study of the classical techniques of Welsh verse, with its more complicated system of alliteration and internal rhyme.   W. H. Auden however, was not only, in turn, influenced by Hopkins, but also more directly inspired by his Old English studies at Oxford.   In *Paid on Both Sides*, the 'charade' he wrote during 1928, which antedates his first full volume of poems published in 1930, he produced a number of passages of verse loosely based on the alliterative model, in which even the cæsuras are clearly marked by capitals not warranted by the punctuation:

Doomèd men awoke,

Felt for their guns, Ran to the doors,

Would wake their master Who lay with woman . . . .[26]

There is no doubt that the vigorous rhythms of the Old English verse were a factor in the development of his energetic but disciplined poetic voice.　Since Auden himself was so influential, on the basis of his early work, no less than on the basis of Pound's translation of *The Seafarer*, it may be claimed that "creating a twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon measure had a liberating influence on the rhythms of English poetry"[27]—in the modern age, that is.　Incidentally, the sharp definition of outline provided by the half-line units was, like his reading of Oriental poetry, important in shaping Pound's (and consequently much of modern poetry's) emphasis on the image:　"I once got a man to start translating the *Seafarer* into Chinese," said Pound.　"It came out almost directly into Chinese verse, with two solid ideograms in each half-line."[28]

　　Apart from these effects on rather recent individual poets, it can be argued that some very different types of later verse forms owe something to Old English prosody. Similarities to the ballad measure can be picked out in some Old English hypermetric half-lines; George Saintsbury has found good examples of such half-lines in a late Old English poem where the rhythm is, moreover, iambic.[29]　It would have been quite natural for the alliterative long-line to have broken up into its two shorter segments, once rhyme had been added to the middles and ends of the lines.　And it is likely that there is some link between these two manifestations of the oral tradition.　There is certainly evidence of a popular tradition of verse in which there was room for both longer recitals and shorter songs sung to the harp, for instance, in Bede's story of the early religious poet, Cædmon, who listened to them on the abbey estates of Whitby.[30] And blank verse, which can be found as far back as Chaucer (interestingly, at the beginning of his prose *Tale of Melibeus*) again demonstrated the English fondness for verse without rhyme.　This of course has yielded some of our greatest poetry from Marlowe through Shakespeare and Milton onwards.　On the other hand, the strictly patterned lines of the heroic couplet used in the eighteenth century shared with the Anglo-Saxon verse the use of cæsuras and parallelisms.　The beginnings of the heroic couplet too can be traced right back to the Middle Ages, and indeed can be seen as early as the twelfth century, even before Chaucer used it for the *Legend of Good Women* and most of *The Canterbury Tales*.[31]　In case the connections with blank verse and the heroic couplet seem somewhat tenuous, it is worth noting that A. J. Bliss has actually calculated that "no less than one line in sixteen in *Beowulf* is a pentameter" and has suggested that Pope's poetry as well as Chaucer's provides a good introduction to the Old English metrics.[32]

　　All this is not to argue for the direct evolution of such disparate verse forms from Old English prosody, which the scarcity of surviving verse from the tenth to eleventh centuries makes it impossible to substantiate; nor is it to ignore the foreign influences which, we know, often gave the impetus for establishing new forms.　But the assembling

of such probabilities does lend support to Eliot's proposition that the mind of a country, in the processes of literary change, "abandons nothing *en route*," and in so doing provides a corrective to the current presumption of "the death of Old English poetry."[33] It seems safe, in fact, to posit something quite close to the opposite—the very real contribution of the native prosody to the living tradition, in serving as a kind of "rhythmical 'bank', a repository of simple forms and procedures,"[34] on which it could draw.

<center>*</center>

It is remarkable that a body of verse which was written out of a common conglomerate past, apparently without any aim of originality, but rather with a deliberate recourse to remembered formulae, should thus have contained the seeds of so much of our later poetics. By way of conclusion to this part of my paper, and as an introduction to the next (on the subjects and themes of Old English poetry), I would like to quote a longer passage from *Beowulf* to illustrate the force and unmistakably poetic nature of Old English verse which must have made this inevitable. It is a description of the mysterious, desolate moorland where evil monsters live:

> Hīe dȳgel lond
> warigeað wulfhleoþu,   windige næssas,
> frēcne fengelād,   ðǣr fyrgenstrēam
> under næssa genipu   niþer gewīteð,
> flōd under foldan.   Nis þæt feor heonon
> mīlgemearces,   þæt se mere standeð;
> ofer þǣm hongiað   hrinde bearwas,
> wudu wyrtum fæst   wæter oferhelmað.   (ll. 1357–64)
> (They a hidden land / inhabit, wolf-haunted slopes, wind-swept
> headlands, / dangerous path over the fen, where the mountain stream /
> goes away down under the mists of the cliffs, / the flood under the
> earth. Nor is that far hence / in the measurement of miles, that the
> lake stands / over which hang groves covered with frost; / the wood
> fixed fast with roots overshadows the water.)

Some of these half-lines might be identified as formulae (*Nis þæt feor heonon*, for instance, with its characteristic negative structure[35]), but the description as a whole is wonderfully vivid. This is partly due to the resourcefulness of the Anglo-Saxons in coining compounds like *wulfhleoþu*—another feature of Old English which has come down to us, as witness the ease with which this is translated into a phrase containing another compound, "wolf-haunted slopes." This combines with the symbolic overtones of the passage to produce a suitably dim, mysterious and horrible setting for the wicked brood of Cain—which, in its larger context, contrasts dramatically with the brightness and cheerfulness of the meadhall where Beowulf will celebrate his victory over the forces of darkness.

<center>*</center>

In discussing the subjects and themes of Old English poetry, and how they too have contributed to our later literature, I take my cue from the comment made directly

above. The world of Old English poetry, peopled with monsters and fierce enemies, is generally described as exceedingly gloomy, reflecting the dourness of our ancestors who were still close in spirit to their Germanic forebears, and the grim realities of life in early times: *Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice* ('all is full of hardship in the realm of the earth').[36] But the adventures which take place in it are the archetypal battles of good against evil, which we find time and again, not always in entirely different forms, in our very greatest poetry; and the hardship is the timeless hardship which man must face on his journey through life, and which later poets would sometimes represent in much the same symbolic way. What is more, the spirit which informs it, whether it seems to be basically the heroic spirit of the pagan past, or more fully the embodiment of the Christian present, is the spirit of man which can triumph over the difficult conditions in which he finds himself. "If Old English poetry has any distinctive subject," says T. A. Shippey, "it is that of courage . . . ."[37] The Anglo-Saxon poets' greatest gift to the future was not a pessimistic, but a tragic vision of life.

The two characteristic strains of Old English poetry are usually seen as the heroic and the elegiac—the heroic being found mainly in *Beowulf* and the later Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, and the elegiac being found in a number of the shorter poems, notably *Deor*, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Although elements of Christian thinking may be found in both these strains, to the extent that *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are sometimes treated as Christian allegories, they do seem not only somewhat different from each other in their main inspiration, but also clearly distinguishable from a passionately religious poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, and from the other more run-of-the-mill Biblical or devotional poems of the period, which bear witness to the increasing hold of Christianity on England since St. Augustine's mission landed on the Isle of Thanet at the end of the sixth century.

It is in the heroic poems that the Anglo-Saxons' tragic vision is most fully illustrated. The basic narrative structure of *Beowulf* is rather simple: in fact Ker, who felt that the poem has been over-valued, wrote that "the story is commonplace and the plan is feeble."[38] As a young prince of the Geats, Beowulf was so brave and mighty that he was able to defeat first the monster Grendel, and then Grendel's avenging mother, for the Danish King Hroþgar; he was greatly honoured for his exploits both by Hroþgar and his own countrymen, and eventually became King of the Geats, whom he ruled wisely for fifty years. But the hero's most difficult challenge was yet to come, when he had to confront in his own land an angry dragon whose treasure-hoard had been disturbed. Although Beowulf managed to slay the dragon, with the support of one loyal young follower, he was fatally wounded by it and died soon afterwards, alone with his faithful follower. We learn that the dragon's hoard was simply reburied, and Beowulf's funeral takes place in an atmosphere of foreboding, as an unnamed woman mourner, no doubt Beowulf's widow, expresses fear for the future of the Geats after the powerful king's death.

From this outline, it does indeed seem that the story is "rather thin and poor."[39] How is it that another critic puts it on a level with *Hamlet* and other literary masterpieces,

calling for a "recognition of different strata in the extant poem"?[40]   In the first place, there is simply no mistaking the *Beowulf* poet's intention to endow the monsters themselves with deeper meaning.   Whatever their roots in ancient folklore (Kennedy feels compelled to call Grendel's mother 'the Troll-Wife' in tribute to her Scandinavian origins),[41] and however fabulous they appear to be, they clearly represent something which was still a real problem for the Anglo-Saxons, and remains relevant to us today: the outlying chaos which constantly impinges on the civilized world.   The monsters not only inhabit murky, hidden depths but are themselves dark, formless and furtive. Grendel is described as *deorc dēaþscua* ('a dark death-shadow'), 1.160, which comes *under misthleoþum* ('under cover of mist'), 1.710, to Hroþgar's towering well-wrought hall, Heorot, with its brilliant treasures and sharply defined horn-shaped gables (*Sele hlīfade / hēah ond horngēap*, 'the hall towered, lofty and horn-gabled', ll. 81–2).   An early hint that the *Beowulf* poet seeks to suggest the presence of such savage, destructive forces in man himself comes when, in the few lines between the first description of the hall, and the first account of Grendel, comes an indication of future troubles at Heorot and its final destruction by *human* subversion—the conflict between Hroþgar and his son-in-law Ingeld, and the eventual burning down of the hall over Hroþgar's nephew's head (ll. 82–6).   It is the reference to this tragic collision between members of the noble family which strikes the first sinister note after the glowing description of Heorot, and suggests to us right from the beginning that "Grendel could not have wrought such havoc unless the seeds of spiritless discord were not already present."[42]

But it takes the Christian element of the story fully to internalize in man himself the evil forces which the monsters represent.   Early in the poem Grendel is described in terms of a *feond on helle* ('fiend in hell') which had begun *fyrene fremman* ('to frame wickedness'), 1. 101, out of revenge for having been cut off from God's blessing and earthly happiness; in what is variously called Hroþgar's harangue, or homily or sermon, in lines 1700–84, he refers to Grendel as *ealdgewinna, ingenga mīn* ('the ancient enemy, my invader—not 'that' invader, which Kennedy has), 1. 1776.   This comes just after his advice to Beowulf that the noble man who achieves his ambitions should not let down his guard against *se þe of flānbogan fyrenum scēoteð . . . . biteran strǣle . . . wergan gāstes* ('he who from arrow-bow maliciously shoots . . . . with sharp arrow . . . of the cursed spirit'), ll. 1744–7.   It hardly matters that the word 'devil' itself occurs only infrequently in the text[43]: it is surely clear enough that the monsters in *Beowulf*, like the hideous half-serpent Error and the ancient dragon in Book 1 of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, are associated by the Christian poet with the evil that exists inside as well as outside man, tempting him to become inwardly corrupt as well as threatening to destroy his world.[44] In fact, Hroþgar's speech at the very heart of the poem, far from being an interpolation as was once thought, perfectly fuses the epic exhortation to be morally fine and the Christian message to be spiritually strong.

The description of the dragon as a *wyrm*, 'worm' or 'serpent', suggests that it too is associated with the Biblical embodiment of evil in Genesis (again, we are bound to think of Spenser's dragon, which had ravaged Eden).   Then, does Beowulf's death

after the fight with the dragon suggest his spiritual weakness, and if so, is the ending of the poem totally negative (we have already noticed that the mood at the end is sombre and ominous)? Like Hroþgar, Beowulf in turn has become an old man, vulnerable to the kind of weakness Hroþgar warned him about. Unlike Hroþgar, or his own younger self, at the end of the poem he is unable to survive the encounter with the deadly adversary: the tumbling of the dragon's corpse over the cliff is followed by his own funeral. Several critics, seeing that there is some basis for interpreting the whole poem as a Christian allegory, find here at least a partial condemnation of its hero. For all his virtues, they feel, Beowulf is a pagan and succumbs in this last episode to (variously) the sin of pride, the loss of faith in God's power, or the sin of avarice. The last is indeed well illustrated in Beowulf's words before the encounter: *Ic mid elne sceall | gold gegangan, oððe gūð nimeð* ... ('I with courage shall | gain the gold, or battle will take me'), ll. 2535-6. Bolton makes a good case for this and also resolves the discrepancy between such obviously un-Christian lines, and the equally obvious parallels in the text with the death of Christ (Beowulf too dies 'at the ninth hour', for instance), by suggesting that the *Beowulf* poet wished to point out clearly, by means of these contrasts, the ways in which Beowulf differed from a Christian hero. However, even such a reading is by no means pessimistic, for it does not fail to recognize the courage and glorious achievement of Beowulf which the epic very properly conveys to us, allowing the old king to depart this life in his battle gear after having taken on and destroyed the dragon almost single-handedly. Bolton remarks that if this is possible for a pagan, how much more can be hoped for from a Christian?[45]

Nor perhaps is it necessary or even wise to seek to explain everything in *Beowulf* in terms of Christian allegory, for this is after all a much more complex poem than at first appears, with historical and legendary elements which we have hardly been able to touch on here, and no doubt also a debt to classical sources like the *Aeneid.*[46] With an eye to the very positive achievements of Beowulf as a young warrior and King, as well as his bravery in the last great fight, many other critics are ready to see in Beowulf's death, despite its sadness, nothing more or less than a final fulfilment of the epic ideal.[47] The elaborate funeral rites at the end not only express his people's sorrow, but also honour the passing of a great man. Whatever lay ahead for his country, and however he may be judged by a later, Christian audience, the *Beowulf* poet tells us that Beowulf himself *wundordēaðe swealt* ('died a glorious death'), l. 3037. Here is the elevation of tone, the sense of pride in the struggling spirit of man in a challenging world, which informs our greatest tragedy. At the end of the long line of descent from the Germanic past, the ideas of the poems have become mingled with, but not submerged by, the Christian ethos of the seventh and eighth centuries, to yield (as Kennedy himself agrees[48]) an unmistakably English poem—a poem which shows the true dignity and nobility of character possible to men even in the face of overwhelming odds.

*

The Battle of Maldon, a shorter narrative poem of the late tenth century about the unsuccessful attempt of the people of Essex to repulse Viking invaders, shows how the

kind of heroic ideals which Beowulf exemplifies continued to be admired right through this period. Once again they are fused with the Christian elements, although there is still a point at which heroism of the old Germanic kind, which is perhaps not commendable from a Christian point of view, is celebrated. In fact, the poem, our first great war poem, can be seen as more "purely heroic" than *Beowulf*.[49] Byrhtnoð, the elderly *ealdorman* of Essex, was a man of great courage who was also renowned for his piety. The poem shows how he led his small force of household retainers and local warriors against a larger band of *hæðene* ('heathen'), l. 181, Vikings: in the high heroic mode, he refused to buy off the attackers, and, what is more, allowed them free passage across the River Blackwater so that they could engage in fair battle. Such *ofermod* ('great pride' or 'over-confidence'), l. 89, may have been rash, and certainly it led to much unnecessary loss of life, but Byrhtnoð does not appear to have been blamed for it.[50] Considerations of honour, and the bond between the follower and his lord, are of great concern in the poem, for the story is told from the point of view of the fighting men who look up to and must defend their lord, and even after his death be prepared to continue fighting when all hope is gone, and die beside him:

> Fram ic ne wille,
> ac ic me be healfe   minum hlaforde,
> be swa leofan men,   licgan þence.   (ll. 317–9)
> (I do not intend to go away / but I by the side of my lord, / by that
> beloved man, intend to lie.)

Indeed, although the event took place on 10 August, 991, and is described with a great deal of authentic historical and geographical detail, it is so close to the spirit of the old Germanic society as to make special reference to one of the slain warriors as Byrhtnoð's *swuster sunu* ('sister's son'), l. 115, a relationship which was considered particularly close in the Germanic world.

Of course, the men of Essex call on God for support, and to grant them vengeance on the enemy (ll. 262–4), and Byrhtnoð's own piety is fully confirmed in his last words before he is hewn down, when he prays to God for his favour, in death as in life, so that the old Germanic code of conduct and the new Christian values combine, even if a little uneasily at the beginning of the encounter, to show forth man's noble spirit. The hopelessness of the fight makes the upholding of both all the more praiseworthy, and it is really not at all odd that the poet should have chosen to write about "an insignificant defeat"[51] rather than some great victory. Out of the unavailing struggle, as out of the apparently "needless death" of Irish nationalists celebrated in our own century by W. B. Yeats in his "Easter 1916", this poet could see that "A terrible beauty is born". What we are left with, once again, is not a feeling of pessimism, but a deep admiration for the spirits of those who fought without thinking of personal safety, refused to consider fleeing even from certain death, in the face of the strong assault. Perhaps the most famous lines in all Old English poetry are these, from Byrhtwold's speech at the end of the poem:

> Hige sceal þe heardra,   heorte þe cenre,

mod sceal þe mare,   þe ure mægen lytlað.   (ll. 312-3)
(Courage must be the stronger, heart the braver / spirit must be the
greater, as our might grows less.)

How far this is from the Stoic endurance often attributed to our forefathers, and how well it expresses the tragic determination of later heroes in our literature to confront inevitable defeat with head held high.   Greenfield's reference to *Hamlet* in connection with *Beowulf* would not be out of place here either.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

The interpretation of the Old English elegiac poems raises much the same questions as the interpretation of the heroic poems.   But here too the readings which take into account the various elements of which they are comprised provide us with a fair picture of the Anglo-Saxons' challenging response to life, as well as their recognition of its transcience—both of which seem to have carried through into our later literature.

It is often pointed out that all the Old English poetry which has survived has come down to us because of its preservation by the Church.   For instance, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *Deor* are all contained in the Exeter Book, assumed to have been given to Exeter Cathedral by Bishop Leofric, who died in 1072.   For this reason the modern tendency in criticism is to see as much of it as possible as having been composed or at the very least moulded by the Christian scribes.   However, we must not forget that (to the discomfiture of a holy man like Alcuin) many secular works were enjoyed in the abbeys, and the early English missionaries themselves were prepared to accept rather than uproot some of the old pagan ways.[52]   In this period of transition, the use of certain words like *wyrd* ('fate') in the Old English poems does not necessarily imply criticism of past beliefs by a Christian writer—for it was gradually coming to be associated with the Christain idea of the ordering of the universe by God[53]; but nor should such a commonly held concept necessarily be taken to suggest the presence of a fully worked out Christian allegory.

This latter, however, is just what has happened in the cases of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, which have been placed firmly in the homiletic tradition by critics like G. B. Smithers, who sees the journeys of each not as the result of the compulsion of circumstances (in *The Wanderer*) or the restless spirit of man (in *The Seafarer*) but as representing the need of the soul to make its 'perigrinatio' to God.[54]   In *The Seafarer*, for instance, Smithers interprets the idea that the sailor's spirit leaves his breast and *ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide* ('over the whale's country wanders wide'), 1.60, as the launching of the soul on the road to its heavenly home.   It is true that an idea linked with the concept of *wyrd* was that the soul of a man only leaves his body when he is doomed to die, yet there is also much here to suggest an actual yearning for the sea, rather than an allegory with homiletic intention from beginning to end.   Moreover, as Smithers himself has to admit, both poems owe much of their essential character to the Germanic past.

The 'wanderer' is a retainer whose lord has died, and who is now a *wineleas* ('friendless'), 1. 45, exile; the 'seafarer' too has passed over *wræccan lastum / winemægum*

bidroren ('the paths of exile / deprived of dear kinsmen'), ll. 15–16. In this respect the unhappiness of both is firmly rooted in Germanic society, in which the bond with the lord, and the drinking with kinsmen and fellows in the mead-hall, were the sources of all security and pleasure, and those who were cut off from them suffered great hardship. The physical pains of the 'seafarer' in particular are emphasized: his feet were cold when he kept watch on the ship at night (*Calde geþrungen / wæron mine fet, forste gebunden, / caldum clommum* ['By cold afflicted / were my feet, by frost bound, / with cold bands'], ll. 8–10); in *The Seafarer* too are these hauntingly evocative pictures of life at sea:

> þær ic ne gehyrde   butan hlimman sæ,
> iscaldne wæg.   Hwilum ylfete song
> dyde ic me to gomene,   ganetes hleoþor
> ond huilpan sweg   fore hleahtor wera,
> mæw singende   fore medodrince.
> Stormas þær stanclifu beotan,   þær him stearn oncwæð
> isigfeþera;   ful oft þæt earn bigeal,
> urigfeþra . . . .   (ll. 18–25)
> (There I did not hear anything except the sea roaring/ the ice-cold
> wave. From time to time the song of the swan/ I took for enjoyment,
> the sound of the ganet/ and the curlew's noise instead of the laughter
> of men/ the gull's singing instead of mead-drinking./   Storms there
> beat upon the rocky cliffs, there the tern responded to him/icy-winged;
> very often the eagle screamed around/ his feathers wet with spray.)

Compare this to the early Latin philosopher Boethius's use of the sea- or land-journey for religious imagery, and it will be immediately apparent that here is something more direct, more personal, altogether closer to actual experience.[55]

The sufferings of the 'wanderer' and 'seafarer' are naturally exacerbated by their experiences of joy in the past, and the recognition that such pleasure passes all too quickly in this world gives these poems their nostalgic tone: *Hwær sindon seledreamas?* ('Where are the joys of the hall?'), l. 93, asks the 'wanderer'. Because passages of lamentation occur also in *Beowulf*, particularly at the end of course, Old English poetry can easily be seen as the first expression of what is often called the elegiac mood in our later poetry, which crops up again, for instance, in the mid-eighteenth century, in perhaps the best-loved of all our shorter English poems, Gray's *Elegy*. What could be more like the acknowledgement of the ironies of life in Gray's seventh stanza ("How jocund did they drive their team afield!/   How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!") than the way the 'wanderer' cites the disappearance *under nihthelm* ('beneath the cover of night'), l. 96, of the lusty young warriors of the past? Gray's meditation on the transcience of human achievement, of life itself; the melancholy expectation of death; and the final turning to God as the sole source of lasting friendship (*The Wanderer* has *frofre*, 'comfort', l. 115)—all find their parallels in these poems.

It may be, as Ker suggested, that these poems show "the Celtic spirit"[56] in its very earliest contribution to the mainstream of English poetry, especially as Mrs. Ida Gordon

has been able to show some similarities with the Old Welsh poetry, and can therefore claim with some authority a Celtic element in their background, as well as a Germanic one.[57]   In that case it is of special interest that Gray himself translated some Welsh poetry, and of course there is also evidence of his interest in it in "The Bard".   It is not too much to suggest that it was because of Gray's deep roots in this old tradition that his *Elegy* "abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo."[58]

The existence of this tradition certainly helps to explain the way in which the term 'elegy' has been used in English poetry from early on, to describe any poem of a solemn, reflective cast, rather than (as in classical times) to refer to poems on various subjects in the elegiac metre (a highly formal dactylic hexameter couplet), or to rather short poems more strictly confined to paying tribute to the dead.   Another poet who wrote a celebrated elegy was Tennyson, of course.   *In Memoriam* itself, like most of his poems, owes a great deal to classical influences, as well as to Dante; but it also shows the influence of Shakespeare, Milton and Shelley, and goes much beyond the pastoral elegies of the two latter poets ("Lycidas" and "Adonais", written firmly in the Sicilian Greek tradition) in encompassing his feelings and reflections over a period of seventeen years after the death of his friend Arthur Hallam.   That Tennyson was also inspired by the more distant English past can be seen by his poetic rendition of Malory's *Morte Darthur;* and going further back still, he wrote a poem based on his son's prose translation of the tenth century "The Battle of Brunanburh", a poem entered in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle in celebration of King Aethelstan's mighty victory over his Northern enemies. The general comment that Tennyson's special skill was to "modulate epic into elegy"[59] (his *Idylls of the King* is a good example here) brings Tennyson peculiarly close to the Old English poets in spirit, and alerts us to another strand in the many literary influences which permeate his work.

The two shorter Old English poems which we have been looking at are, like the heroic poems, themselves a blend of various influences.   They are not only characterized by their Germanic-Celtic elegiac mood, however important this may be.   There is sterner stuff here, which is suggested in part by the Christian element, which, even if we are not inclined to find it just beneath the surface of the poems throughout, does give the last part of each a positive turn.   *The Seafarer* takes an explicitly Christian direction much earlier than *The Wanderer*, and ends on this hopeful note:

> ond we þonne eac tilien   þæt we to moten
> in þa ecan   eadignesse
> þær is lif gelong   in lufan Dryhtnes,
> hyht in heofonum.   (ll. 119–22[60])
> (and let us then each strive that we may/ enter that eternal bliss/ where
> there is everlasting life in the love of the Lord,/ bliss in heaven.)

Admittedly this is rather a conventional homiletic passage, showing us that at some point the sailor's experience has indeed been seen as a type of the human passage through life—a type which was to be used so widely and effectively in our literature, in poems

as diverse as Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and Tennyson's *Ulysses*. Even this early use of it, in the later stages of *The Seafarer*, is not without its power. The verb *tilian*, 'to strive', is a clear call to action, which goes well with the 'seafarer's' earlier urge to voyage: it has the same sort of resonance as words like *lust*, 'desire' (1.36), and *fusne*, 'eager' (1.50) near the beginning of the poem, which express his keenness to contend with the challenges of the sea.

*

In some respects, the little poem *Deor*[61] would seem to be less positive than these two poems. For one thing, it lacks the poignant consciousness of life's passing joys which appears in both, and the awareness of the beauty of this world, with its different scenes and seasons, which appears in *The Seafarer;* and for another thing, the Christian element (lines 31–4) is more in the nature of an aside, and even those critics who argue strongly for a thoroughgoing Christian interpretation of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* admit that it is likely to be an interpolation. Deor is an aged minstrel who has been discarded by his lord in favour of a (presumably) younger harpist, and the poem consists mainly of an enumeration of the trials of certain figures from the Germanic heroic past, legendary (like Weland the smith, who was said to have made Beowulf's coat of mail) or historical (like the subjects of the cruel Eormanric, fourth century King of the Goths), in a series of strophes each ending with the cryptic refrain: *þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg.* This is often translated simply as 'that passed away, and so may this',[62] the 'this' referring to Deor's own misery, described at the end. This would indeed appear to be fatalistic, hardly off-setting at all the cumulative effect of the various accounts of past suffering.

However, this translation does not seem to take into account the genitive cases of the two demonstratives, nor the stronger sense of the verb *magan*, 'to be able' (not simply 'may') in Old English, as Shippey has pointed out.[63] The line means literally, 'of this passed over, of (all) this also can' (*þisses* being the genitive singular of the compound demonstrative), and it is obvious that some of the sense is implied rather than expicitly stated, no doubt in the interest of keeping the refrain formula constant. Recognizing that *þæs* is not in fact the subject of *ofereode*, some editors, like Fowler, suggest that *ofereode* has purely impersonal force—but it would surely be in order to supply an appropriate pronominal subject for it, according to the content of each strophe. (The second, about Beadohild, would require a feminine pronoun.) This would produce quite a dramatic effect, giving the verb the much more active sense of 'overcame' or 'surmounted', a sense in which it is used elsewhere in Old English poetry. Such must be the rationale behind Charlton M. Lewis's expanded paraphrase of the refrain, 'he strove on and overcame; nor shall *my* strength be less'.[64] A closer translation would be simply, 'this he overcame; all this, in the same way, can I'. This is equally or more acceptable grammatically, the sense of it applies well, for instance to Weland, who certainly got his own back on misfortune, taking revenge on King Niðhad for laming and enslaving him by killing his sons and raping Beadohild, his daughter—the subject of the next strophe—before flying away; and it fulfils the purpose of the poem, to encourage the lonely minstrel, much better.

Pearsall has commented perceptively that even the less positive interpretation sits uneasily in a Christian context: "improvement in worldly fortune can never be the theme of Christian consolation."[65]   This is true, and it argues for the strength of the heroic temperament which resisted the moulding of the Christian scribe, and the indomitable spirit of the Anglo-Saxons who could face misfortune, with or without the comfort of Christianity, and be determined not to succumb to it.   This hard vein of determination, as well as the elegiac mood, has perhaps been passed on to us from the shorter poems as from the longer ones.   The picture of the old man continuing to chant his song in sorrowful exile reminds us, for instance, of the words of King Lear to Cordelia, as he faces the utter degradation of imprisonment by the forces of his ungrateful daughters: "We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage" (V. iii. 9)—and this, incidentally, in a tragedy which takes its origins from the early Middle Ages, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's influential twelfth century work, *Historia Regum Britanniae*. We may perhaps play with the possibility that Shakespeare had seen some Old English poetry, since the manuscript of *Beowulf* was then lodged at Sir Robert Cotton's library, which many literary men of his time are known to have consulted; *The Battle of Maldon* also passed into this library early in the seventeenth century.   What we can say for sure is that the tradition our greatest English poet drew on had its beginnings not simply in Seneca and the classical past, but in our own literary history too.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Of the Old English poetry which clearly takes its original inspiration from Christianity, *The Dream of the Rood* is undoubtedly the finest.   In fact it is often described as unique, but this is no reason why it should not be discussed as the representative of its kind, since only a small proportion even of the Old English religious poetry has come down to us, and it may be as well to judge by the best.   Bede tells us that the seventh century monk Cædmon wrote Biblical poems on many Old and New Testament themes, devotional poems and many homiletic poems designed to "turn away all men from the love of vice . . ."[66]; but only the single poem which Bede himself quoted has survived, owing to its preservation in the historical prose text.   *The Dream of the Rood* itself has sometimes been attributed to Cædmon.   Although the most complete text of the poem is in the later tenth century Vercelli Book, a manuscript of Old English works housed in the Cathedral library at Vercelli, parts of it appear in carved runes on the Ruthwell Cross, dating from perhaps as early as the seventh century, and written in the Northumbrian dialect much as Cædmon would have used it.[67]   The poem has also been attributed to Cynewulf, the ninth century writer who was the first of our poets to put his name to his work; but perhaps this is less likely, especially as the four poems known to have been written by Cynewulf are contemplative and mystical without the heroic strain found in *The Dream of the Rood*.

For this poem gains a part of its powerful effect from its use of the old heroic language and concepts to describe the ordeal of the crucifixion, and the final victory of Christ over the forces of evil.   As its title suggests, it is cast in the dream/vision framework which later poets from Chaucer onwards were to find so useful as a narrative device,

for instance in Chaucer's own *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls*. At the beginning the poet relates how he saw the wonderfully ornamented cross in a dream one night, surrounded by all the angels of God; how he could make out, beneath its glory, the sufferings which had taken place on it; how he felt great awe, a sense of his own sinfulness, and sorrowful feelings in its presence; and how the visionary cross at last spoke to him. The contrasts between glory and suffering, joy and sorrow, are developed when the personified cross recounts its own torment and Christ's cruel treatment at the hands of *strange feondas* ('fierce enemies'), 1.30, but then goes on to expound on the miraculous resurrection and its (the cross's) own subsequent glory. Christ, who has been referred to as a *geong hæleð* ('young hero'), 1.39, and *se born* ('the warrior'), 1.42, almost as if he was the typical Germanic hero sacrificing himself for his people, is after all *God ælmihtig—/strang ond stiðmod* ('Almighty God, powerful and resolute'), ll. 39–40.[68] Having reflected on the important part it (the cross) played in opening up the true path of life for man, the cross finally calls on the poet to report the vision to others. The poet ends with the expectation of his own future salvation, and brings the poem to a close on a high note of triumph, with a reference to the Harrowing of Hell:

> Se sunu wæs sigorfæst   on am siðfate,
> mihtig ond spedig.   þa he mid manigeo com,
> gasta weorode,   on Godes rice,
> anwealda ælmihtig,   englum to blisse,
> ond eallum ðam halgum   þam þe on heofonum ær
> wunedon on wuldre,   þa heora Wealdend cwom,
> ælmihtig God,   þær his eðel wæs.   (ll. 150–6)
> ('The son was triumphant on that journey,/ mighty and prosperous.
> Then he with a host came,/ with a troop of spirits, into God's
> kingdom,/ the Almighty Lord, to the angels, to bliss,/ and to all the
> holy ones who before in heaven/ lived in glory, when their ruler
> came,/ Almighty God, where his kingdom was.')

The intensity of this poem, as well as some of the techniques which convey it, are to be found again in the best religious poetry of succeeding ages. Its dramatic element, with the detailed description of Christ's mounting on the cross and being harshly stretched out on it, reminds us of the power of the fourteenth century York Realist's play on the crucifixion, written when drama was still closely tied to the religious impulse. And we have only to think of Donne's sonnets 10 ("Batter my heart, three-personed God . . . .") and 14 ("Death, be not proud . . . .") to see how later poets have used military imagery, personification as well as dramatic devices to convey the complexities of religious experience. The metaphysical poets in particular can be seen as hiers to a writer, whether Cædmon or some other unknown poet, who could show with such mystical excitement the progress of the wooden cross, of Jesus, and hopefully of man himself from the troubled depths of suffering in the physical world to the unassailable heights of heavenly joy. Another Old English poem, *Genesis A*, has been proposed by Lawrence Mason as a possible source of *Paradise Lost*[69]: it is certainly a tempting pro-

position, which, if confirmed, would make it possible for us to link our great Christian epic directly to this early tradition. And we do know that Milton had read at least one Old English poem (albeit in Latin translation), from his critical references to the inflated style of "The Battle of Brunanburh" in his *History of Britain*.[70] But Mason does not advance any detailed argument in support of his proposition, and all we can fairly say is that the Old English poets in general were at the beginning of the long tradition from which Milton derives, the tradition which seeks to convey "the ways of God to men" using the persuasive techniques of poetry.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Although it is not without its gentler lyric graces, its sense of the beauty and pleasures of life, the quality of Old English poetry which comes across to us most vividly is its impressive strength—the strength of the language, the strength of the alliterative line with its marked rhythmic emphases, and the strength which is celebrated in its heroes and encouraged in ordinary men by the writers of the shorter poems. No wonder Pound contrasted it with the "wish-wash that passes for classic or 'standard' poetry."[71] Even if the evidence cannot often be conclusive, there are not only cases of individual poets having been influenced by it, but also substantial grounds for believing that, in general, "the importance of the native stock [has] been underestimated,"[72] and that its predominant characteristics, as well as some of the ways in which they found expression, persisted and became a part of our English literary heritage. Readers and critics as well as poets would benefit from appreciating how the changes in our literature, even the major changes which occurred during the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, have not entailed the abandonment of its past riches. The 'heirloom' which has been handed down through the ages should be acknowledged, rather than simply buried again like the gold in the dragon's hoard to which my epigraph refers.

NOTES

1. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 51.
2. *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1960), p. 58.
3. See for instance Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 1 (Chapter heading).
4. *English Literature: Medieval* (London: Williams & Norgate, undated), pp. 57-8.
5. *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972), p. 13.
6. Greenfield, p. 1.
7. Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* (Middlesex: Pelican, 1940), p. 8.
8. See "The Date of 'Beowulf'" in C. L. Wrenn's supplement to *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, by R. W. Chambers (Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 531 onwards. Common sense sets the composition of a poem about a Scandinavian hero before 793, when Norwegian raiders plundered Lindisfarne: Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 23.
9. For a full discussion of the question, see Chambers, p. 333 onwards.
10. *Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978), p. 178.
11. My sources in the discussion which follows are:- E. E. Wardale, *An Old English Grammar* (London: Methuen, 1922); Eduard Sievers, *An Old English Grammar* (New York: AMS Press, 1970); Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, rev. ed. 1959),

and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

12. The text of *Beowulf* used in this paper is Frederick Klaeber's 3rd ed., (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950).

13. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1910), p. 206.

14. *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic*, trans. Charles W. Kennedy (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 50.

15. George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day* (New York: Russell and Russell, 2nd ed. 1961), I, 12.

16. *An Essay on Criticism*, ll. 84–6.

17. The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1948, p. 795.

18. The exceptions are 'shore' (a Middle English loan-word from Germanic sources), and 'fragments' and 'ruins' (from the French). The etymology of 'scattered' is doubtful, but it may perhaps be derived from the Old English noun *sceat*, 'corner', 'region'.

19. Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody* . . . . , I, 12.

20. The half-lines are usually marked according to the five types distinguished by Sievers in his *Altgermanische Metrik* (1893), explained by A. J. Bliss, *The Metre of Beowulf* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 36. I have not adopted this system, although the first line here would clearly be Sievers's type C | type A, and the second, type A | (approximately) type E, because Sievers follows the rule of 'resolution' whereby two unstressed syllables can often be seen as a 'lift'. My purpose, however, is to show similarity with modern metrical feet in which the unstressed syllables, which I have marked ⌣, need to be distinguished. Bliss himself suggests the need for this in "An Appreciation of Old English Metre," *English and Medieval Studies*, eds. Norman Davies and C. L. Wrenn (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1962), p. 33, n. 3: "we shall have to count a resolved stress in Old English as equivalent to two syllabes in Modern English."

21. Saintsbury, *A History of Modern Prosody* . . . . , I, 14.

22. *Old English: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1971), p. 184.

23. Bliss, *The Metre of Beowulf*, p. 138. This is supported by the present consensus that the composition of the Old English poems shows much "stylistic forethought"—Ann Chalmers Watts, *The Lyre and the Harp: A Comparative Reconsideration of Oral Tradition in Homer and Old English Epic Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 123.

24. *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), p. 11.

25. "Creativity and Spiritual Tension," *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Bottrall (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 106.

26. *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 25.

27. See the *Cambridge Book of English Verse*, 1900–1939, eds. Allen Freer and John Andrew (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 179.

28. *ABC of Reading*, p. 51.

29. See the "Grave Poem," the second halves of ll. 1 and 2, in his *Historical Manual of English Prosody* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 38.

30. Bede, p. 206. John Collins Pope places *Beowulf* firmly in this context by showing how accompaniment on the harp would have brought out a basic rhythmic pattern in the poem—*The Rhythm of Beowulf: An Interpretation of the Normal and Hypermetric Verse Forms in Old English Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, new ed., 1966); A. Campbell makes a clear distinction between such epic material and shorter 'lays' in "The Old English Epic Style," *English and Medieval Studies*, pp. 24–6.

31. "Our own scattered decasyllabic couplet rather precedes the French, though Guillame de Machault has the credit, rightly or wrongly, of teaching it to Chaucer," Saintsbury, *Historical Manual of English Prosody*, p. 331. Translations of Chaucer were of course among Pope's earliest work.

32. "An Appreciation of Old English Metre," pp. 33 and 38.

33. Shippey, *Old English Verse*, p. 13.

34. Pearsall, p. 74.

35. See *A Concordance to Beowulf*, ed. J. B. Bessinger, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p.

166 (*Næs* occurs twenty-eight times in the text, several times in similar constructions.)

36. *The Wanderer*, 1. 106. My text for the shorter Old English poems is: *Old English Prose and Verse: A Selection*, ed. Roger Fowler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, rev. ed. 1978).

37. *Old English Verse*, p. 17.

38. Ker, p. 30.

39. Ker, p. 33.

40. Greenfield, p. 157.

41. Kennedy, pp. 40, 45. See Chambers, p. 451 onwards, for a discussion of the Grendel story and "Tales of the Waterfall Trolls."

42. Michael Swanton, ed. *Beowulf* (Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 22.

43. Especially as, since Dorothy Whitelock has pointed out, "some expressions used of Grendel and the dragon are applied to the devil elsewhere," *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford University Press, corrected ed., 1958), pp. 10–11.

44. There is no need for T. A. Shippey to be puzzled by the fact that Grendel is apparently endowed with a human soul, and considered to be subject to judgement at Doomsday. It is surely not "confusion born of cultural discrepancy," as he suggests, but a sign that Grendel does indeed represent 'the old Adam' in us—*Beowulf* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 42.

45. See Bolton, p. 177.

46. See for instance William Witherle Lawrence, *Beowulf and the Epic Tradition* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1961), p. 285, although Lawrence clearly feels that the artistic effect of the poem in general comes from its grounding in the Germanic past.

47. As might be expected, Lawrence is one of these: see pp. 229–230.

48. Kennedy, p. lxii. onwards.

49. E. V. Gordon, ed. *The Battle of Maldon* (London: Methuen, 1937), p. 25.

50. Pearsall suggests that the use of the word *ofermod* itself shows that his behaviour was being "complexly registered as deplorable or suspect," as some critics would say Beowulf's was at the end of the longer poem. Yet, as he himself remarks later, *The Battle of Maldon* as a whole is not only a celebration "of personal heroism," but, as regards Byrhtnoð in particular, is little short of hagiography. See Pearsall, pp. 48 and 62.

51. Fowler, p. 71.

52. See for instance Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 331. The adoption of the name of the pagan goddess *Eostre* for the great Christian festival 'Easter' is a well-known example of the utilization of the pagan past for the Christian present.

53. See even in *Beowulf*, ll. 2526–7, where Fate is described as *metod manna*, the 'creator of men'.

54. See Smithers's "The Meaning of 'The Seafarer' and 'The Wanderer'," *Medium Aevum* 26, no. 3 (1957), p. 137 onwards.

55. See for instance *The Consolation of Philosophy*, intro. Irwin Edman (New York: The Modern Library, 1943), p. 19. Boethius's work was translated by the Anglo-Saxons and admired by them.

56. Ker, p. 52.

57. See her edition of *The Seafarer* (Manchester University Press, 1979), p. 15 onwards.

58. Samuel Johnson, *Johnson: Prose and Poetry*, selected by Mona Wilson (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1966), p. 944.

59. David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2nd ed, 1969), 4, 998.

60. Not given by Fowler because of textual corruptions, but often printed elsewhere, for instance by Ida Gordon, p. 48.

61. I have expanded my discussion of this poem in an article, "*Deor:* The Refrain," which will be published in *The Explicator* next year.

62. See for instance Pearsall, p. 5.

63. *Old English Verse*, p. 200, n. 39.

64. *Select Translations from Old English Poetry*, eds. Albert S. Cook and Chauncey B. Tinker (Boston:

The Athenæum Press, 1902), p. 58.

65. Pearsall, p. 5.

66. Bede, p. 207.

67. See Bruce Dickins and Alan S. C. Ross, eds., *The Dream of the Rood* (London: Methuen, new ed., 1963), p. 12 (although Dickins and Ross would set the date of the poem a little later than Cædmon).

68. Pearsall points out that the use of military imagery was well established in Latin sources, p. 47. But surely this description of Christ himself as a hero is much closer to the Germanic tradition. It may be significant that Dickins and Ross note a parallel to *Beowulf* in the line immediately preceeding it.

69. Preface to *Genesis A*, reprinted in *Translations from the Old English* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1970), unnumbered page.

70. See *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 5, Part 1, ed. French Fogle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 308–9.

71. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 216.

72. Gavin Bone, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: An Essay with Specimen Translations in Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 5.

April 18, 1984.