AS THE ANGLO-SAXON SEES THE WORLD:

MEDITATIONS ON OLD ENGLISH POETRY

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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It is a pity that Old English poetry is not more widely known, not only because it is beautiful and powerful but because to read it is to experience a different way of thinking. It is also a pity – or opportunity – that many first-year Old English students express a "love-hate" relationship with the language. Therefore, it is worth trying to discover what there is in the poetry to interest the general educated public and create enthusiasts among undergraduates.

The multitudinous answers, found herein, have one over-riding answer: the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking. Old English poetry opens a door into a dim past by disclosing, in puzzle-piece hints, that epistemological world, which becomes more fascinating the more one pokes around in it. This dissertation seeks to give the beginning student and the reader from the general educated public a chance to wander in this landscape where, generally, only scholars tread.

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INTRODUCTION

With these essays I invite you to enter the world of Old English poetry. It is the Anglo-Saxon world of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries – and yet not that world because, as much a weird-mirrors-room as any literature, this poetry warps, blurs, and distorts the world it writes about, embellishes, magnifies, and enriches it even as it shines light onto it. Because there is so much we don't know about Anglo-Saxon society – how the people lived, who wrote these poems, how close to reality their depiction of the society was, how many poems have been lost, even what some of the words in some of the damaged manuscripts might be – we can only infer from the poems dim pictures of the world they come from.

A mist-enshrouded past is part of the fascination of studying Old English poetry, a study that has delighted, enchanted, and absorbed me ever since I started learning the language during my first year as a graduate student at the University of Oregon. I had always felt that as an English major at Vanderbilt University and then as a Marshall Scholar in English at Cambridge University, I should somewhere along the way have had a chance to learn Old English. But I was at those institutions in the 1960s, when the study of Old English was at a low ebb. Trends change, and by 2006, when I began my studies at UO, Old English was in the catalogue. Unfortunately, the class met on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule and I was obligated to teach in Grants Pass, two hours south of the University of Oregon, every Friday. But I so much wanted to take Old English that

I gathered nerve enough to explain the situation to the professor and ask if I could take the class anyway.

She looked positively dismayed. I would miss one-third of the classes! I promised fervently that I would work extra hard to keep up ("really I will" – like an earnest, foolish undergraduate), and in the end she did allow me into the class.

I am forever grateful. I fell instantly in love with the language, fascinated by its concreteness, its flexible word order, its difference from and sometimes vague similarity to the English on my tongue. The literature charmed and intrigued me – the haunting beauty of the elegies, the sophisticated complexities of *Beowulf*, the foreign concepts of life in the Anglo-Saxon world, the poetic conventions (the alliterative line, variation, interlace, syntax, compounds). Just as the language was incomprehensible on first glance and yet a preamble to modern English, just as the historical era, still largely unknown, helped shape the English society of today, so the poetry was as foreign as Vergil's to me and yet is the precursor to the long history of English-language literature I have loved for so long.

A thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral is a solid monument to the thinking of the age, witness to aesthetic, political, and religious ideas of the world in which it was erected. But the Anglo-Saxon era, with its wooden buildings and vulnerable manuscripts, left very little concrete evidence of the people who were forerunners to modern, even late-medieval, history. We have some archeological evidence from excavations at Sutton Hoo and other tombs and village sites, and we have four manuscripts of poetry (and others of prose, but my interest lies in the poetry) that have survived the difficult

centuries of loss – the inevitable ravages of carelessness and time; Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries along with their libraries in the sixteenth century; the fire at Ashburnham House in 1731, which destroyed or damaged 212 of the 958 medieval manuscripts collected by Sir Robert Cotton, including the *Beowulf* manuscript. But within the surviving manuscripts are some true gems of poetry, as powerful as anything by Gerard Manley Hopkins, as beautiful as a Keatsean ode, as tightly controlled by poetic convention as an Elizabethan sonnet. Here we find the Seafarer, detailing the hardships of life on sea in the winter, a life he chooses because he seeks God; Beowulf, the last of the great heroes of the Heroic Age; the defeated British at the (historically documented) battle of Maldon; the Phoenix, who burns to ashes and resurrects every thousand years; the Wanderer lamenting his dead lord and the heroic world he no longer inhabits; the Wife lamenting *her* lost lord and her current life in an earthcave under an oak tree. I was amazed at the sophistication of this poetry. There are no baby steps here, no tentative crawling on the way to a flourishing literature. The oral poetry that predated the written manuscripts laid a solid foundation. This poetry, this first literature in vernacular English in an era when "literacy" meant Latin, a corpus that contains the oldest medieval vernacular poetry in Europe, is fully mature at its birth.

And I, an English major, with a graduate degree from Cambridge University, had been aware only of *Beowulf*. As I read and studied Old English poetry, I began to feel more and more strongly that other people would be as eager to know it as I, people like my hiking partner, a mathematics professor who loves poetry; or my sister, a professional calligrapher and editor-writer; or my physicist friend who reads from the canon of

English literature. My zeal was only slightly less than messianic, but it was my adviser, Dr. James W. Earl, who suggested that I write a dissertation in the shape of short essays geared towards the general educated public as well as the scholar.

Immediately I wanted to do it. But could a dissertation really take such a shape?

"There are no rules," Jim said. "The only rule is to interest your reader." He did add that the plan would have to be approved by my dissertation committee and that the dissertation would have to satisfy the scholarly reader as well as the public reader.

Addressing that double audience turned out to be a difficult task. Half of my audience would know very little about Old English poetry and the world it came from – former English majors, college students just discovering Old English, the prototypical *New Yorker* reader – in short, the general educated public who appreciate art, history, literature, philosophy, ethics, who enjoy broadening their minds and widening their perspectives of the world by looking at other ways of thinking. The other half of my audience would know my material intimately. I would have to introduce Old English poetry to the one audience without boring the other.

In general, my plan was to use a more informal than scholarly tone (with a nod towards the general-educated-public audience) while basing my essays on good scholarship and research (with a nod towards the scholarly audience), hoping to provide a new vision of hitherto unknown poetry to some readers and a fresh vision of the same poetry to other readers, who might be feeling enervated by their own long scholarly searches.

I call these essays meditations (with a nod towards Ortega y Gasset, whose *Meditations on Don Quixote* was an inspiration for the format of this book) because they are ways of thinking about the poetry – about the poets and their world – intended to lead readers far enough into the past to give them a glimpse of the world that has so fascinated me through a literature that has done likewise. Like the meditative thinking of the medieval monks who might have composed, and who certainly recorded, these poems, these meditations perambulate a mental landscape. To help the reader on afternoon walks through that landscape, I have provided signposts in the table of contents: "The Way They Lived and Thought," "The Way They Used the Language," "The Way They Saw Nature," in which signs "they" refers, of course, to the inhabitants of the world the essays are exploring.

The world of the poetry, so different from our own, has a vocabulary that belongs exclusively to it. Because some of those words, which I have used frequently in these essays, lose so much in translation or pertain to concepts so foreign to our own world that translations are ungraceful and cumbersome, I have used them throughout without explanations, definitions, or translations. Definitions can be found in the glossary.

Unless otherwise designated, all translations are my own.

When I told my friend Jim, a fellow Marshall Scholar, that I was going back to graduate school to get a Ph.D., he said the thought of writing another dissertation made his spine crawl. To the contrary, for me, writing this book has been an exciting and joyous journey. I hope the reader finds as much pleasure in reading these explorations of Anglo-Saxon life and poetry as I did in writing them.

CHAPTER II

THE WAY THEY LIVED AND THOUGHT

Meditation 1: Thinking Like an Anglo-Saxon

I am looking for a poet, one who lives in eighth- or ninth-century England and who, given the distribution of literacy and the diminished importance of the scop, is probably a monk. I'm not looking for a copyist but for an original writer, a poet of what we have come to call the Old English elegies. Maybe these poems were transmissions of earlier, oral poetry, but I think they were literate compositions following the rules of a consciously devised "genre." I am looking for this poet-monk because I want to read his poem through his – the Anglo-Saxon – way of thinking.

Through the mists of the centuries I find a monastery where, however dimly, I see a monk, coped and cowled, sitting in the scriptorium where the whispered reading of the copyists disturbs the Benedictine rule of silence. His feet rest on a rug, and his book lies in his lap as in the figure of St. Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels (Fig. 1). Burning with the fever of creative composition, filled with an irrepressible desire to compose or, maybe, to write down a poem he has already created, scop-like, complete in his mind, he picks up his stylus, mumbling, feverishly – I catch only the gist of his words – "Forgive me, Lord, for not writing in your language, for looking again at the pagan world of my grandfather, for finding such joy in language that doesn't seem to resound to your glory, because I'll make it good to you in the end; I promise I will, just let me – I just – there's this idea, this mood I want to express …."

Fig. 1. St. Matthew, Lindisfarne Gospels
Image taken from "The Lindisfarne Gospels in Use." www.fathom.com.

It is the mood of his times he wants to express, as other poets have done. He has read – or has heard read – their lyrical vernacular expressions. He is aware of the flourishing secular poetry of his day, for it might have flourished in his own monastery, if we accept the argument of Dr. Lamar York that monastic literacy in these two centuries was moving increasingly in the direction of the vernacular (472). My poet is inspired by this poetry, so different from anything he knows in Latin. These poems evoke the old ways with haunting cries of lament. They pulsate with the power of the English language. Latin cannot do what these poems do. If my poet-monk is going to express the mood of the times, he must compose in his own, native, language.

The times are such that no one – neither clergy nor laity, aristocrat nor peasant – can forget that this mortal life is naught but changes and chances. European populations, after falling for four or five centuries, have stagnated for two hundred years. *Ecghete oþþe yldo oþþe adl* (edgehate [i.e., the sword] or illness or age): war – invasions from all quarters; illness – measles, smallpox, plague; and old age, the Grim Reaper's last resort, have diminished cities and depopulated countrysides. And still the Vikings come year after year, wreaking havoc, snatching slaves, plundering monasteries. Ruins of Roman cities, strewn across the landscape, remind people unrelentingly that *lif* is *læne* (life is on loan; it is fleetingly short). The old ways of the scop with his harp and his hearers, the meadhall with its warriors and wine, the peaceweaving of women and the giving of gold are but memories now, as literacy replaces orality; nation, comitatus; and silver, gold. A nostalgic sense of loss is palpable in the wind. No wonder a poet would pick up his stylus to write down an elegy. There was a powerful emotion to express.

As a monk, my poet and others like him lived a life circumscribed by rules: the rule of the liturgy for religion; the rule of the order for monastic daily life; the rules of Latin grammar for writing. "Everything is taught according to the *artes*," Jean LeClercq tells us, "[and] an art, in the classical and medieval acceptance of the term, is a collection of precise rules" (46). In *The Earliest Irish and English Bookart*, Robert Stevick points out the exacting geometrical and arithmetic rules for manuscript design, and in a paper at the 1990 Manchester Conference, Dr. D. R. Howlett theorized that the *Beowulf* poet followed the rules of chiasmic structure of the Bible's "In the beginning was the word" passage. There must have been rules for writing an "elegy," too, the first of which would

have been to create a mood of despair – of loss, hardship, nostalgia – and then to resolve that mood with what the estimable scholar John Niles calls, "a soothing application of bardic balm," a *consolatio poesis* ("Myth" 13).

If we understand "creation of mood" as the first rule, perhaps we are relieved of the "obdurate difficulty" of making sense of the stories in the poems, a task so difficult, T. A. Shippey says, "as to make one think no story was ever intended" (*Poems* 147). Old English poets, Carol Braun Pasternak says, "frequently forego temporal and causal sequence and present a fragmentary, disjointed narrative" (407). If we abandon the search for narrative, the confusion of *The Wife's Lament*, for instance (what was the sequence of events? which lord was a husband?) dissolves without protest. "First my lord went hence from his people over the waves," the Wife says (*ærest min hlaford gewat heonan of leodeum / ofer yþa gelac* [6]), leaving her wandering in exile, seeking help. Then "the kinsmen of this man [what man is ambiguous] began to think in dark thoughts that they would separate us" (*ongunnon þæt þæs monnes magas hycgan / þurh dyrne geþoht þæt hy todælden unc*" [11-12a]). Narratively, this line either supposes, unrealistically, that the husband's kin want to separate the married pair even though they are already apart or, clumsily, that another character has been introduced or, confusingly, that *ongunnon* is pluperfect and makes the kinsmen's plotting responsible for the husband's exile (Klinck 179). The crux becomes moot if we accept that the poet's intent was not so much to tell a story as to express a sentiment of loss and loneliness. The sentiment was more societal than personal, though expressed through the personality of a speaker, as the rules must have specified.

Another rule would have been to use conventions long available to the oral poet – traditional themes, formulaic phrases, poetic vocabulary, syntactic constructions, and the alliterative line and established meter. These techniques made a poem a poem, but, more importantly, they provided the poet with a way to address social continuity, which Cambridge University's Peter Clemoes sees as the real business of this poetry (xi). Society, reeling from seismic shifts that buried orality, paganism, and tribe while uplifting literacy, Christianity, and nation, needed the recognition of loss and the *consolatio poesis* provided by these poems in these familiar styles to maintain a sense of continuity.

The poet would also be obliged to incorporate – and would delight in expressing – the Anglo-Saxon love of pattern and ornamentation, using such techniques as variation and other textual patterns, anaphora, personification, and, especially, both structural and thematic verbal interlace. The poet, like the visual artist, played with patterns, his envelope structure, for instance, paralleling the enclosed borders of manuscript art, such as the tail- and leg-biting creatures on the carpet page of the Book of Durrow (Fig. 2). His interwoven themes spiraled in and out of each other like the interlace on a carpet page of the Lindisfarne Gospels (Fig. 3), a book that Michelle Brown has called a "heroically patient one-man feat of spiritual and physical endurance, meditation and prayer" (16).

He would also delight in giving his poem sudden turns and surprising paradoxes, for the Anglo-Saxon loved surprise and paradox. ("Paradox was particularly relished," says Clemoes [103]). Think of the riddles. Think of the Virgin with two right feet in the Book of Kells – and the Child in her lap with two left feet! (Fig. 4) or the surprising appearance of the cats and mice on the Chi-Rho page of the Book of Kells (Fig. 5). Think

Fig. 2. Carpet page, Book of Durrow
Image taken from http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth109/arth109_sl17.html

Fig. 3. Carpet page, Lindisfarne Gospel
British Library, MS Cotton Nero D.IV, f. 26v.

of the Wife sent to live in an earthcave in *The Wife's Lament: Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe, / under actreo in þam eorðsceafe* (The man commanded me to dwell in a grove in the woods/under an oak tree in this earthcave [27-28]).

Fig. 4. Virgin and child, Book of Kells, detail
From Meyer Schapiro, *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*

Fig. 5. Cat and mouse detail, Chi Rho page, Book of Kells
http://albertis-window.blogspot.com/2011/06/book- of-kells-folio-34-description.html

Two other factors in eighth- and ninth-century Anglo-Saxon life would have influenced my monk's poem. First was the sense of time endemic to the Anglo-Saxon Christian. Apocalypse is the predominant time frame of the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking – to see the world "hastening in a downward spiral toward a dismal end," in the words of Anglo-Saxon scholar R. M. Liuzza (14), is a characteristic historical reflection among the Anglo-Saxons. Thus all time is simultaneous. The Creation parallels events of the past that foreshadow the end-of-time redemption. Clemoes applies this sense of time to the language itself when he talks about its binaries – nouns that bind in one phrase two concepts of "essential being," by which he means the element of a being (wolf, eagle, man) that captures the core of its identity: the jaw of the wolf, the scream of the eagle, the speech of man. Because potential action exists in essential being, there is a "flowingness fundamental to all action" (91). We see this concept represented in manuscript art when the artist "prolong[s the] moveable members [of zoomorphic figures] – jaws, tongues, ears, tails, limb-joints, legs, feet and ribbon-like bodies – into patterns of extended movement, curling, coiling, twining" and in verbal art in such patterns as the "inexorable progression" in the chain of coordinate clauses of the early sections of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (Clemoes 91), such as we find in the entry for 888:

> Her was Goda se Dæfenisca þægn ofslagen and mycel wæl mid him. And her Dunstan se halga arcebiscop forlet þis lif and geferde þæt heofonlice. And Æðelgar biscop feg æfter him to arcebiscopstole and he litle hwile æfter þam leofode, butan an gear and III monðas.
>
> At this time Goda, the Devonshire thane was slain, and there was much slaughter with him. And here Dunstan, the holy archbishop, gave up this life and thus attained the heavenly life.

> And Æthelgar the bishop succeeded after him to the archbishop's chair, and he lived a little while after, only one year and three months.

The other factor of monastic life that influenced this poetry was the method of scholarship the monks used. My monk, preparing his stylus in the scriptorium, would have been steeped in a style that followed associative thinking rather than dialectics, that was Augustinian rather than Scholastic. Monastic authors were used to writing with great freedom within the chosen literary form, not adhering to a logical pattern fixed upon in advance but following a "psychological development, determined by the plan of associations," as LeClercq tells us (74). Thus when a poem takes a sudden, seemingly illogical turn, as when the speaker in *Wulf and Eadwacer* suddenly tells us what a young man would do or when a *snottor on mode* (a wise man) intrudes in the monologue of an *eardstapa* (an earth-walker) in *The Wanderer*, we think, "Where did this come from?" but the Anglo-Saxon monastic audience would have easily followed the crooked path of contemplative writing. This winding way of thinking, following the supple pattern of thought rather than forcing thought to follow the stiff pattern of logic, is reflected in the interlace structures of both verbal and visual arts. (See Meditation 9 for a discussion of interlace in poetry and art.)

This way of thinking forms the basis for the poetic expression of the monk I am watching through the dim light of the ages. Being with him in his place and in his time, reading over his shoulder, I begin to understand the poem he is recording on vellum, the poem we call *The Seafarer*, though he puts no title to it. (My translation of *The Seafarer* is on pages 155-158. The Old English version is in Appendix B.) *Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgiedd wrecan / siðas secgan* – "I can tell a truth-tale of my own, recount my

journeys," he begins, writing rapidly, from margin to margin. The formulas he remembers from childhood and has heard in vernacular poetry rise easily into place, just as the evocative power of the monastic language he has been steeped in for so long – "a biblical language, concrete, full of imagery," as LeClercq describes it [54-55] – directs his stylus. Because I understand that he intends first to express a wail of loss indicative of the times in which he lives, I do not try to devise a story to fit the speaker of the poem, as other critics have done. The Seafarer does not have to be a pilgrim (as Dorothy Whitelock suggests), nor do there have to be two voices, as John C. Pope posits ("Dramatic," "Second"; Stanley Greenfield, "Myn"). Nor is the speaker meant to be telling us the autobiographical story of the poet. My monk does not have to have been in a boat at sea alone in winter, but by picking that image from the treasury of Anglo-Saxon images at his disposal, he can express what he feels is true: his deep sense of the hardships of life, the lost joys of earthly life which he relinquishes for that which is more difficult and preferable, the Christian calling. "What appears to be a concrete referent, like the persona of the Seafarer …, may prove to be no more than the description of a mood," Michael Swanson concludes after a long look at the Seafarer as a *peregrinus* (127).

Calde geþrungen / wæron mine fet, the poet says. A usual translation is something like "Afflicted with cold were my feet," but *geþrungen* is so forceful a word I am tempted to incorporate it in the translation: "*Gethrungen* with cold were my feet," letting us hear the echo of its English derivative, "throng." *Geþrang* most fundamentally means "to crowd," and so we see how vapid and vague is the Modern English, Latin-based "afflicted" compared to its Old English cousin that allows for the essential being of cold

and its potential action. Cold "throngs" the feet – presses on them so hard they cannot move. That is what cold does. Then, in the midst of signifying pain with images of cold, the poet inserts a sudden paradox by signifying pain with an image of heat: "cares sigh hot around the heart." This concreteness of the language (so different from the mental agility of Latin!) is the heart and soul of this poetry.

The speaker who suffers these hardships is an exile. Again, we don't need to think autobiographically, the poet or speaker at one time an exile, except in that all men are exiles from God, paralleling, in the all-time of now-time, the exile of Adam from the Garden of Eden. Exile is a conventional form of depicting hardship – the severance from the community, the loss of the comitatus. At the same time the exile theme serves the purpose of producing nostalgia, a longing for the heroic days (when all the men were strong, all the women good-looking, and all the children above average). Those days are no more, in the now of the poet's day, so the exile-speaker bereft of his friend-kinsmen is the poet-monk bereft of the world of lords and thanes, of warriors and their vows of loyalty spoken over the ale cup.

To express that loss the poet uses the conventional images of sea birds' cries substituting for the joys of the hall. The Wanderer, in his eponymous poem, uses the same conventions, but whereas the Wanderer hears the sounds of the birds in his sleep and imagines them as the sounds of the meadhall, only to wake, brokenhearted, the Seafarer, in my monk's poem, is fully conscious of his loneliness. He deliberately takes the singing of swans as his entertainment because what else does he have? How dismal to be "drinking in" the singing of gulls (not even a melodious sound!) instead of the good

strong mead that bound him and his comrades together. Despair and nostalgia are exquisitely evoked, albeit in formulaic language.

Nineteenth century scholars thought Old English poetry difficult and "thorny." The repetitions seemed tedious and unsophisticated, the alliteration juvenile, the style "barbarous," "barren," "artificial," "common," "imperfect," and "half-formed," in the words of the nineteenth-century critic Sharon Turner (qtd. in Calder 9). This judgment stemmed in large part from ignorance of the rules of the poetry. When Magoun in 1986 introduced his theory of orality as a primary influence on the poems, and as the extent of formulaic usage became widely accepted, some critics, such as Robert Creed, even claimed that anyone could compose an Old English poem. All you have to do is know the formulas and paste them together, a trick Creed demonstrated by rewriting a passage from *Beowulf* in his essay "The Making of an Anglo-Saxon Poem" (370). (He did admit that the *Beowulf* poet's version was the better one.) Likewise, Derek Hull, in *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Art*, gives precise instructions for creating the grid on which interlace art is drawn. Make yourself a grid, and you, too, can produce interlace designs. Plug in the formulas, and you, too, can write an Old English poem. Somehow, though, when we do it, the magic is gone. Our efforts are but sad, lifeless mimics of these ancient, vibrant arts.

Stanley Greenfield defines the originality of the Anglo-Saxon poet as "the degree of tension achieved between the inherited body of meanings in which a particular formula participates and the specific meaning of that formula in its individual context" ("Formulaic" 205). We might have read about *læne lif* (the fleeting life) in *The Phoenix* and about proud thanes in *Beowulf*, but when the Seafarer says *forþon me hatran sind /*

dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif, / læne on lond (therefore hotter to me are the joys of the Lord than this dead life, fleeting on land), the formulas sound both fresh, because integral to the poem, and rich, because they work intertextually for the audience, for whom *lif* and *læne* would have recalled other recitations, other songs in which the same words were used in different contexts. Here *hatran* of line 64 also recalls the "hot sighs" around the Seafarer's heart of line 11, commingling images of the joys of the lord – and Lord – with the extreme miseries of life at sea, while *dryhtnes dreamas* (the joys of the lord) contrasts paradoxically with the *deade* (lifeless) life on earth.

Another aspect of the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking, at least among the nobility, was emotional reserve. As the Wanderer tells us, it was unseemly to talk about emotions. Of course, the Wanderer goes right ahead and pours out his heart to us (paradoxically), just as the Seafarer has no qualms about telling his audience about his misery, but in another way neither the Wanderer nor the Seafarer is talking about his own emotions. It is we who interpret their words in terms of sorrow and sadness, longing and loneliness. The Seafarer merely tells us that the princes have grown old and gray, the children of noblemen are in their graves, and the gold-givers of earlier times are gone. The concreteness of the language, its noun-based firmness, helps the poet stay in this, the ultimate "show, don't tell" poetry.

Clemoes's theory of the binaries of the Old English language is relevant here. The *stanclifu* of line 23 is not so much stone-adjective cliffs as a combination of two nouns, "stone" and "cliffs," each with its essential being and its potential action: the unmovingness of stone, the toweringness of cliffs. As a binary noun the *stanclifu*

produces a stronger picture than the modern English adjective-plus-noun, emphasizing the contrast between the unrelenting thrashing of the storms and the solidity of the stone cliffs. *Bealosiþa* (woe-journeys), *nihtscua* (night-shadows), *hringþege* (ring-receiving/giving), *wræclast* (exile-footsteps), *modsefa* (mind-heart), *eorðwelan* (earth-wealth) – such words strengthen the emotional impact of the poem by the actions they imply – the potentiality of their actions – while keeping the poem firmly grounded in the beingness of things rather than in the verboten expression of emotions.

The Seafarer also exemplifies the delight of the Anglo-Saxons in ornamentation and patterns. After twelve lines of misery at sea, the poet inserts a brief flash of the opposite kind of life that he will depict in more detail, bit by bit, later in the poem. Interwoven between the pictorial episodes of an exile in his boat, *Þæt se mon ne wat / þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð* (the man to whom it befalls fairest on earth does not know that kind of thing) is just a glimpse, an envious aside, of the joys known if one is not stuck in a boat on the sea in winter. Five and a half lines later the speaker introduces the happiness he once had on land when he tells us how the birds in various ways remind him of hall life – thereby reminding us of the joys he has lost: mead, laughter and fellowship. Without even leaving the scene of misery, he has interlaced it with a scene of joy. After four more lines of storms and sea birds, the poet introduces the next interlacing of joy with the same convention with which he introduced it earlier: then – *þæt se mon ne wat* (a man does not know that); here – *him gelyfeð lyt* (he little believes). This technique of producing pictures of joy by using negative images, a sort of litotes and an illustration of the good-bad paradox, is skillfully used to interlace the joy of life on land with the

miseries of the exile at sea. (See Meditation 7 for a more thorough examination of this point.) No matter how proud or generous or brave or loyal a man is, the speaker says, he will have sorrow in life, but by mentioning these exalted attributes in this negative way, the Seafarer nonetheless evokes the image of the proud, brave, loyal warriors of the life he is in exile from. The man who takes to the sea in voluntary exile (who eschews worldly life for the Christian life) does not want all those things of life on land – which, mentioned in this negative context, have the reverse effect of strengthening the enticement of that life:

> Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege –
> ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht. (44-45)
>
> Nor is there for him a mind for the harp nor for ring-receiving,
> nor joy from a woman nor hope from the world.

To hear the harp, to receive rings from one's grateful lord, to sleep with a woman – these actions are imbedded in the nouns. The concreteness of the language and the evocation of what was by telling us what is not produce the emotional impact of despair while preserving the speaker's Anglo-Saxon imperative to "keep his spirit bound fast in his spirit-place" (*þæt he his ferðlocan fæste binde* [The Wanderer 13]).

A major crux of *The Seafarer* is the speaker's shifts of attitude. He bewails life at sea for thirty-three and a half lines, then says his heart is ever urging him to go to sea:

> Forþon cnyssað nu
> heortan geþohtas þæt ic hean streamas,
> sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige
> monað modes lust mæla gehwylce,
> ferð to feran. (33b-37a)
>
> Whereupon now the thoughts of the heart
> beat at me that I should know for myself the deep currents,

the play of the saltwaves.
The desire of the mind urges me all the time
to fare forth.

The speaker spends another twenty lines bewailing the exile's lot and then suddenly says, again, that he is yearning to take the exile's path.

Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
min modsefa mid mereflode
ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide. (58-61a)

Whereupon now my mind turns in my heart.
The thoughts of my heart turn widely with the seaflood
over the homeland of the whale.

Thinking like an Anglo-Saxon, we resolve the paradox of this simultaneous hating and desiring. These abrupt turns are like the twisted feet of the Image of Man (the symbol for St. Matthew) in the Durrow manuscript (Fig. 6) – a surprising turn which, when examined, makes sense. Meyer Schapiro's justification of these profile feet on a forward-facing body results from carefully looking at the illustration as a whole: "It depends ultimately on the relation of the figure to the frame. The frame has been so designed that its ornament, in decided contrast to the rigid figure, is a winding form that moves from right to left around the whole. It is anything but symmetrical or stable" (13) – as the stable, symmetrical body of the Durrow Man becomes less so with his feet turned. (However, as Professor Anne Laskaya has noted, the feet might be turned to lead us into the text of the Gospel of St. Mattew on the facing page.)

Just as understanding the twisted feet of St. Matthew depends on the relation of the figure to the frame, understanding the abruptness of the Seafarer's change of direction

depends on the relation of those lines to the poem as a whole. In both passages just quoted – f*orþon cnyssaþ nu* and f*orþon nu min hyge hweorfeð – forþon* acts as a structurally interlaced indicator of a sudden turn of thought. (The word is used again in

Fig. 6. Image of Man, Book of Durrow
http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/images/durrowmatthew.jpg

this way in line 72.) Thus the poet establishes a pattern at the same time as he wanders in associative thinking – as a good monk would – from one theme (the hardships and

miseries of exile) to another (the necessity of turning away from the transitory joys of the world toward the more noble path, service to God).

The same justification of monastic thinking could be made for the turn towards gnomic wisdom at the end of the poem, but another "elegy" rule is at work here as well – the obligation to resolve at the end of the poem the despair with which it began. Various poems illustrate various means of resolution: the inevitability of apocalypse in *The Ruin*, resignation to hopelessness in *The Wife's Lament*, religious salvation in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer,* and gnomic advice in *The Seafarer*. The poems usually have a change of tone at the end that seems surprising to us but may have been expected by the Anglo-Saxon audience. When reading over the shoulder of a poet who handles language and theme as adroitly as the composer of *The Seafarer* does, it is best to recognize our own aesthetic ignorance and allow for his aesthetic integrity.

When John Ruskin studied Insular manuscript art, he thought it "sterile" because of its commitment to "geometrical conventionalizing of all forms that excluded nature" (Schapiro 7-8) – but how wrong we think that judgment today! When Ezra Pound omitted the last part of *The Seafarer* in his translation, he was doing the same injury to the poem that Schapiro suggested he himself did to the Durrow Man when he redrew the figure with the feet made symmetrical (14) (Fig. 7). In both cases, the reconfiguration does not lead the reader/listener or viewer towards the religious significance the poet or artist intended. The lines of gnomic wisdom seem banal and anticlimactic to us: *Micel biþ se meotudes egsa* (Great is the might of the Creator); *Dol biþ se þe him his Dryhten ne ondrædeþ* (Foolish is he who does not dread the Lord); *Eadig bið se þe eaþmod leofaþ*

(Blessed is he who lives humbly). But these lines belong to the poem for the same reason that a lament for the loss of the heroic world belongs in this poem of Christian yearning for God. It is the same reason that a liberal use of formulas makes the poem not stale and cobbled together but rich with intertextual connotations and inventive usage. It is the same reason that a story-telling arc is irrelevant in a poem of associative thinking and imagistic intent. In the Anglo-Saxon, monkish way of thinking, that is the way you write an elegiac poem.

Fig. 7. Meyer Schapiro's redrawing of the Image of man, Book of Durrow
From *The Language of Forms: Lectures on Insular Manuscript Art*

Meditation 2: Walking with Ghosts

> In the study of these textual ruins we may yet find an echo of the voices of the men and women whose lives we honor by our attention to them, by the piety of placing ourselves in relation to the past.
>
> R. M. Liuzza

One record-hot day in Greece, in early-morning stillness before the arrival of other tourists, I wandered alone among the ruins of Delphi. Ghostly buildings rose from stone floors. Monumental columns held up no roofs. Broken capitals toppled from scalloped columns; walls of polygonally cut stones fell into rubble. Through the mist of centuries the ghosts of ancient Greece walked with me: vendors hawking articles of piety and souvenirs of the Pythian games; children whining to skip the worship and get to the stadium; priests interpreting the inarticulate mutterings of Apollo's oracle; a tragic chorus of *Medea* wailing its lament from the theater. At the stadium my inner senses heard the ancient thud of a discus and the roar of 7000 people crowded into the twelve tiers of stone seats. I saw insubstantial naked athletes praying before the statues of gods. I smelled their sweat.

I'm not the only one to imaginatively people ruins with the vibrancy of a living culture. It's an inevitable reaction: Who lived here and what were their lives like? How different they were from us! How far we have come! And so we think we're on familiar ground when we read the Old English poem *The Ruin*, in which a dweller of Anglo-Saxon England, a poet, contemplates the ruins of Bath (as was almost certainly the site, given the archeological, historical, and geographical evidence presented by Cecilia Hotchness in her Ph.D. dissertation and not seriously challenged since). This poet, like

us, acknowledges the ghosts of the ruins and marvels at the accomplishments of their former selves. But, as it turns out, there are enormous differences. We can read Edmund Spenser's sixteenth-century poem "The Ruines of Time," or "The Glory of Ruins" by the nineteenth-century American poet Henry van Dyke, or "Ruins of a Great House" by the twentieth-century West Indian poet Derek Walcott and feel at home in their intellectual framework, but the epistemological milieu as well as the actual experience of viewing the ruins in the Anglo-Saxon poem is different.

The inhabitants of eighth- and ninth-century England (presumably when *The Ruin* was written) saw ruins in a way that is impossible for us today. When we visit Delphi or Anasazi, the Pont du Gard or the Coliseum or a ghost town of the Old West, we come deliberately, as tourists, outsiders, ready to feel the ghosts and acknowledge the long distance between then and now. But when the Anglo-Saxon poet contemplated the ruins of Bath, he was not a tourist. He just paused at the site, perhaps, on a walk across the countryside. And though phrases like *burnsele monige* (many bathhouses – or "stream-rooms," as the Old English puts it) and *stream hate wearp, / widan wylme* (hot streams gushed, in a wide surging) help designate the site as Bath, he could just as easily have stopped at another pile of rubble of a villa or aqueduct or city. When the Romans withdrew from Britannia in 410, the people who came in their wake – the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons – were not city dwellers but agriculturalists. If they inhabited the cities (as they must have briefly done, for archeological evidence shows that people were living in the baths after 410, according to Dr. Philip Daileader), they soon abandoned them. Squatters remained in Bath until the West Saxons captured the former city at the battle of

Deorham in 577. Since the conquerors had no interest in living in the city, the intricately made walls, the villas with their mosaics, the carefully engineered baths fell to ruins. Similar scenarios left the English countryside strewn with ruins in the last half of the fifth century that must have made a powerful impression on the Anglo-Saxon mind, as Anne Klinck recognizes (61-62). Ecocritic Matt Low suggests that to the Anglo-Saxons, such ruins embodied "the hardships that the true force of the natural world could bring onto humankind" (12-13).

So the first difference between the way we view ruins and the way the Anglo-Saxons saw them is that we live in the dailiness of a visibly flourishing civilization, whereas the Anglo-Saxons lived with constant visual reminders that things end. And the way a society views ruins is influenced by the second difference: the framework of time in which we live. When we visit ruins, we are in the present looking back into the past. The difference between the now and the then is striking because our own civilization sticks to us like tarweed. We arrive in cars or chartered buses; we chat on our cell phones; we snap pictures with our cameras. Experiencing the ruins of ages past, we drag an ever-present nowness with us. As for the future, it stretches along that line of history, forever moving forward. We know that time moves in cycles – people are born and die, cities come and go, seasons turn – but such tiny cycles as these spin along a linear path with the past behind us, the future ahead, and ourselves solidly "here." Visiting ruins reinforces our linear concept of time.

The Anglo-Saxons saw time not as linear but as simultaneous. They were therefore as close to their ruins in time as they were in space. The Anglo-Saxon saw no

oxymoron in Jesus's words, "The time is coming and now is" (John 4:23). Linear time (things beginning and ending, events happening in a sequence) was concomitant with the circularity of time (seasons turning; people being born, growing old, dying) because all time was apocalyptic. The end of the world was prefigured in its beginning. Linear time had a beginning date (5196 BC) and an ending date, known only to God, which would be in the 6000th year after the day of creation (Bately 2). Ruins evoked a sense that the end was near. Thus the speaker of *The Ruin* can say with confidence that although the wall he was viewing had withstood storms kingdom after kingdom (*rice æfter oþþrum, / oftstonden under stormum*), the men buried there would stay buried "until a hundred generations of nations of men had endured" (*oþ hund cnea / wer eode gewitan*) – though there is some ambiguity in the line. *Oþ* means "up to" as well as "until," and Old English has only one tense for all past action, so we could translate that the men buried there had endured (stayed buried) "up to a hundred generations," making the line refer to the past rather than to the present. That is the impulse of the modern reader because we are uncomfortable with giving an end date to the world. But since the poet lived with a sense of apocalyptic time, it is not unreasonable that he would have thought that the ruins would remain for only another, oh, two thousand years or so, depending on how long a generation was thought to be.

Another phrase strengthening this future-time interpretation is *eorðgrap hafað waldend-wyrhtan … , heard gripe hrusan* (the earthgrip, the hard grip of the ground, holds the masterbuilders). The image of men buried in the earth, firmly locked in their graves, would have brought with it the simultaneous image of those graves opening on

Judgment Day, the grip of the ground loosening, the bodies ascending from their graves to Judgment, thence to Heaven to join the angels and the heavenly comitatus for eternity – or falling into the gaping mouth of Hell, likewise for eternity. The Anglo-Saxon reader knew that the *heard gripe hrusan*, as grim as the image is, signifies resurrection as much as it does death.

The past, vividly present in the ruins, and the future, vividly imminent in the apocalypse, comprised the context of the present. Thus the physical ruin of a building, especially of a hall, which to the Anglo-Saxons was the center of human activity, had an apocalyptic context as it never does for us. In ruins we see cultures and civilizations rising and falling, but we do not see an end to it all. Unlike the Anglo-Saxons, we, culturally, do not think apocalyptically (though, of course, there are individuals who do).

A third difference between the Anglo-Saxon experience at ruins and our own is the ghosts we see. I knew how to people the ruins at Delphi because I have read about the religion, philosophy, arts, and sports of ancient Greece. (Admittedly, I might have interpolated too much modernity with the introduction of vendors. We do bring our present with us when we visit the past.) But the poet of *The Ruin* did not have the advantage (if advantage it is) of such widespread literacy. He did not have books like *The History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* or *Quo Vadis* describing the life of ancient Rome. He was most probably a monk and would have read his Bible, studied his grammar, puzzled his riddles, learned his prayers, and memorized his Latin (Lendinara), but what would those texts tell him about the Roman way of life? He read Cicero and Vergil as a study of Latin, for the application of their ideas to the Christian life, and for

the beauty of the poetry (in Vergil's case) (Leclercq 117, 134), so it is doubtful how much intellectual energy he would have spent on deciphering from them an account of life in Rome. Maybe his only concept of the way people lived was the way his own people lived, which is the image with which he describes the city at its thriving best:

> Beorht wæron burgræced burnsele monige,
> heah horngestreon heresweg micel,
> meodoheall monig, mondreama full.
> … þær iu beorn monig,
> glædmod ond goldbeorht, gleoma gefrætwed
> wlonc ond wingal, wighyrstum scan;
> seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas,
> on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,
> on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices. (21-23, 32b-37)
>
> Bright were the city-dwellings, numerous the bathhouses.
> high were the abundant arched structures, great the sound of armies,
> many the meadhalls, full of the mirth of men.
> …There, long ago, many a man,
> joyous and gold-bright, brightly adorned,
> proud and wine-regaled shone with battle-trappings;
> he looked on treasure, on silver, on battle-gems,
> on prosperity, on possessions, on precious stones,
> on this bright city of the broad kingdom.

This is a quintessential description of Anglo-Saxon hall culture: the meadhall full of joy, the warriors, the camaraderie between thanes and lord, the emphasis on treasure and booty, the pat phrase "proud and wine-regaled" indicating, perhaps, not only the joviality of drinking but also the vows made over the meadcup between thane and lord. It is not the picture of a Roman city as we know it.

But there might be another reason the poet conceptualized the inhabitants of the ruins as people as he knows them rather than as the people they more likely were – not because he did not know any better (we will leave that question moot) but because he saw

time – events – as simultaneous. If all time is now, then the past is no different from the present, those people no different from us. By conjuring an Anglo-Saxon culture into the city of old, he takes us out of linear time so that his elegy for the end of glories past is a lament for the imminent demise of his own world. He marvels at the ruins – how wondrously wrought was the wall (*Wrætlic is þes wealstan*), how marvelous the craftsmanship (*in hringas…gebond / …wundrum togædre* – bound wondrously together in circles), how fine the architectural components (the *hrofas, torras, hringeat* – roofs, towers, arched gates), how incomprehensible the engineering (*þæt wæs hyðelic* – that was handy, he says about the way the hot streams were harnessed into the bathhouses); how mighty the warriors, how treasure-rich the buildings, how merry the hall.

But to the Anglo-Saxon *lif* is *læne* (life is fleeting – or "on loan," to translate more closely) – it is but the blink of an eye in God's all-encompassing nowness of time – past, present, and future. Those glories of the past are now destroyed, "now" being the now of the ruins in front of him and the now of Doomsday that is coming, the demise of the city of Bath, the demise of his own hall, and the demise of the world. If a poet can equate the erection of a hall with God's act of creation, as the *Beowulf* poet does in his description of the building of Heorot, then the description of the destruction of buildings, as in *The Ruin*, can also equate to cosmic destruction or "de-creation," in the phraseology of Old English scholar Martin Green (511). Indeed, the poet of *The Wanderer* (as that of *The Seafarer* as well) explicitly equates the ruins of hall-life with Doomsday:

> Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle hu gæstlic bið
> þonne ealle þisse worulde wela weste stondeð
> swa nu missenlice geond þisnes middangeard
> winde biwaune weallas stondaþ,

hrime bihrorene. Hryðe þa ederas;
woriað þa winsalo. Waldend licgað
dreame bidrorene duguþ eal gecrong,
wlong bi wealle
…
Yþde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend.
(73-80a, 86-87)

A wise man must perceive how ghostly it will be
when all wealth in this world stands as a wasteland,
just as now variously around this middle-earth
walls stand, blown upon by wind,
fallen upon with frost. Then the snow-swept enclosures,
the wine-halls totter. The ruler lies
bereft of joy, all the duguth, fallen in battle,
proud by the wall.
…
Thus did the Creator of men lay waste this middle-earth.

Finally, it seems inevitable, in looking at ruins, to wonder about the causes of demise. Just as we argue endlessly over why the Roman empire fell, the speaker of *The Ruin* looks for and finds agents of destruction: frost (*hrim on lime* – frost on mortar – or, keeping the rhyme, "rime on lime"), age (*ældo undereotone* – eaten away [or, more literally and picturesquely, "undereaten"] by age), storms, war, pestilence. What is notably missing, and different from some modern theories (think: Gibbon), is any sense that the folks of the Roman city were being punished because of their behavior. Strangely, for a literate culture of monks, the Anglo-Saxon poets who write about ruins do not follow the Biblical model of punishment for sin. Babylon fell because it was wicked; the Tower of Babel was destroyed for the hubris of its builders, but far from showing a similar disdain or hatred for the city's long-ago inhabitants, the speaker of *The Ruin* seems to admire them. He looks for causes of destruction, but God's retribution is not one.

The man with the blue guitar says he sings of things as they are, but we can always only sing of things as we see them. Eighth- and ninth-century England is a place as foreign to us as Persia or T'ang Dynasty China. We peer down the long linear trajectory we call history into the ruins of that time – a ring or two, a clasp, a Sutton Hoo harp, a tenth-century manuscript (itself in ruins, partially burned) with records of songs of earlier days. Who were these people? How did they see the world? Wandering in those ruins we find the ghost of a poet, singing faintly. If we know how to listen, he can help us see things as they were.

Meditation 3: Mountains or Molehills

There was once a young man poking around in an old abandoned house, where he found, in a dilapidated bureau in the attic, this poem, handwritten (it was that old!) on a piece of lined notebook paper:

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
Give him an inch, and he'll take a mile.
Measure twice, cut once.
Beggars can't be choosers.
If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.
People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.
There's no use crying over spilled milk.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
He let the cat out of the bag!
There's more than one way to skin a cat.
You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
I'm between a rock and a hard place.
Three's a charm.

Thinking it might be important, the explorer of attics took it to the university for further study. There the scholars had a ball. For years the yes-it-is, no-it-isn't, it-means-this, it-means-that debates flew. Though some scholars said it was not a "real" poem,

merely a collection of sayings, others tried to find coherence in the lines. Some thought it must have a subtle narrative framework and tried to recreate the story: "A man – a tailor – was eating apples to keep healthy, but he took more than his share because there was plenty. The beggar on the corner gave him some advice on his profession, having been a tailor himself before hard times fell upon him. The tailor answered in a fit of temper that he had never wanted to be a tailor in the first place, but, he told the beggar bitterly, you don't get what you want just because you want it." And so forth. The story seemed contrived, but how else to make sense of the thing if one is to call it a poem?

Other scholars tried to make it cohere around a theme, something like, "the physical world and the social order by which man survives in it." Others tried to decipher its purpose. A mnemonic? Advice? Irony? Poetry? Wisdom? Was it banal and petty, or was it deeply meaningful? What kind of literature was it? What genre did it belong to? Or were scholars just making mountains out of molehills?

Still other scholars tried to understand the people and culture of the unknown poet through the poem. They concluded that:

- The people of this culture are obsessed with numbers and measurements (lines 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 13).
- They ride horses and have dogs and cats (5, 11, 9, 10).
- They keep their cats in bags (9).
- Their diet consists of milk and apples – and maybe cats, unless they kill cats for the fur (7, 1, 10).
- . They live in glass houses in a rocky, bushy country with lots of birds (6, 12, 8).
- . They are insensitive to the plight of the poor (4, 5).

Here are many errors. You and I know that when we say, "There's no use crying over spilled milk," we are not referring to milk at all but to an error made. We know that "beggars can't be choosers" has nothing to do with the homeless man on the street. In other words, we understand the "poem" because we know the contexts of the sayings.

Maybe that is also why we enjoy the poem without worrying about unity, cohesion, theme, or poetic skill. It's just kind of fun to read.

All the preceding pretty much summarizes the situation of the Old English poems called *Maxims I* and *Maxims II*. *Maxims I* is found in the tenth-century Exeter Book manuscript and is divided into three parts, A, B, and C, often considered three different poems, as each is designated in the manuscript by a colored majuscule letter at its beginning. *Maxims II* is found in the eleventh-century Cotton manuscript. Both poems share certain characteristics with other gnomic Old English sayings: they use *sceal* (must, should) or *bið* (is) statements; they are instructive; they are concerned with life in general. Susan F. Deskis, a professor at Northern Illinois University, identifies them as gnomic (wise sayings) in that they "consist primarily of declarative assertions of universal fact" (328). The poems are, as their titles suggest, maxims – succinct formulations of a fundamental principle, general truth, or rule of conduct, similar to proverbs, adages, and gnomes. They belong to the genre of wisdom literature, in which we also find the Wisdom of Solomon, the Sermon on the Mount, Cato's *Dicta*, the Old Norse *Hávamál*, Bacon's *Ornamenta Rationalia*, La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard, but nothing in contemporary literature, as the genre has long since fallen from fashion.

The Old English *Maxims* cause the kinds of scholarly problems outlined above. The question of their unity (or lack thereof) has troubled scholars for decades, as the poems seem on first reading to be as disconnected and random as the catalogue of sayings jotted down and stuck in a bureau drawer. These lines from *Maxims I C* will serve as an example:

> Gryre sceal for greggum, græf deadum men;
> hungre heofeð, nales þæt heafe bewindeð
> ne huru wæl wepeð wulf se græga,
> morþorcwealm mæcga, ac hit a mare wille.
> Wræd sceal wunden, wracu heardum men.
> Boga sceal stræle – sceal bam gelic
> mon to gemæccan. Maþþum oþres weorð
> gold mon sceal gifan. Mæg god syllan
> eadgum æhte ond eft niman.
> Sele sceal stondan sylf ealdian.
> Licgende beam læsest groweð,
> Treo sceolon bræden ond treow weaxan
> sio geond bilwitra breost ariseð. (11-23)
>
> There shall be terror for the grey wolf, a grave for dead men.
> The grey wolf laments for hunger. He does not surround that grave
> with lamentation at all.
> Nor does he weep at all for the slaughter,
> the murderous death of men, but he always wishes it were more.
> A bandage shall bind. Revenge shall be for cruel men.
> A bow shall be for the arrow – both alike shall be
> as a comrade to man. Treasure becomes another's.
> A man shall give gold. God might give
> possessions to the wealthy and take them afterwards.
> A hall shall stand, a body grow old.
> The tree that is low-lying grows least.
> Trees shall spread and faith shall grow –
> it arises in the breast of the merciful.

One of the first scholars to look carefully at the *Maxims*, Blanche Williams, in 1914, said they had a "total absence of unity" (qtd. in Tigges 111), and E. V. K. Dobbie contends, in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* of 1942, that *Maxims II* lacks "unity in style

and content" (lxvii). J. K. Bollard, on the other hand, wrote in 1975 that *Maxims II* "presents a remarkably consistent world view" with a "definite purpose and direction which the poet has well under control" (180). Bollard expresses this purpose and direction in terms as general as the one given for the contemporary maxims-poem above – in fact, that expression of theme is his in relation to *Maxims II*: "the physical world and the social order by which man survives in it" (179). To my mind, the applicability of this statement to a large number of Old English poems renders it fairly useless as a unifying theme for *Maxims II*. Stanley Greenfield and Richard Evert, also writing in 1975, suggest that *Maxims II* is unified by a slightly more specific theme: "True wisdom ultimately reveals the limitations of human knowledge" (340).

As for *Maxims I*, James Earl finds that *Maxims I A* is not made up of "unrelated and disconnected thoughts set down at random" ("*Maxims"* 280), as it seems, but is unified under the theme, "the wise man's role in maintaining order in the world" (280). Fair enough, and probably one could manipulate the random-seeming statements of *Maxims I B* and *I C* also into thematic cohesiveness, but credulity in the author's purpose stretches into a dubious trust in the scholars' individual readings. Deskis argues that thematic connections of *Maxims I* are "sketchy or apparently absent" because of the lack of cohesion between one series of gnomes and the next (330). The search for theme begins to look like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Every thick, shiny, two-inch piece of straw a scholar finds looks like a theme. Maybe, in the end, it is just a pile of hay.

If not thematic unity, is there another kind? R. M. Dawson's 1960 analysis of the Old English gnomic poems sees their unity as "a universal principle of association," i.e.,

stream-of-consciousness (20). This is very clever. We can take just about any section of the poems at random and see the stream-of-consciousness associations:

> Fæmne æt hyre bordan geriseð
> widgongel wif word gespringeð – oft hy mon wommum bilihð
> hæleð hy hospe mænað; oft hyre hleor abreoþeð
> Sceomiande man sceal in sceade hweorfan; scir in leohte geriseð.
> Hond sceal heofod inwyrcan, hord in streonum bidan.
> (*Maxims I A*, 62a-66)

> A woman must preside at her table;
> a wandering wife causes gossip. Often a man is deceived by a woman.
> Men speak insults about her; often her cheeks fade.
> A shamed man must walk in the shade. An unblemished man goes about in the light.
> The hand shall be laid on the head. Treasure abides in treasure-hoard.

Here, the associations go from the woman who does as she should to the one who does not, and from there the mind goes to the man who misbehaves and then to the ceremony between a lord and his thane who, in order to receive this blessing, must be one who does not misbehave, and if we're talking about lords and thanes, obviously our minds turn to treasure, and so on. However, this kind of unity is no unity at all, as our thoughts can progress from one thing to another with the slightest hint of connection, whether narrative or semantic or orthographic or any other kind imaginable, and except for the broad universal principle of association, nothing coheres.

Wim Tigges, in an essay in the *Companion to Old English Poetry*, suggests that *Maxims I* is held together by contrasting statements, allegory, and narrative. He says, for instance, that the opening line of *Maxims I B*, *forst sceal freosan* (frost typically freezes, in Tigges's translation [113]) contrasts in its banality with less obvious statements, such as *widgongel wif word gespringeð* (a widely-going wife inspires gossip [*Maxims I A*, 63a]) (113). I see three problems with this approach. (1) The six intervening lines

between the two statements greatly diminish, if not nullify, the contrasting effect. (2) Such contrasts are too inconsistent to be a unifying factor. (3) We do not know the social context of the poems. Perhaps to the Anglo-Saxons the second saying was as insipid as the first – or the first as deeply meaningful as the second. As Paul Cavill points out in *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, the "brute fact" that frost freezes "functions differently in different societies" (172) – one way in pre-scientific Anglo-Saxon England and another way to the fact-saturated, science-sophisticated readers of today. It is as Emmanuel K. A. Asante says in writing about the proverbs of the Akan people of Ghana: "In a common language, persons of a community do communicate to one another, sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings in a peculiar way that is characteristic of their very own way of life. Only those who possess that culture can fully understand such expressions" (1). In just such a way we should hesitate to think we understand Old English maxims.

Likewise, Tigges's elaborate allegorical interpretation of the whole of *Maxims I B*, that the "everyday truths, homely events and the conventional behavior of nature" are allegories for "spiritual desirabilities" (114), and his even more labyrinthine narrative interpretation of the same poem, based on an ironic reading ("a not a-typical Anglo-Saxon attitude") (114), are as much a contrivance as the narrative I created for my own maxims poem at the beginning of this essay. Having to work so hard to elicit sense from the poem is perhaps a clue that we are barking up the wrong tree. Maybe the Maxims poems are not meant to be narratives or allegories. Maybe, even, they are not meant to have the kind of cohesiveness we sometimes try to force on them. "The problem is not so much the style of the *Maxims*," Cavill says, "but our expectations of 'coherence' and

'beauty'; and then not so much that the *Maxims* lack these features, but that we demand them in certain forms, and do not find them in the poems" (158). Maybe unity (our concept of unity) is irrelevant.

A second problem facing scholars and readers is the lack of context for the sayings. We immediately understand the meaning of "you let the cat out of the bag" because we know that the context is "surprise," but a lack of context makes the Old English maxims sound more jejune than they might be. We know so little about the Anglo-Saxon era that when the Old English scholar Christine Fell interprets *Maxims I A*, 11-13a, in light of Anglo-Saxon marriage laws (qtd. in Hill, Thomas "Wise" 169-170), we suddenly realize how broadly we may be missing the mark on other maxims. Here is *Maxims I B,* 11-13a:

> Cyning sceal mid cease cwene gebicgan,
> bunum ond beagum bu sceolon ærest
> geofum god wesan.
>
> The king must buy a queen with possessions,
> with chalices and rings. They both must above all
> be generous with gifts.

Reading these lines as Fell does, in the context of laws about property settlements in royal marriages, which respectfully address the property rights and authority of the queen, dissolves the bad taste of misogyny on the tongue of the modern reader.

If we could recreate such contexts for all the *Maxims*, perhaps they would make more sense to us. If Ælfræd, say, complained that his wife wanted more gold necklaces, did Leofsunu look at him wisely and say, *Forst sceal freosan* (Frost must freeze [*Maxims I B*, 1]), meaning that just as it is in the nature of frost to freeze, so is it in the nature of women to want gold? If Ælfwine lamented to Godwic that his aim with his lance had been poor lately, might Godwic have comforted him by saying, *Wolcnu scriðað*

(Clouds move [*Maxims II*, 13a]), i.e., "This, too, will pass"? If Offa suspected that his wife, Hildewulf, was lusting after Eadwacer, did he think to himself, defensively, *Wif sceal wiþ wer wære gehealdan* (A woman must hold faith with a man [*Maxims I B*, 30]), but did Offa remind him that *fela bið fæsthydigra, fela bið fyrwetgeornra* (many [women] are steadfast, many are curious" [*Maxims I B*, 31]) and Hrothæsc just shrug and say, *Wyrd bið swiðost* (Fate is strongest" [*Maxims II*, 5a])?

Even if we knew the social context for such sayings, however, only some lines of the *Maxims* would be more clear, for not all are like proverbs. *Maxims II*, 1b-2a, for instance –

> Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
> orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon,
> wrætlic weallstana geweorc
>
> Cities are seen afar,
> those which are on earth, the skillful work of giants,
> wondrous wall-stone work

– is descriptive rather than a "wise saying" and *Maxims I A*, 8b-10,

> God us ece bið
> ne wendað hine wyrda ne hine with dreceþ,
> adl ne yldo ælmihtigne.
>
> God is eternal for us,
> fate does not turn him nor do sickness or old age
> trouble him, the almighty one,

is more religious dogma than proverb. However, the Akan proverb, "Except God," meaning that no one was present at Creation "except God" and no one will be present at the End "except God," implies the limitation of our own knowledge, so perhaps the "religious" lines in the *Maxims* poems have more proverbial intention than we realize. The dearth of information about the lives of the Anglo-Saxons leaves the *Maxims* poems

artifacts without context. There is no attic with old furniture and dusty photographs among which they lie, and the context problem remains unsolvable.

Finally, there is the prickly problem of purpose. T. A. Shippey, in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, lists a number of possibilities, discarding each as he goes:

> If they were intended as entertainment, one can only say that they neither amuse nor distract. If they were mnemonic poems, catalogues, then they have neither the completeness nor the ease of reference which one might hope for in such works. If they are didactic then they ought to come to firmer conclusions. It is hard to imagine them being sung in the meadhall, read in the refectory, or even set as an exercise in copying, all contexts which one might imagine for at least some Old English poems (18).

Of course, Shippey is speaking from today's perspective. That *we* don't find the maxims amusing doesn't mean the Anglo-Saxons didn't. (Anyway, I, for one, *do* find them amusing.) Maybe a ninth-century writer in need of a gnomic saying could, with his prodigious, oral-culture-trained memory, have used the *Maxims* poems as a catalogue. Maybe the Anglo-Saxon reader/listener did not need firm conclusions to didactic literature, and, since copying was a tool for learning, why not imagine *Maxims I* and *II* in the school room?

Another possible purpose, proposed by Thomas D. Hill, is that the *Maxims* poems were intended as collections for poets and other public speakers, "a kind of gathering of *sententiae*, which [Old English readers and listeners] could use and adapt if they were called upon to speak formally in public" ("Wise" 171). For evidence he points to the maxims and gnomic sayings that crop up like weeds (some think) in the flower gardens of Old English poetry. Here's an example from *The Seafarer*:

> Dol biþ se þe him his dryhten ne ondrædeþ – cymeð him se deað unþinged.
> Eadig bið se þe eaþmod leofaþ – cymeð him seo ar of heofonum, …
> Stieran mon sceal strongum mode. (106-107, 109a)

> Foolish is he who does not fear his Lord, for death comes to him unexpected.
> Blessed is he who lives humbly, for the grace of heaven comes to him. …
> A man must steer with a strong mind.

The Wife's Lament also ends with a sententious saying, using the maxim format of *biþ* and *sceal*: *Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langþe leofes abidan (*Woe comes him who awaits the beloved with longing [52b-53]). Even the *Beowulf* poet uses maxims. When Hrothgar, for instance, "gave [Beowulf] bounty, both treasure and horses" (*he him est geteah / meara ond maðma* [2166b-2167a]), the poet adds, *swa sceal mæg don* – "So should a kinsman do," in good maxim form (*sceal*), making an indirect contrasting reference to Hrothgar's kinsmen, who, instead of giving gifts, "weave deceit-nets in secret craft" (*inwit-net … bregdon / dyrum cræfte* [267b-268a]).

It would be easy to think these poets consulted their compendia of maxims for these lines because line 106 in *The Seafarer* is very similar to *Maxims I A*, 35 (*Dol biþ se þe his dryhten nat – to þæs oft cymeð deað unþinged*), and line 109a is almost an exact copy of line 50a of *Maxims I A* (*Styran sceal mon strongum mode*). The lines from *Beowulf* could be alluding to the maxim from *Maxims I B*, 12b-13a, that a king and a queen should both, first and foremost, be generous with gifts (*bu sceolon ærest / geofum god wesan*). If the *Maxims* poems were collections for such use, we would justify not only the existence of these strange poems but also the use of gnomic sayings in other poetry, a practice scholars have sometimes derided. Robert B. Burlin, in "Gnomic Indirection in *Beowulf*," calls the *Beowulf* poet's use of the gnomic formula "flatfooted" and "uncharacteristic of the poet at his most inventive" (41), though thinking the poet has to be "inventive" instead of invoking a wide context by quoting sayings familiar to his audience is anachronistic criticism. The modern disdain of maxims and adages in literature and a

critical scorn that calls such utterances "trite" (Tigges 113) and "a belaboring of the obvious" (Howe 133) interfere with our assessment of their use.

If Hill is right that *Maxims I* and *II* serve as a reference for poets of other genres, we can hardly fault those poets for using them. If Anglo-Saxon culture was strongly dependent on the continuity and importance of tradition, as seems to be the case (see, for instance, R. M. Liuzza, "The Tower of Babel: *The Wanderer* and the Ruins of History"), then, as Hill says, "appeals to the received wisdom [i.e., use of maxims] had a kind of rhetorical and cultural force" (171). Maxims in the poetry would have served a culturally mnemonic purpose, and collections might have been important, or at least useful.

However, to think that the Anglo-Saxon poet needed to find just the perfect maxim in a collection made for his reference is to counter the meaning of a maxim (or proverb or adage or gnome) – they are maxims and gnomes precisely because they are frequently quoted. They must have been as familiar as "measure twice, cut once" or "three's a charm." The poets would have had the right saying always at the tip of the tongue.

I like Paul Cavill's solution to the purpose problem. He calls the sayings of the *Maxims* poems "nomes," from the Greek word *nomos,* defined by Liddell and Scott as "anything assigned or apportioned…, a usage, custom…, a law, ordinance…, a received opinion" (qtd. in Cavill 10). Because the *Maxims* poems "organize thought and experience, society and its ethics, and literature," as Cavill says (11), they are what they seem to be: "collections of sayings compiled and elaborated by the poet" (Cavill 158). Their purpose is neither more nor less than to give the reader a large number of maxims, as Nicholas Howe, cutting through scholarly puzzlement, asserts in *The Old English Catalogue Poems* (152).

As such, the *Maxims* are their own proof against the charge of triviality – if maxims organize knowledge, if they "invoke a sense of order in a context where chaos threatens" (Cavill 107), then the collection, *ipso facto*, has a purpose. Again, contemporary sayings can be illustrative. When, ironically and perversely, the worse of two possible outcomes happens – the $50 car repair turns out to be $200 – we take comfort in the irony of the toast always falling butter side down. If I tell you that a watched pot never boils, you know immediately that you should be patient because the outcome will happen in its own time. This kind of "sense of order where chaos threatens" in the context of *Maxims I* and *II* was illustrated in the earlier paragraph about the Anglo-Saxon characters with their marital problems and slumps in marksmanship. Looked at from the societal perspective, there is nothing inane in familiar sayings. They become important in expressing a "socially-sanctioned view of life and its perplexities" (Cavill 106).

The "view of life and its perplexities" presented in the *Maxims* poems is that of ordinary people, not, as in other Old English literature, that of heroes, saints, or monks. Although the poems do sometimes speak of the noble world of heroic poetry, saying that a king should give out rings in the hall (*Cyning sceal on healle/beagas dælan* [28a-29b]), that the queen should serve her lord before the other retainers (*forman fulle to fean hond/ ricene geræcan* – "give the cup promptly first to the hand of her lord" [*I B*, 20-21a]), that the nobleman should be on horseback (*eorl sceal on eos boge* [*I A*, 61a]), and that gold belongs on a man's sword (*Gold geriseþ on guman sweorde* [*I B*, 55]), other topics, such as the difficulties, problems, and evils that people encounter, belong to the lives of all:

- the deaths of children – *Umber yceð, þa æradl nimeð* (The more the children, the more the disease to take them away) (*I A*, 31-34)

• adequate nutrition – *Seoc se biþ þe to seldan ieteð* (Sick is he who too seldom eats) (*I B*, 41). *Mægen mon sceal mid mete fedan* (Eat well to feel well) (*II B*, 44)

• illness – *Lef mon læces behofað* (The halting life holds to the healer) (*I A*, 45a)

• loneliness – *Earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan / wineleas wunian* (Wretched is he who lives alone, friendless and fondless) (*I C*, 35-36a)

• thieves – *Þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum* (If the weather is foul, the thief will prowl) (*II*, 42a)

• criminality – *A sceal…wearh hangian, / fægere ongildan þæt he ær facen dyde / manna cynne* (He who does the crime pays the fine.) (*II*, 54a-57); *[Mon sceal] morþor under eorþan befeolan* (Bury deep a murderous deed.) (I B, 44b)

The poet of *Maxims I A* gives an especially sympathetic account of blindness, pitying the man who cannot see the glorious luminaries of heaven:

> Blind sceal his eagna þolian –
> oftigen biþ him torhtre gesihþe; ne magon hi tunglu bewitian,
> swegltorht sunnan ne monan; þæt him biþ sar in his mode,
> onge þonne he hit ana wat, ne weneð þæt him þæs edhwyrft cyme.
>
> The blind man must suffer because of his eyes
> withholding from him bright vision. His eyes cannot observe the stars,
> the bright sun, or the moon. That is sorrow for him in his mind.
> It is vexing when he alone knows it, nor does he believe that a change will come to him.
> (39-42)

There are also maxims for the joys of life:

• family – *Sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan / bearn mid gebyrdum* (A woman and a man's recreation often ends in procreation) (I A, 24-25b)

• music – *Longað þonne þy læs þe him con leoþa worn, / oþþe mid hondum con hearpan gretan* (Depression departs if you play the harp) (*I C*, 32-33)

• being virtuous – *Bliþe sceal bealoleas heorte* (Blithe is the bale-free heart.) (*I A*, 39a)

• playing games – *Hy twegen sceaolon tæfle ymbsittan… / habban him gomen on borde* (The gambler goes giddy with gaming.) (*C*, 44a, 45b)

The frequent images of nature, especially in *Maxims II*, also reveal ordinary life among the Anglo-Saxons. Storms are difficult for them. They are acutely aware of the change of seasons. They welcome the autumn harvest and endure the hardships of the sea. They hunt with hawks, which perch on their gloves. They acknowledge the habitats of wild creatures: fish in the rivers; birds in the air; wolves, bears, and boars in the woods. *Maxims I A* uses nature images metaphorically, as in lines 54-55 (*Swa biþ sæ smilte þonne he sund ne weceð, / swa beoþ þeoda geþwære þonne hy geþingad habbað* – Just as the sea is calm when the water is not aroused, so are the people at peace when they have settled a dispute) and lines 25a-29, where, by juxtaposition of lines, the passage about a tree losing its leaves gives human death a universal perspective:

> Beam sceal on eorðan
> leafum liþan, leomu gnornian.
> Fus sceal feran, fæge sweltan
> ond dogra gehwam ymb gedal sacan
> middangeardes.
>
> A tree on earth must
> suffer in its leaves, lament its branches.
> A person must depart [this life] eagerly. The doomed must die
> and every day resist departure from middle-earth.

The relationship with nature is prominent in *Maxims*, but so is one's relationship with God and with other people – husbands and wives, teachers and students, friends,

parents, holy men, kings and queens, warriors, advisors. (One relationship not mentioned is that between master and slave.) One of the longest, most beautiful, and most humanly specific passages of *Maxims I B* describes a sailor's wife welcoming her husband home after his long sea journey:

> Leof wilcuma
> Frysan wife, þonne flota stondeð
> biþ his ceol cumen ond hyre ceorle to ham
> agen ætgeofa, ond heo hine in laðaþ
> wæsceð his warig hrægl ond him syleþ wæde niwe. (24b-28)

> The Frisian wife
> welcomes her beloved when his ship comes to rest,
> when her lord and his ship have come home –
> her own food-giver – and she invites him in,
> washes his dirty clothing, and gives him fresh clothes.

It is refreshing, after so much poetry about oaths to lords and gold rings for thanes, about battles with dragons and torture of saints, to read about a woman doing laundry. When the poet picks up the sailor-and-wife theme a few lines later, he adds poignancy to the welcoming scene with the acknowledgment that sometimes the Frisian wife might wait for a man who never returns, the sea having taken him:

> Hwonne him eft gebyre weorð
> ham cymeð, gif he hal leofað nefne him holm gestyreð
> mere hafað mundum. (34-36a)

> When afterwards the opportunity arises for him,
> he comes home, if he lives whole – if the the sea doesn't rule him,
> take him in its hands.

The relationship between teachers and students is addressed in *Maxims I A*, 45b-49, immediately after the passage about a sick man needing a doctor. In the same way, boys need teachers:

Læran sceal mon geongne monnan
trymman ond tyhtan þæt he teala cunne, oþþæt hine mon atemedne hæbbe
sylle him wist one wædo, oþþæt hine mon on gewitte alæde.
Ne sceal hine mon cildgeonge forcweþan, ær he hine acyþan mote;
þy sceal on þeode geþeon, þæt he wese þristhycgende.

One must teach the young man,
strengthen him and provide him so that he knows well until the teacher has subdued him.
He gives him food and clothing until he has led him to understanding.
Nor must a man speak ill of him as a young child before he can prove himself.
Thus must he thrive among the people so that he might be strong of purpose.

So: then as now boys' spirits needed subduing, if they were ever going to learn anything. Tenth-century schoolboys, if they were to thrive in the world, had to stop day-dreaming, even as we tell kids today to turn off their video games and do their homework if they want to get ahead in the world.

Such lines endear the *Maxims* poet(s) to us. But we can overdo the "ordinary-life" aspect of the *Maxims*, too. Earl may have thought the author of *Maxims I A* not too monkish and not too heroic (278), but Brian O'Camb, in an essay published in *English Studies*, uses the similarity in vocabulary between Bishop Æthelwold's translation of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and *Maxims I A*, 45-50a to conclude that the poem was written during and responding to the reformation of English monasticism in the late tenth century (270) – i.e., pretty monkish. And Elizabeth Jackson uses the "prescribed-actions" list of *Maxims I C*, lines 1-3, to connect the poem to heroic literature:

Ræd sceal mon secgan, rune witan,
leoþ gesingan, lofes gearnian,
dom areccan, dæges onettan.

A king must tell counsel know secrets
sing songs earn praise
expound glory be busy by day.

By analogy with the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*, Jackson determines that this list was part of the repertoire of a *þyle* (a speaker or orator) and is "a remnant of ancient lore, part of the mass of inherited material passed on orally from generation to generation and preserved as long as it still had some use or maintained some valued connection with the past" (191) – i.e., pretty heroic.

Nevertheless, if we draw back from the trees to look at the forest, we see that the social context of the poems is the whole of Anglo-Saxon society and that the poems "quite deliberately tell us about the nature and familiar assumption of the Anglo-Saxons" (Cavill 158), including the nature of and assumptions about kings and queens, warriors and monks as well as Frisian wives, thieves, children, gamblers, liars, bears, boars, birds, and fish. Such topics make the Anglo-Saxon writer not so very distant from us, after all, in spite of the grand halls and distribution of treasure. "It's a small world" pertains as much to time, perhaps, as it does to geography. Maybe we in today's world partake of the simultaneity of time that the Anglo-Saxons lived with, after all.

More than any other Old English poetry, the *Maxims* and other gnomic literature illuminate the dark in the Dark Ages, for they tell us how the Anglo-Saxons shaped their reality. "Reality is the backdrop of what everybody knows and nobody needs to question," Cavill says, discussing Berger and Luckmann's theories about the sociology of knowledge; "it is the perception of habits, order, relationships and structure that is unproblematic and needs no verification" (174). If the *Maxims* were meant to be an encapsulation of "reality" as shaped by Anglo-Saxon society, the disconnections of the poems, the sudden shifts, the narrative insertions begin to make sense. At first the Frisian wife episode does not seem to belong in a poem that has just told us that frost freezes and

fire burns wood, just as those statements of plain fact do not seem to fit with the statement of good advice that a woman should be genial and generous (*leohtmod wesan … rumheort beon* (light-minded and roomy-hearted) [15a, 16b]) or the proverbial-sounding "A man must fix his mind firmly" (*Hyge sceal gehealden* [51a]). *Maxims I B* contains much more than a catalogue of maxims, but each item tells us something more about what everybody in Anglo-Saxon society knows and nobody has to question – the happiness of the homecoming sailor, the behavior of frost, the comportment of a good wife. "Understanding a society's proverbs," Shippey says, "takes one a long way towards understanding the society" ("Maxims" 40). Even though we also need to understand the society in order not to misinterpret the proverbs, the *Maxims* proverbs take us along that way, and so do the other kinds of statements in the poems. Without accepting as broad a theme as Bollard suggests for *Maxims II*, we might see the coherence of all the *Maxims* poems as the "outline of a world view," as Cavill so succinctly puts it (181).

Finally, I cannot leave even this too long (and yet too brief!) discussion of *Maxims I* and *II* without commenting on their poetics. Although the poets have been accused of using cheap tricks (the "easy rhyming" Cavill [167] points to in *Maxims I C*, 4-5), of "mak[ing] a bit of a mess of it" (Earl 280, about the end of *Maxims I A*), of writing poems that lack "aesthetic unity" (Greenfield and Evert, 337, quoting "general scholarly opinion"), by 2005 the pendulum had swung enough in the opposite direction that Thomas D. Hill could say, "The poetic value of the best of the Old English wisdom poems is widely accepted" (179). I agree with George Hickes, who, in his Latin translation of the *Maxims* poems in 1703, said that their *elegantia, splendor et proprietas Latine exhiberi non possunt* – that their "elegance, radiance, and superior quality cannot

be presented in Latin" (qtd. in Greenfield and Evert, 337; my translation) – not even in that elegant and precise language. The radiance and superior quality, if not also the elegance, can be attributed in large part to the gleeful word play and exploration of sound that abound in these poems. Here are a few of my favorite examples.

(1) There is often a wonderful singsong rhythm, as exemplified in the opening lines of *Maxims I C* quoted above and repeated here:

> Ræd sceal mon secgan, rune witan,
> leoþ gesingan, lofes gearnian,
> dom areccan, dæges onettan. (1-3)
>
> A king must give counsel know secrets
> sing songs earn praise
> expound glory be busy by day.

The translation cannot quite do justice to the passage, though it comes close. In Old English the object of the verb can come before the verb, as in every case here, emphasizing the noun (the king "secrets writes, verses sings") and keeping the structure consistent to the end of the passage. It is possible for Modern English to keep the two-word parallelism ("a king must counsel give") up to that last phrase, where "the king busies by day" does not make sense and must stretch into "must be busy by day." This not inappropriate, folksy, almost nursery-rhyme rhythm occurs frequently in Anglo-Saxon maxims as in ours (see #1-5 on page 34, above).

(2) The next two lines of *Maxims I C* illustrate the frequent play with sound found in *Maxims*. Even without knowing how to pronounce or translate the language, a reader can see this playfulness in the repetition of the –es endings in every major word after the introductory *Til mon* ("a good man"), in the repetition of *til* ("good") in its two forms, and in the repetition of the "o" sound in seven of the eleven words:

Til mon tiles ond tomes meares,
cuþes ond gecostes ond calcrondes.

A good man shall have a good, tame horse,
famed and favored and well shod withal.

(3) Puns and rhymes abound. In the following lines, as in the example above, even the reader unfamiliar with Old English can see the rhyming words and sense the puns:

God bið genge, ond wið god lenge (*Maxims I B*, 50).

God means both "good" and "God"; *genge* and *lenge*, of course, rhyme: "Good prevails and with God belongs".

Treo sceolon brædan ond treow weaxan (*Maxims I C*, 22).

Treo means "tree" and *treow*, with an almost identical pronunciation (the "w" is pronounced, but it is hard to get it in there), means "faith"; *brædan* and *weaxan* rhyme in the last syllable: "Trees must thicken and faith quicken."

Sceomiande man sceal in sceade hweorfan *(Maxims I A*, 65a)

This line illustrates the use of front rhyme in *sceo*, *sceal*, *sceade* – pronounced "shay-o," "shay-al," and "shay-aw-da," with the stress on the first syllable, as always in Old English. Translation almost keeps the rhyme: "The shamed shall in the shade go."

(4) Catalogues themselves, frequently used in the *Maxims*, are a kind of wordplay. My favorite example is the list of superlatives in *Maxims II*:

Wind byð on lyfte swiftust,
þunar byð þragum hludast. Þrymmas syndan Cristes myccle;
wyrd byð swiðost. Winter byð cealdost,
lencten hrimigost (he bið lengest ceald)
sumor sunwlitegost (swegel byð hatost)
hærfest hreðeadegost, hæleðdum bringeð
geares wæstmas þa þe him God sendeð. (3b-9)

Wind is most swift in the sky;
thunder is loudest in seasons. The glories of Christ are great;
fate is strongest. Winter is coldest,
spring most frosty (it is cold the longest).
Summer is most fair with sunshine (the sun is hottest).
Harvest is most glorious; it brings to men
the fruit of the year, that which God sends them.

One of the most delightful things about this list is the ambiguity stemming from the lack of context for the superlative. Does "wind is most swift in the sky" mean "wind is the swiftest thing in the sky," or "wind is most swift when it is in the sky"? Are the connections causal or temporal? Autumn is most glorious *because* it brings men harvest or *when* it brings in the harvest? The glories of Christ are great, *but* fate is strongest? That does not sound very Christian; do the lines mean that fate is the strongest of Christ's glories? The maxims are full of such ambiguities, not least of which is the wonderfully complex verb, *sceal*.

The Old English vocabulary is, word by word, marvelously expansive. As the language evolved into Modern English, words splintered, shattering into numerous words to convey what one word alone formerly held. To translate *sceal*, for instance, we now have many choices: "must," "should," "is in the nature to be," "typically is," "ought to," and so on, including the Modern English derivative, "shall." The trick is to understand which word the poet meant in any particular circumstance – except, of course, that the poet could mean all those words at once. That is the beauty of Old English.

(5) Accurate translation, then, becomes well nigh impossible. We translate one way one time, another way another time. I like the concept "it is in the nature to be" as the meaning of *sceal* in the middle section of *Maxims II*, exemplified by the following lines:

Geongne æþeling sceolan gode gesiðas
byldan to beaduwe and to beahgife.

Ellen sceal on eorle; ecg sceal wið helme
hilde gebidan. Hafuc sceal on glofe
wilde gewunian; wulf sceal on bearowe,
earn anhage; eofor sceal on holte
toðmægenes trum. Til sceal on eðle
domes wyrcean. Daroð sceal on handa,
gar golde fah. (16-23a)

The best companion should encourage his young prince:
"Give battle; give rings."
The nobleman should have courage. The sword should have battle
against the helmet. The hawk should be on the glove,
waxing wild. The wolf should be in the groves.
The eagle should be alone. The boar should be in the woods,
mighty in jaw. Goodness should be in the homeland,
spreading fame. The javelin should be in the hand.
The spear should be gold-enhanced.

The poem goes on for many lines like this, weaving heroic images in and out of nature images in a sort of interlace pattern (which, of course, is another Anglo-Saxon aesthetic technique). Here I translate *sceal* as "should," but what I mean is that "if companions are good, then it is in their nature to encourage a young prince to battle and to be generous with rings"; "the hawk, by nature of its being, belongs on the wrist, and the wolf should likewise be in the woods and the eagle in the sky." That is the world as it ought to be, in which everything follows its essential being, its *cynn*. (See Meditation 13 for a more thorough explanation of *cynn*.)

Greenfield and Evert face the problem of translating *sceal* in "*Maxims II*: Gnome and Poem," noting that we do not know whether to read lines like *Cyning sceal rice healdan*, the opening half-line of *Maxims II*, prescriptively or descriptively (340): "The king *ought to* rule the kingdom" or "The king *rules* the kingdom"? They also note that "some nuance of obligation, fitness or propriety" should be included in translations of many *sceal*-gnomes – but not all, they say (346). But I am not so sure their example –

Þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum (The thief must go about in dark weather [42a] – their translation) – really is an exception, for this line, too, has a sense of fitness, if not of obligation: "It is in the nature of a thief to go about in dark weather," meaning that if a man is going to be a thief, he'll have to do his work in the murky shadows of life. That, I think, is a proprietary statement. This statement, too, is a little snapshot of Anglo-Saxon "reality."

(6) These same passages from *Maxims II* illustrate another kind of wordplay, the play with half-lines. Unusually in Old English poetry, the main idea of the phrase, in line after line in *Maxims II*, is presented in the second half-line and completed in the first half-line of the next line, creating a rocking gait, like a cantering horse. The poet avoids rhythmic monotony by occasional variations of the half-line theme. In lines 38b-40a for instance, he is still using the same rhythm – subject (noun) in the b-line, followed by description, usually of place, in the next a-line – but suddenly in lines 40b-41 he extends the description of rain into a half line plus a full line, then uses an a-line for the next subject, and then resumes the pattern with a different subject:

> Fugel uppe sceal
> lacan on lyfte. Leax sceal on wæle
> mid sceote scri[eth]an. Scur sceal on heofenum,
> winde gelanden, in þas woruld cuman.
> Þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. Þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian
> ana innan lande.
>
> A bird should fly
> on the air. Salmon should glide
> among trout in the pool. Showers should be in the heavens,
> blending with wind, coming into this world.
> A thief should go about in gloomy weather. A giant should dwell on the fen,
> alone in his realm.

(7) Finally I would like to point to the use of parallel language, similar to the chanting quality discussed above and frequently found in the catalogues, as a poetic technique that lends delight to these poems and demarcates sections. In *Maxims II*, 45a-49, for instance, the pattern is the typical *sceal* catalogue: the sea must rage and clouds cover the land and streams flow and cattle propagate *swa him bebead Meotud* (just as God ordered). Then there is an abrupt shift to a parallelism of *wið*, meaning "against":

> God sceal wið yfele; geogoð sceal wið yldo;
> lif sceal wið deaþe; leaoht sceal wið yldo;
> fyrd wið fyrde, feond wið oþrum,
> lað wið laþe ymb land sacan,
> synne stælan. (50-54a)
>
> Good goes against evil; youth against old age;
> life against death; light against darkness,
> army against army, enemies against each other,
> hate against hate, fighting around the land,
> avenging hostility.

Lines 53b and 54a finish the set of *wi*ð parallels with an extended descriptive phrase about hate. Then the poet shifts to the more usual *a sceal*, "always should," construction – the wise man should always think about these conflicts; the outlaw should always hang – before shifting again to the simple present: *Meotod ana wat* (God alone knows). The clumps of unusual parallelisms add the vitality of irregular structure to the poems.

We can now see the difference between the Old English *Maxims* poems and the contemporary "maxims poem" found in an attic. The latter is not a poem at all. There is no deliberate construction to it, no poetics, no play with language or variations of structure, even though it, like *Maxims*, deals with ordinary life and outlines a world view – or would, one feels, if it were complete enough. The Old English *Maxims*, on the other hand, both suggest a world view and reveal the creative hands of their poets. Far from

being trivial, they are wiser than we, at our distance, can fathom. Far from being inferior literature, they sing, as least in places, with poetry and wit. Far from being banal, they reveal depth of vision in the Anglo-Saxon world. Those who have defamed them should eat humble pie.

Meditation 4: Benches, Bangles, and the Gleam of Gold

In the fall of 2010 I took a woodworking class at the University of Oregon's Crafts Center. Though I can wield a good needle and thread and can twist wool efficiently around furiously clicking knitting needles, I was a clumsy carpenter, unfamiliar with table saws, jointers, chop saws, drill presses, sanders. Nonetheless, I was pleased with the finished product, a pine bench to match the pine walls in my new house. It looks skillfully made with simple curves, tapered one-board legs, and a top that opens to reveal a shallow bin for gloves and scarves. As I worked, I thought about the benches of Heorot. Without the advantage of all those electrical tools, the Anglo-Saxons must have made rough-hewn, crude benches, just as, without windows and nails, the hall itself must have been crude and primitive. The Anglo-Saxons were, after all, inhabitants of the Dark Ages.

But "Dark Ages," as I must keep reminding myself, refers more to our ignorance than to theirs. The era is dark because we cannot see into it, not because its inhabitants were benighted. My new house, built with the convenience of all the electrical tools my highly talented, artistically oriented, and meticulously precise carpenter had at his fingertips, is two centuries more beautiful than the cabin with nineteenth-century-era non-electric charm that I built with my clumsy hammer and slow handsaw thirty-five years ago. But that does not mean that the Anglo-Saxon builders were as incompetent as I. The

evidence from literature, archeology, and art tells us otherwise: far from being rough-hewn and dark, the royal hall of an Anglo-Saxon village, such as the Heorot envisioned by the *Beowulf* poet, gleamed and sparkled with light and must have been as intricately decorated and artistically presented as any other Anglo-Saxon work of art – the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Franks casket, or the Sutton Hoo helmet.

Archeology has verified that the grand scale of Heorot was not unrealistic for a royal hall in an Anglo-Saxon village. Hrothgar's hall towers high, gold-adorned – *reced hliuade* / *geap ond gold-fah* (1799b-1800a) – dominating the landscape even as archeological evidence indicates the Scandinavian Iron Age halls must have done, "concentrat[ing] the gaze and the thoughts of onlookers," as John Niles imagines them ("*Beowulf*" 183). Heorot is so large that Hrothgar and Wealtheow and all their retainers plus Beowulf and his thirty men could comfortably feast together and bring in eight saddled horses to boot:

> Heht þa eorla hleo eahta mearas
> fæted-hleore on flet teon
> in under eoderas. (1035-1037a)
>
> Then the protector of earls commanded eight horses,
> their cheeks decked with gold, to be led onto the floor
> in the lower part of the building.

(But it was not so large, John Niles reminds us, that the song of the scop would get lost in its cavernous expanses ["*Beowulf*"173]). Archeology indicates that the late-seventh-century hall at Yeavering measured more than 80 feet long and 50 feet wide, its great height implied by the eight-foot depth of the trenches for its timbers (Campbell, John, Wormald 57). The royal hall at Cheddar was 78 feet long, the Thetford hall 110 feet long

(Hume 64), and the hall at Lejre in Denmark, presumably the historical model for Hrothgar's home (see Chambers; Niles *"Beowulf"*), was 154 feet long by 221.5 feet wide. "It was not just a house or hall; it was an emphatic statement inscribed upon the land," Niles says ("*Beowulf*" 190) – just as the *Beowulf* poet describes Heorot.

It is true that evidence at West Stow indicates that some Anglo-Saxons lived in thatched huts partially sunk in the ground (Swearer, Oliver, Osborn 15), but it is also true that the vast halls at Yeavering, Cheddar, and Thetford show an architectural tradition of surprising sophistication (Addyman 284) that is mirrored in, or surpassed by, the hall at Lejre. The *Beowulf* poet is writing heroic, not historical, fiction, but his depiction of Hrothgar's magnificent architectural achievement is not entirely fanciful. If James Campbell can say that "the finest of [the halls at Yeavering] was as grand a piece of carpentry as can be imagined" (57), surely the *Beowulf* poet can equally say, with no more exaggeration, that Heorot was the foremost hall under heaven for earth-dwellers (*þæt wæs foremærost fold-buendum / receda under roderum,* 309-310).

Beyond telling us that Heorot was "high" and "magnificent," the *Beowulf* poet does not give us much description of it, but not because there was little to describe. Old English poetry is, on the whole, not descriptive writing and pays little attention to architectural space. "[Anglo-Saxon p]oets and chroniclers tend to mirror a world rather like that of a sumptuous manuscript painting: one with splendour of gold, richness with colour, vigour of line and subtlety of decoration but with little indication of depth" (Dodwell 41). One of the few architectural details in Beowulf is that the walls of Heorot were bound with iron (*ac he þæs fæste wæs / innan ond utan iren-bendum / searothoncum*

besmiþod – "It was made fast inside and out with iron bands skillfully smithed" [773b-775a]). By this realistic detail – iron bands were used for the hall at Yeavering (Cramp 342) and have been found in profusion at the Lejre site (Niles "*Beowulf*" 176) – we know that Heorot's walls used well carpentered planks (5 1/2 inches thick, according to Campbell, John, and Wormald, 57), as iron bands would not function with the half timbering or half-trunk construction common in some buildings (Cramp 341).

We also know that the interior of Heorot featured a raised floor that made the hall thunder impressively as Beowulf and his men strode across it (*gang ða æfter flore fyrdwyrðe man / mid his handscale – healwudu dynede* – then he went across the floor, that battle-worthy man, with his hand-picked troop. The hall-wood resounded! [1316-1317]). We know that the exterior featured "horns" (it was a *hornreced*, a horned [gabled?] building [704]). What a building's "horns" are is not entirely clear, though after a thorough investigation of the word, Biggam concludes that architecturally it signifies "a finial, turret, crossbeams, or other addition to a rooftop" ("*Grund*" 60) – not a gable-point, as it is frequently translated. Although the poem only mentions one door, we can be reasonably sure that there were at least two, as all the archeological finds have doors at either end and sometimes an additional door at the side.

Interior walls often divided these buildings into one large hall and several retiring rooms (Addyman, Leigh, Hughes 16), but Heorot seems to have consisted of one large room with no divisions (Dubois 293). In *Beowulf* the married men retire to separate outbuildings for the night while the others sleep on benches in the hall: lines 1236-1240a tell us that after the victory-over-Grendel feast Hrothgar went to his own dwelling

(*Hroðgar gewat to hofe sinum*) while a great many other men stayed in the hall – "as they often did before" (*swa hie oft ær dydon*) – making ready for bed by clearing the benches (*bencðelu beredon*), perhaps of a litter of armor and mead-cups, and overspreading them with beds and cushions (*hit geondbræded wearð / bedum ond bolstrum*). Like Heorot, the hall at Lejre, too, was separate from buildings meant for domestic uses (cooking, sleeping) and seems to have been dedicated to specialized pursuits, such as drinking and high-level, perhaps ritualized, social interaction (Niles "*Beowulf*" 185).

Though Heorot was probably windowless, it was also probably not dark. The hearth (and Hrothgar's chair next to it) was centralized (404), and the roaring fire and, presumably, flickering torches would have kept the hall alive with the dancing light of flames reflected in the myriad metal surfaces of armor, weapons, and gilded benches. Gold gleamed inside and out, so much so that Heorot was called a "gold-hall" (*goldsele*, 1253). It was "decorated with gold" (*goldfah*, 308) and had a gold-plated roof. Grendel's gruesome arm, torn from his shoulder by Beowulf's mighty grip, was hanging under that roof when Hrothgar saw it (*stod on stapole, geseah steapne hrof / golde fahne ond Grendles hond* – he stood on the porch and saw the steep, gold-adorned roof and Grendel's hand [926-27]). The same gold-plated roof caught the eye of Beowulf's men as they walked towards Heorot on the day of their arrival (*oþþæt hy [s]æl timbred / geatolic ond gold-fah ongyton mihton* – until they could see the beautifully timbered and gold-adorned hall [307b-308]). Archeology has turned up no indication of gold on a roof – gold would hardly be expected to lie unused in ruins – but because there is archeological evidence for lead sheets on buildings, gilded sheets or gilded shingles on a roof are not

inconceivable (Cramp 340). The emphasis on gold was no doubt part of the poet's exaggerated exaltation of the world of Beowulf. Hall or hero's byrnie, sword for killing Grendel's mother or burial mound for Beowulf – everything is larger than life. Nonetheless, Heorot is not inconsistent with what is known about actual halls of the late Germanic Iron Age (Niles "*Beowulf*" 178).

Heorot's furnishings were simple – a throne, called the gift-chair (*gifstol*), since one duty of the lord was to distribute treasures and gifts to his retainers, and the benches, called mead-benches because one duty of the retainers was to vow service to their lord in the ritual of mead-drinking. The only detail we have about these furnishings is that the benches were adorned with gold (*golde geregnad* [777]). However, we can therefore assume, of course, that the *gifstol* was extravagantly gilded as well. We can also assume elaborate carvings, tapestries, or wall-paintings. When Hrothgar calls on skilled craftsmen from "all over middle-earth" to adorn Heorot (*weorc gebannan / manigre mægþe geond þisne middangeard, / folc-stede frætwan*), he wanted more than construction carpenters. He wanted Anglo-Saxon goldsmiths, perhaps, whose work had long been renowned for its astonishing level of accomplishment (Dodwell 4). He might have been hoping to attract Northumbrian bone carvers capable of the high artistry of the Franks casket (Fig. 8), Norwegian tapestry weavers for exquisite wall decorations (Fig. 9), ceramicists from the Baltic (Niles "*Beowulf*" 197), or British-Isles silver workers like like those who had ornamented the shield of the king at Sutton Hoo or produced the bowl at Lejre (Niles 139). If Heorot was to be the best hall in the land, it would have to be lavishly decorated by the best craftsmen in the land.

Fig. 8. Franks Casket
http://www.mathomhouse.com/regia/notes/gambesons/frankscasketnotes.html

Fig. 9. Hanging tree details in Norwegian tapestry
Image from Marijane Osborn's *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*. By permission of the author.

That Anglo-Saxon poets seldom mention sculptures, carvings, tapestries, and wall paintings does not mean these arts were not prevalent. The *Beowulf* poet does give us a few brief glimpses of such decorations in Heorot. We know that the floor was painted or somehow decorated or colored or made shiny, as Grendel stepped onto a *fagne flor* (725), a "stained" or "adorned" or "shining" floor. In line 780 Heorot is called*[b]etlic ond ban-fag,* the first term giving the general sense of "magnificent," the second providing a specific detail: "bone-decorated," suggesting that Hrothgar might have used whalebone carvings such as those on the Franks casket (Fig. 8). Though this word is sometimes thought to refer to stags' heads with antlers, reflecting the meaning of Heorot as "stag," or to horn-like projections at the gable-ends of the roof, the *Dictionary of Old English* lists *ban* as meaning "skeletal bone" or "ivory" but never "antlers."

Another mention of decorative crafts comes when Hrothgar orders a cleanup and redecoration of the hall after Beowulf's fight with Grendel (*Ða wæs haten hreðe Heort innanweard / folmum gefrætwod* – Then it was ordered quickly for all hands to adorn the inside of Heorot [991-992a]). The battle had wrought such havoc in the hall that it tore benches from walls (777) and sprang open the hinges despite their iron reinforcement (998-999). Men and women pitched in to help until once again

> gold-fag scinon
> web æfter wagum wundor-siona fela
> secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað. (994-996)

> gold-adorned shone
> the tapestries on the walls many wondrous sights
> for each man who looked on them.

In typical Anglo-Saxon fashion the poet emphasizes the shining surface of the tapestries rather than the depictions in those wondrous pictures. Poets liked to write about what was bright and costly: "It was objects in gold or silver that brightened the eyes of the writers and moistened their pens," Dodwell tells us (19), and the highly decorative nature of swords, caskets, brooches, belt buckles, rings, chalices, even the bronze plate on the back of a shield to which to attach the carrying strap (Fig. 10) gives us reason to infer that Heorot is a highly decorated hall. If helmets were inset with jewels (*since geweorðad* [1450b]) and swords ennobled with gems (*mære maðþum-sweord* [1023a]), would we expect the hall to be bare of jewels and gems? If even a small Anglo-Saxon whalebone casket was extravagantly carved, would we not expect even more to see such carvings on doors, benches, and *gifstol* of the hall? If the eighth-century Book of Kells depicts a highly decorated hall (Fig. 11), could the artist not be reflecting the kind of halls he knows as well as fulfilling an aesthetic of insular art, what Dodwell calls "the Anglo-Saxon imperative to fill or cover all empty space" (38)?

This urge to leave no surface undecorated is everywhere apparent in insular art. Manuscript illuminations were highly complex and decorative, not only in the interlaced border designs but also in the complex calligraphy of incipit letters, the variety of colors, and frequent and opulent gilding (Brown 17, 18). Excavations at Sutton Hoo, the burial site of a seventh-century king, unearthed numerous highly decorated items: a helmet with decorative bronze paneling (Fig. 12); a ceremonial whetstone topped with a prancing, heavily antlered stag (Fig. 13); a gold buckle with a complex interweave of animals, snakes, and bird heads (Fig. 14), and ornaments inlaid with gold and garnets (Fig. 15).

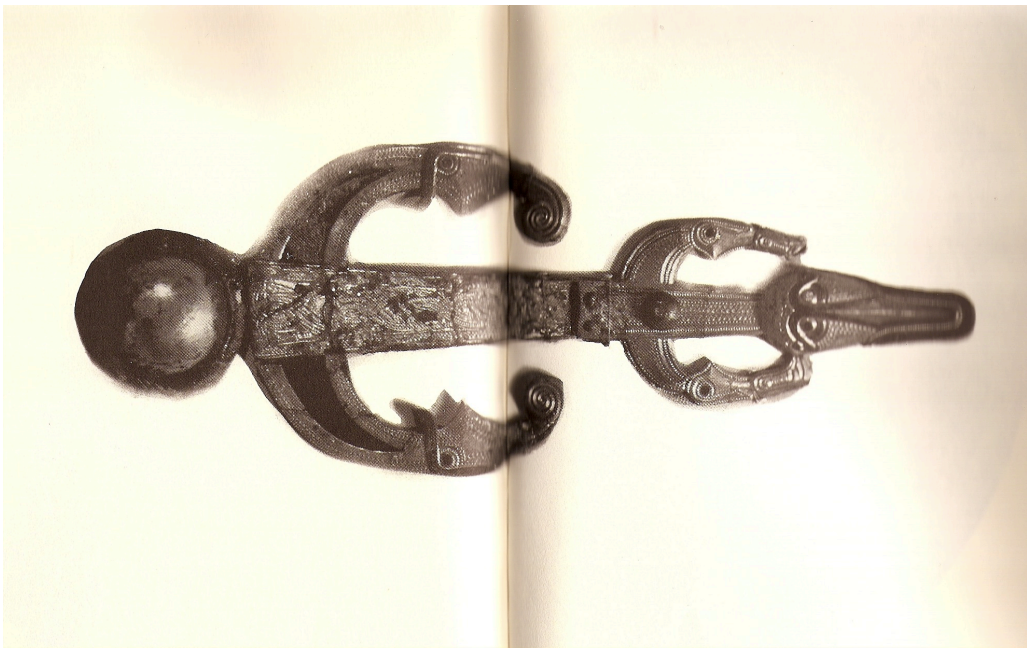

Fig. 10. Bronze plate anchoring the carrying strap on the Sutton Hoo shield
Image from Marijane Osborn's *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*. By permission of the author.

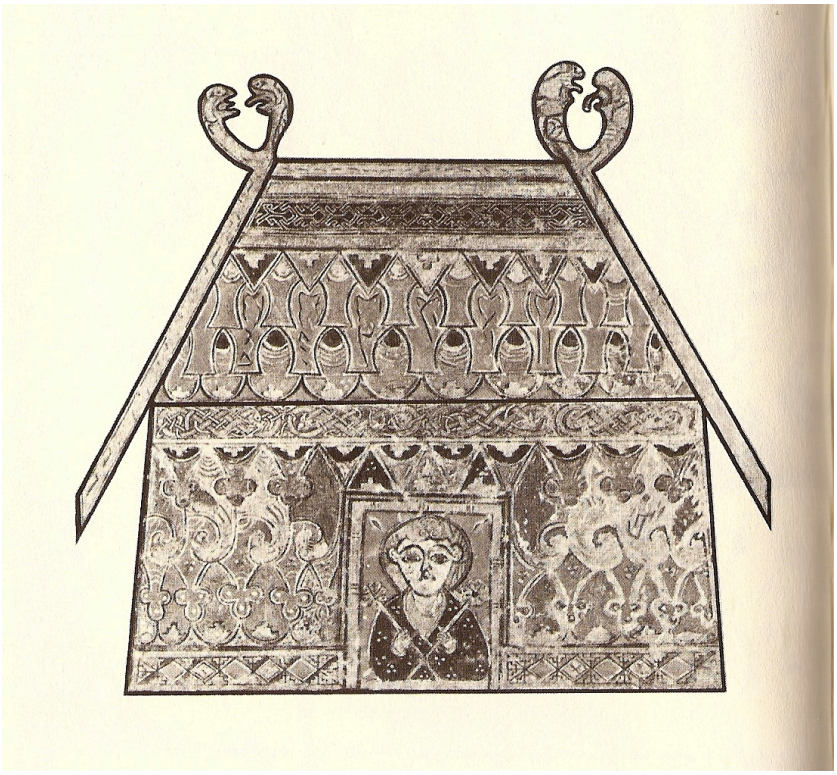

Fig. 11. Anglo-Saxon Hall, Book of Kells
Image from Marijane Osborn's *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*. By permission of the author.

Fig. 12. Sutton Hoo helmet
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/h/helmet_from_sutton_hoo.aspx

Fig. 13. Sutton Hoo whetstone
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights /highlight_objects/pe_mla/h/helmet_from_sutton_hoo.aspx

Fig. 14. Sutton Hoo buckle
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/h/helmet_from_sutton_hoo.aspx

Fig. 15. Sutton Hoo shoulder clasp
www.architecturetraveljournal.blogspot.com

Surely then, Heorot, the best of houses (*husa selest,* 285), is also so decorated. If swords in *Beowulf* are bejeweled (561) and incised with woven patterns (1616, 1667) that suggest "curving lights which catch the light, like designs on silks and brocades" (Davidson qtd. in Dodwell 39) and if the Anglo-Saxons admired good craftsmanship (Beowulf's ring-mail was made by a "master smith" [404] and the wall of *The Ruin* is "marvelously wrought" [1]), then the magnificent Heorot must be resplendent with tapestries, sculptures, paintings, ornamental ironwork, and gold smithing. This is surely what the poet hints at when he says Heorot was *gefrætwod*, "decorated" or "adorned" (992), when he calls Heorot a treasure-resplendent hall (*sincfage sel* [167]).

This conclusion is reinforced when we consider as well the symbolic function of the Anglo-Saxon hall. Dwellings themselves are cosmic symbols, "guiding the behavior, belief, and thought of those who dwell in them by organizing their notion of the world," as James Earl says (*Thinking* 115). The Anglo-Saxon world was organized by ritual and ceremony, at the center of which was the hall. Ritual governed all social interactions: greetings, preparations for battle, feasts, gift-giving, mead-drinking. The thanes made vows of service to their lord with a mead-drinking ritual. Beowulf knew the correct way to greet a king: *cuþe he duguðe þeaw* ("he knew the customs of the duguth" [359b]). A hierarchy of social order was rigidly observed. The retainers' places on the bench were significant and assigned according to status: Beowulf was seated between Hrothgar's sons with the other young men; Wealtheow next to Hrothgar. The queen passed the mead cup first to her lord, then to the more important retainers, and finally to the most important guest, then to the other guests. In such a ritualistic society the hall, the seat of ritual, would have to imply its elevated status with the elaborate use of decoration as well as of gold. If in the gift-giving ritual the lord gives away extravagant gifts such as those Hrothgar gave to Beowulf – a golden banner, a sumptuous sword, a jeweled collar, eight stallions with golden bridles and saddles beset with gems – the setting for such gifts would have to be suitably embellished with ornate opulence. Campbell, John, and Wormald, in *The Anglo-Saxons*, assert that "the buildings [of the Anglo-Saxon kings], like their weapons and their jewels, were of great splendour, and their lives to a degree ceremonious" (58).

Archeology has confirmed that the hall had a special significance to the people living in the village – for celebration, for ritualized feasting, for the ostentatious display of wealth and power, for "the ordering of a community's affairs through well-chosen words witnessed by an audience of peers," for performances of song and story (Niles "*Beowulf*" 183, 188). But even beyond the symbolism of the hall in actuality (to its eighth- or ninth-century society), Heorot was a poetic symbol, a creation of the poet, who depicted it as a "circle of light and peace enclosed by darkness, discomfort and danger" (Hume 64). Outside the music and poetry, outside the ritualistic life of the duguth, outside the hall treasures and golden adornment, lurked Grendel in the murky, damp darkness, looking on that light-filled, golden life spilling joyfully through the walls and open doors of the hall, its gold roof gleaming in the moonlight. Heorot glowed with warmth, wealth, joy, and comradeship, an unbearable contrast to Grendel's world of raw elements, dark forests, mud, and lonely, meaningless wanderings. No wonder Grendel, the outsider looking in, was enraged with jealousy:

> Ða se ellengæst earfoðlice
> þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad,
> þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde
> hludne in healle; þær wæs hearpan sweg,
> swutol sang scopes. (86-90a)

> Then the powerful creature, he who dwelled
> in the darkness, suffered painfully these times of distress
> when he heard, every day, the joy
> loud in the hall where there was the sound of the harp,
> and the clear song of the scop.

Inside the ceremonial space of the hall are the feasting and drinking, the song of the scop and the merriment of men, the wealth and dominance of the human world that

created order in an otherwise hostile environment. “Heorot is not only a monumental artifact, an achievement of *homo faber*," Halverson tells us, "it is also the center for *homo politicus*, the place of social joy, music, drinking and feasting, the source of pleasure, where friends and kinsmen are together in peace. The hall embodies all the good things of this world; it represents the principle of harmony: everything is in order” (594). The venerable Bede himself, Christian though he was, used the image of the pagan-era hall as representative of a realm of protection and warmth within an encircling waste of winter, rain, and cold – the waste-world of Grendel – in his parable of the sparrow in the hall.

In this *Weltanshauung* of human artifice holding at bay the forces of darkness, the attention given to decoration and craftsmanship of artifacts, Fred Robinson believes, represents “a celebration of man’s triumph over the hostile wilderness that surrounds the islands of order such as Heorot” (“Introduction” xvi). It was not mere fancy or delight in teasing the eye, he goes on to say, that made interlaced creatures a favorite decorative motif of Anglo-Saxon art, for the symmetry of that design implied constraint on the bestial elements in nature (“Introduction” xvi). If the towering symbol of the hall was its dominance over the evil and chaotic forces represented by Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon, then there was all the more reason to make the hall as highly decorated an object as those other, less symbolic and highly decorated artifacts of Anglo-Saxon masters.

Finally, the inhabitants of the hall themselves provide proof of the great artistic care lavished on the hall. That they were gold-adorned is unquestionable. Wealtheow is a ring-laden queen (*beag-hroden* [623]), gold-adorned (*gold-hroden* [640]); the men

receive rings, necklaces, collars as gifts. But "gold-adorned" means more than jewels. It also refers to the clothing itself. Elizabeth Crowfoot and Sonia Hawkes, in a meticulous study of Anglo-Saxon gold braids, found that the decorated tunics and dresses were so carefully crafted they "resembled bands of solid gold inlaid with niello or coloured stones, or sheet gold cut out in open-work to permit the colour of an underlying fabric to show through from behind," (45). By the early seventh century Anglo-Saxon weavers had grown expert in the art of gold brocading (Crowfoot and Hawkes 57), which was used as wrist-clasps for cuffs to tight-fitting sleeves of women's dresses or, with brooches, as borders to the necks of the dresses or on head ornaments (Crowfoot and Hawkes 58). In the seventh century extravagant brooches, made of gold and inlaid with garnet were high fashion. Wealtheow and other married women at Heorot would have worn their hair bound, often in a *vitta*, enhanced by gold threads or jewels.

Wealtheow would have glittered and sparkled like sunlight on water. The gold in Hrothgar's clothing and jewelry would have gleamed in the firelight as he sat on the *gifstol* near the hearth, just as Beowulf's byrnie gleamed as he approached the *gifstol* to speak to Hrothgar (*þæt he on heorðe gestod./...on him byrne scan* – so that he stood near the hearth, his byrnie shining [404, 405]). Although it is true that by the ninth century there was very much less use of gold and a great deal more use of silver (Owen-Crocker 199), the *Beowulf* poet, writing some time between the eighth and tenth centuries, was looking back towards earlier days and would surely have decorated his hall and its inhabitants with the opulent gold of former days rather than with the diminished glow of his own day.

Admittedly Heorot is an imaginative construct of the poet, even though there is substantial proof of the existence of the historical Hrothgar's hall at Lejre, Denmark (Chambers 17a; Niles "*Beowulf*"). The *Beowulf* poet was doing more than describing the hall life of days gone by. He was making a point about the loss of that life, using the hall as a symbol of the light, joy, and human relationships that held at bay the violence of the world, whether natural storms or military invasions, neither of which had yet been put to rest in the poet's time. Nonetheless, when we reconstruct an image of Heorot as it must have looked before Grendel turned *gold-fah* into *dreor-fah* (gold-adorned into blood-stained), when it was gleaming with gold, rambunctious with artifice, opulent and glorious, we are basing that image on what we know from archeological evidence of Iron Age halls, what we have found among artifacts of Anglo-Saxon clothing, jewelry, armor, and household objects in excavated tombs, and what we extrapolate in the way of cultural taste from other art objects – illuminated manuscripts, caskets, tapestries.

We might also base our image on at least one modern example of exalted hand-crafted architecture, the Timberline Lodge at Mt. Hood, Oregon. (I am grateful to Dr. James Earl, for putting me in mind of this similarity.) As at Heorot the proportions are grand; to step foot inside the Timberline Lodge is to stand amazed. As at Heorot, a hearth is central, in this case a stone fireplace with an 80-foot stone chimney rising through three stories. Instead of gold, the Timberline Lodge gleams with its warm Douglas-fir paneling in the light of wrought-iron chandeliers and lanterns. As at Heorot, the interior is rich with artistic decoration. Enormous Ponderosa-pine columns have been hewn into hexagons. A wrought-iron rattlesnake handle opens the wrought-iron gate in front of the

dining room, intricate with designs of suns and moons, pine cones, Native American symbols, and coyote heads. Doorways have squared arches; newel posts carry hand-carved animals (a sleeping fawn, a ram's head). Curtains and bedspreads are hand-woven; paintings and carvings decorate walls and posts; mosaics grace the floors. President Roosevelt and the WPA, like Hrothgar, put to work hundreds of artisans to build Timberline Lodge: blacksmiths, stonemasons, weavers, carvers. Surely the Timberline Lodge gives us an inkling of the exalted beauty of Heorot.

If we could walk along the stone-paved road of the Spear-Danes with Beowulf's men, their war-gear shining, their byrnies glistening, their bright mailcoats ringing loudly (319-324), we, too, would catch our breath at our first sight of the gold-glistening roof of world-renowned Heorot, the gold-laced hall, most splendid house among earth-dwellers. As we sat on the bench outside the hall with the other men, their spears now planted upright like ash trees (328b-330a), we would marvel with them at the finial horns, the gold roof, the size and grandeur of the building, its well crafted walls with their iron bands. Invited inside at last, we would enter through the intricately carved door at one end of the hall and stand amazed and dazzled for a moment at the proud, majestic room lined with gilded benches and focusing on a brilliantly sparkling, gold-adorned throne near a crackling hearth where Hrothgar sat, a room shimmering with gold on every surface – benches, *gifstol*, armor and weapons, bare arms and throats, tunics and byrnies, a room resplendent with carvings and paintings and tapestries, with labyrinthine decorations of interlaced animals, with gold, silver, bronze surfaces playing back the light of the fire in a dance of scintillating movement, a room where joy and music, now squelched under the gloom and gore of Grendel's visits, await only the hero's victory

over the forces of chaos and darkness to return the hall to its full power of glamor and grandeur.

My bench, I'm afraid, would have looked crude and dull in Heorot.

Meditation 5: *Eldo Bunden* (Bound by Age)

Today is my birthday. I am sixty-six years old, robust in mind and body, able either to write or to hike for hours at a time, full of good humor and love of life. My hearing is acute, I don't use reading glasses, and if my memory isn't very good, well, it never was. Increasing laugh lines in my face, reduced elasticity in my skin, and a light touch of arthritis in the middle finger of my right hand (immaterial, since I never use its obscene gesture, anyway) are my only perceptions that old age is around the corner. My gray hair elicits no disparagement, even in this youth-worshiping culture, and I now hold a Golden Eagle pass for free admittance to national parks for the rest of my life. Old age may loom ahead, but today it is comfortably distant enough that I'll think about it later.

But what if I had been born in 744 instead of 1944? Would old age have caught up with me by now? How would people have treated me as an elderly woman in Anglo-Saxon England? What does the poetry tell us?

It tells us primarily, of course, that Anglo-Saxon England was a young man's culture. The temporal frame of reference for the Anglo-Saxons might have been simultaneous from the broadest point of view, but in the closer view they seem to have been as obsessed with youth as we ourselves in twenty-first-century America. Eighth-century society's most important social and political entity, the duguth, was a camaraderie

of mostly young warriors. Nonetheless, old warriors were well respected because, as Professor Edward B. Irving Jr., notes, in "any tradition-directed oral society, old people must be accorded the highest respect [because] age is power" (qtd. in Olsen "Gender" 323). The Old English word *frod*, which means "old," also means "wise," a synthesis of meanings paralleled in *ealdor* (from the root word *eald*, "old"), meaning either "elder" or "leader." In *The Battle of Brunanburh* Constantine is called a wise man (*se froda*) and two lines later a "gray warrior" (*har hilderinc*), leaving little difference between the two epithets. Anglo-Saxon respect for both the young man and the old is displayed in *Beowulf* in that the poem divides into two contrasting parts: Beowulf the young hero and Beowulf the old king (cf. Shippey "Structure" 167).

At the beginning of *Beowulf* Hrothgar, king of the Spear-Danes for fifty years, is far from the vigorous victor in battle who built glorious Heorot. Britt C. L. Rothauser figures he could be in his seventies, at the youngest (he would have to have taken the throne at the age of eight in that case), or even in his eighties or nineties (106-7). However, saying he reigned for fifty years – as did Beowulf, also – could simply be a conventional designation for a long rule (Rothauser 107). Whatever his real age, Hrothgar is certainly *gomel* (old) and *eald ond unhar* (old and gray-haired), now broken by his impotence to stop Grendel's twelve-year bout of nightly raids. But his age does not diminish his nobility or his leadership. He may be "bound with age" (*eldo gebunden*), but he is still the generous lord to whom his retainers are completely loyal and who is given the mead-cup first before all others, as befits his rank.

Here, for instance, is Hrothgar at the feast after Beowulf defeated Grendel's mother:

> Þær wæs gidd ond gleo: gomela Scilding
> felafricgende feorran rehte,
> hwilum hildedeor hearpan wynne
> gomenwudu grette, hwilum gyd awræc
> soð ond sarlic, hwilum syllic spell
> rehte after rihte rumheort cyning,
> hwilum eft ongan eldo gebunden
> gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwiðan
> hidestrengo; hreðer inne weoll
> þonne he wintrum frod worn gemunde.
> (2105-2114)

> There was song and music. The old Scylding
> recited many things that he had learned of from afar.
> At times battle-brave, he struck the music-wood,
> joying in the harp; at times he told a tale
> true and sorrowful, at times a strange story.
> The great-hearted king rightly recited.
> At times afterward he began again; bound in old age,
> the old warrior lamented his youth,
> his battle strength. His heart welled within him
> when he, old in winters, remembered many things.

There is something *soð ond sarlic* (true and sorrowful) about the phrase *eldo gebunden* (bound in age), a recognition of how much old age restricts us from the activities of our youth. For Hrothgar and other warriors and kings, old age is a time for remembering the glory of youthful exploits in battle. In an era of lament – for loss in general, for the fleetingness of life, for the passing of kings and warriors, cultures and treasures – the lament for the loss of youth is one of the most poignant.

Beowulf himself might seem to be an exception (here as everywhere), since after he has ruled for fifty years and being, presumably, approximately the same age as

Hrothgar at the beginning of the poem, he isn't sitting at home bewailing his impotence in the face of destruction. He goes boldly and bravely to fight the dragon, age notwithstanding. But the poet emphasizes his age:

> Gessæt ða on næsse nið-heard cyning
> þenden hælo abead heorð-geneatum,
> gold-wine Geata. Him wæs geomor sefa
> wæfre ond wæl-fus, wyrd ungemete neah,
> se ðone gomelan gretan sceolde,
> secean sawle hord, sundur gedælan
> lif with lice. (2417-2423a)

> Then the battle-hard king gold-friend of the Geats
> sat at a point on the sea and there wished good fortune
> to his hearth-companions. He had a mournful spirit,
> restless and ready for death. Fate, exceedingly nigh,
> must greet the old man,
> seeking the treasure of the soul, must divide asunder
> life from the body.

Here is both a contrast and a parallel to Hrothgar in old age. Though Beowulf, like Hrothgar, is an old warrior well tested in battle, the passage about Beowulf looks forward, even if forward to death, while the lines about Hrothgar look only backwards on what has passed. Beowulf goes on to speak to his men about the past in a long discursive passage about the wars of the Geats and his uncle's death in battle, but there is no lament in these lines about his own youth now behind him. Nowhere is Beowulf considered "bound with age." He is called brave (*heard*), good in manly customs (*gumcystum god*), a good battle-king (*god guð-cyning*), gold-friend of the Geats (*gold-wine Geata)*, but not until the dragon has been killed and Beowulf has received his death-wound and has looked on the dragon's treasure, not until Beowulf is ready to give his death-speech does

the poet admit again that he is old: *gomel on giohðe* – "old in his grief." Old age may frequently bind, but it can be defied in Anglo-Saxon times as now.

Or so it seems for men, but what does the poetry tell us about women?

The list of women in the heroic poetry includes, in *Beowulf*, Wealtheow, Hrothgar's wife; Freawaru, their daughter; Hildeburh, Finn's wife and Hnæf's sister; Thryth, the "bad" queen; Hygd, wife of Hygelac, Beowulf's uncle; and the old woman who mourns at Beowulf's funeral. (I omit Grendel's mother as being not quite human). Some of the riddles and Maxims refer to women. In the elegies there are the Wife of *The Wife's Lament*, the speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and the unseen wife of *The Husband's Message*. There is Beadohilde, of legendary fame, mentioned by Deor. Biblically there are Eve and Mary, of course, but they belong to another era, and Judith, who cut off the head of Holofernes with the complicity of her maid. There is Elene, Constantine's mother. And then there are all those saints: Æthelthryth, Eugenia, Juliana. Can we find, among these women, any old women?

Riddle No. 45, like many Anglo-Saxon riddles, is determinedly sexually suggestive.

> Ic on wincle gefrægn weaxan nathwæt,
> þindan ond þunian, þecene hebban.
> On þæt banlease bryd grapode,
> hygewlonc hondum; hrægle þeahte
> þrindende þing þeodnes dohtor.
>
> I heard about something growing in a corner,
> swelling and standing up, raising its cover.
> On that boneless thing a bride,
> the daughter of a prince, elated in spirit,
> touched with her hands; she covered with cloth
> the swelling thing.

You may think the answer to this riddle is obvious, but did you guess it? As any breadmaker could tell you, the answer is "dough." This riddle, like the other sexually explicit riddles of the Exeter Book, suggests what Edith Williams calls the "wholesome and spontaneous attitudes" towards sex during the Anglo-Saxon era (137), but, like the maxims that tell how women should behave (e.g., she should not wander from her husband [*Maxims I A,* 63-65], she should hold faith with a man [*Maxims I B*, 30a]), they are so sexually grounded they preclude menopausal women. We learn nothing from them about how I would have been treated, at my age, in Anglo-Saxon England.

Nor do we find any old women among the martyrs, who, of course, died young. Eve is perpetually young, Mary always the young mother, and Judith sexually enticing and physically strong – i.e., not old. Mary Dockray-Miller emphasizes Judith's maturity by interpreting her as a maternal figure to the daughter-figure, the maid, who is both younger than Judith and of an inferior social class, but all we know of either woman is what is given in the poem – the attempted rape and resultant decapitation, the journey back to Bethullia, the triumphant entry. How either woman entered old age is as unknown for them as it is for Eve or Mary.

Elene, being Constantine's mother, could possibly be a character of advanced age. When Jackson J. Campbell calls her a "cruel, hardbitten, old harridan " (qtd. in Olsen "Cynewulf" 223), he may have reason to call her cruel for torturing Judas, hardbitten for her unrelenting drive to find the true cross, and a harridan because he sees her as scolding and vicious, but there is no reason provided in the poem to call her old. Campbell's

phrase says more about his own association of old women with cruel, hardbitten harridans than it does about Anglo-Saxon attitudes.

Because Elene is a historical figure as well as a character in Cynewulf's poem, it is possible to come to a reasonable conclusion about her age. Early Medieval women, if they lived past the childbearing years (during which mortality was 17%, as opposed to 13% for men of the same age), could live into their sixties and seventies – my age – according to the encyclopedia on women in the Middle Ages (Wilson and Margolis 69). We could logically assume that Elene married as young as twelve, the minimum age allowed by the Church for girls to marry (Shahar 81). The average age for marriage was between 18 and 23, with women at the younger end of the spectrum and noble women frequently younger still (Wilson and Margolis 69). Constantine, we are told at the beginning of the poem, has ruled for six years. We know that he was born around 288 and took rule at the death of his father in 306. Therefore, at the time of the poem he was 24. Elene, we can reasonably deduce, was between the ages of 38 and 44 – that is to say, a great deal younger than I.

Even if these figures are skewed, the poem gives us two other reasons to place Elene in a premenopausal age frame. First, as the Old English feminist scholar Jane Chance point outs, she is identified throughout the poem, literally, allegorically, and metaphorically, as a mother – in Part I as the literal mother of Constantine; in Part II as the spiritual mother of the "Old Man," Judas; in Part III as the mother-muse of Cynewulf, who is writing the poem (47). Allegorically she is Mother Church, as Judas is Synagogue. Of course, postmenopausal women are still mothers, but in Anglo-Saxon society a

woman was valued beyond all else for her ability to produce an heir – "The Anglo-Saxon ideal of the aristocratic woman, or *ides*," Chance tells us, "depended upon her role as a peacemaking queen, which was achieved fundamentally through her function as a mother" (1) – so when a woman was past childbearing age, her social value dropped. In *Innovatio*, the Latin poem that Cynewulf is translating in creating his Elene, Helena is a dowager empress, but Cynewulf turns her into "an assertive Germanic woman whose speech is action but who acts when she must" (Olsen "Cynewulf" 230) – not dowager so much as warrior queen, or, as Helen Damico sees it, valkyrie.

The valkyrie figure is both malevolent and benevolent, both "a fierce battle-demon and a radiant, courtly figure," Damico says ("Valkyrie" 177). Like Modthryth in *Beowulf* and Judith and Juliana, eponymous figures of their respective Old English poems, Elene is a representative of this ancient figure. Like the Old Norse valkyrie-brides, these women are bold in battle, have resolute, profound, and agile minds, spout wit and wisdom, and are chosen servants of God (Damico "*Beowulf*" 196, 197). Brides, whether valkyries or otherwise, are not old women. Valkyries, whether battle demons or courtly figures, are also not old women.

From all the evidence we can assemble, then, Elene is not a woman over sixty but a fully mature woman at the height of her powers. Unlike the *Beowulf* poet's depiction of Hrothgar, Cynewulf's picture of Elene is of a woman not yet touched by any aspect of old age, and we are no closer at understanding how I would have fared as a 66-year-old Anglo-Saxon woman.

Beyond the saints and half-mythological warrior queens are the Anglo-Saxon noble women of the poetry – Wealtheow, Freawaru, Hildeburh, Hygd, Thryth, Beadohilde, the three women of the elegies, and Beowulf's mourner.

Of the women in *Beowulf*, two, the poet tells us explicitly, are young. Freawaru, is called "young" and "gold-adorned" (*geong, gold-hroden*). Hygd is described as "very young," "wise," and "courteous" (*swiðe geong, wis, welþungen*).

Hildeburh, Hnæf's sister, who was given in marriage to Finn in order to weave peace between the two tribes, must also have been a young woman. Though we do not know how long it was after her marriage before that peace was shattered at the Battle of Finnsburh, it could not have been long because the peace was too easily broken for Hildeburh and Finn to have already grown old together. Hildeburh is a young widow, like many Anglo-Saxon women.

Thryth, *Beowulf*'s example of a bad queen, is described as vigorous and, unique for women in *Beowulf*, beautiful. (The word is *ænlic*, meaning "one, singular," with the extended meaning of "beautiful".) For the other women, we assume beauty because of their adornments. Omitting mention of Thryth's rings and necklaces – which, given her position, she would certainly have worn – emphasizes her meanness, as though, being a cruel, murderous, treacherous queen, she was not worthy of adornment. She later marries Offa (and turns good), so she cannot be old. Anglo-Saxon women over the age of sixty were not marriageable.

Wealtheow, the most prominent of the *Beowulf* women, is more thoroughly described. Richly adorned with gold and rings, she is virtuous at heart, generous with

gifts, and politically manipulative on behalf of her sons. She is called not just the "lady of the Helmings" but also "Hrothgar's bedfellow." We are not told her age, but it is unlikely she is as old as I, since her sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, were sitting in the hall with *hæleþa bearn, / giogoð ætgædere* – "the sons of heroes, all the young men together." Probably the boys are teen-agers, as there is still a question of their succession, so Wealtheow would have to have borne them well before she was forty. She is undoubtedly much younger than her husband, who, if we can trust the meaning of her name ("foreign slave"), might have taken her as a captive in war, a beautiful young woman to make his queen, to serve his duguth, to bear him sons, and to be his bedmate. Hrothgar may be old at the time of the poem, but Wealtheow certainly is not.

Outside of *Beowulf*, there are Beadohilde, about whom the scop Deor devotes a verse of his poem, and the three women of the elegies. Beadohilde was not an old woman because she becomes pregnant in her story. The women of the elegies are also, presumably, premenopausal, since (1) the speaker of *The Wife's Lament*, telling a woeful tale of love and hardship, weeping the kind of misery only a young woman knows or an older woman remembers, is in the throes, not the memory, of that misery; (2) the speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* bewails a tale of love and suffering with a different plot but a similar emotion; and (3) the husband who sends his wife (presumably his wife) a message in *The Husband's Message* does not speak as an old man, so we can assume that his wife, also, is not old.

Among the women in Old English poetry, only the mourner at Beowulf's funeral, mentioned in lines 3150-3155, is left for consideration. But the manuscript is so badly

damaged at this passage that in the first two and a half lines only four words (*swylce, giomorgyd, meowle*, and *sorgcearig* – "likewise," "dirge," "woman," "sorrow") are clear, and three words (…*at*, …*unden*, and *heor*…) partially distinguishable. To make any sense of these fragments at all, we have to make guesses. Sophus Bugge, in 1887, guessed the following, which Fredrick Klaeber accepted for his influential 1922 edition:

> swylce giomorgyd [s]io g[eo]meowle
> [æfter Biowulfe b]undenheorde
> [song] sorgcearig.
>
> Likewise an old woman
> with hair bound up, sorrowing,
> sang a dirge about Beowulf.

In 1938 Anglo-Saxon scholar A. H. Smith examined the passage under ultraviolet light and found an *iat* in 3150b, leading John Pope to suggest *Geatisc meowle*, "a Geatish woman," rather than *geomeowle*, an old woman, a scholarly guess now widely adopted (Bennett 36). Still, of the seven proposals for the identity of this woman (see Tilman Westphalen, "*Beowulf 3150-55*: TextKritik und Editionsgeschichte," referenced in Bennett 36), only one is designated as young. The other six are either specified as old women or could be old. With her age indeterminable, we are certain of only three things about this woman: she wears her hair bound up, she is a mourner for Beowulf, and she prophesies evil times to come.

The bound hair tells us that the mourner is not a young, unmarried woman, as "married women were required by custom and law to put their hair up," according to Crowfoot and Hawkes's detailed study of Anglo-Saxon gold braids (63). Georgine de Courtais tells us in *Women's Headdress and Hair Styles in England from AD 600 to the*

Present Day that married Saxon women bound their hair in braids, secured it with hair bindings and ornamented pins, then hid it completely under a veil or head-rail (12). "No Saxon woman ever revealed her hair. Whatever her rank her head and neck were at all times heavily swathed in the folds of the *hæfods-ragel* or head-rail" (de Courtais 11). The *Beowulf* narrator included the detail of *[b]undenheorde* not from his observation, since he would not have seen the hair, but from what he knew about the woman – that she was married – or he implies her not-young age by noting that her hair was bound in a head-rail. The detail of the bound hair is somewhat puzzling, since it is in direct contrast to the woman as mourner: letting down the hair was a sign of lamentation in the Middle Ages, according to the *Encyclopedia of Hair* (Sherrow 277), though, as in so many remarks about "the Middle Ages," this one, too, could be more relevant to the later Middle Ages than to Anglo-Saxon England. Maybe even mourning women never revealed their hair.

This woman's function as mourner is as significant as her function as prophet of the end of the present order of the world. As a *geomuru ides* (a sad lady), she is representative of many (if not all) of the women in Old English poetry. The Wife in *The Wife's Lament*, mourning her exiled state; the narrator of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, whether mourning for her husband, her lover, or her son; Beadohild in *Deor*, pregnant through a rape; Freawaru, in *Beowulf*, a passive pawn in men's political struggles – again and again we see the Anglo-Saxon woman as victim until we begin to agree with Joyce Hill that *geomuru ides* was the dominant female stereotype in Old English heroic poetry (242). "How imaginatively omnipotent and how poetically ubiquitous," remarks Dolores W. Frese in an essay about adulterous women in Old English poetry, "was this vision of

women as full-fledged members of a sorrowing society" ("*Wulf*" 273). And Beowulf's mourner indicates that the sorrowing is theirs individually as well as on the social level: "Without the protection of the best of the world's kings," says Richard Schrader in *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature*, "the *meowle* must endure war and captivity, becoming, with this first of many laments, the commonplace victimized woman of the elegies" (qtd. in Bennett 42).

Just as a king protected society, man protected woman. "Whatever the woman's status, married or widowed, religious or laywoman, she required male support, both legally and physically to protect her possessions" (Chance 62). The law designated protection based on a woman's virginity or lack thereof: wife, widow, or nun (Richards and Stanfield 93), with particular attention to the last two:

> [G]if hwa nunnan gewemme oððe wydewan nydname, gebete thæt deothe for Gode for worolde. (VI Æthelred 39)
>
> And if anyone injures a nun or does violence to a widow, he shall make amends with death both towards church and state.

Although this passage shows that nuns and widows received the greatest protection afforded to women under the laws (Richards and Stanfield 95), a widow, like a nun, could be a young woman as well as an old woman. Whatever her age, a widow came under the Church's category of *personae miserabiles*, the oppressed, because without her husband, i.e., her protector, she, like nuns, needed the extra protection of the law (Shahar 93).

In the end it is the laws concerning women beyond menopause that provide the best indication of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards elderly women. Some prose works in

Old English pay attention to particular women, treating them with great respect and admiration, but there is no indication of attitudes towards elderly women, specifically. In general, women are treated with more respect and equality in the prose than in the poetry, perhaps because the poetry takes place in the heroic world, which is a masculine world, but the prose shows no difference in attitude towards elderly women. For that, we turn to the laws.

The legal dividing line between a mature woman and an old woman was menopause, which began in women between 40 and 50 years old, according to Valerie Garver in "Old Age and Women in the Carolingian World" (129). In a society in which a woman's role as mother was her most important function, it is not surprising that "infertile women, especially older ones, could lose social and legal status as a result of their inability to bear children" (Garver 129). Though it is true, as Garver points out, that elderly women still had roles they could fulfill – caregivers for children and the sick, teachers of girls and young women, political functionaries in their families (141) – it is also true that "an aging queen might be turned out of the palace if she failed to produce the necessary heir," according to Margaret Schaus in her encyclopedia on women and gender in medieval Europe (623). Specifically, the law designated that when a woman reached menopause, her *wergeld* – the monetary value of a person as determined for the purposes of compensation for crimes and misdeeds – decreased. "Early medieval law codes marked this final life stage [menopause] – which might often run for three or more decades – by assigning [a woman] a lesser *wergeld*, a mark of her now diminished social

value and a blatant indication that her days of greatest usefulness were in the past" (Schaus 623).

One brief mention of an old woman in a single half-line in *Beowulf*, however, shows us that this is not always the case. In this passage ((2928-2932), Ongentheow, who is called *se froda fæder Ohtheres, eald ond egesful* (the old father of Ohthere, aged and terrible) is engaged in a battle at Ravenswood in which he rescues his wife, who is called *gomela(n) iomeowlan*, an aged old woman or maybe "his wife, the woman of old" (Mitchell and Robinson 151, footnote on line 2931). We know three things about her: that she is the mother of Ohthere and Onela; that she had been captured in war and was "bereft of her jewels," and that she is old. Given the Anglo-Saxon diminution of a woman's value at menopause and the fact that this old woman is wearing no wealth, we might as well put a romantic spin on the story and suppose that Ongentheow rescued his wife because he loved her. Maybe she was 66 and still valued by her husband.

A young, newlywed noble woman in the eighth century must have been excited to braid her hair the first day of her married life, proud of her *bundenheord* as a symbol of her new status, her new position as a woman. If she succeeded in being a mother, and as long as she fulfilled her role as peaceweaver – by serving as a wise counselor, by being generous with horses and treasures, and by recognizing rank among the duguth as she passed the meadcup in the hall (Chance 3-4) – she was assured of respect and honor. But as she approached her forties and fifties, would she have lifted her hand more heavily to bind her hair, thinking about being *eldo bunden*, dreading the imminent cessation of menses that would thrust her, again, into a different status, a different position? "Surely I

can still give counsel and pass the meadcup as skillfully as ever," she might have thought, plaintively. "Why must I be cast among the useless? My husband is bound by age more than I – he is more gray, he limps from his war wounds, all he does is sit in the hall telling tales about his glorious youth, yet he still rules; he is still respected. But in a few years I will be lucky to be asked to the hall to pass the mead cup. If anyone does me harm, my husband will get little compensation. I will be valueless." Maybe she will try to hide the onset of menopause, telling no one. But without bras and lipstick, without face lifts and liposuctions, without synthetic estrogen there would be no hiding the fact. Feeling the imminent binding of old age not so much in her body as in the eyes of the world, she would have bound her hair in its hair-rail, sighed, raised herself to her queenly height, and continued for as long as she could as a beloved, respected, gold-adorned queen with a function to perform in her society.

CHAPTER II

THE WAY THEY USED THE LANGUAGE

Meditation 6: Walking the Tightrope of Translation

"Your assignment is to take a passage of at least eight lines," said my professor in a graduate seminar on *Beowulf*, "and memorize it, analyze it, and render it in an elegant but accurate translation."

This was a marvelous assignment! I chose lines 2592b-2602a, which relate part of the battle between Beowulf and the dragon. My recitation was flawless and my analysis adequate, but I was most proud of my translation. I had worked hard to make it both accurate and elegant, which meant, as I interpreted the phrase, poetry my audience would read with the same delight with which I had read the original. Here is my translation. (A more accurate translation and the original lines appear in Meditation 11.)

> It wasn't long before
> the two sworn enemies met again.
> The miserly muckworm bucked up his courage. He swelled his chest,
> regathered his strength, suffering in the narrowly confined space,
> wallowing in fire. Only yesterday he ruled the world.
> And all those hand-picked men of Beowulf's troop,
> those sons of princes – did they stand behind him with
> soldierly valor? No! They boogied to the woods,
> scared to death! All except one. His heart alone
> welled with sorrow. No one in his right mind
> would ever abandon a relative in need.

My professor was looking puzzled from the beginning, but "muckworm" was more than she could take. "Wait, wait, wait," she interrupted. "Where is this word 'muckworm'?"

"The word itself isn't in the text," I admitted carefully. "But the line is referring to the dragon, and that's the word I use for the dragon." I was a bit proud of "muckworm," a word that gave an appropriately unpleasant aspect to the beast while hinting at the Anglo-Saxon word for "dragon" (*wyrm*) and conveying an image of the creature in an earthy, cave-like, enclosed space. ("Boogied," later in the passage, likewise echoes the Old English word *bugon*, meaning "fled," but I think I modernized the vocabulary too much in that case. The jocularity jars.)

Though the students received my translation with enthusiasm, my professor was not impressed. "You and Seamus Heaney," she said, dismissively.

I was so insulted! Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* has been scorned in academic circles – Howell Chickering dubbed it "Heaneywulf" (161) – because he does not know Old English himself and too frequently sacrifices accuracy for elegance, without always achieving elegance. Jolie Wood, on the other hand, praises Heaney's translation for "at once retaining the feel of the original while introducing a transnational element of Hiberno-English idiom" (53). Perhaps my translation could be justified for containing the transnational element of American-English idiom, but I don't think that is what my instructor meant. I still sting at being compared to Seamus Heaney as a translator of *Beowulf*.

Translation theories abound about how to reduce inaccuracies while achieving elegance. Nonetheless, most theorists admit, with Yves Bonnefoy, that "the answer to the question, 'Can one translate a poem?' is of course no" (186). Burton Raffel, poet, translator, and (emphatically and proudly) not a scholar, says that a good translation

"must keep the receiving language even more in mind than the original one" ("How" 282) and that translations of poetry must be read and evaluated "with the inner ear, unaided by dictionaries, grammars, annotations, and scholarly disputes" ("How" 285). Translating Old English poetry, he says, "is a task for the poet, not the scholar" ("Translating" 44) – i.e., for him, not for people like, for instance, Stanley Greenfield, who, for his part, "quarrels with Raffel's recreative freedom," which, he thinks, has caused him to falsify both the esthetic and the meaning of *The Seafarer* in his translation ("Esthetics" 95).

Vladimir Nabokov goes even beyond Greenfield in decrying Raffelite theories: "The term 'free translation' smacks of knavery and tyranny. It is when the translator sets out to render the 'spirit' – not the textual sense – that he begins to traduce the author. The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase" (127). Nabokov is not the only one to contradict Raffel's contention that "readability is a distinctly minimal standard" ("How" 281). James Earl likes to give students his translation of *Beowulf* 2200-2315 precisely because it is not very readable. Not attempting to "clarify or prettify" the parts of the original that are "ambiguous or awkward," he produces a pretty unreadable translation precisely because it is "no more unreadable than the original" ("*Beowulf*" 16).

In the end, it seems, all translators (Raffel excepted) admit defeat, agreeing with Schopenhauer that there is "unavoidable imperfection in all translations" (32), though it is Dryden who put it best: "'Tis much like dancing on ropes with fettered legs – a man may shun a fall by using caution; but the gracefulness of motion is not to be expected;

and when we have said the best of it, 'tis but a foolish task; for no sober man would put himself into a danger for the applause of escaping without breaking his neck" (18). David Bellos points out that translation commentary, at least in the West, frequently contains "unmistakable signs of anger and hurt" (315). In the end, all translators barely escape without breaking their necks (except for those who readers think *did* break their necks).

Yet when I read a passage of Old English poetry that particularly delights me or strikes me with awe or transports me with its music, I am inspired to translate, to convey this power to the reader who cannot discover it without a bridge between languages. While I was reading (and, necessarily, translating) *The Phoenix*, I came across a passage that so bowled me over with its beauty that I wanted the Modern English reader to know it, too. But that was not possible in translation. Although David Bellos points out, truthfully, that "there is no reliable way of distinguishing a translation from an original by internal criteria alone" – i.e., that a translation certainly can be as beautiful and as powerful as the original – a translation has its own beauty, rather than conveying that of the original. I wanted the reader to know the beauty of the original. Though this passage is not as difficult and powerful – or even as beautiful – as, say, many passages in *The Seafarer* or *The Wanderer* or, of course, *Beowulf*, it still serves as a good example of the difficulties of translating Old English poetry, partly because it is more straightforward – less difficult – than many others.

Here is the passage (*Phoneix* 291-313), in which the poet is describing the phoenix, the great mythological bird of immortality. (I translate this passage at the end of the essay and provide other translations in Appendix A.)

Is se fugel fæger forweard hiwe,
bleobrygdum fag ymb þa breost foran.
Is him þæt heafod hindan grene,
wrætlice wrixled, wurman geblonden.
þonne is se finta fægre gedæled,
sum brun, sum basu, sum blacum splottum
searolice beseted. Sindon þa fiþru
hwit hindanweard, ond se hals grene
nioþoweard ond ufeweard, ond þæt nebb lixeð
swa glæs oþþe gim, geaflas scyne
innan ond utan. Is seo eaggebyrd
seac ond hiwe stane gelicast,
gladum gimme, þonne in goldfate
smiþa orthoncum biseted weorþeð.
Is ymb þone sweoran, swylce sunnan hring,
beaga beorhtast brogden feðrum.
Wrætlic is seo womb neoþan, wundrum fæger,
scit ond scyne. Is se scyld ufan
frætwum gefeged ofer þæs fugles bæc.
Sindon þa scancan scyllum biweaxen,
fealwe fotas. Se fugel is on hiwe
ægwæghwæs ænlic, onlicost pean,
wynnum geweaxen, þæs gewritu secgað.

A translation would begin, maybe, “That fowl is fair of hue before, gay with varied colours on its breast” (Bradley) or “The bird is handsome of colouring at the front, tinted with shimmering hues in his forepart about the breast” (Kennedy) or “The bird is ever fair of hue, bright with varied shades in front round the breast” (Gordon 244). Or, in poetic form: “Before is that fowl fair in its plumage, / Bright colors glow on its gorgeous breast” (Faust and Thompson, 143), or, worse, “Phoenix is in front fair to look upon, / His bosom embellished with a blending of colors” (Hall, Leslie 29), or, by his own admission most poetically, Raffel’s: “The Phoenix’s breast is a flickering rainbow / Of color, bright and beautiful” (*Poems* 116).

Whether any of these translations is good or bad, they all miss the essential element of the poem: *The Phoenix* is a religious-ecstatic poem. These translations give us the picture but omit the ecstasy. In this and all descriptions of the phoenix, the poet uses a language and a style that exalt the bird beyond any earthly bird, though for 423 lines there is no indication of the religiosity behind the ecstatic descriptions. That explanation comes in the more plodding 254 lines that end the poem, in which the poet interprets the symbol of the phoenix in religious terms, thereby justifying the breathless ecstasy and awe of the first part. Without the religious correspondences between the phoenix and mankind in relation to both Christ and Adam and Eve (J. E. Cross discusses the poet's tropological, anagogical, and allegorical interpretations of the phoenix in "The Conception of the Old English *Phoenix*"), the bird is just a bird in a myth, exotic and beautiful though it may be, as we see from the translations above. Without an acknowledgment of the religious-ecstatic tone, the translations are flat, leaving the reader thinking, "What a pretty bird," whereas the poet had fallen to his metaphorical knees in religious awe. Burton Raffel, ending his translation of *The Phoenix* at line 423 because "one cannot make poetry of sheer doggerel – which is, in my judgment, what '*The Phoenix*' rapidly descends to, after line 423" (67), has missed the entire point of those 423 lines.

To translate, then, we should look at how the poet achieves this sense of ecstatic devotion. The most immediately noticeable technique is the powerful anaphora – repetition at the beginning of a phrase, in this case of *is*. *Is se fugel fæger. Is him þæt heafod hindan grene. Is se finta fægre gedæled* ("Is the bird beautiful!" "Is his head green

behind!" "Is the beautiful tail divided!"). Eight of the first nine sentences begin with "is" or "are"; the other begins, "Beautiful is." The anaphoric pattern – and the subject-verb inversion – is not broken until line 311b, when the poet summarizes the descriptions: *Se fugel is on hiwe / æghwæs ænlic* ("The bird is in its hue utterly unique").

The anaphora of "is" is doubly emphasized in that, before this sudden outburst of the insistent "is," the poet has been using *bið* ("be-ith"), another word we translate as "is." *Bið* is normally used for on-going time, everlasting beingness; *is* is for immediate time. Gnomic sayings use *bið*. *God us ece bið* ("God is always with us": *Maxims I* A, 8b); *Seoc se biþ þe seldan ieteþ* ("He who eats seldom sickens": *Maxims I B,* 111). When the Wife in *The Wife's Lament* says, *Wa bið þam þe sceal / of langothe leofes abidan* ("Woe be to him who must endure longing for his beloved" [52b-53]), the use of *bið* indicates "all men," "any man at any time," not just the particular man she has been speaking of up to this point. When the poet of *The Phoenix* suddenly switches from *bið* to *is*, he is emphasizing the uniqueness, the individuality of the bird. It is as though with the sudden ringing cry of "*Is! Is! Is!*" the poet breaks into a hymn of praise in total amazement of the (holy) beauty of this unique bird.

How should we translate this? Though both prose and poetry in Modern English use anaphora (Churchill: "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence") and, occasionally, subject-verb inversion (Donne: "Or snorted we in the seven sleepers' den?" Thomas: "In the beginning was the pale signature/…And after came the imprints on the water"), we cannot begin a declarative sentence in Modern English with "is." If we begin with "is,"

we are asking a question. Adjectival anaphora and verbal elision might get us closest to the ecstasy with which the poet is speaking: "How beautiful the bird! … How green his head! … How beautifully divided his tail!" This rendering is not quite like that emphatic *is*, but it is more enthusiastic than any of the translations above, all of which ignore the anaphora and sentence inversion, thereby dampening the rapture.

Even greater difficulty lies in wait for the Old English reader faced with translating words that convey concepts of Anglo-Saxon life completely foreign in modern life. The companionship of warriors known as the duguth, the "hall society," the rituals of mead-drinking and oath-making, feuds and wergild, thanes and lords – what do we know of any of this? We can translate *frætwe* as "treasure" or "ornament," but the Anglo-Saxon audience that hears lines 308b-309a – *Is se scyld ufan / frætwum gefeged* ("The shield [a part of avian anatomy] above is joined with ornamentation") – immediately associates the image of the bird with brightly burnished weapons such as Beowulf's men carried onto the ship for their voyage to Heorot (*Beowulf* 214) or with the treasures a lord generously gives, such as the treasure and plated gold (*frætwe ond fætgold*) that Hrothgar gives in gratitude to Beowulf (line 1921). The *Phoenix* poet's use of heroic vocabulary – *gim*, *goldfate*, *hring*, *beaga*, *frætwum* – gems, gold plates, rings, necklaces, treasures – carries with it social connotations the translator cannot convey or today's reader intuitively grasp. N. F. Blake notes that because the *Phoenix* poet uses heroic vocabulary to underscore the symbolism of the phoenix as mankind when he uses *willsele* or *hof* for the phoenix's home, these words should be translated not as "dwelling" and "abode," but as the more culture-specific "pleasant hall" and "hall." (54). A bird's nest is a dwelling or an

abode; only men (or, symbolically, the phoenix) build halls in which gold-adorned women pass the mead cup to lords and warriors.

Nothing in lines 291-313 is more indicative of this gulf between Anglo-Saxon and modern audiences than the vocabulary for color. Translations of these lines present a colorful bird – green, scarlet, purple, brown, white, yellow – and admittedly these words are there: *grene*, *basu* ("red"), *wurman* ("purple"), *brun*, *hwit*, *fealwe* ("yellow"). Noticeably, there is no blue. Before the seventh century with its introduction of Latin texts, Old English had no Basic Color Term for blue, according to Old English analyst C. P. Biggam ("Sociolinguistic" 54-55), in keeping with Berlin and Kay's theory that all languages gradually increase the number of their Basic Color Terms over time and that those terms always appear in the same order: a term for red before one for green, one for yellow before one for pink, and so on (Biggam "Sociolinguistic" 51). *Hæwen*, meaning, originally, "moldy" and by extension "cool colored," was evolving to fill the need for a word for "blue" in translating Latin, but the Norman Conquest squelched that evolution with the introduction of French *bleu*, which became the English "blue."

The words the poet uses for the colors of the bird, then, are basic and, from our point of view, sparse because his language did not differentiate colors as precisely as ours does. We are used to a vocabulary of vivid, distinctly separate colors. The *Describer's Dictionary* gives twelve categories for green – from vivid green (emerald, smaragdine) to deep olive (loden green) to blackish green (avocado), each with its own set of terms, for a total of thirty-three words and phrases for the color green (Grambs 158-159). Old English is satisfied with *grene*, which is the most frequent of the genuine simple colors, with red

and yellow coming next in frequency, as counted by William Mead in "Color in Old English Poetry" (171).

Hwit, *brun*, and *fealwe*, describing, respectively, the underfeathers, parts of the tail, and the feet of the phoenix, can mean "white," "brown," and "yellow," but if we were hearing these words as Anglo-Saxon listeners, we would not associate them so much with color as with surface, for, as the medieval arts critic C. R. Dodwell observes, "Anglo-Saxons were always attracted to surfaces which reflected the play of light" (35). If our world fractures into a thousand different colors, the Anglo-Saxon world, far from being the "dun-colored, dung-covered, burlap-wearing world" of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, is a "shimmering, gleaming, gold- and candle-lit world," in the words of Anglo-Saxon scholar Carin Ruff (227). The paucity of color words in Old English is redressed by the great variety of words for light and darkness. In the passage of *The Phoenix* being examined, we find fifteen words or phrases referring to shining, gleaming, flashing, radiating surfaces, in contrast to the three words for genuine colors (*grene*, *hasu*, *wurman*). (Interestingly, the other Old English word for "purple," *purpura*, refers as much to fabric as to color, a multi-colored, gleaming kind of silk that we today call shot-silk taffeta. See Dodwell 145-150.) The brilliant scintillations of the surfaces help convey a sense of ecstasy.

Translation can put the light out, colorful though the result might be. In line 292, for instance, the bird is described as *fag*, "stained" or "tinted," with *bleobrygdum*, "a combination of colors," as we might translate it. But if in the compound *bleobrygdum*, *bleo* means "color," it equally means "appearance," and *brygdum* means "brandishing,

unsheathing," so the Anglo-Saxon listener, attune to surfaces more than to color, would envision a brilliant scintillation, an active shiningness in this description that we utterly miss when we translate "tinted with a combination of colors." Indeed, the Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary gives "scintillation" as one meaning of *bleobrygdum*. In the translations given above for this line, "shimmering hues" (Kennedy), "bright colors glow" (Gordon), and "flickering rainbow" (Raffel) attempt to convey something of the scintillation inherent in *bleobrygdum*, but they still emphasize color, as we would see the bird, instead of its gleaming surface, as the poet more probably meant.

Likewise, when the poet is describing the bird's tail as "beautifully divided (*fægre gedæled*) by colors" and then names the colors – *sum* ["some parts"] *brun*, *sum basu*, *sum blacum splottum*, he is using *brun* not just as "brown," or, more likely "reddish brown," but as "gleaming with metallic luster," as it means when applied, as it often is, to helmets or the edge of swords; and if by *basu* he really does mean "scarlet," with *blacum splottum* he is saying that the tail is divided "with bright, shining, glittering, sparkling spots" – no colors mentioned. The bottom feathers are *hwit* (line 298), and though they probably are white, to Anglo-Saxon ears *hwit* means, even more than "white," a bright, shining, flashing radiance – not color but surface. The beak *lixeth* – gleams, shines, flashes (line 298). The belly is *scir ond scyne* – bright and shining, resplendent. The jaws *scyne* – flash, are luminous and glowing, inside and out. Even the *jaws* gleam and shine and radiate.

The metaphors enhance this image of radiant brilliance. The beak gleams like glass or a gem (*lixeð / swa glæs oþþe gim*). The eye of the bird by its very nature is "most

like a stone" (*stane gelicast*), by which the poet is not envisioning the rock on the path but a precious stone, a gem, as he elaborates in the next line, "a brilliant gem, set in gold plate" (*gladum gimme*, *þonne in goldfate / ... biseted weorþeð*), a line that thrice depicts how the eye shines (*gladum*: brilliant; *gimme*: jewel; *in goldfate biseted*: set in gold plate). The feathers around the neck of the phoenix are braided or twisted "like the ring of the sun, the brightest of necklaces" (*swylce sunnan hring / beaga beorhtast*), now the brightness deepened by four. Finally, *frætwum*, in line 309, could be translated as "ornaments," but the connotation to the Anglo-Saxon includes shiny surfaces, since the word, as noted above, refers to treasure (gold, jewels) and to weapons (which, burnished, shine). We can hardly imagine the brilliance of this bird, we who are so enamored of color that we miss the subtle variations between surfaces. Where we see a brilliantly colored bird, the Anglo-Saxon audience would see a gleaming, shining, radiating bird. Burton Raffel's "flickering rainbow" misses the point.

The loss in translation, however, is more important than just loss of image. It is also a loss of what I have called the poet's religious ecstasy. The words in this passage that describe the phoenix in such radiant terms are used later in the poem, when the poet interprets for us what the phoenix means. In lines 589-594b, for instance, *scyne* is used twice, *beorhte* and *glad* once each:

> Þonne soðfæstum sawlum scineð
> heah ofer hrofas hælende Crist.
> Him folgiað fuglas scyne,
> beorhte gebredade, blissum hremige,
> in þam gladan ham, gæstas gecorene,
> ece to ealdre.

When Gordon translates, "Then high above the vaults of the sky the Saviour Christ shall shine on the righteous. Fair birds shall follow Him born again in beauty, gladly exulting in that happy home, chosen spirits for ever and ever," he has captured the meaning but missed the imagistic connection with the phoenix earlier in the poem. He translates *scyne* as "shines" in reference to Christ, but when the same word is applied to the birds in the next line, he translates it as "fair," not "shining." The poet says the birds are *beorhte gebredade* ("brightly reborn") in line 592, but Gordon says they are "reborn in beauty." The poet puts them in a *gladan ham*, which echoes the *gladum gimme*, the brilliant gem, of line 303, the simile for the bird's eye. Thus the home is not "happy," as Gordon translates, but gleaming with joyousness. The ring in lines 602 – *beag beorhta brogden wundrum / eorcnanstanum*, which Gordon nicely translates as "a radiant crown wondrously fashioned of precious stones" – reflects the bright ring of feathers on the phoenix's neck braided (same word, *brogden*, in each passage) with feathers (line 306). The ecstatic descriptions of the phoenix that depend so much on the images of shining and gleaming, as in lines 291-313, are justified by the religious interpretation of the last part of the poem.

But how can we say all this in a translation? How can we say "white" and mean "gleaming" at the same time or say the bird's "shield" has been joined by ornaments and indicate at the same time the whole heroic culture evoked by the poet's word *frætwum*? How can we convey the religious ecstasy of the poem with the paucity of our vocabulary and the rigidness of our sentence construction? "The answer to the question, 'Can one translate a poem?' is of course "no," so I hesitate to jump into the translation melee and

satisfy no one, not even myself. But of course I must if I want you to know anything at all about this beautiful poetry. This essay has been both an introduction to and an apology for what I am about to do, which is offer you a translation of lines 291-313 of *The Phoenix*. In the original language they are beautiful lines, which I hope to have rendered well enough that I will at least not have broken my neck. If as you read my translation you keep in mind all that I have discussed in the previous pages, perhaps it will convey a small glimmer of the beauty and power of these lines.

Phoenix 291-313

How beautiful is this bird from the front!
How scintillating its tinted forepart, around the breast!
How green the back of its head,
artfully alternating with and blending with purple.
How beautifully divided is the tail,
some parts shining like burnished metal, some scarlet, some
with gleaming spots ingeniously set. How radiantly white are the tips
of the wings! and how green the neck
below and above. And the beak flashes
like glass or a gem; the jaws shine
inside and out. How rigidly staring, by its very nature, is the eye
and in hue most like a glittering stone,
like a luminous gem set
in gold foil by the skill of the smiths.
How like the brilliant circle of the sun, the brightest of treasure-rings,
is the neck-ring of the bird, woven of feathers.
How marvelously wrought is the belly below, exquisitely lovely,
translucently gleaming, resplendently flashing. How like glowing treasures,
joined together, is the shield above, on the back of the bird.
Grown over with scales are the legs
and the dusky feet. The bird is in appearance
glorious in every way, most like a peacock,
rapturously growing, as the writings tell.

Meditation 7: Reading an Old English Poem Is Not a Displeasure

The poets of Anglo-Saxon England like to say how a thing is by telling how it is not. No mean feat, this! When the warriors at the Battle of Maldon encourage their fellow fighters, they say not, "Warriors, be brave!" but "Warriors, don't be cowards!" When the *Phoenix* poet describes Paradise, he calls it not a place of joy but a place of no lamentation. When the Seafarer wants to say, "I am lonely," he says, "There is no hall-music here on the sea." The Anglo-Saxons were not inept in their use of negatives.

Though statement by negatives is a well-known Old English device, most scholars who discuss it (T. A. Shippey, Roberta Frank, George Clark, A. Leslie Harris) do so in terms of litotes, understatement that produces a wry, nay, even a grim humor. Anglo-Saxon poets create litotes by using negations and diminutions in a way that is "intimate without being specific," in the words of Roberta Frank, "keeping things sane and funny, like make-up and high heels" ("Incomparable" 62). Sometimes, however, negative language intimates what is by being very specific about what is not, and is not at all interested in humor. This kind of negative language is characterized by a catalogue of negatives in parallel phrases. Its effect is intensification, either of contrasts or of a sense of loss, and it is found mostly in poems that deal with a "displacement of the past," as Raymond P. Tripp calls it ("Humor" 56), a re-imagining of the Anglo-Saxon ancestral past in terms of what the contemporary audience psychologically needs rather than what that past might actually have been – in *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and, to a lesser extent, *The Husband's Message* and *The Wife's Lament* among the elegies; in "The Lay of the Last Survivor" in *Beowulf*; and in *The Battle of Maldon*, when the warriors face the

loss of their leader on the battlefield. It also occurs in the rapturous religious poem *The Phoenix* and in the highly poetic prose of Wulfstan's *Sermon to the English People*. These poems (and Wulfstan's sermon) are suffused with nostalgia – "a people's romance with their own imagined origins" (Niles "Myth" 34). Because nostalgia "is a presence that gnaws on absence" (Niles "Myth" 35), the use of negative language becomes an exceptionally appropriate literary technique for Old English poetry.

That Old English poets were fond of this technique is also not surprising when we consider that the Anglo-Saxons saw their world as a complex structure of oppositions, an apt phrase used by Marie Nelson in *Structures of Opposition in Old English Poetry* (6). Examples of this concept abound. The Anglo-Saxon term for earth – *middangeard*, middle earth – reveals the very fundamental nature of life in a world structured in oppositions. Two of the most popular literary genres of the time, hagiography and riddles, are based on opposition. The lives of the saints pit good against evil, Christian against pagan; and riddles, which by definition use this-not-that thinking and were supposed to be *on gewin sceapen* (shaped on struggle), deal with the question of how one lives in a world of oppositions (Nelson 2). The mind of the *Beowulf* poet is binary, or, in Raymond Tripp's hip vocabulary, "essentially Boolean" ("Humor" 56), and the story itself depicts the Anglo-Saxon choice between life-with-honor and death, or, in Beowulf's case, life-with-honor or death-with-honor (Nelson 147). One of the most basic tenets of Anglo-Saxon society lies in the shame-honor opposition, which is often addressed with negative language (as in *The Battle of Maldon*). The Old English poets, verbally astute, "alert to the ways opposition shapes perception [and] affects language," as Tripp says, ("Humor"

57), developed a technique of anaphoric negatives that worked well in a *Weltanschauung* of oppositions.

This technique frequently takes the form of *ne-ac* ("not this, but that"). For instance, when the Wanderer wants to describe his loneliness after the loss of his lord, he says he

> warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold,
> ferðloca freorig, nalæs foldan blæd (ll. 32-33)
>
> holds close the footsteps of an exile, not at all twisted gold;
> holds close an icy heart, not at all the splendor of the earth.

The *ne-ac* construction makes a pointed contrast between the speaker's abstract world of the present and the concrete, thing-filled world of his past. He describes his suffering with two phrases – "exile-footsteps" and "icy heart" – that may sound concrete (footsteps, heart) but are actually abstract. Was he really following the footsteps, there on the earth, of an exile? Was his heart really icy? Or, rather, were these concrete expressions metaphoric of abstractions, of his emotional state? The *ne-ac* construction puts the emphasis on the concreteness of the things he misses. He actually did hold, tangibly, in his hands, twisted gold (rings, necklaces) and other treasures. Now he "holds" only abstractions, non-tangible things that cannot be felt in the hand or worn or given to another. Using negative language allows the speaker to bring into brittle contrast the world of pleasure that he has lost and the emptiness of his present state. "What gives the wanderer's grief its 'sharpest edge,'" says Lawrence Beaston in a perceptive essay called "The Wanderer's Courage," "is the contrast of his present circumstances with the

happiness of his former life" (127). It is at this point of the "sharpest edge" of his grief that the poet pulls out negative language.

The poet of *The Phoenix* uses the *ne-ac* technique to emphasize contrast in a different way for a different reason. He takes the worst of life and posits its opposite to tell us what Paradise is like. Reviving one by one his reader-listeners' memories of the terrible sufferings of life – lamentation, enmity, old age; sin, poverty, illness; snow, hail, rain – negating each one as he details it, he erects an image of Paradise. Cancel all the long list of sufferings, and what do you have left? Paradise. The poet is using the same technique as the *Beowulf* poet in his many litotic statements: bestowing praise "not by adding up virtues but by subtracting faults" (Frank "Incomparable" 64), not by painting brightness, but by rubbing out the dirt, the way sandblasting King's College Chapel in the 1960s turned a dingy, smudged building into a glorious, bright monument to God.

Nis þær on þam londe laðgeniðla,
ne wop ne wracu, weatacen nan,
yldu ne yrmðu ne se enga deað,
ne lifes lyre, ne laþes cyme,
ne synn ne sacu ne sarwracu,
ne wædle gewin, ne welan onsyn,
ne sorg ne slæp ne swar leger,
ne wintereweorp, ne wedra gebregd,
hreoh under heofonm, ne se hearda forst,
caldum cyulegicelum, cnyseð ænigne.
þær ne hægl ne hrim hreosað to foldan,
ne windig wolcen, ne þær wæter fealleþ
lyfte gebysgad. (50-84)

There is not in this land foes,
nor lamentation, nor misery; no sign of grief,
old age, nor poverty, nor painful death,
nor destruction of life, nor coming of harm,
nor sin, nor strife, nor sore tribulation,
nor toil in poverty, nor a lack of prosperity,

nor sorrow, nor death-sleep, nor oppressive illness,
nor snowstorm, nor change of weathers,
fierce under heaven. No hard frost
with cold icicles crushes anyone.
There neither hail nor rime falls to earth,
nor windy clouds, nor does water fall there
occupying the air.

These twelve and a half lines present the *ne* side ("this is what Paradise is not"). The following twenty-two and a half lines begin with the *ac* concept ("but this is what it is") but elaborate on only two main images, the glorious waters of Paradise and the trees of the groves, and are interrupted four times with an interlace of negative descriptions, as though whenever the poet tries to be direct in describing the beauties of Paradise, he must resort to presenting the opposite of beauties and then negating that image as the best way to describe how magnificent the place of the Phoenix is. Of course, one of the reasons he knows how to describe Paradise at all is that he has read such descriptions in works of antiquity, which, according to Kathleen Barrar in her study of depictions of Paradise in Old English poetry, conventionally describe temperate weather conditions in terms of negative formulas (106-107). Nonetheless, in the Anglo-Saxon world one is never far from suffering, so this poet dwells almost lovingly on the lack of bad things that makes Paradise so unbelievably wonderful. Even the images of joy must be told in the language of suffering.

Just as the Old English poet describes happiness as the absence of suffering, he describes honor as the absence of shame. In a moral universe "whose vital principle," in the words of medieval scholar George Fenwick Jones, "is the pursuit of honor and avoidance of shame" (qtd. in Clark "Hero" 285), negative language emphasizes the

importance of the latter. When the Wanderer advises a man how to be the best of his kind, he tells him *how not to be* – how to avoid shame – rather than *how to be* in order to garner honor:

> Wita sceal geþyldig –
> ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde,
> ne to wac wiga ne to wanhydig,
> ne to forht ne to fægen, ne to feohgifre
> ne næfre gielpes to georn ær he geare cunne. (65b-69)

> A man must be patient –
> he must not be too hot-hearted, nor too hasty of speech,
> nor too weak among warriors, nor too reckless,
> nor too fearful nor too joyful, nor too avaricious,
> nor ever too eager of boasting before he clearly knows.

The speaker is speaking from experience of living in a world of oppositions, where struggle is inescapable and survival depends on weighing alternative possibilities (Nelson 74). His way of expressing these opposite courses of action is to state the shameful course and negate it, leaving the honorable course for the listener to interpolate. This is *ne* language to imply *ac*.

The poet of *The Battle of Maldon* uses negative language to exceptional advantage in his depiction of the battle exhortations in the second part of the poem. By this time Byrhtnoth, the estimable, brave, and perhaps rash leader of the English ragtag army of farmers and thanes, has been killed in battle, and the outcome is looking desperate for the English. At this point the poet abruptly abandons the narrative style of the battle to present a series of exhortations from various warriors to encourage their fellow fighters to continue the fight. Any appeal to public recognition is worded

negatively: not that one should fight for glory and fame but that one should fight so as not to be shamed.

In fact, all the exhortations of *The Battle of Maldon*, except Byrhtnoth's, take a negative approach. Instead of saying, "I will bring glory to my ancestors if I fight in this battle," Ælfwine says, "I will avoid shame if I don't run from this battle." Instead of saying, "Go forward into battle," Dunnere says, "Don't hesitate." Avoiding shame seems to be a stronger motivation to fight than achieving glory, perhaps because it is easier: to avoid shame all one has to do is stay in the battle, whereas to earn glory one has to do something active and heroic (tear the arm off Grendel, as Beowulf does; taunt the Vikings by refusing to pay their tribute, as Byrhtnoth does).

Another example of the negative approach as a motivator is the avoidance of mention of what the warriors are actually doing – fighting. Ælfwine, like other exhorters, says, "I won't run away" instead of "I'll stay and fight." The purpose of this approach may be in the psychological effect of not mentioning what is ahead. It is easier to say, "I won't run away" than to have to face what it is you want to run from. "I'll stay and fight" suggests active participation in the horror and the slaughter, whereas "I won't run away" suggests a more passive, less agency-dependent action. "I'll stay and fight" reminds the listeners of the battle before them, whereas "I won't run" gives agency without demanding action.

Offa's exhortation (lines 230-243) illustrates yet another variation on the negative approach. Whereas most speakers use personal example as a negative exhortative technique ("I will not run"), Offa uses a non-subjective example for the same purpose:

"Don't be like Godric." At the end of his speech, he becomes so angry at the deserters he forgets his exhortative purpose and curses Godric and the others who ran away. Both the curse and the negative example of Godric and his followers allow the poet to reinforce in the reader's mind the contrast between the good men and the bad on the English side, a thematically important point.

Byrhtnoth, however, does not use a negative approach, and he alone addresses the manly virtues, telling his men, in indirect discourse, *forð gangan / hicgan ... to hige godum* (to go forth, mindful of noble courage) (3-4). Thus Byrhtnoth is distinguished as a man of action, a leader, whereas the poet reminds us that his thanes are beneath Byrhtnoth in both courage and nobility in that they focus on avoiding shame rather than achieving glory, as though only Byrhtnoth can do the latter.

In some poems the catalogue of negatives implies honor rather than shame. Lines 39-47 in *The Seafarer* emphasize the best qualities of men on this earth, just as the above lines from *The Wanderer* do, but they do so with the opposite use of negatives. The Wanderer says, "A man *must not* be thus-and-thus" (avoiding shame); the Seafarer says, "It will *not* avail a man *to be* thus-and-thus" (to be honorable).

> Forþon nis þæs modwlonc mon ofer eorþan
> ne his gifena þæs god ne in geoguþe to þæs hwæt
> ne in his dædum to þæs deor ne him his dryhten to þæs hold
> þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe,
> to hwon hine Dryhten gedon wille. (39-47)

> Therefore there is not a man on the earth so proudminded,
> nor so generous of his gifts, nor so bold in his youth,
> nor in his deeds so brave, nor his lord so gracious to him
> that he ever in his seafaring does not have sorrow,
> as to what the Lord wants to do to him.

The catalogue of parallel negative phrases builds up the suspense: "In spite of all that honorable behavior," we wonder as we read, "– what?" It is like Martin Luther King, Jr., in *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, forcing his readers to stay with him through a page-long string of "when" clauses – when you see your brothers and sisters beaten at whim, when your little daughter asks why she can't go to Funtown, when no motel will accept you – before he finally lets the reader go with the concluding clause: "Then, sirs you will understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience." The Old English poet's anaphora of *ne*s keeps us on the hook until, finally, he tells us, "In spite of all that honorable behavior, sorrow prevails." We ought to be proud, generous, bold, brave, and beloved of the lord. But no matter how proud, generous, bold, brave, or beloved a man is, he will always have sorrow because, well, you never know what God has in store for you. This is not a denial of the opposite, which is the most common type of understatement in Old English (Bracher 915), but a statement of one part of a binary (a life of honor rather than a life of shame) with negatives that wipe out even those good characteristics in the face of the unknown sorrows of life.

Another instance of the *ne-ac* construction in which *ac* is not stated but implied, without diminishment of the contrast between what is and what is not, occurs in Wulfstan's *Sermon to the English People*. His words are not litotes. To say a father is not protecting his child is a statement of fact, not an understatement that implies its opposite, as when Widsith says, "That was not a sluggish king," meaning "That was a generous king." But, like litotes, Wulfstan's negative language "underline[s] … the characters' expectations of social conventions and … call[s] attention to the failure or frustration of

these expectations" (Harris, A. 8). Wulfstan lists the hardships that have come upon the people (lines 43-56 in Marsden 214) – theft, murder, sickness, pestilence, cattle-plague, disease (*uncoþu*, with a significant negative prefix, since Wulfstan could just as well have said *coþu*, which has the same meaning), malice and hatred, plundering from robbers, excessive taxes (*ungylda* – "ungold," gold being denied, as it were), bad weather (*unwedera* – un-weather), crop failures (*unwæstma* – "un-fruits," the negative prefix again obliterating the tangible object), injustices (*unrihta* – un-rights, with the same negating force), and wavering loyalties. Of these fourteen bad things, five are stated in negating terminology, four of those consecutively. This list of "uns" is followed immediately by a list of "nors." The kinsman does not protect his kin, *nor* the father his child, *nor* the child his aged father, *nor* one brother the other; *nor* is anyone living as he should, *nor* the monk living according to the (monastic) rule *nor* the lay people according to the law. People hold neither the teaching *nor* the law of God as they should. The effect of this buildup of negative language is to emphasize the dichotomy between what is and what should be, how bad (drawing on the modern sense of "negative") things are, how nothing is left of the way things should be because all there is is its negation. The people cannot but weep and repent.

Besides its use in sharpening contrasts, negative language serves to indicate the emptiness of loss and to intensify its anguish. Perhaps there is a reason that most of the examples of this kind of negative language occur in the elegies and that, with the exception of *The Phoenix*, even the poems that use negative language that are not considered elegies are poems dealing with loss. "When the displacement of the past

becomes the *raison d'etre* of a poet's writing, he becomes preoccupied with negative redefinition," Raymond Tripp says ("Humor" 56). Except for *The Phoenix*, all Old English poems with extensive use of this kind of negative language deal with displacement of the past, that is, with fulfillment of the desire for continuity with the past by addressing the nostalgia for that past as it was seen in the imagination of the contemporary audience.

We might expect to find this usage in the saints' lives, since the saints are always between oppositions: between the devil and God, between pagans and Christians, between the holiness of virginity and the betrayal of Christ, between life and death. But there is no sense of something lost in these poems. Of course, the saints do lose their earthly lives, but Æthelthryth defies her father and husband and keeps her virginity, Elene converts the Jews, Juliana defeats the devil, all defeat suffering, and all win everlasting life with God, to say nothing of sainthood. In the saints' lives, suffering has purpose and grandeur; there is elevation of the spirit rather than lament for loss, though there might be a hint of regret that the age of miracles was long ago.

In the elegies, in contrast, there is a deep sense of loss of culture and companionship, the agonized loneliness of a person who has fallen into the hollow between oppositions, one who has lost his footing in the material world either because that world is gone ("Lay of the Last Survivor," *The Wanderer*) or because he or she is exiled from that world (*The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*) or because the world is in such flux that nothing holds true any more (in the non-elegiac non-poetry of Wulfstan). It is well to remember that eighth- through tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England struggled with

warfare and disease and the shift from a pagan to a Christian society, from tribal culture to kingdoms and courts, from orality to literacy. The sense of loss revealed in the elegies and in *Beowulf* could not have been an unfamiliar sentiment. The use of negative language to express loss must have struck a chord with people who were having to deal with much loss and had a palpable sense of negativity, not in the modern sense of "badness" but in the original sense of "not-ness." During the time when "the transition to sophisticated literacy was rapidly accelerated," John Niles tells us, many Anglo-Saxons experienced cultural anxiety regarding the loss of a former heritage ("Myth" 13). It was this awareness of lack, of absence, that fed the deep nostalgia of the Anglo-Saxon audience for their Germanic origins and that must have touched a responsive linguistic chord in the poets to express their thoughts in negative language.

Exile is the preeminent Old English image of loss. To be in exile is to be outside the world where oppositions are balanced and life is structured between extremes. To be outside that world is to be in danger of becoming lost in the emptiness. This is the situation of the Seafarer, who has deliberately left the safety of the world of lords and thanes ("how I … endured … the tracks of exile, / bereft of friend-kinsmen"); of the Wanderer, who has lost that world due to the death of his lord ("separated from the homeland, far from noble-kinsmen") of the Wife of *The Wife's Lament*, who, bereft of her husband, has been sent to live in an earthcave ("where I might weep my exile-journeys"); of the Last Survivor in *Beowulf*, whose people have all died, leaving him, alone, to remember the life that once was. They all mourn the world they have lost using a buildup

of negative language. Here, for instance, is the Seafarer, describing the loneliness and longing of the exile:

> Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege,
> ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht,
> ne ymbe owiht elles, nefne ymb yða geweale. (44-46)
>
> Nor is there for him thoughts of the harp, nor of ring-receiving,
> nor of joy in a woman nor of hope in the world
> nor of anything else, except for the tossing of the waves.

The emphasis is on the things lost. The music of hall life is gone, the treasures the lord would so generously give his loyal retainers are gone – even more to the point, the king who gave those rings and the thanes who received them are gone. The Seafarer laments that there is no longer "joy in a woman" (how beautifully put!), and then he ends with the broad, general and piercingly poignant cry of any who have lost their metaphysical bearings – "no more hope in the world!" Utter despair. By talking about what is no longer in his life – no use to have even a thought of these things – he makes brilliantly clear his loneliness, the "thinglessness" of his life now, when there is nothing but the emptiness of the sea.

This emphasis on "what is not" is a great deal of what gives the elegies their haunting tone, and they are most haunting when negative language describes things in terms of their absence. *The Wanderer*'s *ubi sunt* passage, with its evocation of that which is missing and its anaphoric *hwær cwom* and *eala*, like the parallelism of *ne* in other passages, has the force of negative language:

> Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?
> Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?
> Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!

Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under nihthelm swa heo no wære. (92-96)

Where has the horse gone? Where has the kinsman gone? Where has the treasure gone?
Where have the settings of banquets gone? Where are the hall-joys?
Alas, the bright cup! Alas the armed warrior!
Alas the glory of the prince! How the time has gone,
Grown dark under the helmet of night as though it never were.

In the inflexible subject-verb-object word order of modern English, we have to say, "Where have all the flowers gone?" "Where have all the soldiers gone?" "Where have all the horses gone?" putting the emphasis on the thing itself. "Where have all the horses" – what? Put their harnesses? Scattered the hay? What about the horses does the writer mean to say? And then, finally, the sense of absence: "Where have they gone?" With the more flexible Old English language, the poet can put the emphasis on the absence, the emptiness: *Hwær cwom* – "Where have gone" – what? Flowers? Soldiers? Horses? Before we get to the thing itself, we have the yawning gap that used to be filled with the various things that will come in the next breath. The Old English poet uses the technique of the visual artist, who, instead of drawing the outlines of things, draws the outlines of the spaces around things, the negative spaces. In the poem the repetition and prominence of the negative space and the subsidiary position of those things that used to fill that space leave the impression of vast emptiness. A better translation than "where has the horse (kinsman, treasure, feast, hall-dreams) gone?" might be, "Oh, the absence of the horse! The absence of the kinsman!" In the usual, and more literal, modern English translation, the passage has no negative construction. Nor, strictly speaking does the Old English passage – there is no *ne* or *nalæs*. Nonetheless, this passage, with its repetitive

emphasis on absence, exemplifies negative language just as strongly as those passages with a repetition of *ne-ac*.

In this catalogue of absences, as in the *Seafarer* passage, we experience with the Wanderer both his real and his existential emptiness, both the loss of the world of treasure-giving and feasting, of horses and kinsmen, and the loss of meaning that world gave to his life. “The wanderer’s anxiety … is experienced psychologically in terms of his sadness and sorrow and socially in terms of isolation and loneliness," Lawrence Beaston says in "The Wanderer's Courage." "The absent horse, the absent young warrior, the absent treasure-giver, the bright cup, all these represent the non-being at the foundation not just of the wanderer’s own life but of an Anglo-Saxon culture that is no longer unified by the values of the pagan past. It is, as the speaker notes in line 96, as if this past had never existed at all” (128).

The last line of this passage from *The Wanderer – swa heo no wære* (as if it never were) – is also found in *The Wife’s Lament*. In this elegy, the wife says of her relationship with the lord/lover/husband from whom she is now separated that at one time they vowed together that they would never be parted except by death. Note the use of negative language in the passage:

> Ful oft wit beotedan
> þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana,
> **owiht** elles. Eft is þæt onhworfen;
> is nu swa hit **no** wære
> freondscipe uncer. (21-25a)

> Very often we vowed
> that we would not be separated except by death alone,
> nothing else. Afterwards that was turned around.

It is now as if it never were,
our friendship.

The emptiness and meaninglessness of the Wife's world without the man she loves is as deep an existential agony as that of the Wanderer. And in such a circumstance, she, too, uses negative language for the most anguished expression. The emptiness of the present negates the joys of the past.

When the poet of *The Wanderer* uses negative language in lines 29b-36 to create a sharp contrast between the world he once knew and the world he inhabits now, as discussed above, he is also using it to underscore the despair of being in exile.

Wat se þe cunnað
hu sliþen bið sorg to geferan,
þam þe him lyt hafað leofra geholena.
Warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold,
ferðloca freorig, nalæs foldan blæd,
Gemon he selesecgas ond sincþege,
hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine
wenede to wiste – wyn eal gedreas. (29b-36)

He who knows
knows how cruel sorrow is as a companion,
for him who has few beloved companions.

[It is worth noting the litotes of this line 31, a different device from the use of negatives in the next two lines. To say the exile has few companions is understatement, since he has none.]

He holds close the footsteps of an exile, not at all twisted gold;
holds close an icy heart, not at all the splendor of the earth.
He remembers the hall-companions and the receiving of treasure,
how his gold-friend entertained him at feast
among the young retainers. All joy has perished.

Just previously, the Wanderer had spoken of dreaming that he was in the presence of his lord again, embracing him, laying his hand and his head on the lord's knee, only to waken to the crying of sea-birds, a sharp reminder of the emptiness of his situation. Awakening negates the dream, which was a false (negating) interpretation of the present. The Wanderer treads the same *wræclast*, exile's tracks, as the Seafarer. He calls himself *seledreorig* – sad at [the loss of] a hall: homesick (line 25). He is *eðle bidæled* (deprived of his homeland) (line 20) and *freomægum feor* (far from noble kinsmen) (line 21). Thus the two short half-lines, 32b and 33b ("not at all twisted gold," "not at all the splendor of the earth"), stated in negative language, indicate a large world that is lost to him. The Wanderer has slipped into the emptiness of existential nothingness, as all that had made his life meaningful has been lost with the death of his lord. "The memory of his former happiness serves to remind him how meaningless and spiritually unsatisfying his present life seems" (Beaston 128).

Although *Beowulf* is a poem about the loss of a world (the same world that the Seafarer and the Wanderer lament), the *Beowulf* poet seldom uses the *ne-ac* construction. He uses "negative evaluations," mostly litotes, at the average rate of one every thirty lines (Frank "Incomparable" 63), and he exemplifies by negative example (Heremod as the kind of king Beowulf should not be; Hygd a good queen, unlike Modthryth), but he does not pile up negatives in parallel phrases to emphasize the contrast between binary choices or to express an existential emptiness. One reason is that the structure of Beowulf is narrative, its intent to tell a series of events – the past that will be displaced – not to express a cry from the soul or to paint a picture of Paradise or decry the sins of man. A

second reason is that the lament of the elegies is a lament for a world lost, whereas in *Beowulf* that lost world is only projected into the future at the end of the poem. There is nothing yet to mourn – except for the death of the father's son in "The Father's Lament" (lines 2444-2471) and the loss of the society of the Last Survivor (lines 2247-2266). Significantly, in both these episodes in which the elegiac speakers are mourning the same kind of loss that the Seafarer and the Wanderer mourn, the poet uses a build-up of *ne*-type constructions, seven in twenty-eight lines of "The Father's Lament" and six in the nineteen lines of "The Lay of the Last Survivor."

In this elegiac lament known as "The Lay of the Last Survivor," the speaker, the last living person, perhaps even the last living being, of a world like the one in which *Beowulf* takes place, laments the end of that world as he buries the treasure of his erstwhile civilization in the earth. All his comrades have died. All his world of treasure-giving lords, bright armor well burnished, hawks on the wrist, and harps in the hall is gone, as they were also gone for the Wanderer. In expressing the same gnawing emptiness of the Wanderer and the Seafarer, the Last Survivor uses the same buildup of negatives. Though the parallel negatives occur mostly at the end of the elegy, the passage in its entirety poignantly suggests the context of emptiness in which the absence resounds, so I present here the whole lay. Besides, the first achingly woeful line and a half of "The Lay of the Last Survivor" – *Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð ne mostan, / eorla æhte* – are the most beautiful in the lay and set the tone for the end with its parallel *nes.*

Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð **ne** mostan,
eorla æhte. Hwæt, hyt ær on ðe
gode begeaton; guðdeað fornam
feorhbealo frecne fyra gehwylcne

leoda minra þara ðe þis lif ofgeaf;
gesawon seledream. **Nah** hwa sweord wege
oððe forð bere fæted wæge
druncfæt deore; duguð ellor scoc.
Sceal se hearda helm hyrstedgolde
fætum befeallen; feromynd swefað
þa ðe beadogriman bywan sceoldon;
ge swylce seo herepad sio æt hilde gebad
ofer borda gebræc bite irena
brosnað æfter beorne. **Ne** mæg byrtnan hring
æfter wigfuman wide feran
hæleðum be healfe. **Næs** hearpan wyn
gomen gleogeames **ne** god hafoc
ond sæl swingeð **ne** se swifta mearh
burhstede beateð. Bealocwealm hafað
fela feorhynna forð onsended. (2247-2266)

Now, earth, hold this, the possession of noblemen,
now that the warriors can**not**. Indeed, in earlier times,
it was from you that good men took it. Death in battle has destroyed them;
the terrible life-bale has taken each man,
each of my people, those who have given over this life,
who once saw hall-joy. There is **not any** who might wield the sword
or bear forth the gold-plated cup,
the treasured drinking vessel. The duguth has fled elsewhere.
The hard helmet with its golden adornment
must be deprived of its gold plating. The polishers are asleep
who should be burnishing the battlemasks [helmets].
So likewise the coats of mail, that endured in battle
the bite of iron over the clash of shields,
decay after the warriors died. **Nor** after the warleaders have died
might the byrnie, the ringmail, travel widely
by the side of heroes. There is **no** joy of the harp,
play of the song-wood, **nor** is there a good hawk
swinging around the hall, **nor** a swift horse
stamping around the courtyard. Baleful death has
taken away all the life-kin.

There is so much emptiness in this passage! Some of the evocation comes from showing what is gone: life taken by death, the warriors fled, the gold on helmets missing, people asleep (by which the Anglo-Saxon reader would think “dead”), metal decaying.

Those emptinesses are balanced and deepened by the negative language that emphasizes what is not: warriors **no longer** hold their treasure, wield their swords, or drink from the cup; the wargear **no longer** travels with the warrior; the harp **no longer** sings **nor** the hawk fly **nor** the horse stamp. There is **no** sound, **no** movement, **no** life, just as for the Seafarer alone on the sea there is **no** music, **no** gift-giving, **no** love with a woman and for the Wanderer in the steps of exile **no** treasure, **no** feast, **no** horse. The concreteness of the images, emphasized by the use of negative language, makes palpable the poignancy of loss. Not just "gone," but "no longer," "not at all," "not any more" echo through the elegies. The poets' laments linger in the emptiness and fill our hearts with their longing.

Meditation 8: Twisting the Tongue to Bend the Mind

My father used to tell a story about a language that put into one word what English needs five or six phrases to say. The point of the story was the buildup of phrases into words – a cage is called a "cotter" and a kangaroo a "butel-rotten," so a kangaroo cage is a "butel-rotten-cotter." At the climax of the story someone says, "The butel-rotten-lotten-gitter-wetter-cotter-Hotten-totten-stridle-trotter-muter-otten-tater has escaped," meaning, "The murderer of the Hotten-Tot mother of stuttering children who was imprisoned in the kangaroo cage with a slat-cover to keep the rain off has escaped." I loved this story when I was a child, delighting in a language that could say so much in one long word. When I went to bed at night, I would say the word over and over just to hear the way it sounded and to feel my tongue twisting over its tangles and my lips curving, tapering, and flaring around its syllables.

When I first read *The Battle of Brunanburh*, this same delight flash-flooded over me. This poem is the entry for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles for the year 937. Many scholars consider it a panegyric for the victorious Anglo-Saxons, seeing the tone as scornful and gloating. Bruce Mitchell says, "The tone of … *Brunanburh* is one of scorn, exultation, and grim triumph" (300), and John Niles: "Nowhere else in Old English is there such a quintessential poem of boasting and scorn" ("Skaldic" 358). The poem tells of a battle near the stronghold of Brunan when the combined West Saxon and Mercian forces roundly defeated the invading Scots and Norsemen. As the enemies fled, the victors slaughtered them from behind. What was left of the enemy army leapt into their ships to retreat to Ireland, having no need to rejoice that – and here came the words that stopped me in my tracks –

> … heo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
> on campstede, cumbolgehnastes,
> garmittinge, gumena gemotes,
> wæpengewrixles, þæs hi on wælfelda
> with Eadweardes afaran plegodan. (48-52)

> … they were better in battle-works,
> on the battlefield, in standard-clashes,
> in spear-meetings, warrior-encounters,
> and weapons-exchanges when they contended
> on the slaughter-field against the sons of Eadweard.

Beaduweorca? *Campstede? Garmittinge*? *Cumbolgehnastes*? *Wæpengewrixles*? *Wælfelda*? All those compounds, crammed into such a short space! Here was "butel-rotten-lotten" in real life. What kind of language was this that could use such words, one tumbling after the other? What kind of language would produce such wonderful, crazy, mouth-stretching, tongue-tangling, lip-wrenching, mind-boggling words?

As I discovered in my continued studies of Old English, it is a language that, when it entered literacy, demanded pronunciation of every letter of every word, including "w"s before "r's" and guttural "h"s before other consonants: *wæpengewrixles* (wap-en-ja-w-ricks-les); *cumbolgehnastes* (coom-bowl-ja-[cough]-nahs-tess). Many of these delightfully hard-to-pronounce words come from another characteristic of Old English: it is a language that generously accepts neologistic compounds. Where a Modern English poet must use adverbs and prepositions, a poet of Old English could simply put two words together to form a new word that carried as great a mind-full of meaning as its letters carry a mouthful of sounds. For many compounds, one or both of their two elements are common in Old English poetry. *Hilderinc* (warrior) (line 39), for instance, comes from two common words, *hild* (war) and *rinc* (man), and is found in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* as well as in *The Battle of Brunanburh.* Frequently, though, compounds are *hapax legomena* – words found only once in the Old English corpus.

Compounds condense meaning. They are powerful linguistic tools because they "connote complex, subtle concepts in small, simple language" (Davis-Secord 1). When the *Brunanburh* poet says g*umena gemotes* (encounter of men), he evokes two pictures: men and then specifically, men meeting in some kind of encounter. But when he says, g*armittinge* (spear-meeting), he creates an immediate concept: not so much spears meeting in combat but the instant of that meeting of spears. If the function of a compound is to condense meaning in this way, then it follows that a poet who condenses the use of compounds in his poem is likewise intensifying meaning and that the ratio of compounds per line might indicate a level of poetic skill that is often not recognized in *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

In its inevitable comparison with *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle of Brunanburh* usually comes out the tawdry loser. Traugott Lawler says, "Few if any of these [scholars, literary historians, and other readers of Old English] will permit themselves to speak for very long about *Brunanburh* without turning to disparage it before *Maldon,*" citing Friedrich Klaeber, Alois Brandl, and E. V. K. Dobbie as examples (52). Dolores Warwick Frese says, "*Maldon*, with its dazzling varieties of impersonated consciousness, has always been understood and admired as poetry, while *Brunanburh* is typically assigned secondary status as commemorative battle verse" ("Poetic" 83). But when we look at compounds, we might credit the *Brunanburh* poet with a pretty skillful pen. In *Beowulf*, a poem of 3182 lines, compounds, many of them unique to the poem, make up one-third of the vocabulary, putting *Beowulf* "practically in the front rank of Old English poems," from the point of view of numbers, Friedrich Klaeber, the preeminent *Beowulf* scholar, says (qtd. in Brodeur 6). If, as Brodeur argues, the number of compounds in *Beowulf* testifies to the creative brilliance of the poet, then the following comparisons between *The Battle of Brunanburh* and two other Old English poems justify a similar appreciation of *Brunanburh*.

The Battle of Maldon: 54 compounds in 325 lines (one about every 6.5 lines)
0 lines with a compound in each half-line
The Wanderer: 56 compounds (in 52 lines) in 115 lines (about one every 2 lines)
5 lines with a compound in each half-line
The Battle of Brunanburh: 33 compounds (in 29 lines) in 73 lines (about one every 2.2 lines)
4 lines with a compound in each half-line

Another indicator of condensed use of compounds is the use of single-word half-lines. In printing Old English poetry, today's editors use a wide space at the caesura between the two half-lines that make up a line of poetry in Old English. Each half-line

contains two stressed syllables (the stress in Old English words is always on the first syllable, prefixes excepted), of which one (or two) in the a-verse must alliterate with the first stressed syllable of the b verse. One-word half-lines are relatively rare. *Maldon* has three and *The Wanderer* has none, but *Brunanburh* has ten single-word half-lines, nine of which are the poet's compounds. (The other, *Constantinus*, line 38, is a name.) Even in the short section of *The Battle of Brunanburh* quoted above – lines 48-52 – the poet has managed to create three one-word half-lines. Compounds are almost as tightly condensed in lines 20-25, with five compounds in four lines, and in lines 60-64, where four compounds occur in four lines with two of them comprising single-word half-lines:

Wesseaxe forð
onlongne dæg **eorodcistum**
on last legdun laþum þeodum
heowan **herefleman** hindan thearle
mecum **mylenscearpan**. Myrce ne wyrndon
heardes **hondplegan** hæleþa nanum. (20b-25)

The West Saxons went forth
the entire day in **troops**,
in the footsteps laid down by the hated people.
They hewed **army-fleers** violently from behind
with **mill-sharp** swords. The Mercians did not withhold
hard **hand-play** from any warriors.

Letan him behindan hræ bryttian
saluwigpadan, þone sweartan hræfn
hynednebban, ond thane **hasewanpadan**
earn æftan hwit, æses bruca.
grædig guðhafoc ond þæt **grægedeor**,
wulf on wealde. (60-65a)
They left behind them, to divvy up the corpses,
the black raven, **dark-winged,**
horny-beaked, and **dusky-coated**.
They left the eagle, white from behind, that greedy war-hawk,

to enjoy the carrion, and they left the **gray-beast**,
the wolf from the forest.

In the first of these passages, the poet emphasizes the thoroughness of the military victory. The hated enemy is in retreat, slaughtered by the victors as they run. Here, the density of the compounds and the rhythmical repetition of two-word half-lines ending in compounds (lines 23-25) imply the relentlessness of the hacking and hewing. To my ear it does not necessarily sound like gloating. To the contrary, the relentlessness of victory is the same as relentlessness of defeat. Tara Bookataub Montague also reads this passage as contradictory to panegyric, since its tone, bringing home the horrors of war, is not consistent with that purpose (197). Because the scene focuses on the emotional, psychological state of the defeated enemy, she says, "we find ourselves, [oddly,] understanding the battle on the enemy's terms, and sympathizing with his loss" (198). A study of the compounds corroborates this point of view, justifying the interpretation that the poet has sympathy for the horrors of war – and even for the enemy himself – in spite of his exultation in the victory.

After this short section describing intense slaughter, the poet immediately considers the soldiers of Anlaf, the invading leader, who are lying dead on the field: not just corpses but men who only yesterday were kings and kinsmen, men young in battle now lying unburied on the battleground. In all of this passage, which follows immediately after the five and a half compound-rich lines about the West Saxon slaughter of the fleeing army, the poet uses comparatively few compounds (four in seventeen and a half lines, 26-44a). At line 39 the poet returns to his more usual pattern of one compound every other line, and at line 48, as discussed above, he intensifies the use of compounds

in describing the battle with words of assembly and meeting, so that the density of compounds helps de-emphasize gloating over victory.

Lines 53-59 have only two compounds, but the five-and-a-half-line passage about the beasts of battle (60-65a) contains four. Just as lines 23-25 in the passage about the pursuit of the retreating army emphasize compounds with rhythmic repetition, here the compounds have a tonal repetition that puts emphasis on the passage: *saluwigpadan* (dark-winged), *hyrnednebban* (horny-beaked), and *hasewanpadan* (dusky-winged) with the sonorous second-element sounds of *padan*, *nebban*, and *padan* (again) giving dark weight to the passage – those dark birds with hardened beaks ready to gouge out eyes and tear at entrails, the eagle with its incongruous white, the grey wolf, the greedy warhawk. They circle, repetitiously, and land heavily, with compound force, on the corpses. The poet's neologistic vocabulary conveys the weightiness of the scene beyond the battle-scene cliché of carrion eaters.

A poet creates a compound by combining two elements: two nouns or a noun and an adjective (or verb form used adjectivally) to create either a noun or an adjective. Some words are used more frequently as elements than others. The most innovative compound-builder will create entirely new words, using elements that are seldom, if ever before, combined. Jonathan Davis-Secord, in his Ph.D. dissertation on compounds in Old English literature, says, "The coining of new compounds was an important stylistic feat in many Old English texts. The creation of a new compound gave special emphasis and heightened importance to a concept" (3). The chart below compares compounds for their uniqueness in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Wanderer*.

The Battle of Maldon: 8 repeated first elements (2 used three times, 1 four times)
7 repeated second elements (1 used three times)
5 compounds repeated
The Wanderer: 14 elements used more than once (in either first or second place)
5 compounds repeated (one repeated 3 times)
The Battle of Brunanburh: 2 repeated first elements (*here* and *wæl*)
1 repeated second element (*padan*)
0 compounds repeated

By Jeffrey Mazo's assertion that the originality of the "literary poets" stems from their not forming "more than two or three, and rarely more than one, new compound with a given first element" (84), the *Maldon* poet shows poorly, whereas the *Brunanburh* poet is a great innovator of compounds, for he has comparatively little repetition of elements. In addition, a great many of his compounds are unique in the Old English corpus. *Beowulf* provides a telling comparison: The incidence of compounding in *Beowulf* is about two compounds every four lines. (John Niles gives credit to Otto Krackow for this figure and goes on to say that Krackow "takes care to add that blind counting of compounds means little. One must also ask what *kind* of compounds occur," noting that in *Beowulf* there is very little verbatim repetition of compounds or their elements. ["Compound" 502]). In *Brunanburh*'s seventy-three lines there are thirty-four compounds, for a ratio of one approximately every two lines. The poet repeats only three first elements of these compounds, each only once. Even if blind counting means little, we have to be impressed by this significant language usage.

Finally, it is worth looking at the way density and uniqueness of compounds in *The Battle of Brunanburh* affect meaning. Though John Niles asserts that a poet chooses his compound diction only to fulfill the requirements of alliteration with "the least contortion of rhythm and syntax" ("Compound" 498), to me the compounds in

Brunanburh prove the opposite. They seem to fulfill a thematic and tonal function beyond the alliterative utility. The three compounds under consideration in lines 48-52, for instance, are a series of appositives to another compound, *beaduweorca* (battle-works) in line 48. *Cumbolgehnastes* (standard-clash), *garmittinge* (spear-meeting), and *wæpengewrixles* (weapons-exchange), like *gumena gemotes* (encounters of men, which is not a compound), are kinds of battle-works, but they are a kind that strangely ignores victors and losers, carefully equalizing the contenders without praise or blame. Standards clash. Spears meet. Men encounter one another. There is an exchange of weapons. Except that we are talking about battle, we could almost be at a diplomatic meeting, a "thing" from an Icelandic saga, for instance, where feuding sides meet to determine justice. These words so fitting to assemblies of men in peaceful times, coming in so concentrated a form between the specific designation of "battle-works" and "slaughter-field" (*wælfelda*, line 51) – reminders that we are talking about war, not diplomacy – level the panegyric mood into a more sympathetic rendering of an enemy's defeat. If we can use the compounds' "elevation, and their harmony with the [*Beowulf*] poet's thought and feeling" as exemplifying "the genius of a great poet" (Brodeur 28) when discussing *Beowulf*, can we not do the same in discussing *The Battle of Brunanburh*?

Those of us who delight in words cannot paint our house "pickle" no matter how much we like the color, and we like pipsissewa better than tarweed no matter which flower is more beautiful. I like to think the *Brunanburh* poet was one of us, that he went to bed at night rolling around his tongue words like *wæpengewrixles,* But because he is a poet, not just a word nerd, he knows how to use those words to poetic effect. I like to

think that the night after he wrote *The Battle of Brunanburh*, he sank onto his hard-plank bed saying, "*Wæpengewrixles*. S*aluwigpadan*. W*igsmithas*," loving the sounds of the words he had created and the beauty, dignity, and thematic intensity they added to his poem.

Meditation 9: Overlaid Maps

When I was at Cambridge University in 1967, I saw my first Ionesco play, *The Lesson*. Oh, but it was thrilling – theater of the absurd (and wasn't it too true, the absurdity of life?) – existential angst (how existential we were in our college angst!) – and the daring minimalism of the dialogue! My boyfriend and I walked home playing out the lines: "Knife! Knife! Knife!" he would say, and I would say, "Toothache. Toothache." We were heady with the excitement of new art.

Of course, literary minimalism had its roots long before the sixties. *The Lesson* opened in Paris in 1951. Hemingway's minimalist prose of the twenties looked forward as much as Faulkner's equally powerful contortionist style looked backward. Minimalism was the new look. The steady pulse and monotonous iteration of phrases in Philip Glass's and Arvo Pårt's music echoed the equality of parts and repetitions of Frank Stella's stripe paintings and the repeated phrases in Samuel Beckett's and Ionesco's plays. The economy of words in William Carlos Williams's poetry and Raymond Carver's prose had the same aesthetic base as Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" architecture. Wherever the impulse came from, whoever influenced whom across the boundaries of art forms, minimalism was indisputably present in music, art, literature, and architecture of the sixties.

Styles come and go. Minimalism, with its repetitions and economies gave way to postmodernism with its jerks and flashes and short-attention-span, never-stay-still segments, a style that has permeated drama, poetry, fiction, painting, motion pictures, and music. Just so, in early Anglo-Saxon England interlace art was all the rage. The aesthetic taste for complex ornamentation to cover every surface suffuses the era's manuscript art and crafted items such as buckles and brooches. Intricate braided forms decorate the borders of manuscripts. In poetry, the complex interwoven syntax as well as the intricate interweaving of themes and sometimes also of narrative elements reflects the same cultural delight. Gerard Le Coat finds a propensity for braided forms and elaborate ornamentation in the music of the period, in particular in the St. Gallian troped *Kyries* and *Alleluias*, in which both the syntactic and tonal levels of structure use interwoven (or "interlaced") patterns (5, 6). Because interlace is a visual or aural way to express a concept of simultaneity, its widespread use in the arts in Anglo-Saxon times is not surprising.

Professor Clare Lees, however, scoffs at scholars who find such parallels: "To say … that interlace patterns, seen and/or heard, are resourced *by* Anglo-Saxon culture because such patterns are found *in* Anglo-Saxon culture does not have strong explanatory power" (118). To point out parallel paths is not a deep analysis, she says, for these paths will not converge: "Art historians will analyze visual interlace, literary critics verbal interlace" (118) – and music historians tonal interlace. But finding a parallel of interlace in Anglo-Saxon music confirmed for Le Coat that interlace really is a "basic component of the Anglo-Saxon cultural system" revealed in its visual, verbal, and tonal thinking (6).

Therein could lie, he says, a method of cross-media investigations (6) – just such an examination as I propose here between the visual arts of the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries and Old English poetry. Instead of using Lees's analogy – parallel structures in different genres are like parallel lines that never converge – I use the analogy of overlaid maps: overlaying the critical vocabulary of art over the poems, like placing a transparent map of, say, wildlife species of an area over a map of the geological formations of the same area, to see what new vision might emerge.

Of course, overlaid maps only work if there is a match between the two. Insular art, with its emphasis on interlaced forms, flourished in the sixth through mid-ninth centuries, after which Danish and Viking invasions, with their plundering and pillaging, raping and reaving, weakened the institutional, communal life that had supported this art (Schapiro). By the early tenth century, a new style had arisen, the Winchester style, in which figures were no longer static in a field of continuous movement (usually interlace), as in earlier Insular art, but now showed a "studied effect of excitement and movement" and a more naturalistic drawing style (Campbell, Jackson 28). Interlace was de-emphasized compared to its place in earlier art. Old English poetry comes to us in tenth-century manuscripts, so how can an overlay of earlier visual art "match" this poetry?

It can, for several reasons. First, just because the manuscripts can be accurately dated to the tenth century does not mean that the poems themselves were written in that era. The date of *Beowulf* is highly contested – anywhere from the eighth to the eleventh century. When John Leyerle states definitively, in his seminal essay, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*," that *Beowulf* is composed "in the early eighth century in the

Midlands or North of England, exactly the time and place where interlace decoration reached a complexity of design and skill in execution never equaled since" (1-2), he is making the facts fit the theory. If *Beowulf* is a tenth-century poem, Leyerle's theories must be defenestrated, so we will give him the benefit of the doubt. We cannot date the composition of Old English poems with great accuracy, so it is *possible* that they were composed at the same time that interlace art was *au courant* in Anglo-Saxon England.

Another explanation is that Old English poetry is highly conservative. It looks to the past. *Beowulf* is an elegy for a heroic age long past. In *The Battle of Maldon*, composed maybe as early as the end of the tenth century (the battle itself took place in 991), the poet has used archaic material for poetic form, vocabulary, and syntax, the antiquated nature of the language matching the glorification of heroes past. Tenth-century England in general, besieged by invasions, looked to the past for a sense of cultural continuity. The poets helped fulfill the need for this continuity by emphasizing past glories and using a poetic diction that drew on the past. If they learned alliteration from oral poetry, might they not also have borrowed interlace from artistic forms that were popular in earlier days? So *even if* the poets were writing after the heyday of Insular art, they could have been influenced by interlace forms to mimic the technique in their verbal arts.

Or, perhaps, the poems are written forms of old poems from the oral tradition. That, too, would account for verbal interlace a century later than visual interlace. Though this proposition is not unreasonable, my own sense of the poems is that the complexity of the interlace is highly literary and that the poems were not simply the material of the scop

transferred to vellum. Nonetheless, the skill with which poets like the *Beowulf* poet and the *Seafarer* poet used interlace, the frequency of the technique in Old English poetry, and the common references to "weaving" and "braiding" in relation to words, poems, and stories indicate that the poems, like the music, manuscript art, and craftsmanship of the day, used interlace as a culturally expected and pleasing artistic technique, a style in widespread use during the time the poems could have been written.

Interlace was widespread in Old English poetry, but not in its prose. Just as certain Old English words were restricted to poetry, so certain techniques, such as interlace and alliteration, were considered material more for poetry than for prose. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, for instance, use a straightforward narrative style; Alfredian prose is notably uncluttered by complexity in its presentation of narrative and theme. Wulfstan does use interlace in his *Sermon to the English People*, but in this as in other techniques, such as the use of negative language, as discussed on pages 115-116m, Wulfstan is more poet than otherwise.

How widespread verbal interlace was in the early Middle Ages is a more tricky question. Schapiro traces the origins of interlace patterns in Insular arts to a Mediterranean source (164), and James Earl argues convincingly that the Old English "Rhyming Poem" is an exercise in imitating a complex Latin poetic style, the *hisperic* style: "playfully erudite poetic obscurantism, both formal and linguistic ("Hisperic" 189). But "complexity" covers a lot more ground than simply interlace, and it is not yet clear whether we can apply the term "interlace" to poetry in other languages of the early Middle Ages. Besides the Latin poetry of the hisperic style, the poetry of Old Saxon, Old

Irish, and Old Norse is also convoluted and tangled – nothing could be more knotty and obscure than Old Norse poetry, with its unimaginably enigmatic kennings (saying, "the flour of Froði's hapless slaves" for "gold" and "the flesh of the mother of the enemy of the giantess" for "earth"). But whether this poetry uses interlace as we find it in Old English poetry is a tantalizing question I will leave to some other graduate student to pursue.

What we mean by "interlace" in visual arts, whether in the borders of manuscripts or in buckles and brooches, is fairly clear because we can see the strands weaving around each other. (See Fig. 14 and 15, for instance.) When we apply the term to literature, though, there is some confusion. Ferdinand Lot, the first critic to use the term for medieval narratives, applied it to the situation in which several narrative strands cross over each other – i.e., when the writer has started one story, then pauses before completing it to take up another story with different characters, and so forth with any number of strands, as happens often in Arthurian romances.

Although we can see the metaphorical accuracy of the term "interlace" as applied to narrative, Morton Bloomfield rightly points out its imprecision, since narrative is always linear and sequential. It is true that narrative strands can interrupt each other, but each is held invisibly in memory while another is being told, unlike strands of visual interlace, which are always discernible, even when one strand for the briefest of moments covers another. But John Leyerle, writing two decades before Bloomfield made his objection, had no such qualms about using the term for the structure of narratives in *Beowulf*. He confidently identifies two kinds of interlace in the poem, structural and stylistic.

Structural interlace, Leyerle says, in poetry as in manuscript art, "is made when the [narrative] bands are turned back on themselves to form knots or breaks that interrupt, so to speak, the linear flow of the bands" (2), as when the story of the Swedish wars in *Beowulf* is broken into several episodes (bands) scattered throughout the poem. (In criticizing Leyerle's use of the term to describe techniques in *Beowulf*, Carol Heffernan points out that, like the serpentine coils of Anglo-Saxon decorative art that is constantly recoiling on itself, "linear in design with clear beginning, middle, and end is what *Beowulf* is *not*" [39].) Structural interlace is used extensively throughout *Beowulf*: almost every episode is interrupted with narrative bands that pertain to events outside those immediate actions and which are, themselves, told in a splintered, or interwoven, fashion, a little bit here and then, later in the poem, a little bit more of the story.

The term "structural interlace," however, applies only to narrative poetry and is not useful for understanding a non-narrative poem like *The Seafarer*. Richard Lewis applies "structural interlace" not to narrative structure but to the alliterative structure of the poetic line. He thinks it a useful term "[to] characterize the interaction between extended and recurrent alliterative associations and the overall syntax and narration" (204). But this meaning of interlace is also too narrow, since interlace in poetry obviously involves more than tied-together alliteration. "Interlace" could also refer to narrative, as above, or to the interweavings of theme, motif, or variations (parallel phrases in apposition to each other).

The interweaving of two or more strands of variation is what Leyerle calls stylistic interlace (4). Clare Lees also defines literary interlace as synonymous with "variation,"

"apposition," "repetition," and "formula" (114). Although we can see how appositives (variations) "interlace" (examples appear on the following pages), restricting the term to variation only gives the critic a replacement synonym, not a new way to understand a poem, and the term becomes superfluous.

Lewis Nicholson's definition seems the most precise and the most useful: "a single motif or thread as it runs throughout the fabric of the poem, or … the development of a double motif or theme as it intertwines like two strands of fine silk to give a colorful and meaningful texture to the complete design" (240). This definition emphasizes the one important point of commonality in all the definitions: an intricate interweaving of strands, whether of words, paint, tone, or carving.

Interlace in Anglo-Saxon art is a well-established concept. Its presence in Old English poetry is proven in the lines from *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer* given below and in the color-coded map of *The Seafarer* at the end of this essay. When Michael Swanton says that the "intellectual elements" of *The Phoenix* "interpenetrate in a complex plaitwork of recurrent images and themes that intertwine and develop" (149), he is using "plaitwork" and "intertwining" synonymously with "interlace." If variation is interlace, then interlace is pervasive in all Old English poetry, but even if we restrict the term to a more complex interweaving of motifs and themes as well as of narratives, we find it in most of the poetry. Once we establish the existence of interwoven strands in both verbal and visual arts, we can use an overlay of art criticism to clarify some of the difficulties we face in reading *The Seafarer* and other Old English poems.

One of those difficulties is the problem of "ornamentation," of unnecessarily complicated, thematically irrelevant syntax and excessively long passages of formulaic material. Zeugma (phrases belonging ambiguously to two or more other phrases) abounds. For instance, in lines 19b-22 of *The Seafarer* –

> Hwilum ylfete song
> dyde ic me to gomene ganetes hleoþor
> ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera
> mæw singende fore medodrince.
>
> At times I took the song of the swan
> and the cry of the gannet as entertainment
> and the sound of the curlew as the laughter of men,
> the singing of the gull for mead –

are the song of the swan and the cry of the gannet entertainment, as translated above, or is the cry of the gannet, like the sound of the curlew, the laughter of men: "At times I took the song of the swan as entertainment and the sound of the curlew and the cry of the gannet as the laughter of men"? Zeugma allows for both interpretations in Old English, though modern English is forced to choose one over the other.

Variation by means of appositives also obfuscates syntax and also abounds. This variation is further complicated by the interlace made possible by both the flexibility of Old English word order and the Anglo-Saxon freedom from punctuation. (Punctuation was a later innovation.) Here is a simple example from *Beowulf*. (I translate literally to preserve the interlaced phrases).

> Eodon him þa togeanes, gode þancodon,
> ðryðlic þegna heap þeodnes gefegon
> þæs þe hi hyne gesundne geseon moston.
> (1626-1628)

Came together around him, thanked God,
the valiant troop of thanes rejoiced in their prince
this one whom they might see safe.

It would have been so much more uncluttered if the poet had dispensed with interlacing the actions – *eodon, þancodon*, *gefegon* – and told us from the beginning that it was the *ðryðlic þegna heap* (valiant troop of thanes) who came, thanked, rejoiced. Variation is one thing, but is it necessary to separate the appositives with other phrases, i.e., to create an ornament of interlaced structure?

The use of formulas is another kind of ornamentation that often seems unnecessary. Sea voyaging, beasts of battle, exile, comitatus loyalty, cold weather – such themes, as Robert Diamond enumerates in "Ornament in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," are often depicted in formulaic phrases that occur frequently throughout the corpus of Old English poetry. Diamond sees these forumlaic passages as "mere ornamentation," "pure decoration for its own sake" (467). For instance, when the poet of *Elene* uses thirty-one lines to describe Elene's sea voyage to the Holy Land, Diamond objects that the poet could have "translated St. Helena across the Mediterranean" in one or two lines and that "it is as if the poet turned it on, and the traditional formulas came tumbling out, and then he turned it off, and St. Helena, having arrived in the Holy Land, goes on about the chief business of the poem, finding the True Cross" (463, 464). Diamond sees no use for "ornamentation" in poetry. (He does not mention whether he objects to it in architecture and art. One wonders if he lives in a house of Bauhaus functionalism.) Although Diamond recognizes that the term "cliché" is not pejorative in discussing Old English poetry, he has no qualms about disparaging a poet for using "mere ornamentation."

Perhaps, though, "ornamentation" is also not pejorative. Perhaps the business of the poem is more than its narrative plot.

A look at some interpretations of interlace ornament in manuscript art helps us understand the use of the same artistic device in Old English poetry. Meyer Schapiro, Jackson Campbell, and other critics of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts have pointed out that the interlace variations in the borders of the manuscripts have a larger function than ornamentation. They pertain to the whole of the picture, giving meaning to the central figures on the page. Thus the interlace border on the Image of Man (St. Matthew) in the Book of Durrow (Fig. 6) relates the figure to the frame through both color and movement, as the feet point in the direction of the movement of the interlace (as discussed in Meditation 1). In the image of the lion (symbol of St. Mark) in the same manuscript (Fig. 16), the interlace in the vertical border changes color and becomes looser just at the point of the lion's crossing. Interlace borders are structurally and thematically important, not ornament for the mere sake of ornament.

Overlaying this understanding of the visual art onto the poetry, we find that the convolution of variations and the extended formulaic descriptions in the poetry are also not "unnecessary" but can serve a thematic function. Lines 2354-9 of *Beowulf*, which Leyerle uses as an example of stylistic interlace (4), illustrate how this works:

> No þæt læsest wæs
> hondgemota þær mon Hygelac sloh,
> syþþan Geata cyning guðe ræsum,
> freawine folca Freslondum on,
> Hreðles eafora hiorodryncum swealt
> bille gebeaten.

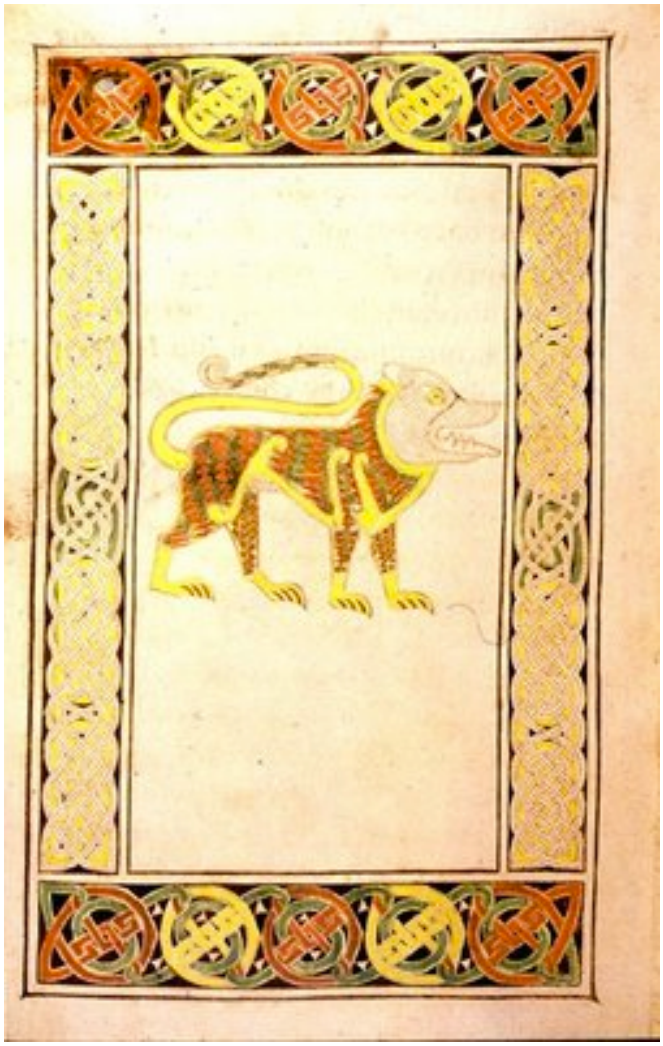

Fig. 16. Image of the Lion, Book of Durrow
http://matters-arising.blogspot.com/2008/12/book-of-durrow.html

Leyerle translates, with an eye towards depicting the interlaced variation rather using smooth language:

> That was not the least
> of hand-to-hand encounters where Hygelac was killed,
> when the king of the Geats in the rush of battle,
> the beloved friend of the people, in Frisia,
> the son of Hrethel died bloodily,
> struck down with the sword.

The use of colored text helps reveal the three interlaced strands: the variations on Hygelac (in red), on the place of battle (in brown), and on the death (in blue). Leyerle calls this use of stylistic interlace "the literary counterpart for interlace designs in art that are decorative rather than structural" (5), but as we have just seen, the interlace designs in art *can* be structural, so might we not also see them that way in the poetry? In fact, Fred Robinson, in "*Beowulf* and the Appositive Style," draws that very conclusion: that the use of variation in the poetry, which Leyerle has called stylistic interlace, is structurally important. Each step in the buildup of appositives adds something important to the text. Thus, here, the poet builds our sympathy for Hygelac's death by moving from the fairly unemotional *mon sloh* ("one killed") to the more specific *hiorodryncum swealt* ("blood from sword-drink") to the even more specific and emotional *bille gebeaten* ("[he was] struck down by a sword"). Variation – stylistic interlace – is no more "mere" ornamentation in poetry than it is in art.

One of the most vexing problems about *The Seafarer* is the poet's sudden shifts of attitude and focus. The most striking shift comes in line 33b, where the poet, after presenting thirty-two and a half lines about the miseries of seafaring, abruptly declares that the thing he most desires is, of all things, seafaring:

> Forþon cnyssað nu
> heortan geþohtas, þæt ic hean streamas,
> sealtyþa gelac sylf cunnige. (33b-35)

> Whereupon now the thoughts of the heart thrash
> that I should know myself the deep currents,
> the play of salt-waves.

No sooner does he tell us he wants to be on the sea than he begins lamenting what he loses by becoming a seafarer:

> Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege,
> ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht,
> ne ymbe owiht elles, nefne ymb yða gewealc,
> ac a hafað longunge se þe on lague fundað. (44-47)
>
> Nor is there for him a mind for the harp nor for ring-receiving
> nor joy from a woman nor hope from the world
> nor anything else around except around the tossing of waves.
> But he has a longing he who hastens on the water.

Another shift is the sudden introduction of the Christian theme in lines 64b-66a:

> Forþon me hatran sind
> dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade life,
> læne on londe.
>
> Therefore the joys of the Lord are hotter to me than this dead life,
> fleeting on land.

No sooner does the poet introduce this idea than he begins telling us how one should live in this life – i.e., for the praise "afterlivers" will give him after his death, a very pagan concept.

> Forþon þæt eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
> lof lifgendra last worda betst (72-73)
>
> Therefore for every nobleman this is best: the praise of after-speakers,
> of the living ones, spoken after a man's death.

Neil Isaacs emphasizes this problem of sudden shifts, repeatedly pointing them out: "[The poet] lead[s] us inevitably through his constantly shifting perspectives to the final fixed morality of his message" (21); "The clever reversals by shifting perspective and by the association of ideas by opposites have not completely covered the ground or clinched

the issue. So the poet shifts gears and perspective again" (31); "By this point the poet has completed the process of reversal he began almost as soon as he initiated the pattern of shifting perspectives" (32). Isaacs goes to elaborate lengths to justify these shifts in terms of a complicated interpretation of the poem as depicting external-internal polarities.

Other critics either dismiss the sudden shifts as poor poetry (G. V. Smithers says the narrator could not really be a seafarer because of the "inconsistency … of juxtaposing a 'yearning' for a sea-voyage (which is to be full of sorrow) with a picture of the beauties of spring on land" [qtd. in Orton 45]), while others justify them with complex, often strained theories and explanations of multiple themes. Peter Orton answers Smithers by saying, "This 'inconsistency' is surely the whole point here" (45), and then goes on to justify the inconsistencies with a labyrinthine theory of "oppositions" that inform the two halves of the poem: between the seafarer and the landlubber in the first half of the poem (augmented by a secondary opposition between the condition of exile and the possession and enjoyment of one who has a country [49]), and, in the second part, between the exiled state of all mankind and the Christian who finds his home in heaven (51), among other, more complicated oppositions. Brian Green sees the poem as tripartite so as to reconcile the "logically incongruous components in the poem's structure" (29). And so forth. Every scholar who has ever tackled *The Seafarer*, and every undergraduate reader as well, has been flummoxed by the contradictions, oppositions, and sudden shifts in the poem. Any solution, such as those mentioned above, is inevitably complex, elaborate, and strained.

Again, we could take some clues of interpretation from art criticism. Schapiro points out that the carpet pages and monogram pages of Anglo-Saxon gospel manuscripts frequently contain similar shifts: “The mode of expansion of an ornament in the field displays an inventiveness, a sustained play and paradox, with reversals and a perpetual shifting from one mode of grouping to its opposite” (29). The interlace borders are usually not monotonously alike from panel to panel but include many variations such as mirroring, color differences, reversals, etc. (See, for instance, the Carpet Page from the Book of Durrow, Fig. 2.) “Variations were invented within a framework where each unit enters into the form of the whole in significant and mutually reinforcing ways and as a satisfying source of surprise,” Schapiro tells us (34). (See the Virgin with two left feet, Fig. 4, and the cat and mouse on the Chi Rho page, Fig. 5.) The *Seafarer* poet might have been displaying lexically the same propensity for reversals and shifts towards opposites. If we view the varying perspectives of *The Seafarer* like the “variations” Schapiro finds in the interlace borders, we might see these shifts not as disruptive to the "whole” (the poem in its entirety, not as its segmented parts), but as reinforcing the larger spiritual meaning of the poem, the joys and hardships of the spiritual life. As for “a satisfying source of surprise,” that phrase could apply directly to *The Seafarer – if* we stop looking for satisfaction only where there are no surprises.

Just as the sudden shifts within interlace borders – or the figures within the borders or elements outside the frame – deliberately create the delight of surprise (the turned feet of the Durrow Man; the feet, hands, and fragmentary head outside the border of the St. John page in the Book of Kells [Fig. 17]), so, too, does that sudden shift in line 33b of

Fig. 17. St. John, Book of Kells
http://www.codex99.com/typography/37.html

the wilderness beyond the boundaries of his own culture, loses his sense of identity, only to reach back to a different, more comprehensive vision of man and the world in order to recover it" – Orton again (52)? Is the poem about "the inferior values on which men base their understanding of happiness," as Brian Green would have it (42)? What on earth is the reality of the situation and of this man on the sea?

If we can see interlace as a cross-genre technique and can use an overlay of art criticism on the poem, we will get some help with these conundrums. Jackson Campbell says, specifically about the figure of St. John in the St. Gall Gospel (Fig. 18),

> Verisimilitude and naturalism are clearly factors which the artist did not strive for. … Whether or not his figure looks like a real man in detail, there is no question that it *is* a man. It is a man not so much of flesh and blood, mere molecules, but ideas, spirit and meaning. It is also a man of solidity, grace and harmony, with eyes that suggest profundities of wisdom" (9).

The emphasis of the painting is on those eyes. As for all the rest – the disproportionately small body, the unrealistic hands and feet, the folds of the robe that we cannot follow in the way any fabric would really fall, the dotted blue and red hair – "The whole presents a unified and harmonious design which puts a distinct focus on the head and the eyes" (Campbell, Jackson 9) – i.e., on the spirituality rather than the physicality of St. John.

Likewise, to look for verisimilitude in *The Seafarer* is to miss the point of the poem and to open the door to confusion. We are not to think of a sailor on the sea but of a spiritual man giving himself to God. We are to read, not realistically and not even metaphorically, but abstractly. There is no question that the Seafarer *is* a spiritual sailor,

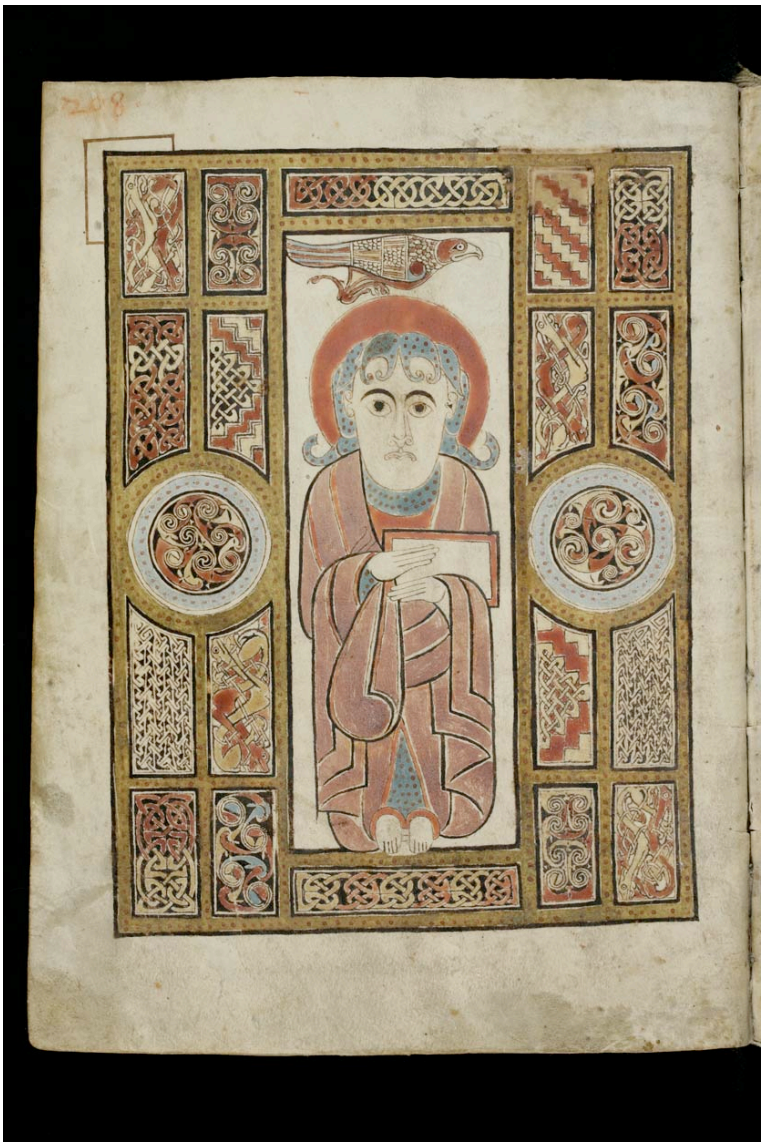

Fig. 18. St. John, St. Gall's Gospel
Cod. Sang. 51, p. xx, Abbey Library of St Gall. Codices Electronici Sangallenses
http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0051

and we are not to think in "flesh and blood" but in the spiritual meanings the poet is presenting. When we let go of the necessity of "understanding" how the poem could be "realistic," we open our critical senses to the beauty of the poem, which lies in its abstraction, "which is more significant," as Jackson Campbell says about the abstraction in the St. Gall gospel's St. John, "than physical reality. … [The] true beauty [of the

painting] lies in that transcendental realm beyond the reproduction of anything in the world of nature" (9).

So it is in *The Seafarer* as well. When we stop reaching for verisimilitude to the world of nature and accept the "abstract reality" of the poem instead, we begin to absorb its spiritual meaning. The Christian life is full of hardship, the poet tells us, but greater are the joys of a life given to the Lord than anything this earthly life has to offer. It is our modern impulse to make everything "realistic," by the standards of nature, that makes the poem difficult. To read *The Seafarer* as a piece of abstract art, as Schapiro and Campbell suggest we see Insular manuscript art, is to "allow [it] to invoke a genuinely spiritual response" (Campbell, Jackson 45). To suspend our belief in verisimilitude and accept the abstract nature of *The Seafarer* is to appreciate the beauty of the interlaced lines, the delightful surprises of the sudden shifts, the oxymorons of "this dead life" on earth and the "joys of the Lord," and the interlace of misery and joy, seafaring and hall life, dead life and joyous death. Campbell's comment about St. John of the St. Gall gospel, that "the abstraction overrules the literal almost completely" (45), is applicable not only to much of Insular art of the sixth through eighth centuries – the height of interlace art – but also to *The Seafarer* and other Old English poems that use interlace technique. Applying the insights from art to the poems, we see that, as Campbell says, "the deeper, intangible reality is beautiful in the extreme" (45).

To me, *The Seafarer* is beautiful in the extreme, not least because of the poet's masterful use of interlace. Below is a color-coded "map" of my translation of the poem to demonstrate this mastery. (A similar map of the poem in Old English is in Appendix B.)

This analysis of the interlace in the poem shows clearly the two parts of the poem with the sharp turn at lines 64b-65: *forþon me hatran sind / dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif* (Therefore hotter to me are the joys of the Lord than this dead life). Before those lines, the interlaced themes are hall life and life at sea, the joys of the one and the miseries of the other. Lines 64b-65 introduce an interlace of death and life motifs that continue to the end of the poem: life on earth is spurned as "dead," while life after death is joyous in the duguth of heaven. Like opposing borders of an illuminated manuscript, each of the two parts of the poem has its own interlace pattern.

Three things remain to be noted: (1) With skillful use of negative language the poet creates ever more complex interlace; (2) the lines in black on the color-coded map are not part of the interlace; and (3) the purple lines, both light and dark, suggest the blend of themes, i.e., what used to be misery (seafaring) is now joy (which was earlier the opposing theme to seafaring: hall life) and, after line 65, what used to be dead (life on earth) is now joyfully alive because the poet is following the Christian life. The interlaced themes of the poem weave around each other, then blend, like the zoomorphic forms of border art, each one biting the creature ahead of it until the last one bites itself.

The Seafarer, with color-coded interlace

First part (lines 1-64b)
- Red = miseries at sea (cold, hunger, exile)
- Blue = joys of hall life on land
- Green = Christian theme – joys of the Lord (after death)
- Purple = seafaring now a joy

Second part (lines 64b-125)
- Yellow – dead life
- Green – Joys of life after death (Christian theme)
- Dark purple – joys of life on earth for the Christian

I could tell a truth-song about myself,
tell about the journeys, how I in workdays
often endured hardship,
how I have abided bitter heart-soreness,
have known many rooms full of care in the ship,
much terrible tossing of waves, when
the restricted nightwatch often fell to me
in the bow of the ship
when it beats at the cliff. Tightened with cold
were my feet, bound with frost,
with cold fetters. Then cares sighed
hot around my heart. Hunger, inwardly, slit
the mind of this seaweary man. The man on earth to whom
it falls most fair does not know
how I, wretched, full of cares, endured the ice-cold sea
endured winter in the tracks of exile,
I, bereft of friend-kinsmen,
beset all around with frost-cicles. Hail flew in showers.
Then I heard nothing except the roaring of the sea,
the ice-cold wave. Sometimes for entertainment
I had the song of the swan; the cry of the gannet
and the sound of the curlew for the laugher of men;
the singing of the gull for mead-drink.
There the storms beat the stonecliff; there the terns call,
ice-feathered; full often the eagle yells,
wet-feathered. Not any of protecting-kinsmen
might comfort the destitute spirit.
Whereupon he little believes, he who possesses the joy of life,
who lives in the city with few hardships,
proud and wine-merry, how I, often weary,
must endure on the sea.
Night-shadow grows dark. It snowed from the north.
Frost bound the earth; hail fell on earth,
the coldest of grains.

Whereupon now the thoughts of the heart thrash
that I should know myself the deep currents,
the play of salt-waves.
The desire of the mind urges all the time,
to fare forth so that I should seek far hence
the yard of foreigners [or of the other world].
Whereupon there is not a man over earth proudminded to this extent
nor generous of his givings to this extent nor keen in his youth to this extent
nor brave in his deeds to this extent, nor a lord loyal to him to this extent:
that he does not always have sorrow in his seafaring
as to what the Lord will do for him.
Nor is there for him a mind for the harp nor for ring-receiving

nor joy from a woman nor hope from the world
nor anything else around except around the tossing of waves.
But he who hastens on the water always has a longing.
The groves take with blossoms, the city grows fair,
the plains grow beautiful, the world hastens on.
All then urges the eagerness of the mind,
the heart, to a journey. For the one who thinks thus,
he departs far on the flood-waves.
Likewise the cuckoo urges with a mournful word,
the ward of summer sings, bodes sorrow,
bitter in the breasthoard. This the man does not know, he who is
a blessed-happy man: what a certain one endures
who sets the widest exile-track.
Whereupon now my mind turns over my heart-place;
my heart-mind turns widely with the sea-flood
over the homeland of the whale
(over) the face of the earth. Afterwards the lone-flyer comes to me,
eager and greedy, yells,
urges my heart irresistibly on the whale-way,
over the waves of the sea. Therefore are hotter to me
the joys of the lord than this dead life,
fleeting on land. I do not believe
that earth-wealth stays for a man forever;
always a certain one of each of three things
becomes as a doubt before his final-time:
sickness or old age or edge-hate
tears away the spirit of the doomed-to-die departing one.
Therefore for each of earls this is best: the praise of afterspeakers,
the praise of a reputation among the living,
so that he might achieve, with good deeds on earth,
harm against enemies, before he must go away,
doing harm against the devil with brave deeds
so that children of men should praise him after
and [so that] his praise should live afterwards among the angels
and he have always, forever, the riches of eternal life,
joy among the duguth. The days are departed
of all the pomp of the kingdom of earth,
There are now no kings nor emperors
nor gold-givers such as there once were
when they performed the most glorious deeds among them
and lived in renown among the most noble.
Fallen is all the duguth; the joys are past.
They who were weaker endure and hold the world;
they enjoy through toil. Prosperity is brought low;
the nobility of earth grows old and withers.

Thus, now, each of men around the middle-earth:
age fares on him, his face grows pale,
he laments his gray hair; he knows his friends of old,
the children of princes, given over to the earth.
Nor might there be for him then a body when he loses that life from him,
nor to swallow [something] sweet, nor to feel sorrow,
nor to stir with his hand, nor to think with his mind.
Though his brother will strew his grave with gold,
one brother for his fellow-born [brother] – bury him beside the dead
so that there will be with him various treasures,
gold might not, for the soul that is full of sin,
be as a help for the fear of God
when he hides the gold earlier, while he lives here.
Great is the fear for the maker because He turns the world
and has strongly established the ground,
the face of the earth and the sky above.
Foolish is he who does not fear for him his lord; an unprepared-for death comes to him.
Blessed is he who lives humble; the grace of heaven comes to him.
The maker establishes for him that spirit because he has lived in His power.
A man must steer with a strong mind and hold in a fixed place
and be certain in pledges and clean in manners.
Each of men must hold with moderation
toward the loved and toward the hated **** harm
though that he would **** him full of fire
or burned up on the pyre,
the friend he has made. Fate is stronger,
the maker mightier, than the thought of any man.
Let us think where we have a home
and then think how we came thither,
and then we also strive for what we are permitted towards,
in that eternal blessedness
where life is long in the love of the Lord,
our hope in heaven. May this be thanks for the holy one,
that he has honored us, the prince of glory,
everlasting lord, in all time.
Amen.

Meditation 10: "Here's to You, My Lord!"

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, language, according to Professor Martha Bayless, abhors a synonym. Natures fills a vacuum, but language drives a wedge between

synonyms until they become two words with distinct differences. If "stone" and "rock" are used in identical situations now, it won't be long before one of them, probably “stone,” will fall into disuse.

The wedge Modern English uses between synonyms for objects is their appearance. When we say "hairbrush" we see a different object from the one we envision with the word "scrub brush." A dress that is an evening gown is a different object from the everyday dress, which is different from a Sunday-go-to-meeting dress. We do not call an everyday dress an evening gown if it is worn to a ball. By the same token, a bicycle tire used in a sculpture is still a bicycle tire, and if we take one bowl and use it for mixing cookie dough one minute, for the dog's water the next minute, and for a makeshift baptismal font later, we would still call it a bowl. Though we have many different words for a cup – mug, tankard, teacup, demitasse, chalice – each names an object distinct from the others by its appearance.

But the wedge Old English uses between synonyms for objects is the use of the object. When the *Beowulf* poet mentions a cup, he might call it a *wæge* or one of its compounds *ealowæge* and *liðwæge*; a *ful* or one of its compounds, *seleful* or *medoful* (or the special case of *liðful*); the funny *hapax legomenon*, *meodoscenc*; one of the “vessel” words, *sincfæt*, *drinkfæt*, or *maðþumfæt*; or, finally, *orc* or *bune*. All of these cups look similar, as an Anglo-Saxon cup is always some variation on the same chalice-like object seen in Fig. 19. The different words for a cup in *Beowulf* convey not a visual difference but a difference in use, and just as we would not call a teacup a mug, the *Beowulf* poet would not use *ful* in a situation that called for *orc*. Each word for “cup” is used in a

specific kind of *mise-en-scene* in which another word for "cup" would be inappropriate – or, at least, less actively participant in the revelation of theme. By examining the varying uses of these words throughout *Beowulf*, we can follow the poet's theme of a noble society that once was and is no more.

Fig. 19. Goblet found in Cornwall
http://www.abdn.ac.uk/english/beowulf/feast.htm

As ceremonial objects, cups hold in their rounded forms the full meaning of that noble society. They are central to the feast, that "great symbol of the good life lived among men," as Hugh Magennis calls it ("*Beowulf*" 161). *Beowulf* contains three extensive scenes of feasting. In lines 491-661 the poet describes the welcoming feast for Beowulf and his men when they arrive at Heorot, in lines 1008b-1068a and 1161b-1233a the victory feast after Beowulf vanquishes Grendel, and in lines 1975-2023 the feast in Hygelac's hall when Beowulf and his men return from Denmark. (The victory feast after Beowulf kills Grendel's mother is only mentioned in passing, in lines 1787-1789a).

In all these feasts what is eaten is not mentioned, as the word for "feast," *symbel*, refers not to food but to celebration. What is imbibed, on the other hand, is given elaborate ritual, centered around the cup. Passed from man to man by the highest lady of the land, the cup holds in its bejeweled depths everything the hall embodies: the joy of the harp and the lay of the scop, the camaraderie of warriors and their loyalty to their lord, the lord's reciprocal generosity to them, celebration, wealth, and a stable society. "Cup," "the ritual item for swearing oaths of allegiance to a lord" (Taylor 231), is mentioned fourteen times in these descriptions. In nine of these fourteen occurrences the poet uses *ful* or one of its compounds. Twice he uses *ealowæge*, and, once, he uses *sincfæt*. At the last feast the cup is called, uniquely and somewhat whimsically, a *meodoscenc*, a mead-pourer. Although cups are still and indeed increasingly important in the poem, outside these feast contexts no cup is again called a *ful*. Thus there must be a particular connotation to *ful* that the poet's contemporary audience would have immediately noted – all the implications of the word that make it appropriate in the first part of the poem and conspicuously absent in the second part. These connotations can be condensed into the phrase "hall values," which include hierarchical relationships, camaraderie, music and story, boasting, and vow-making.

The Anglo-Saxon world is a hierarchical one, and the cup is the preeminent symbol of its hierarchical structure. The identical descriptions of Wealtheow's participation in the first and second feasts indicate both how ritualized the cup-passing process is and that its purpose is primarily to "establish the lordship of the individual first served and named and the subordinate status of those served afterwards" (Enright 179).

By accepting the cup, each in his turn, the retainers acknowledge the ruler's precedence and their own position in relation to him. The ritualized order in which Wealtheow passes the cup reflects the ritualized and symbolic seating order: always the king first, then the more renowned warriors of the duguth, then the young warriors, finally the guests, beginning with the most prominent.

In both scenes the queen makes a noteworthy entrance after the festivities have begun. At the first banquet, the Geat warriors are first served by a thane who passes an *ealowæge*. After a song by a scop and some general *hæleða dream* (joy of warriors), Unferth and Beowulf have their flyting (their verbal duel), and then Wealtheow enters and performs the cup-passing ritual. At this point the cup is called a *ful*, bearing as it does, now, the full weight of hall values. In this thirteen-line passage, "cup" is mentioned five times. Four of those occasions use the term *ful*, including two compounds, *seleful* (hall-cup), in alliterative combination with *symbel*, and *medoful* (mead-cup).

The second occasion in which cups play a part is the victory feast after Beowulf has fulfilled his vow to kill Grendel (1008b-1068a, 1161b-1233a). The lord and his warriors and guests sit on the glory-benches to drink and eat. Hrothgar gives Beowulf horses and treasure and to each of his men a treasure, too. The harp is plucked, songs are sung, the scop tells the lay of Finn and his sons, and then Wealtheow comes forward with the cup. Again it is a *ful* that she offers, again first to Hrothgar, and again when the cup is passed to Beowulf (1192), it is a *ful*, presented along with friendly words and twisted gold. The only exceptions to *ful* as the preferred term for "cup" when "cup" is used in the ritual of hall celebrations are *ealowæge* ("ale-cup"), in lines 481 and 495, and *sincfæt*

(treasure-cup), in line 621. However, there *sincfæt* is surrounded on all sides by *ful*, two before and two after. Thus it serves as an appositive to the "cup of drink" in the hall, giving the *ful* added power and value as a treasure vessel – not only its adornments and gleaming beauty but its treasured contents as well, both as drink and as metaphor. All uses of the word *ful* reflect the values of the hall that are so cherished in the noble high world of Anglo-Saxon warriors and lords, the world that is soon to crumple into dust or disappear in smoke, the world of the mystical past that eighth, ninth, or tenth century Anglo-Saxons look back towards with nostalgic yearning.

A particularly poignant use of *ful* occurs sixteen lines after Beowulf accepts the cup from Wealtheow in the first banquet scene. Here, in lines 1207b-1208a, *ful* stars in the poem's sole cup metaphor. In a digression about Hygelac, who died fighting the Frisians and wearing the gold necklace that Wealtheow gave Beowulf, who subsequently gave it to Hygelac, the poet tells us that to fight the Frisians Hygelac crossed the sea, which the poet calls by a lovely kenning, *yþa ful*, the cup of waves (1207a-1208). The use of *ful*, with its connotations of the hall atmosphere the king has left behind and its emphasis on his superior position in society, adds poignancy to his journey, from which he will not return. *Ealowæge* would have been inappropriate, as the waves were not bearing ale, and simply *wæge*, as we shall see shortly, would not have echoed the hall values. Only *ful* carries the full impact of this noble warrior's death.

Ful has a second important connotation, linked inextricably to the first: it implies the oath the retainer makes to fight for his lord, never to let him down. This oath is always made in the hall and is always accompanied by drinking, so much so that the cup,

ful or *ealowæge*, becomes the symbol of the vow. The cup is "the ritual item for swearing oaths of allegiance to a lord" (Taylor 231). The first mention of a cup in the poem is in this context, in Hrothgar's speech to Beowulf when the two noble warriors first meet. In telling Beowulf about the havoc Grendel has wrought, Hrothgar says,

> Ful oft gebotedon beore druncne
> ofer ealowæge oretmecgas
> þæt hie in beorsele bidan woldon
> Grendles guþe mid gryrum ecga. (480-483)
>
> Full often they vowed – those warriors
> who had drunk beer over the alecup –
> that they would wait with their sharpened swords
> in the beer-hall for Grendel's battle.

Magennis calls this speech "an illustration of the good connotations of drinking imagery – the good life cruelly destroyed by the horror of Grendel's coming" ("*Beowulf*" 161), but even more than that it symbolizes the vow the thane makes to his lord. It is significant that the poet chooses *ealowæge* for Hrothgar's speech and for the occasion when, fourteen lines later, the beerhall is made ready for the Geats, who are served ale by a thane (495-496a). The poet has not yet introduced the *ful*, with its connotations of joy and feasting – and Wealtheow has not yet entered to conduct the elaborate drinking ceremony – so *ealowæge* carries less weight than the subsequent *ful*.

Furthermore, although thanes make vows over *ealowæge* as well as over *ful*, the poet might be suggesting a subtle difference. After Hrothgar's speech the words for "cup" are predominantly *ful* and its compounds – until the poet introduces the thief. The cup the thief takes is a *wæge*, a word that, as I will show later, does not resound with vibrant connotations of hall values and loyalty to the lord. Therefore, it is fitting that the first

time the poet introduces the concept of "cup" as symbol and as bearer of theme (481, 495), he uses *ealowæge*, subtly introducing as well the downfall of the civilization which is still so far distant. Hrothgar's warriors are not able to keep their vow to defend Heorot and Hrothgar from Grendel. Beowulf's warriors, many years later, are not able to keep the vow they made over their ale to come to their lord in time of need, as Wiglaf reminds them. That time of need came about because of a *wæge*, the word for the cup the thief stole – not *ful*. Thus we find the poet's tight control of vocabulary lending thematic weight to his image of the cup as symbol of the vow of loyalty.

Such an oath, made over the *bragarfull* – the cup, or toast, of the king, as it is called in Old Norse heroic lays and sagas – is "too sacred to be broken under any circumstances," Helen Damico tells us (*Beowulf's* 167). Thus when Hrothgar tells Beowulf that his thanes had promised they would fight Grendel, he emphasizes with the use of an appositive that theirs was an oath made over the king's cup – *beore druncne*: drinking beer, he says, they made this oath. Then he adds, so emphatically as to mean "raising the very alecup itself," *ofer ealowæge*. (That there is an inconsistency in the drink that was in the cup – ale or beer – should not disturb us. After all, it is as Clyde Pharr says in a footnote to line 128, Book II of *The Aeneid*: "Great poets such as Vergil [and the Beowulf poet] and big liars such as Sinon rarely worry over logical consistency" [92]).

If we jump now to the end of the scene that Hrothgar's speech introduces (the welcoming banquet), we see another speech and another vow to confront Grendel, made over a *bragarfull*. Now it is Beowulf making the same oath as Hrothgar's thanes had

made but with an added one-upmanship: he will use no weapons. And, of course, he, in contrast to the thanes, succeeds. Significantly, the poet has chosen to call the cup over which Beowulf makes this vow a *ful*, a word brimful of retainer loyalty and all hall values. In Beowulf's vow to kill Grendel *oþðe on wæl crunge* (637b) (or else I should fall in the slaughter), there is no whisper in the cup vocabulary of failure, of lack of heroism, on the part of Beowulf. There is only loyalty, honesty, a boast to be fulfilled, a vow, made over the *ful* he takes from Wealtheow, that will be kept.

Understanding the impact of a vow made over the king's cup helps us avoid being led astray by modern meanings when we meet the word *druncne* – not "drunk" or "intoxicated" but a simple past participle, "having drunk." Fred Robinson points out that in both *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, a warrior made his vow to serve his leader when he drank the mead, "as if accepting the drink confirmed the binding force of the oath" (*Beowulf* 77). Thus, Hrothgar's *beore druncne* (480) means not that the men were so drunk with beer that they did not know what they were saying, but that, having drunk beer, "the vow swearers (*oretmecgas*) uttered their vow that they would face Grendel" (Robinson "*Beowulf*" 77). Likewise, Wealtheow's *druncne dryhtguman* (1231) are not drunk warriors but thanes who, just as they are *getrywe* (true), *hold* (loyal), and *ealgearo* (always ready), are also men who, "having engaged in the drinking which symbolizes their loyalty, are ready to act out this loyalty in deeds" (Magennis "*Beowulf*" 161).

At the feast Hygelac throws for Beowulf and his men upon their return from Denmark, the cup again, of course, is passed, this time by Hygd, Hygelac's queen, who moves among the men not with a *ful* but with a *meoduscenc* (from *medo*, mead, and

scencan, to pour), a mead-pourer, or a cup that pours out mead. Perhaps by not using *ful* the poet is making a subtle suggestion that Hygd is not of the same quality as Wealtheow or that this feast doesn't match the importance of the two at Hrothgar's hall – or maybe he was simply playing with words, coining a unique compound. This explanation is not unlikely, given the poet's creative flexibility with language and given that the cup Hygd carries contains what the poet calls *liðwæge*, translated as "strong drink." This word, too, is a *hapax legomenon*, the etymology of which is *wæge*, "cup," and *liðan*, to travel by water. Perhaps there is an echo of the metaphor of the cup of waves, implying that one who drinks from this cup of strong drink might experience a tipsy journey. The occasion is the joyous return of Beowulf, Hygelac's retainer and nephew, a celebration of his successful and heroic adventures. There is no etymological hint of doom or failure in the words for cup, though in light of what follows, perhaps the lack of *ful* is not accidental.

Because at this point *ful* has disappeared from the poem. The next time we see a cup, it is in the hands of a thief and is called *sincfæt*, a treasure-vessel (2231). Stripped of its usefulness as a bearer of drink, no longer passed from thane to thane in the hall, no longer borne by a beautiful, noble, gold-adorned queen, the *ful* has become simply treasure, like any of the other items of *sinc* (treasure) in the dragon's hoard, any of the swords, gold-plated cups, helmets, mailcoats, harps, and other musical instruments the Last Survivor buried, any of the generalized treasure of ornate objects, gold or twisted gold, gold wire, battle gems, and precious jewels, any of the specified items – swords, mailcoats, battle shirts, cups, helmets, armrings, gleaming gold banner, drinking vessels,

and dishes – of the dragon's hoard. The vitality of the *ful* is gone; what is left is an inanimate object, a *sincfæt*.

In his typical spiral style, the poet returns later to this object to tell us of its earlier history. In the lament of the Last Survivor, as the speaker contemplates what is left of his world – the once brilliant and useful objects that have no humans now to keep them useful, the musical instruments that carry no more joy in the hall, the courtyards empty of horses, the hall empty of hawks, and all the world empty of human companions – he mentions cups in particular:

> Nah hwa sweord wege
> oððe f[orð bere] fæted wæge
> dryncfæt deore. (2252-2254a)
>
> I do not have anyone who
> carries the sword or bears forth the plated cup,
> the precious drinking vessel.

Here the cup is a *wæge*, an object halfway between the vitality of the *ful* and the lifelessness of *sincfæt*. It is given the context of a *ful* – someone bearing forth the cup, the beautiful plated cup – but the context is dead, a memory. Feasts and drinking, vows and the joys of the hall are a thing of the past. Calling it *fæted* (gold-plated) intensifies this impression, as *fæted* is a poetic word, which, like *wæge*, is, in the poetic prose of Roberta Frank, "a word burnished by time … [so that] the *fæted wæge* of Beowulf, disinterred from a stone barrow in Geatland, is doubly backward-looking, evoking bedrock beginnings in a windswept northern landscape" ("Three" 413).

The appositive immediately following *fæted wæge – dryncfæt deore* – emphasizes this emptiness. The *fæted wæge* is no longer an *ealowæge*, a cup that holds ale; it has

become a *dryncfæt deore*, a precious drinking vessel. In this case the cup is surely more "dear" to the speaker for its symbology than for its gold and ornamentation. Surely he is not thinking about the "monetary" value of treasure but about the joys of the hall and the oaths sworn over the cup, all that which is now past. The items that he mentions – swords, gold-plated cups, helmets, mailcoats, harps, and other musical instruments – have lost their usefulness. Nothing is left for the last survivor, this Anglo-Saxon Ishi, to do now but to bury the beautiful but useless items, turn them into buried treasure, and follow the other warriors, in his turn, to death.

And so the *dryncfæt* becomes the *sincfæt* of line 2231, a transition word between the theft from the dragon's hoard and the story of the treasure's burial by the Last Survivor. Because the manuscript is corrupt in this and the immediately preceding lines, we cannot be sure, but it seems reasonable that sincfæt refers to the cup the thief takes, though we do not discover till line 2282 that what he took was a cup. Now the poet uses the word *wæge*, echoic of the Last Survivor:

> …mandryhtne bær
> fæted wæge, frioðowære bæd
> hlaford sinne. (2281b-2283a)
>
> He bore to his lord
> a plated cup; he begged his lord
> to take it as a peace-offering.

In line 2223 the poet means to identify the thief for us, but due to defects in the manuscript, we will never know whether the thief was a servant or a thane, as all we have for clue is a thorn – the old English *þ* – followed by space enough for three letters. *Þeow* (servant)? Or *þegn* (thane)? (Or *þeof* [thief], if you think the space might have held only

two letters.) Even Kevin S. Kiernan's careful scrutiny of the manuscript has not revealed the answer. Although the usual translation and vocabulary gloss today is *þeow*, there is evidence to support either choice. Considerations of the words for "cup," in combination with the reasons the thief stole the cup in the first place, lend weight to the choice of "thane" (a choice that Harvey De Roo meticulously justifies solely on lexical grounds, anyway).

We know little about the thief, but the story can be pieced together from the evidence in the poem: Once there was a man (thane or servant?) guilty of some altercation with his lord, for which he was either beaten or threatened with beatings. Understandably he fled. Wandering on a headland, on open ground near the water-waves, in need of shelter, he stumbled upon a barrow. Inside this earthcave was a sleeping dragon. All around the dragon – on the walls of the barrow, near the dragon's head, heaped on the ground, everywhere – was a vast treasure. The man may have hesitated, squatting on his haunches, eyeing the sleeping dragon, tempted to steal, or he may have impulsively reached to snatch the nearest treasure and fled immediately. The manuscript is badly damaged here, providing only a few tantalizing details – "close to the heathen hoard"… "hand" … "radiant in treasure." But we know that the man took something because he is called a thief (*þeof*), a guilty man (*secg synbisig*), and an intruder (*gyst*). We learn later that what he took was a gold-plated cup to give to his lord as a peace-token. The ruse works; the lord, enthralled by the artistry of this ancient treasure, forgives him.

However, in the meantime, the dragon has awakened and is enraged by the theft. That night he takes revenge, burning the entire countryside, leaving nothing alive in his

fiery path. The cup makes its way to Beowulf, presumably as evidence of cause of this sudden destruction. Beowulf commandeers the unfortunate thief to lead him and eleven other warriors to the lair of the dragon, where he intends to fight the dragon to the death. The thief is terrified to return to the scene of the crime (think how the dragon has shown its power in the meantime!), but, captive by command of the king (if you think *þ___* is *þegn*, or captive because a servant, if you think *þ___* is *þeow*), he takes the men to the earthhall near the surging sea where the dragon lives with his treasure.

From there the story belongs to Beowulf, his thanes, and Wiglaf. We hear no more about the thief as the tale moves to its desolate end: the death of Beowulf and the prophesied devastation of the Geats.

The end of it all began, then, with a cup. But why a cup? Of all the treasure in the hoard, wouldn't it have been symbolically more suitable for the thief to take an emblem of war – a sword or mailcoat – if the robbery was going to start a feud, a *fæhð*, and lead to the destruction of the world as it was? Or if the thief wanted a gift, why didn't he take armrings of gold or the beautiful banner or other treasure perhaps worth more than a mere cup? Considering the reasons the poet inserted a cup rather than a sword or precious jewels into the hands of the thief and considering the meaningfulness of cups, we are justified in leaning towards "thane" rather than "servant."

We have seen already, in an examination of the connotations of various words for "cup," the symbolic meaning of the item the thief took – hall values and thane loyalty. If the thief were a thane out of favor with his lord, he would be making a powerful statement to give his lord this fine, ornamented, gold-plated cup, this *sincfæt*, this

maðþumfæt, which, when held to the light or cupped in the hands – like holding a conch to the ear to hear the sea – rings and gleams with all the joys of that world of heroes now so greatly diminished. If he is a servant, the symbology would be nullified or at least muted, like a cracked conch that cannot sing the surf; the cup is merely a nice gift, reminiscent of fine things for the lord but devoid of personal connotations that would turn it into an impossible-to-deny request for reconciliation.

Whether servant or thane, the thief did intend the cup as a gift to his lord, reflecting yet another thematic weight filling the cup. The society of the poem, as like or unlike as it may have been to the Anglo-Saxon society of the era it was depicting, rests in large part on the relationship between the retainers and lord. As a frontier society, an era of settlement, Anglo-Saxon society was both male-dominant (Earl *Thinking* 37-38) and based on gift exchange. The giving of gifts, as we have seen, was an important part of the frequent banquets. Lords are called ring-givers and treasure-givers. Hrothgar burdens Beowulf with gifts as he leaves Denmark, and Beowulf courteously gives those gifts, in turn, to Hygelac and Hygd. The thief does not steal from the hoard for personal wealth. He wants a gift for his lord, with whom he has had a quarrel. “Gifts always carry something of the giver’s wishes," John Hill says, "[and] gift exchange always involves temporary inequalities within relationships of support and dependency” (265). In giving his lord a gift, the thief would be hoping to destabilize the present relationship, which had resulted in his flight from punishment.

Because personal wealth represents an individual warrior’s honor and merit (Cherniss 477), the thief also hopes to honor his lord by increasing the lord’s treasure (the

indication of his merit) by the traditional method of gift-giving. The treasure could hardly serve to increase the thief's personal wealth because if the thief is a slave, he would not have had any wealth, and if he is a thane, the value of the wealth would only be as a gift for his superior. True to the exchange tradition of the society, he chooses to take wealth only in order to give it away.

His flaw is to conceal the origin of the wealth, the theft itself. Theodore Andersson argues that this concealment is a good indication that the thief is a slave or servant, for, arguing by analogy with stories of theft in Icelandic sagas, he says,

> We may judge it unlikely that the manuscript 'th…' should be filled in to read 'thegn,' which would lend the thief status in the freeborn and even noble warrior class. If the reading 'th[eof] ('thief') is rejected, the best remaining alternative is 'theow' ('slave'), which assigns the thief to the same class as Hallgerthr's ne'er-do-well thrall Melkofr" (506).

However, thieves from the noble class are neither unknown (Andersson himself gives examples) nor unimaginable, and because the exchange of gifts among the nobility is a strong foundation of the society, it might be more imaginable that the thief is a thane than that he is a slave, who might be reluctant to give his lord such an extraordinary gift as an ancient cup. After all, where would he have gotten it, except by theft?

The choice of a cup as gift further encourages this interpretation of the missing letters. As Roberta Frank points out, precious and adorned cups were not infrequently given as gifts:

> King Æthelberht, desiring a pair of falcons, sent Boniface 'a silver drinking-cup lined with gold and weighing three and a half pounds.' Alcuin recalled the 'precious vessels' given by Oswald to York in the previous century. King Ælthelstan presented Chester-le-Street with lidded silver

> drinking cups, along with three horns 'fashioned in gold and silver.' Two secular women, Æthelgyth and Alfwaru, endowed Ramsey with silver cups and bowls, joining a pride of tenth-century Anglo-Saxon aristocrats who laid up their treasure in heaven by giving it to monasteries. ("Three" 407)

Frank lists many examples of cups as legacies. "These vessels, bullion reshaped as art, are 'positional goods' representing status and power," she points out. "They are out in the world doing political, social, and testamentary work – not lying, silent, like golden moss under a sleeping dragon" ("Three" 408). The thief's lord would have understood the value of a precious drinking vessel as a gift. Although a servant might want to bring these connotations to mind by giving his lord a cup, a thane, closer to the heart of the hall life than a servant, would know more explicitly, more intimately, the values of hall life that he would be conveying to the lord by giving him a cup. The thief's choice was meant to please.

But the thief wanted more than a gift; he wanted a peace offering. He wanted his lord to forgive him his transgression and welcome him home. And, indeed, that's exactly what happened.

> Ða wæs hord rasod
> onboren beaga hord, bene getiðad
> feasceaftum men; frea sceawode
> fira fyrngeweorc forman siðe. (2283b-2286)

> When the hoard was razed,
> when the hoard was bereft of rings,
> the lord granted the request to the miserable man
> [and] looked on the ancient work of men for the first time

Though we do not see cups serving directly as peace offerings elsewhere, the concept is not far from the item, since those who weave peace in the society of the poem

are also those who shuttle the meadcup among the warriors. We see this most clearly at Hygelac's banquet for Beowulf. In telling Hygelac about the feast with which Hrothgar welcomed him to Heorot, Beowulf calls Wealtheow *friðusibb folca* (peacefriend of the people):

> Hwilum mære cwen
> friðusibb folca, flet eall geondhwearf,
> bædde byre geonge. (2016b-2018a)
>
> At times the renowned queen,
> peaceweaver of the people, moved all around
> the hall, encouraging the young men.

There in one three-line image is the double function of a noble woman: one who conducts the ritual of passing the cup in the hall and one who "weaves peace" among nations, most notably by her marriage. Three lines later Beowulf doubles the double image (an example of the appositive style so well explored by Fred Robinson) in telling the story of Freawaru:

> Hwilum for [d]uguðe dohtor Hroðgares
> eorlum on ende ealuwæge bære
> þa ic Freaware fletsittende
> nemnan hyrde, þær hio [næ]gled sinc
> hæleðum sealde. (2020-2024a)
>
> At times the daughter of Hrothgar bore the alecup
> for the duguth, for the earls, each in turn.
> Then I heard the hallsitters
> name her Freawaru, when she gave
> that studded treasure to the warriors.

Freawaru, whose name reflects "lord-treaty," has been engaged in marriage to Ingeld so that she might *wælfæhða dæl / sæcca gesette* (2028b-2029a) (settle a great number of deadly feuds, of conflicts). Here again the cup-bearing queen is equated with the maker

of peace. The word for "cup" here is *ealuwæge*, as it was in Hrothgar's speech explaining the situation at Heorot to Beowulf, and here, as there, the poet drops a hint of coming disaster, as Freawaru's peacekeeping marriage only ends in more feuding, more deaths. But at this point in the poem Freawaru is still a potential peacemaker, a gift to Heathobards. Women are frequently sent into marriages as peacemakers between tribes. Women pass the meadcup to the men in the hall. The connection between "cup" and "peace" is not hard to see. In the same way that a woman functions in society as both cupbearer and peaceweaver, the thief wants the cup to be a peace-token for his lord.

After narrating the theft of the cup and then backtracking to explain how the dragon came to have a hoard, the poet picks up the story line again, returning to the dragon, who has awakened to find footprints where the cup had been. This cup, once a *ful* and an *ealowæge* and to the thief a *wæge*, is to the dragon a *sincfæt*, a treasure-vessel. When the enraged dragon spends a day looking for the thief and the missing item, what he is looking for is a *sincfæt* (2300). Six lines later, close enough that the rhyme reinforces the use of both words, especially considering that they are positionally parallel, the dragon plots to repay with fire the stolen *drincfæt*. To the dragon, the cup is neither *ful* nor *wæge* but simply a vessel – that drinking cup, that treasure vessel. The consistent change of vocabulary for "cup" in Beowulf implies a change of value so that the world of humanity is no longer redolent in the cup. Nonetheless, the theft of this cup, even bereft as the object is of hall values, is motive enough for the dragon's violent reaction. Michael Cherniss argues that the dragon's reaction is justified because the treasure represents the dragon's honor (481). However, even beyond the cup's inherent value, symbolic or as gift

exchange, the dragon feels the assault of his space having been violated by an intruder and his honor by a trickster while he slept. Or, maybe, for the dragon as for all misers of storyland, any diminution of the hoard was grounds enough for rage and disproportionate retribution.

After the thief's lord receives the cup and forgives his thane-or-servant and after the dragon rampages because of the lost cup, we lose track of the precious item until, by means of some unidentified informer, the *maðþum mære* (renowned treasure, as it is now called) comes into Beowulf's possession. (Nicely, it comes to his *bearm*, his bosom, the same place where Scyld Scefing's treasure [also *maðþum*] lies at his burial in the opening lines of the poem.) It is immaterial, now, what particular form that renowned treasure is. It could be a dish or sword or battle jewels. Indeed, perhaps it is significantly now not a cup, not a *ful* or an *ealowæge*, not a peace offering, a symbol of hall joy and vows of the thane to his lord, but now only some stolen treasure, instigator of battle and signifier of death.

There remain two last passages in which cups play a part: when Wiglaf looks on and plunders the hoard and when the people gawk at the piled treasure next to the dragon before shoving the carcass over the cliff and burying the goods. Once again the poet shifts vocabularies. When Wiglaf, in the dragon's den at last, looks on the vast treasure, he sees gold glittering on the ground. He sees wonders on the wall and, among helmets and mailcoats and a gilded banner, cups, now named with yet a different word:

> ond þæs wyrmes denn,
> ealdes uhtflogan, orcas stondan,
> fyrnmanna fatu, eormendlease,
> hyrstum behrorene. (2759b-2762a)

And in the den of the dragon,
of the old dawn-flier, stood cups,
vessels of ancient men, without burnishers,
deprived of adornments.

These cups, now called *orcas* and given the appositive "cups of ancient men," reflect the Last Survivor's world, rich in things and bereft of people to use those items or keep the metal polished to a proud sheen. At that time the items were still vibrant, but the Last Survivor knew that they would lose their shine, since the burnishers were now all dead. A cup then was a *wæge*. Now, when Wiglaf looks on the treasure, cups are *orcas*. Fifteen lines later, when Wiglaf carries, close to his bosom (perhaps that is where treasure belongs), many items from the barrow to place before Beowulf, cups are called *bucan* and are coupled with *discas* (dishes), a phrase also used later to identify the drinking vessels and cups next to the dragon's corpse.

In "Three 'Cups' and a Funeral in *Beowulf*," Roberta Frank points out the archaic nature of the words *orc* and *bune*. For *bune*: "In three Anglo-Saxon alphabetical glossaries, Old English *bune* conveys the antique, exotic, and darkly sacral overtones of Greek/Latin carchesium; for the audience of *Beowulf*, it similarly aged and made strange the metallic cups of the dragon's hoard" (411). For *orc*: By the time *Beowulf* was copied into Cotton Vitellius A. xv, "this three-letter word had acquired an antique patina and a pagan mythological charge" (411). *Orcas ond bunan* "register a discontinuity, a rupture, a yawning gap between worlds long past" (Frank "Three" 411). The centuries redound in the poet's vocabulary, new choices of words for the cups of the hoard, those ancient works of men.

Cups, then, encapsulate theme in Beowulf. From *ealowæge* immediately to *ful* (the word for cup which dominates the youthful-Beowulf part of the poem), from *ful* to the *wæge* the thief takes (with its lack of usefulness and vitality), and finally, from *wæge* to the echo of centuries in *orc* and *bune*, we can follow the fate of Beowulf's world: from the glorious days of a society at its height of vitality – the grand banquets in the hall and the strength of a warrior's vow – to the flight of Beowulf's thanes in his time of need, the curse of a dragon's hoard, and the prophesied doom of the Geats at Beowulf's funeral. Such control over and deliberate use of vocabulary underscores the artistry of this first of great English poets. The best we can do for him today is to raise our cup of wine in tribute: "Here's to you, my lord."

Meditation 11: Without Beowulf, No-one

Beowulf is an elegy for a fallen society. From its opening lines about the greatness of the Spear-Danes, underscored by the treasure-laden funeral ship of Scyld Shefing floating away to God knows where, the poet is moving us in the direction of the poem's closing scene: Beowulf's dragon-damaged body burning hot on the funeral pyre as the people mourn their lord and lament a future of invading armies, slaughter, slavery, rape, and ruin. Beowulf, the great man, Grendel-killer, dragon-slayer, no longer lives. His like will not be seen again.

Many passages and scenes in the poem indicate this, its largest theme, but none, perhaps, is more pertinent, penetrating, or poignant than lines 2591b-2602a, in which

Beowulf's thanes, witnessing his fight with the dragon, run terrified to the woods. It is a pivotal symbolic moment.

> Næs ða long to ðon
> þæt ða aglæcean hy eft gemetton.
> Hyrte hyne hordweard – hreðer æðme weoll
> niwan stefne; nearo ðrowode,
> fyre befongen, se ðe ær folce weold
> Nealles him on heape hand-gesteallan,
> æðelinga bearn ymbe gestodon
> hildecystum, ac hy on holt bugon,
> ealdre burgan. Hiora in anum weoll
> sefa wið sorgum; sybb' æfre ne mæg
> wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.
>
> It wasn't long before
> the fierce enemies met again.
> The hoardguard took heart; his chest swelled with air;
> he renewed his strength. In the narrowly confined space,
> engulfed by fire, he who earlier ruled the people suffered.
> Not at all among the troops did those hand-picked men,
> sons of princes, stand behind him
> with soldierly valor, but they hurried to the woods
> to save their lives. The heart of one of them welled
> with sorrow. A man would never
> turn away from his kin if he thinks rightly.

In the popular Seamus Heaney translation, as in others, the editors begin this passage with a new paragraph, indicating a change of direction from what went before, but to the Anglo-Saxon listener/reader the only clue to that shift would have been the word *næs* (not at all), with which it begins. Beowulf has already taken up arms against the dragon, who, in revenge for the theft of a cup from his hoard, has been destroying homes, halls, and harvests. In the passage preceding lines 2591b-2602a, Beowulf has just dealt the dragon a terrific blow with his sword, a renowned sword that has never failed him in battle before. But now it does. (*Guð-bill geswac, / nacod æt niðe* – The naked

sword failed in battle.) The poet has already told us four times that Beowulf, though he kills the dragon, will die in the fight (lines 2311, 2342-2344, 2419b-424, 2510-2511a). Now, for the next five lines (2587-2591a) the poet compares Beowulf's forced retreat to his eventual death in battle – the "journey" from the battlefield (i.e., death), his "dwelling in another place," his giving up the days that had been loaned to him (*læn-dagas*) – "as we all must do," the poet adds: *swa sceal æghwylc mon* (so shall each man).

After these comments about retreat and death, the poet tells us that

næs ða long to ðon
þæt ða aglæcean hy eft gemetton (2591-2592)

It wasn't long before
the two fierce enemies met again.

These lines bring us back to the present moment, a moment of intense danger. During the interval between the failure of the sword and the recommencement of the battle, while the poet was sidetracked into a premature contemplation of Beowulf's death, the hero has had a breath of time to adjust to the failure of his sword, and the dragon has had a moment to recover from the blow Beowulf has dealt him. Now the poet's audience is poised for renewed battle.

At this point the poet nudges us towards the dramatic moment of this passage, the moment towards which the momentum must take us: not the dramatic action but the moral point, not Beowulf's fight but Beowulf's thanes' desertion. That Beowulf's men abandon him in his hour of need is unconscionable in the Anglo-Saxon heroic age, that age just past, when a thane's duty was to protect his lord, when the retainer vowed in the meadhall to repay the generosity of his lord by fighting with him to the death, when the

greatest shame was to return home alive if the lord lay dead on the battlefield. Therefore, the poet needs to build a strong case for flight. After all, these thanes, Beowulf's men, are the best in the world. The danger must be very, very great for them to abandon their lord. So the poet turns his attention not to his hero but to the hero's adversary, drawing on several literary techniques to create a picture fearsome enough to warrant the men's abdication of the strongest ties of the Anglo-Saxon world.

The heavy stress on alliteration in line 2593 emphasizes the overwhelming presence of the dragon: *Hyrte hyne hordweard – hrether æthme weoll* (the hoard-guardian took heart; his breast swelled with air). That string of breathy, coarse "h"s becomes onomatopoeic for the dragon's hissing breath, a reminder to *us* of what the *thanes* are hearing. In this and the next two lines the poet pictures an ever more menacing dragon. Each half-line of line 2593 uses three words to express one action: *Hyrte hyne hordweard* (the hoard-guardian took heart); *hrether æthme weoll* (his breast swelled with breath). The next three half-lines use two words each: *niwan stefne, nearo ðrowode, fyre befongen* (he renewed his strength; he suffered in the narrow space, engulfed by fire). This shortening of sentences creates suspense – a sense of impending threat – and reinforces the amplification effect of the appositives as the poet's reader-listeners – and, more importantly, Beowulf's retainers – see the dragon in action.

However, a bit of ambiguity in the next half-line, 2595b – *se ðe ær folce weold* (he who earlier ruled the people) – mitigates this interpretation. Who is "he"? Beowulf? Or the dragon? If, as most scholars agree, it is Beowulf who once reigned and is now engulfed in fire, suffering in the narrow space of the dragon's barrow, then the poetic

effect I see in these lines is muted, since the three-word actions would belong to the dragon and the two-word actions to Beowulf. Whether *se ðe ær folce weold* refers to Beowulf or to the dragon, though, the scene the thanes are witnessing is presented in a build-up of horror. We see the dragon's chest swelling menacingly. We feel him gathering renewed strength. We see him – or Beowulf – in the narrow space, enduring the confines of stone cliff, stone arch, and barrow wall as the fight surges. Finally, we see either the dragon in his most frightening aspect – engulfed by fire – or Beowulf in the utmost danger (engulfed by fire). In either case, the thanes must have been scared – to – death.

Because *se ðe ær folce weold* (he who earlier ruled the folk) is static, devoid of battle action, it would seem anti-climactic after the build-up of threatening images. It sounds like the familiar Old English descent into banality (as some see it; see Meditation 3 for a refutation that such statements are banal). However, far from being a gulf between the immediacy of the dragon in battle and the resultant flight of Beowulf's men, this line connects us most directly with that flight by bringing us back to the most frightening aspect of the dragon: the power he has wielded in retaliation for the raiding of his hoard. This line lays out the stakes of the battle – if Beowulf loses, the dragon rules.

Beowulf's men, reminded by the awesome sight before them of the power of the adversary, turn tail and run. And these are Beowulf's best men, as the poet emphasizes in a series of appositives – his hand-chosen men, the band he most loves and most trusts. They are sons of princes; they are – or are supposed to be – the epitome of *hildecyst* (soldierly valor). And yet, even these men cannot face the danger. What sort of society, then, will be left without Beowulf? His men scatter to the woods – to save their lives, the

poet tells us scornfully, echoing Anglo-Saxon contempt for that impetus to action and contrasting the thanes with Beowulf, who stays in the fight, even with a useless sword. The thanes abandon not only their lord but the time-honored precepts of their society.

The diminishment of excitement found in line 2594b and the line's allusion to the human world allow us to suspend the picture of the burning dragon and his disarmed adversary while the poet shifts our attention to Beowulf's band of warriors, beginning with a negation, *nealles him* (not at all to him) in line 2596. In Old English the listener or reader must hold onto that "not at all" without knowing how it applies, knowing only that something is "not," while the poet continues with "him" – the dragon? Or Beowulf? The next few words clearly identify the antecedentless pronoun as Beowulf, as the poet resorts to his favorite technique, use of appositives, to indicate the men in the band, the handpicked men, my God, think about it – *sons of princes* – who "not at all" … what? The anticipated verb could be anything: they not at all feared for their lives; they not at all thought Beowulf unequal to the task; or, to use a more Anglo-Saxon approach, they not at all betrayed their vows. The verb left hanging by the negation of the beginning of the sentence, though, is much more shocking than these suppositions: these hand-picked men, sons of princes though they were, did not at all stand around their leader with battle-virtue. Here litotes, stated negatively, as so often in the poem, gives added emphasis to the point, while the enjambment of *hildecystum* (soldierly virtue), especially coming as it does after so many rhythmic half-lines, bears the brunt of the men's betrayal. They had no battle-virtue. Shamefully, they fled.

One could sympathize with the men not only for the great danger the dragon presents but also because Beowulf had told them specifically not to fight with him. "Wait here on the barrow, my army-men," he tells them before he goes into the dragon's lair (*Gebide ge on beorge, byrnum werede* [2529]); "this is not your fight" (*nis þæt eower sið* [2532b]). By not helping him, they were only being obedient and do not deserve our disparagement – or so one argument goes.

The poet doesn't buy it. To him Beowulf's thanes have acted shamefully. They do not behave as loyal thanes once did. Their cowardice is indicative of the final unraveling in the slow disintegration of the social contract. In Beowulf's first battle, against Grendel, his men fight, sword by sword, with him:

> Þær genehost brægd
> eorl Beowulfes ealde lafe,
> wolde frea-drihtnes feorh ealgian,
> mæres þeodnes, þær hie meahton swa. (794-797)

> Then all Beowulf's men
> drew their swords, those ancient heirlooms,
> to defend the life of their lord,
> the noble prince, however they could.

In the next battle, with Grendel's mother, Beowulf dives into the mere, leaving the men who accompanied him sitting on the bluff, watching. With horror, they see the water surge with bloody waves. Everyone thinks Beowulf has died. Hrothgar and his men wend a sorrowful way home, but Beowulf's men, though sick at heart, stay there, staring at the mere (*Gistas setan / modes seoce ond on mere staredon* [1603]). They may not be fighting with their lord, but they do not abandon him and are there when he emerges victorious with Grendel's head.

Now, in Beowulf's third and last great battle with monsters, his men neither fight with him nor loyally wait for him. They run away. They head for the woods (shelter, safety; see Meditation 13). They leave their lord on the battlefield. Men can no longer be

trusted to do glory-deeds, to act with courage, as they once did in days of old, the days of the Spear-Danes with which the poem opens:

> Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in gear-dagum
> þeod-cyninga, þrym gefrunon,
> hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon (1-3)
>
> Listen now! We have heard about the glory
> of the Spear-Danes, those princely people, in days gone by,
> how those princes performed courageous deeds.

Now the days of old are gone.

But one among Beowulf's men remains true to the old code, one in whose heart sorrow wells up (*weoll*), smothering fear. Throughout lines 2591b-2602a the sound of *weoll* rings. The heart of the one man to remain with Beowulf wells with sorrow just as the dragon's breast had welled with his breath. We hear an echo of *weoll* in *weold* (ruled) of line 2595, as though the dragon's power had welled over the folk. The final echo of this sound, and therefore the summation of the meanings in these words, lies in the last emphatic (because both terminal and alliterated) concept of the passage: *wel*. The passage that began with the renewed encounter between Beowulf and his formidable foe that emphasized the hissing, fiery dragon and continued with the action of Beowulf's men deserting him in his time of need ends with a homily: one does not turn away from the ties of kinship, not if he is one who thinks well. What might seem to a modern audience

like a vacuous, anticlimactic ending to a dramatic introduction of an important battle probably would have sounded perfectly fitting to an Anglo-Saxon audience, whose expectation of poetry included homilies. Pausing to give his opinion about how noble men should behave, the poet suspends the action, thus providing room for the interpolation of Wiglaf in the next section. The dragon is still there, swollen with breath and hot with fire. Beowulf is still there, ready to fight. But Beowulf's men have left him alone with his battle – except for one, the only one of Beowulf's men who *thenceth wel* (thinks properly).

Wiglaf is his name. He alone stays true not only to the lord-thane relationship but to the bonds of kinship, as we know he is related to Beowulf by the explanatory homily, *sibb æfre ne mæg / wiht onwendan* (no one would ever abandon kin in need). These ties are as strong as or even stronger than those forged in the meadhall. Neither dragons nor battles nor dangers of any kind, neither loss of life nor the enfolding fire will keep a man from coming to the aid of his kin – *if* that man remembers his virtuous nature, as Beowulf has always done and as Wiglaf, now, will do for him.

Thus in this passage that makes a shift of focus to Wiglaf, the poet makes a subtle shift not only from Beowulf as king to the next leader (Wiglaf, since Beowulf dies without sons) but more precisely from the heroic age, the time of heroes like Beowulf, to an era when heroes no longer wage battles, when thanes no longer fulfill their vows to their lord, when men who do not turn aside from doing what is right according to kin and to lord are few. While the dragon breathes fire and Beowulf draws another sword, we take a look at Wiglaf, a valorous and loyal man but young and untried:

Þa wæs forma sið
geongan cempan þæt he guðe ræs
mid his freo-dryhtne fremman sceolde. (2625b-2627)

[The battle with the dragon] was the first time
the young warrior should face
the rush of battle with his lord.

Beowulf will die in that battle. His young kinsman will aid him both in battle and in death. But the air blows empty through the world.

CHAPTER III

THE WAY THEY SAW NATURE

Meditation 12: Bound by Ice and Snow

Today at my home on the mountain I feel the iron grip of winter. The only thing moving is snow, falling in steady showers, etching hard, white lines on bare branches. Dark falls early, dropping its heavy, cold, starless wrap over the mountain. Phrases from *The Seafarer* float through my mind – "snow binds the earth" – right. Exactly. Binds it tight. "Storms bash the stone-cliffs" – or, in this case, the forest. "Cold binds the feet with fetters"; "time grows dark under the helmet of night"; "I endured in affliction the winter-cold night." Right. Exactly. The wintercold night.

But wait. Was that line in *The Seafarer* or *The Wanderer*? Or some other poem?

It's no wonder I can't remember. These images of winter occur repeatedly in Old English poetry and always with the same words. Compare these lines:

From *Andreas*

Snaw eorþan band wintergeworþum.	Snow bound the earth in winter-storms

From *The Wanderer*

Hrið hreosende hrusan bindeð wintres woma.	Falling snow – the howling of winter – binds the earth

From *The Seafarer*

Nap nihtscua, northan sniwede hrim hrusan bond	Nightshadows grew dark; it snowed from the north; frost bound the earth.

From *The Wanderer*

Þonne won cymeð nipeð nihtscua	Then dark came; nightshadows grew dark.

From *The Seafarer*

Hægle scurum fleag	Hail flew in showers.

From *The Wanderer*

norþan onsendeð	The north sends fierce hail-fare to
hreo hæglefare hæleþum on andan	warriors on earth.

From *Andreas*

Weder coledon	The weather grew cold with hard
heardum hægelscurum	hail showers.

From *Andreas*

Is brycgade	Ice bridged the dark sea-road.
blæce brimrade	

And that is only three poems. I could have added winter-image passages from *Beowulf* (1130-1134, 1608-1611), *The Ruin* (4-5), *Maxims I* (71-77), and other texts, in which the same words about binding and bridging, the same frost, snow, hail, storms, cold, and dark occur.

One explanation for this repetition and sameness lies in the oral-formulaic theory, according to which the Anglo-Saxon poet had in his repertoire ready-made formulas. For instance, in the lines quoted above from *Andreas*, the eponymous hero is sailing from Mermedonia (modern Ethiopia) when he suffers a winter storm. But because hot-climate Ethiopia is not a place of hail showers and snow, Robert E. Diamond conjectures that the poet must have merely used formulas of winter suffering available from oral poetry to aggrandize the tribulations of the saint and, carried away by his theme, embroidered beyond necessity (468). To prove the point that these winter images are formulaic, Diamond determines that ten of the fourteen half-verses in this passage consist of phrases used in other Old English texts (468).

Agreed, there is not much realism in setting this kind of winter storm in Ethiopia, and, agreed, the phrases are repetitive in the Old English corpus. But repeated images are not necessarily mindless insertions (and not necessarily formulas, either), and the *Andreas* poet was not aiming for realism but for metaphor, using the conventions of winter imagery, B. K. Martin asserts, to emphasize the saint's ability to endure (377). It might be awkward for us to read about a snowstorm in Ethiopia, but it might not have been so to the Anglo-Saxon reader/listener, who was looking for metaphor, not verisimilitude. Because "winter" – especially winter at sea – was the Anglo-Saxon poet's preeminent indication of adversity, its appearance as metaphor in *Andreas* is not as incongruous as Diamond asserts.

Though there is not much quarrel with the idea that these images are conventional, if not always oral-formulaic, an alternative – or parallel – theory of their frequency suggests that they derived from Ovid, Vergil, and other Latin masters who also talked about "bonds of cold" and "bridges of ice" over which men, horses, and even oxcarts could cross (Martin 380, 382). B. K. Martin has indisputably documented that "these ideas of winter binding, bridging, closing, and laying bonds upon land and water [occurred] in the Latin literature … known in Anglo-Saxon England" (383) – even the icicles on the Seafarer's body had their literary Latin precedent (Martin 385-6).

But that doesn't prove that when an Anglo-Saxon poet uses such a phrase, he is imitating his Latin forebears. Was I imitating my Anglo-Saxon forebears in my description of winter in the opening lines of this essay? That my writing pre-graduate-school (i.e., pre-Old English language acquisition) uses the same images suggests there

was no such influence. Years ago I was saying my winter-riddled feet were "stubs of ice on the ends of my legs" (*Seafarer*: *Calde geþrungen / wæron mine fet, forste gebunden/ caldum clommum* – "Afflicted with cold were my feet, bound with frost, with cold fetters.") Snowbound, I have said, "Nothing has moved for days. Time is frozen." (*Andreas*: *Land wæron freorig / cealdum cyclegicelum* – "The lands were frozen with cold icicles.") I have said, "When night falls, I gaze through the skylights at the black world outside. Between the stars the air snaps with cold." (*Wanderer*: *Þonne won cymeð / nipeð nihtscua* – "Then dark comes; night-shadows grow dark.") I am quite sure that if the creek had frozen from bank to bank, I would have talked about walking over it, and if I had had icicles hanging from my bangs peeking out from under my wool hat, I would have said so. (*Seafarer*: *ic ... behongen hrimgicelum* – "I … with icicles hanging off me.") I use this language because it is descriptive of the way I experience things, not because I am following literary models.

Whether the images of winter in Old English poetry were handed down through the oral tradition or were lifted from the Latin literature or had another source, as I will argue shortly, they are indisputably metaphors for human suffering, one of the lenses through which the Anglo-Saxon saw the world. Earl Anderson points out that winter as a Germanic metaphor for adversity is of ancient usage ("Seasons" 237), and the ability to endure is a highly valued Anglo-Saxon quality frequently touted by the poets as a heroic or spiritual achievement. Beyond merely depicting suffering, however, the poets' larger purpose in using these and other images of the natural world, according to Jennifer Neville, is to define the human by emphasizing its separation from the non-human. In Old

English poems, winter, though not evil, is hostile. Against the power of the natural world the human being is helpless and alienated – the seafarer besieged by hail-showers, fettered by cold; the earth bound tight by frost and ice; water stopped in its tracks by the hard grip of cold. Such a vocabulary as this "reflects the human race's inability to move and act against the natural world," Neville says (46). Andreas's endurance in his misplaced Mermedonian storm is a heroic act, and suffering at sea encourages the Seafarer in his poem to seek God. Winter is one of the most salient and frequent means of depicting the hostility that surrounds human society.

Yet another *raison d'etre* for the winter imagery is Biblical or, at least, ecclesiastical. (Again we are reminded of the Anglo-Sxon's religious eyes in viewing and understanding the world.) In this point of view, the poet who says, *Nap nihtscua* (Nightshadows grow dark) and *norþan sniwede* (It snowed from the north), is referring to the devil, since, as Frederick Holton informs us, "night and darkness are most usually associated with Satan and are in contrast to the brightness of the Heavenly City (Apocalypse 22. 5) or to the light of Christian truth, shed from the *sol iustitiae*, which is Christ. It snows from the north, and in patristic tradition the north is most commonly associated with the devil" (210). Hot and cold also have moral equivalence. Both Augustine and Gregory refer to charity as warm and sin as cold, and, according to Thomas D. Hill, Old English poets use warmth and cold with the same reference. In *Solomon and Saturn*, for instance, lines 462-469, the hell the unfortunate sinners are cast into is *wealcealde wic wintre beþeahte* – "a deadly cold place covered in winter." Hill

suggests that “hell here is murderously cold and fixed in winter because the warmth of charity is wholly absent there” (Tropological” 469).

Certainly it is true that the warmth of charity is absent in hell, but maybe also hell was cast in terms of ice rather than fire because sometimes winter was hell.

Our Anglo-Saxon poets were writing between the eighth and tenth centuries. Between 750 and 950 Europe experienced eight periods of severe winter weather that were documented in written records and have also been verified by the truth-telling tales of glaciers and volcanoes. Before Europe’s Little Ice Age, which commenced with an abrupt change in climate around 1400, the continent experienced the Medieval Warm Period, beginning around 800 with continued warming till 1100, when temperatures cooled slightly to the onset of abrupt cooling around 1400 (McCormick, Dutton, Mayewskii 874). There was a brief cooling between 900 and 950. From about 800 to 900 the Northern Hemisphere experienced “the warmest period in the last 2,000 years, with the sole exception of the last few decades of our own time” (McCormick, Dutton, Mayewskii 874). But both historical written records – chronicles, annals, letters – and records written in geology by the advance and retreat of glaciers and by volcanic activity indicate that between 750 and 950 there were eight “truly … major winter anomalies” (McCormick, Dutton, Mayewskii 874). Admittedly, personal evidence is not always reliable because writers make comparative statements – a winter is “harsh” in comparison to other winters the writer has known – and the geographical scope of these records is limited to the writers' own regions (McCormick, Dutton, Mayewskii 877), but given the corroboration by scientific evidence, the following descriptions of those “anomaly”

winters will suffice to show both the severity of the winter and the language used to describe it. (Page numbers refer to "Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe, A.D. 750-950" by McCormick, Dutton, and Mayewskii.)

(1) The winter of 763-64 was so extreme across Europe that historical records refer abundantly to it. In Ireland there was "a great snowfall which lasted almost three months." (Cf. the poet: *Snaw eorþan band* – Snow bound the earth.) The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle called that winter "the great winter" (879).

(2) and (3) The unusually cool summer of 821 was followed by two exceptionally long and harsh winters. The Rhine, Danube, Elbe, and Seine froze so solidly that "for thirty or more days carts could cross the great rivers as if on bridges" (882). (Cf. the poet: *Is brycgade blæce brimrade* – "Ice bridged the dark sea-road.") The Old Irish Annals of Ulster record, "Abnormal ice; the seas, lakes and rivers froze and herds of horses and cattle, and loads, were brought across them" (882).

(4) In the winter of 855-56 "the principal lakes and rivers of Ireland could be crossed by people on foot and on horseback," according to Irish records for this winter (884).

(5) The winter of 859-60 was "extraordinarily long and cold" across western Europe (884). (Cf. the poet: *Weder coledon* – "The weather grew cold.")

(6) The winter of 873-74 was exceptionally long and hard in western Europe and possibly in Spain and North Africa. Both Hincmar of Reims and the Fulda annalist wrote that this was the worst winter ever seen. Snow fell continuously from the first of November till the spring equinox. The Rhine and the Main were completely frozen (886-7). (Cf. the poet: *Hrið hreosende hrusan bindað* – "Falling snow binds the earth.")

(7) The Annals of Ulster document that the winter of 912-13 was a "dark and rainy" year. The exceptionally dark winter, as well as its notable precipitation, could have resulted from volcanic aerosols present at the time, which would have "act[ed] as cloud condensation nuclei" (888). (*Nipeð nihtscua* – "Nightshadows grow dark.")

(8) The year 939 (or 941) in Ireland produced "unusual frost" – (Cf. the poet *Hrim hrusan bond* – "Frost bound the earth") – and rivers so frozen a battle took place on one. Documents from both Germany and Switzerland attest to this year as "a most harsh winter" followed by a bad famine.

The effects of these winters went beyond the immediate suffering and even beyond the human and animal deaths attributed directly to the weather. Loss of livestock meant loss of capital goods, food supply, and traction power; resulting famines (recorded in 763-64, 823-24, 873-74, and 939-40) and crop failures meant food shortages and more deaths (McCormick, Dutton, Mayewskii 892). In these cases people writing letters to each other and record-keepers writing chronicles mention the weather again and again with the same kind of language. It took no resort to an oral formula to say that the rivers froze so hard people and livestock could cross from one side to the other.

McCormick, Dutton, and Mayewskii make the interesting observation that a child born in 765 could die at the ripe old age of fifty-five without having lived through such a winter, but one born in 820 would experience five such crises in the same span (892).

Five such winters. It is very possible that the creators of *Andreas*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, and other Old English poems were living during one or several of those winters, when snow really did bind the earth, hail really did fly in showers, and rivers really did make bridges of ice. Or, if the poets did not experience any of those winter, it is

just as possible that the memory of such hardships, especially in a society on the oral/ literate culture cusp, would have lingered for generations in stories handed from parent to child, from grandparent to child, providing rich winter imagery. A poet would not have had to learn such language from Ovid and Vergil or from the scop's repertoire. And because he would have known the force of the image – how tightly the earth is bound by snow, how densely the ice of a river can freeze, how thickly storms of hail can fly – he could have imbued with passion his thoughts about the alienation of the human in the natural world, the powerlessness of people in the face of the natural world, the fragility of human settlement as snow collapsed the roof of a house, a child died, food supplies ran short, and the husband was so ill he could not chop wood for the fire. It is no wonder he saw the world as a place of suffering.

Even in the years of ordinary winters, the Anglo-Saxons were winter-conscious. They divided their year into two seasons, winter and summer, in the Germanic way; the division of the year into four seasons came under the influence of Latin learning and existed for a long time side by side with the two-season calendar (Anderson 235, 245). October was called *Winterfylleð* ("winter-fill," the first full month of winter) because, Bede says, it marks the onset of winter – and, also, the end of summer (Anderson "Seasons" 236). October was not called "summer-end," since the important point was that winter was coming, not that summer was ending, nor is there a comparable "summer-coming" month-name on the other side of the calendar. Summer was marked as the cessation of winter – not winter as the cessation of summer. The important summer

moment was not the summer solstice (which, after all, indicates that winter is in the future), but earlier, when summer finally defeats winter (Billington 43).

"Winter" is the oldest seasonal term. The earliest terms for the two seasons were winter and *jer* (which became "year"). "Summer" originates from Celtic **sam* (Indo-European *sem* "half") plus the -er suffix of "winter." Thus "summer" originally meant "half-year," and the two seasons were "winter" and "the other half of the year," winter and non-winter (Anderson, Earl "Seasons" 235). "Winters" predates "years" for counting a length of time passed, as in telling a person's age: Hrothgar ruled for fifty winters; Beowulf, too, ruled for fifty winters; the Wanderer is winter *cearig*, meaning both "worn with the cares of winter" (enduring its hardships) and "worn with the cares of age." "Winter enjoys a privileged place in English, as the oldest and most stable seasonal term, as a frequent synecdoche for 'year,' and as a metaphor for adversity and, by extension, for wisdom. All these are indicators of its centrality in the language," Earl Anderson says ("Seasons" 238) – and, I add, of its centrality in the poetry.

Thus both the linguistic evidence of the Anglo-Saxon emphasis on winter as the season of note and the geological and historical evidence of harsh winters during the two-hundred-year span in which Old English poems were written imply that the poets were not drawing their winter images simply from conventional formulas or from Latin literature and that they were not arbitrarily selecting "winter" to help define the human as opposed to the non-human. The poets were drawing on what they knew in life.

The objection to this point of view is that these are not real-life poems. The conventions of Old English poetry are not those of, say, T'ang dynasty poetry, which is,

by conventional understanding, autobiographical, written to increase awareness of the significant moments in an individual's life. When Tu Fu writes a poem about spending the night in a tower by the river, the reader knows that he really did spend the night in a tower by the river, that he really did see a line of cranes in flight and the moon's reflection in the waves of the river. The poem is Tu Fu's verbal manifestation of the inner state produced by this moment. But Anglo-Saxon readers were not supposed to think that the Seafarer really was tossing about the icy waves in his boat in the middle of winter with icicles in his beard and his feet half frozen. We are to read the images abstractly, to read through the literal meaning to see the Seafarer's embrace of the path of God. Old English poetry was not meant to have narrative accuracy, which is subservient to the emotional or spiritual meaning.

Nonetheless, when such a concrete language as Old English needs to convey such abstract ideas as alienation, the individual's path towards God, and the fragility of life, the images cannot be abstract. They must be strongly rooted in the material world. They must convey real-life accuracy in the midst of metaphorical emphasis. The joys of hall life may have been exaggerated for metaphorical purposes (all elegiac writers exaggerate the joy, glory, or pleasure of what is lost), but hall life did include feasting and drinking, songs from the scop and music of his harp, bejeweled cups and lavishly gowned cup-bearers, as the poets tell us. The beasts of battle, those wolves and eagles that devour the slaughtered on the battlefield in so many Old English poems, may have been a convention, but according to both place-name and archaeological evidence there really were wolves (Aybes and Yalden) and eagles (Yalden) in Anglo-Saxon England. If there

were no such thing as exile and alienation from society, the image of the Wanderer, the earth-stepper, wandering over the earth in exile from his fallen lord and his duguth would not have wrung the hearts of the listener/readers. I think it is fair to say that this poetry, even as powerful as it is to us today, would have touched the hearts and spiritual conscience of its contemporary audience with much deeper impact than it has on us because the images were more immediate to them than they are to us.

We think we know how hard winter can be, but neither we nor any of our kin lived through the winter of 873-74, when the river froze from bank to bank and no amount of wood on the fire (and oh! the smoke in the house!) could keep the cold from fettering our feet and an axe was needed to get to the water for cooking and drinking. We think we know snow storms, hail showers, and the dark of winter, but when we walk out in the snow, to go skiing or to shovel the walkway, we have warm houses to return to, and our electric lights have extinguished the dark of winter. We don't know half of what the Anglo-Saxons suffered during those winter anomalies, either in cold, dark, or storm. We are like the Seafarer's "man to whom it befalls most fair to him on earth" who knows nothing about how he, the Seafarer, "wretched-caring, endured the ice-cold sea in winter… behung with frost-cicles as hail flew in showers." If we listen to the poets as they write about suffering and adversity in terms of winter, though, we might feel a chill of what they meant when they said, grimly, that they "endured."

Meditation 13: The Greenwood Tree

Every year, one spring day in the rhododendron garden in Eugene, the fairies return. No one knows exactly when they'll be there, but one day someone will be walking through the park and spot a fairy (or is it a pixie? or an elf?) hanging by one hand from the limb of a rhododendron tree, another dancing in a mass of bleeding hearts, a third clinging to the bark of a Douglas fir tree. They are tiny beings with pipe-cleaner bodies and colorful yarn-wrapped limbs. No one knows how they arrive or how many there are. If you find one, you are welcome to take it home – but only one. Then, in the whisper-breath of a moment, they are gone, leaving the magical aura of their appearance lingering in the garden.

This is a sweet story because of its generous, free-spirited nature but also because of its setting. It would not have the same spirit if the fairies were hidden in a shopping mall or around gas stations. The dolls are thought of as elves or pixies or fairies because they sport among giant pink rhododendrons, head-drooping lenten roses, blue star-beds of forget-me-nots. Deep in our imaginations, if not in our beliefs, the old pagan animism lives on, as it did also in Anglo-Saxon England.

When Christianity arrived in Britain, paganism was an unstructured belief system, loosely comprising polytheism, animism, funerary practices, and various other beliefs and magics. Perhaps because Germanic paganism never was a complete set of theological ideologies (Tolley 153), Christianity's conquest over paganism in Britain was relatively painless. "No arm-twisting was necessary to persuade the English kings to give up their pagan rites," John Niles tells us ("Pagan" 126). There was no dogma to be contradicted, no doctrine to be argued, merely some practices to forbid and beliefs to whitewash. But

those practices and beliefs turned out to be stubbornly persistent, rooted as they were in the "rich soil of popular belief and custom" (Niles "Pagan" 139). The roots of tree worship must have gone especially deep into that soil, since that practice in particular was not easily eradicated, according to Della Hooke (24). Even as late as the eleventh century Cnut was making laws expressly prohibiting occult magic and the honoring of "heathen gods and the sun or the moon, fire or flood, springs or stones or any kind of tree" (*hæðne godas & sunnan oððe monan, fyr oððe flod, wæteryllas oððe stanas æniges cynnes wudutreowa* [qtd. In Neville 148]). The existence of these laws proves the tenacity of pagan beliefs, but that tenacity itself pays tribute to the gentleness of St. Gregory's method in combatting paganism: co-optation rather than decimation. The heathen midwinter celebration of Yule became the Christian Christmas; the April celebration of the goddess Eostre became Easter; springs and wells that were once sacred to pagan gods were now dedicated to the Virgin; "Thor's-hammer amulets were out; cruciform amulets were in," (as John Niles so picturesquely puts it in "Pagan Survival and Popular Belief" [130]); heathen temples served as foundations for Christian churches (Glosecki 93); wood from demolished sacred groves was used for oratories, altars, and other Christian architecture (Hooke 22), and Germanic animism, the perception of nature as alive with spirits, easily morphed into a God-inhabited universe (Jolly 241). A pagan-Christian simultaneity was long tolerated.

Animism dwelled long in the collective unconscious. Anglo-Saxon Christians, distancing themselves from paganism without quite relinquishing animism, honored the natural world with a language that reflected the old beliefs. They talked of *cynn* (kind – what we might call "species"), by which they meant each individual's inherited, birth-

given way of being, which was determined by the "kind" to which it belonged. But kinship is an animistic concept, as John Niles observes, quoting from Paula Gunn Allen's *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*: "[A]nimistic philosophy … embodies a principle of kinship that extends far beyond the human race: 'the supernaturals, spirit people, animal people of all varieties, the thunders, snows, rains, rivers, lakes, hills, mountains, fire, water, rock, and plants are perceived to be members of one's community'" (qtd. in "Pagan" 132). To the Anglo-Saxons *cynn* determined the potential for action of each individual. "[W]hat really mattered about any being at all," Peter Clemoes asserts, "– be it human or non-human, animate or inanimate, natural or manufactured according to our classifications – was the potential or potentials for action which he/she/it had received from his/her/its origin" (74). Any being received its identity, and therefore its representation in poetry, from its *cynn*, and it displayed the *feorh* (life, spirit) common to that *cynn* (Clemoes 76). This concept of the essential being of every entity on earth and, therefore, of its potential for action through its *feorh*, was a natural growth of animism into Christianity, as it was God who endowed each being of creation with its "essential being." Karen Jolly sees this early medieval Christian view of "nature as spiritual" as a large determinant in the survival of Germanic animism (235).

But every *cynn* is not kind to the human being. In *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Jennifer Neville asserts that the Old English poets represent the natural world as the context in which the human being is helpless and alienated (37). To these poets the natural world is a hostile place against which to define their fragile society (Neville 21). Similarly, Matt Low argues that images of the natural world depict an unrelenting and unfeeling world that is "openly admonished and abhorred" (as in *The*

Wanderer), a world that is "a source of hardship and ruin" (as in *The Ruin*), and an inimical environment in which the city serves as shelter (as in *The Seafarer*). Both Neville and Low propose that images of nature in Old English poetry not only function as a literary construct but present a force against which humans must assert themselves. Examples abound. The sea is dangerous to those who sail it; winter must be endured; frost and storms threaten habitations; mountains and deep pools of water are unfathomable, mysterious, and threatening. We see this attitude when the Seafarer bemoans his frozen feet; we see it in the lonely, empty environment of the Wife in *The Wife's Lament*, and we see it, in spades, when Hrothgar describes Grendel's mere to Beowulf or when the dragon destroys the buildings in Beowulf's kingdom. These depictions of nature show the human race in "a state of perpetual siege" (Neville 43) and the human world inferior to nature's power (Neville 35).

But not all nature is of the same *cynn*, and beings act according to their *cynn*. Neville is wrong to include "forests devoid of joy" in her list of natural-world elements that express fear and emptiness (38). Trees in Old English poetry are not in the same category as mountains, oceans, and caves, the other natural elements on her list. Not so long before the onset of literacy, trees were worshiped, and in later Anglo-Saxon times they were still a part of a mythical-Christian world view. Trees in Old English (and songbirds, but I am looking at trees) are a part of the natural world that have a *feorh*, a spirit, that is friendly to the human world.

I hear a chorus of "Not true!" from Old English scholars clamoring to point out the *wynleas wudu* – "forest devoid of joy" – of Grendel's mere, a deeply adversarial place that has trees in two of its four descriptions:

Nis þæt feor heonon
mil-gemearces, þæt se mere standeð
ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter overhelmað 1361b- 1364

It is not far hence,
marked in miles, that the mere stands;
over it hangs the hoar-frosted grove;
a wood made fast with roots overshadows the water.

He feara sum beforan gengde
wisra monna, wong sceawian,
oþþæt he færinga fyrgenbeamas
ofer harne stan hleonian funde,
wyn-leasne wudu; wæter under stod
dreorig ond gedrefed. 1412-1417a

With some of the few wise men he
went first to show the way
until he suddenly found mountain-trees
leaning over gray stone,
a joyless wood; water ran beneath it,
bloody and stirred up.

The hostility of this place, its alienation to the human, is undeniable. However, the trees themselves are not hostile. In the first passage, the sinister element is frost, a well-known villain in Old English poetry. The tree is almost a victim, its earth-bound roots preventing it from removing itself and the frost preventing it from blossoming.

In the second passage, the woods that are "joyless" are specifically "mountain-trees." Mountains are not friendly entities in Old English poetry (cf., for instance, the looming hills over the Wife's earthcave in *The Wife's Lament*). Mountains are mysterious and dangerous elements, where monsters might dwell. They are a part of nature that is the "other" against which the human world must assert itself. The trees at Grendel's mere are not trees of the plains, as, for instance, in descriptions of Paradise, such as we find in *The Phoenix*, lines 33-9,

Smylte is se sigewong; sunbearo lixeð
wuduholt wynlic. Wæstmas ne dreosað
beorhte blede, ac þa beamas a
grene stondað swa him god bibead.
Wintres ond sumeres wudu bið gelice
bedum gehongen; næfre brosniað
leaf under lyfte, ne him lig sceþeð
æfre to ealdre

Peaceful is the Victory-place. A sunny grove lies there,
a joyful wood. Plants and bright blossoms
do not die, but the trees always
stay green, just as God decrees for them.
Winter and summer the wood is the same,
hanging with blossoms. The leaf under the sky
never crumbles, nor does searing heat injure it
forever and ever.

The trees at Grendel's mere are also not the beautiful blossoming trees of the cities, as in *The Seafarer* (*bearwas blostmum nima*ð – "the groves take with blossoms," line 48). The compound *fyrgenbeamas* (mountain-trees) in the *Beowulf* passage implies a different kind of tree, one that could indeed become a *wynleas wudu*.

Then, too, the trees at Grendel's mere are not the same as the friendly trees in other Old English poetry because the landscape is mythical. Whether it is meant as the entrance to Hell, as Geoffrey Russom argues, or as a mythical, troll-like landscape in parallel with that in Grettir's Saga, as Marijane Osborn argues ("Manipulating Waterfalls: Mythic Places"), it is an imaginary landscape into which the poet can insert trees made unfriendly by association with their surroundings. The trees in Grendel's mere are not like the trees that Old English poets and other Anglo-Saxon people know and love – the beautiful trees of the cities, the well-known boundary trees, the ever-in-leaf trees of Paradise, the tree that became the Cross, the Tree of Life from the Garden of Eden. They are of a different *cynn* and therefore have a different *æðelu*.

Peter Clemoes describes æðelu as the inherited nature, or "essential being," of each entity that determines its action (76). The *æðelu* of a tree, for instance, determined that it would grow in one place and not another (Clemoes 77). Anglo-Saxon readers would not have generalized about trees, that they are good beings or not. They would have considered each kind of tree in its place. Most trees in most places, in Old English poetry, are friendly and useful. These trees in this mere, however, have a different *æðelu*. They have a capacity for action, a reason for growing in that particular place, that is in accord with the essential being of Grendel, who is of the cynn of Cain. They are more like the Tree of Death that the poet of *Genesis B* inserts in the Garden of Eden as a counterpoint to the Tree of Life:

> Oðer wæs swa wynlic, wlitig and scene,
> Liðe and lofsum, þæt wæs lifes beam;
> …
> þonne wæs se oðer eallenga sweart,
> dim and þystre; þæt wæs deaðes beam,
> se bær bitres fela.
>
> One tree was so pleasant, beautiful and shining,
> gentle and praiseworthy – that was the Tree of Life;
> …
> Then the other was all black,
> dark and gloomy; that one was the Tree of Death.
> It was sharp and biting.

The *æðelu* of the Tree of Death was different from that of the Tree of Life. They were different kinds of trees, even as the trees at Grendel's mere were of a different *cynn*. Other woods, woods comprised of other kinds of trees, are nowhere in the poetry joyless or repugnant. Except for the grove at Grendel's mere and the exceptional Tree of Death in *Genesis B*, trees – groves, woods – are admired for their beauty, appreciated for their usefulness, and revered for their essential beings.

I hear a voice making one last protest: "What about the 'friendless unhappy man who enters the forest' and is torn apart by wolves?" The voice is Neville's (129), referring to *Maxims I C* 8-9*:*

> oft mon fereð feor bi tune, þær him wat freond unwiotodne.
> Wineleas, wonsælig mon genimeð him wulfas to geferan
> felafæcne deor; ful oft hine se gefera sliteð
>
> Often the man goes far by the town, where he knows friends are uncertain to him.
> Friendless, the unhappy man takes for himself wolves as companions,
> a very treacherous beast. Very often that companion rends him to pieces.

But Neville makes a mistake here. She interpolates a forest where the poet has none. The poet merely says that the man avoids the town and takes wolves as companions. Though it is true that wolves in Old English poetry are creatures of the woods, the poet does not place the man in a forest. Trees are not mentioned.

The Wanderer, the Seafarer, and the Wife, lamenting their lost human worlds, support Low's and Neville's understanding of nature in Old English poetry as an adversarial environment in which human habitations are friendly and hospitable and against which characters are challenged to assert their heroism. These three narrators, in exile in lonely, uninhabited, psychically and physically abrasive natural surroundings, long for the towns, for hall life, for companionship and all the blessings of civilized society – for the *burh*. To Anglo-Saxon poets, Low says, "the city [*burh*] was a refuge from a natural world that had not yet been 'conquered' by human civilizations," a place, with its "attendant political leadership, military might, and conveniences of human innovations," that the elegists longed for (13). Unlike Romantic, or even some modern, poets, Old English poets do not long for "the tree, the river, the field, or the wild animal that are made the objects of nostalgia today" (Low 13). They long for the town.

But the tree should not be in Low's list of natural things the Old English elegists are not nostalgic for. When the Seafarer thinks yearningly about the city, for instance, he is thinking about its beautiful trees.

> Bearwas blostmum nimað byrig fægriað
> wongas wlitigað. (48-49a)
>
> The groves take with blossoms. The city grows fair;
> the plains become beautiful.

That the Seafarer is nostalgic for trees – that the poet conflates images of trees with images of the city – shows that Anglo-Saxon poets do not see all of nature as antithetical to the human. Trees in Old English poetry are, most often, friendly entities. Such passages as this one from *The Seafarer* belie Della Hooke's claim that "the enjoyment of trees for the sake of their own beauty, was effectively expunged from the literature" by the Christian church (69).

The Seafarer is not the only Old English poem to express appreciation for the beauty of trees. *Maxims II* tells us that according to the *cynn* of a tree – its essential being – trees must bloom: *wudu sceal on foldan / blædum blowan* (trees must [or "it is the essential nature of trees to"] flourish with blossoms). When poets include ever-green, ever-blossoming deciduous trees in their paradisiacal landscapes, they are partly, of course, following their models, but the old animistic concepts, the sacred groves of yore, lurked below the surface. If in *The Apocalypse of St. Peter* the blossoms, plants, and spices of Paradise never fade and if in the Paradise of classical Latin poets trees likewise remain perpetually in leaf (Barrar 106-7), it is also true, as C. Tolley points out, that in the heavenly plain of Germanic paganism, in the midst of a great meadow, the world tree grows (156). In *The Phoenix* Paradise has a "sunny grove, a joyful wood" (*sunbearo,*

wuduholt wynlic) where fruits and bright blossoms never drop and the trees stay always green (*Wæstmas ne dreosað / beorhte blede, ac þa beamas a/grene stondað*). In Guthlac's earthly Paradise "the earth is blooming" – *folde geblowen* – a phrase which could refer either to flowers or to trees. But flowering trees are often mentioned in the poetry and wildflowers almost never (Elizabeth Deering Hanscom claims that "the whole body of [Old English] poetry … is almost unrelieved by sight or scent of flowers" [442]), so we might understand Guthlac's Paradise, like the Phoenix's, like Ovid's, like the Vulgate Bible's, to be rich with flowering trees. The yew tree, though not a blossoming tree, is appreciated in the *Rune Poem* as a joy in the land (*wyn on eþle*), probably because it is an evergreen, giving further evidence to a friendly rapport between the animistic tree and the Anglo-Saxon people.

It is somewhat mysterious that the Old English poets, who extol the beauty of the spring-blooming tree, never do the same for the autumn-color tree. Hanscom thinks that this "indifferen[ce] to the special glory of the dying year" can be attributed to "the peculiar obtuseness of the English to color-effect," but I'm not so sure. Maybe it is more the peculiar (to us) emphasis on the adversities of winter that disinclines Old English poets to celebrate the dying year.

Besides their beauty, trees are appreciated for their usefulness. From the modern point of view, trees are useful as commodities, but the Anglo-Saxons did not mean "commodity" in thinking of the usefulness of trees. They thought of the *feorh* of a tree that belonged to it by birthright. "The function of human craftsmanship was to render a material's innate potentials operational," Clemoes says (75). Thus we read that oak is made into a ship (*Rune Poem* 77) and a tree into a distaff (Riddle 56) or a battering ram

(Riddle 53). The essential being of an ash – straight and strong – is so specific to spears that a spear is called an *æsc*, just as a shield is called a *linden*. By Riddle 12 we know that the beech provides good forage for boars. Holly is good for burning (*Maxims I B* 9), and the yew is the "guardian of fire" (*Rune Poem* 36). Trees are also useful in medicine, as we know from charms, cures, and "leechdoms" (Hooke 63-64); as boundary markers, as we know from charters; and as designations for important meetings, such as *Augustinæs Ac*, Augustine's oak-tree, where St. Augustine and British bishops met in 603, on the boundary between Hwiccan and West Saxon kingdoms (Hooke 169).

It is interesting to recognize that trees in forests are not useful as boundary markers. A tree has to stand out prominently on the landscape if it is to serve as a designator between one property and another. For instance, charters in the Fens indicate the last remaining woods in what Oliver Rackham calls an otherwise "rather featureless region" (8). By the use of trees as boundary markers in Anglo-Saxon charters, we see that Anglo-Saxon England was not a landscape of forested wilderness interspersed with islands of habitation. By the time the Angles and the Saxons arrived in Britain, the wildlands had already been cut and subdued, resulting in a landscape very similar to that of the thirteenth century – and of today: farmland and moorland with a small percentage of woodland, many non-woodland trees in hedges and fields, and managed areas of coppices, wood-pastures, wooded commons, and wooded forests (Rackham 7). In some regions woodland had regenerated enough to create a landscape of woodland intermixed with enclosed fields and scattered towns, while in other regions cultivated land dominated, with few boundary hedges and fewer scattered trees (Hooke 165). According to Rackham, at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, England had less woodland, in

relation to its area, than France has today (8). The poetry's numerous references to woods probably do not occur because the Anglo-Saxons were a people "desperately clinging to a strip of shore between the encroaching sea and the obstinate forest," as Elizabeth Deering Hanscom describes them (444). More likely they reflect a deep-seated and unconscious animism along with a strong sense of kinship with trees because the tree was known and understood, domesticated and controlled, in a way that wolves and eagles, storms and the sea were not.

Chief among the uses of trees, if frequency in the poetry is any evidence, is shelter, perhaps because in pagan times, among Germanic tribes, the natural woods were the oldest sanctuaries (Frazier, qtd. in Barrar 117). In both *Beowulf* (2598) and *The Battle of Maldon* (192-194), men escape the horrors of battle by running to the sanctuary of the woods. That these were shameful acts of cowardice and oath-breaking does not diminish the quality of the woods as shelter, for in *Beowulf* 2923-35, the Battle-Scylding warriors also run to the shelter of a wood (Ravenswood), but only after their king has died. There is no shame attached to their escape to the woods. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the child (*hwelp* – whelp) is taken to the woods, presumably for safety. (In fact, the frequent reference to woods as shelter in Old English poetry justifies this interpretation of a puzzling line – *hwelp* to mean "child.") In *Genesis* B when Adam and Eve are turned out of Eden, Adam says to Eve, "Let us go into this wood / into the shelter of this wood" (*Uton gan on þysne weald innan, / on þisses holtes hleo*). Likewise in the opening lines of *Judgment Day* the narrator is sitting in a beautiful grove, which he calls a shelter:

> Hwæt! Ic ana sæt innan bearwe,
> mid helme beþeht holte tomiddes
> þær þa wæterburnan swegdon and urnon
> on middan gehæge, eal swa ic sege,

Eac þær wynwyrta weoxon and bleowon
innon þam gemonge on ænlicum wonge. (1-6)

Listen! I sat alone in a grove,
sheltered, as with a helmet, by the covering of trees,
where the waterstream resounded and ran
in the middle of the meadow, just as I say.
Also pleasant plants grew and bloomed there,
on the beautiful plain, in multitudes.

(These last two lines could be a rare reference to wildflowers, though they could also refer to trees in blossom, as it is trees, not flowers, that beautify plains in Old English poetry as well as in classical and patristic descriptions of Paradise.)

The oak tree in *The Wife's Lament* presents a peculiar case. The Wife has been separated from her husband (or lover) and exiled to a lonely place which, however more or less connected to human habitation, is described with an emphasis on its natural surroundings, including a specific oak tree:

Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe
under actreo in þam eorðscræfe.
Eald is þes eorðsele, eal ic eom oflongad;
sindon dena dimme, duna uphea,
bitre burgtunas, brerum beweaxne,
wic wynna leas. …
þonne ic on uhtan ana gonge
under actreo geond þas eorðscrafu. 27-32a, 35-36

A man commanded me to dwell in a grove of trees
under an oak tree in this cave-dwelling.
Old is this earthhall. I am full of longing.
The valleys are dark, the hills high,
the enclosed yard hostile, overhung with briars.
It is a joyless dwelling-place. …
Then at dawn I walk alone
under the oak tree around these earthcaves.

Depending on one's interpretation of *eorðscræfe,* the environment is more or less hostile. If one agrees with K. P. Wentersdorf that the *eorðscræfe* is a cave or with Raymond Tripp

that the narrator is a revenant speaking from the grave, then the Wife's isolation in a natural and hostile environment is extreme. If, on the other hand, one agrees with Joseph Harris that *eorðscræfe* refers to a sort of underground house traditional in Germanic architecture (204) and that *geond þas eorðscrafu* indicates she is living in a deserted settlement (205) – or with Earl Anderson that she is living in the kind of sunken hut archeology has uncovered in Anglo-Saxon villages and that *wic* refers to a settlement and *burgtunas* to fences or enclosures ("Uncarpentered" 75) – then the narrator is exiled not into the wilds but to the outskirts of a village, where dwellings are unkempt with briars and nature lurks close. According to Paul Battles's interpretation, the narrator lives in a souterrain, "an artificial underground dwelling or chamber" common in the British Isles in the early Middle Ages (268). In this case, the *eorðscræfe* could have been a "spacious, well-provided structure" in which the Wife would have had "room enough to wander," as Paul Battles sees it (272) – a much less hostile, though still lonely, environment. This interpretation of *eorðscræfe*, however, depends on a reading of *geond* as "through" rather than "around" (as Marsden glosses it [343]), so that the Wife would be walking inside the building rather than outside it.

Whatever the interpretation of *eorðscræfe*, the wife is certainly living unhappily in a lonely environment which emphasizes natural, rather than human, elements. The tall hills *(dun*a *uphea*) amplify the woman's loneliness, the dark of the valleys (*dena dimme*) her joylessness, the thorns her alienation. But there is something comforting about that oak tree under which the exiled Wife walks alone at dawn. It is a living being, attendant on her, in a place where the only other living thing is briars. The essential being of briars is antagonistic, but a tree that provides shelter and joy is comforting. (Kathleen Barrar

also speaks of the grove in *The Wife's Lament* as sheltering [115].) Even Guthlac, living in a desolate island in the fens where he is sheltered in a wood that God had shown him, finds comfort in his grove (*leofstan earde* – most loved place), to which he returns before his death:

> smolt wæs se sige-wong and sele niwe
> fæger fugle reord folde geblowan
> geacas gear budon. (Guthlac B 742-744a)
>
> Peaceful was the victory-place and his new hall,
> beautiful the voice of the birds. The earth blossomed.
> Cuckoos proclaimed the year.

Not only hermitages like Guthlac's but minsters and monasteries, Della Hooke points out, were established in the shelter of woods (85).

Woods also serve as shelter for animals. At the beginning of the Battle of Maldon, when Byrhtnoth rallies his men to fight, one of the soldiers, before joining the fight, releases his beloved hawk into the woods (*he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan / hafoc wið þæs holtes*), probably because that is where the hawk will be safe. The interpretation that the hawk was set free to the woods because that is where wild hawks belong ignores the domestication of hawks in the early Middle Ages, as illustrated in *Maxims II*. Though this poem states that wolves and boars belong in the woods – *wulf sceal on bearowe* (the wolf should be [or must be or by its very nature is] in the grove) and *eofor sceal on holte* (the boar should be [with the same ambiguity in the translation of *sceal*] in the woods) – it also says that wild hawks belong on the wrist: *Hafuc sceal on glofe / wilde gebidan* (the hawk should stay on the glove, wild). Both the wolf and the boar are given an additional half-line epithet. The wolf is an *earm anhaga*, a wretched solitary one, and the boar lives in the woods *toðmægenes trum*, secure in his tooth-strength. There is nothing adversarial

in these epithets. The wolf is a recluse; the boar defends himself with his tusks. They live in the woods. The hawk is on the wrist. That is as things should be.

Certainly animism, slipping gradually into the pagan past as it blended with and was taken over by Christian language, influenced the poets' appreciation of the beauty and usefulness of trees, but the Cross (ironically, given its deep significance to Christians) presents an even closer connection between pagan and Christian views of trees. Della Hooke points out that "as an extension of the symbolism of the tree, the cross of crucifixion itself became the *halig treo*, 'holy tree'" (28). In *The Dream of the Rood* the poet consistently calls the cross a tree: *syllicre treow* (most wondrous tree), *beam beorhtost* (brightest of beams [wood, trees]), *syllic wæs se sigebeam* (wondrous was the victory-tree), *wuldres treow* (tree of glory), and so on – seven times in the first 25 lines, while the narrator, the dreamer, is describing the vision he saw at midnight, when all the "speech-carriers" (people) were asleep: a vision of a tree (shaped as a cross) with jewels on its shoulder-span, alternately drenched with gold, then with blood, stretching to the corners of the earth, exalted by all creation and by angels of the Lord. "This tree," Michael Swanton says of the tree in *The Dream of the Rood*, "bridges the psychic hinterland of the pagan world and Christian imagery" (103).

When the cross speaks (we know it is a cross, though it is called only a tree), it tells its story: like any of its *cynn*, it was living its tree existence, in this case at the edge of the woods, when along came some "enemies" (*feondas*) and hewed it down, then carried it on their shoulders out of the wood and erected it (without turning it into lumber; it is still a tree) on a hill as a gallows, as though for criminals. Then Christ joyfully, courageously, in good Anglo-Saxon heroic fashion, climbed onto the heartbroken tree, who wanted to

bow down to the earth (in shame? to prevent the crucifixion?) but remained steadfast because it was the decree of God that it be the instrument of death.

In the poem, the cross takes on all the suffering of the Passion: "They pierced me with dark nails" (*þurhdrifan hi me mid doercan næglum*); "they mocked us both together" (*bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere*); "I was all drenched with blood" (*eall ic was mid blode bestemed*). Finally, in line 56, the tree becomes a cross in a powerful, climactic, heartbreaking four-word, five-syllable half-line that ends the narration of Christ's (the tree's) suffering:

> Geseah ic weruda God
> þearle þenian. Þystro hæfdon
> bewrigen mid wolcnum wealdendes hræw
>
> scirne sciman; sceadu forð eode,
> wann under wolcnum. Weop eal gesceaft,
> cwiðdon cyninges fyll. Crist was on rode. 51b-56

> I saw the God of hosts
> suffer harshly. Darkness had
> hidden with clouds the corpse of the warrior,
> the shining splendor. Shadows came forth,
> dark under the sky. All creation wept,
> lamented the death of the king. Christ was on the cross.

The aliveness of the cross, the cross as living tree, comes from a long lineage of ancestors. Christian writers had long assimilated World-Tree symbolism into the cross of Christ, as Della Hooke indicates in *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England* (28). The Germanic veneration of trees shows up in Icelandic mythology in *Ask* "Ash" and *Embla* "Elm" (the first man and first woman) and in Yggdrasil, the sacred ash that holds the world together (Glosecki 93), the tree on which Odin hanged himself in order to acquire knowledge and wisdom (Hooke 3). Irminsul, a sacred column, a "Tree of Victory," in the form of a large trunk of wood associated with the world ash tree, also found extension beyond paganism

in the symbolism of Christianity. Bede, writing about Oswald's victory over the heathen army and about the cross of victory Oswald subsequently erected on the hill, is perhaps deliberate in the association of the cross with Irminsul, which, according to Eugene Goblet d'Alviella, "the oldest chronicles define as the trunk of a tree erected in the open air" (112). Irminsul was the Universal Sustainer, related to the Vardtrad, the Guardian Tree that was regarded as animate (Tolley 163). Oswald's cross, then, looking like Irminsul on the hill, would have made a powerful impression on the conquered. Bede was reporting Oswald's actions, but Oswald himself was no doubt exploiting the idea of the Cross as tree, "drawing," Tolley says, "upon concepts comparable with those associated with the Irminsul (including aspects of the world tree…) – a pillar of victory, which represented the sustaining axis of the world, and was a guardian of its worshippers" (166-7). This protective quality of Irminsul, Sandra McEntire argues, was also reflected in the sign of the cross marked on the forehead by the thumb or forefinger, a signum used in Britain to ward against the devil from as early as the time of Bede (395).

Glosecki suggests that the Anglo-Saxons embraced the Cross so fervently because their native mythos included a sacred tree (Yggdrasil) and a god who was hanged on it (Odin) (93) and that the dream vision of *The Dream of the Rood* might have originated "in a native tradition of shamanizing, of entering the dreamtime to meet the gods, learn from them, and bring divine revelations back to help mankind" (91), but the tradition of the cross as a living tree reached beyond the time of *The Dream of the Rood* as well as backward into the past. In discussing medieval English paintings and manuscript illuminations of the Crucifixion that depict Christ on a green, sometimes flowering, tree, Thomas Hall cites manuscripts from the eleventh century and later but also asserts that

"representations of the Cross as a leaf-bearing tree or as surrounded by vegetation have been recorded from as early as the fourth century" (304). He connects this representation of the Cross with the paradisiacal *lignum vitae* of Genesis 2.9 in patristic and medieval symbology (302).

And so we find ourselves in Paradise again, not only at Christianity's Tree of Life but also at paganism's world tree. The association of Cross and Tree of Life is explicitly reflected in Anglo-Saxon art, as, for instance, in a miniature in the Winchcombe Psalter (1030-1050) that depicts a cross with *lignum uit(a)e* (tree of life) inscribed on the crossbeam, as Hall notes (304). Thus the extraordinary animism given to the Tree of Victory in *The Dream of the Rood* may have roots not only in Yggdrasil and Irminsul but also in Genesis, and the tree in *The Phoenix*'s Paradise comes not only from patristic and classical forebears but from pagan animistic roots as well. When we remember the simultaneity of the Anglo-Saxon perception of time (all time, past, present, and future, is now, and all events of the past are typologically events of the present), we are further strengthened in reading the prosopopeia of *The Dream of the Rood* not as a cute poetic device but as a deeply religious evocation of theological concepts combined with just as deep a sense of trees as living beings with their own essential being and potentials for action. In this way the rood is like the blossoming trees in the Seafarer's vision, the sheltering wood of *Judgment Day*, the tree on the plain of Paradise in *The Phoenix,* and each tree that fulfills its usefulness in a crafted item. To the Anglo-Saxon, for all these reasons, a tree is a thing of beauty.

CHAPTER V

AFTERWORD

The purpose of these pages has been to share with you my enthusiasm and love for Old English poetry. I confess, now, what has probably been apparent throughout, that these essays, a public response to the poetry, are guided by my most private responses, to use James W. Earl's phraseology in "Reading *Beowulf* with Original Eyes." After pointing out that we are mostly unaware of our private responses, Earl challenges us to engage in the "tough critical work" of "bring[ing] to consciousness our unconscious relations to the poem" (689). Here, in these last few pages, I want to do just that – bring to consciousness what it is about this poetry I respond to so fervently.

Earl tells us that his captivation with *Beowulf* was a result of a personal childhood experience coupled with the historical moment in which he first read the poem. "It seemed to be singing a very familiar song. Looking back, I am not surprised it caught me by the throat," he says (691). Such is not my case. I cannot put any time reference, historical or personal, to the first Old English poetry that caught my breath – *The Battle of Brunanburh* (see Meditation 8). Nor was it the subject matter that mesmerized me; I am not particularly fond of battle poetry. It was not the time period; I have no great love for heroic eras or male-dominated societies. All that posturing, those proud, battle-hungry warriors – I don't relish them and didn't particularly want to spend my six years of graduate school immersed in such attitudes. Nor was I any more eager to spend my hours with the religious poetry – all that angst and ardor, the tortured saints, the miracles and

martyrs and spiritual might. A six-year immersion might be like memorizing, in the lilting days of spring, Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland," a long poem about a winter shipwreck. One day, reciting the poem as I drove from Eugene to my home in the Applegate, through mountain forests bursting with new-leaved trees, past farms with leaping lambs and blossoming fruit trees, under a spring-blue sky, I suddenly revolted against voicing all that anguish and despair in the freezing ocean when the immediate world was resplendent with beauty and joy and warm sunshine. Would I similarly find myself missing the beauty of the immediate world by becoming a part of the dark Anglo-Saxon world for the next six years?

I thought I didn't want to do it. Better to drop myself in some other world – George Eliot's, for instance. I would enjoy living in *Middlemarch* for six years. Or what about those Nabokov novels I had been autodidactically reading for years? Or Spenser – I love Spenser. Just as I can't see Mt. Shasta without saying, "… in all her glory," I can't say, "Spenser" without adding, "I love Spenser." There were a lot of possibilities besides Old English.

None of that seemed to matter. Old English put out its tendrils and entangled me in them, interlacing me right into the poems. My curiosity wouldn't let me go. Who were these people who wrote down these poems? Who was their audience? How did they live, in what homes, in what social conditions, with what customs? How did they see the world? How could this poetry, at the very beginning of literacy, be so sophisticated? How could such a concrete language, so noun-dependent, so lacking in words for abstract concepts, express such complex abstract ideas? How could poetry so dependent on

formulas remain so powerful and fresh? Why didn't it sound tired and full of clichés? Whence came such emotional power?

I couldn't let go of the questions.

In Old English I, Professor Bayless widened the context of the literature with pictures of Anglo-Saxon artifacts (chalices, silver hoards, Sutton Hoo treasures) and copies of pages of original manuscripts in beautiful Anglo-Saxon minuscule hand. She brought to class a reproduction of a claw-beaker that she had bought in England. By bringing alive the historical reality of the period, these teaching tools at least raised the study of Old English above the tediousness of noun endings for some students, but for me they opened vistas. To hold the claw-beaker transported me to the hall of the lord; to look at the manuscript pages put me in the scriptorium of the monk.

Then in Old English II the poetry I was reading began to reveal – or tantalizingly half-reveal – the world it came from. In *The Wife's Lament*, for instance, when the speaker tells us she was forced to live in an *eorðscræfe*, an "earth-shaft" or "earth-pit" –

> Heht mec mon wunian on wuda bearwe,
> under actreo in þam eorðscrafe (27-28)
>
> A man ordered me to live in a grove of trees,
> in an earth-pit under an oak tree –

I thought, "In a *what*? Was she living in a *cave*? Under an oak tree?" I envisioned something like the cave at Oregon Caves National Monument, with its large opening on the slope of a mountain and, yes, oak trees growing above it, a dank and dark home enough. But Dr. Earl told us that archeological evidence has revealed that at least some Anglo-Saxon villagers lived in roofed huts dug into the ground and placed around the

perimeter of the village (see Swearer, Oliver, Osborn 15; see also Meditations 4 and 12). Dr. Earl suggested that maybe the Wife was exiled to one of these huts at the farthest extreme of the population, far from the hall and its center of social life, close to the wilds with their bears and wolves and unknown, lurking Grendels. All at once my ignorance of these people, their culture, their history, their social relations, their architecture and art, swept over me. What was village life like? Why was exile such an extreme punishment, the Wife a *wineleas wræcca* (friendless exile), the Wanderer following *wræclast* (exile footsteps) after he buried his lord? Was the comitatus, which is so central in the heroic poetry, a fictive construct or something real in the lives of lords and thanes? The questions wouldn't let me go.

The most nagging question of all was how the poets, new to literacy, could write such sophisticated poetry. Far from struggling to express their ideas and create art with written words, they poured forth poetry as polished and refined as Yeats's or Eliot's. How could this be? (Of course, not all Old English poetry is this good. The surprise is how good the best of it is.)

Gradually I began to realize that the poetry was not new-born. It came from a deep well of oral poetry from which the literate poets drew language, images, and techniques. When the poets of *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood* begin their poems with *Hwæt!*, we feel the presence of the Anglo-Saxon scop. In the alliterative line, in stock phrases, in *Beowulf*'s attention to genealogy, we hear the echo of the scop's song. Although John Niles cautions that Old English poets, in addressing a strong Anglo-Saxon sense of nostalgia for a past that never existed, overstate the role or even posit the person

of the scop ("Myth"), oral poetry and some kind of bard certainly existed. However mythical the scop eventually became, an oral tradition underpinned the new written poetry.

Another precursor to literacy in Old English was runes. When I first read *The Dream of the Rood*, I was impressed by its prosopopoeia, a poetic technique of giving speech to an inanimate object. How brilliant, I thought, to let the Cross tell the story of the Crucifixion. Then I discovered the Ruthwell Cross, a stone cross with runes repeating lines 39-64 of the poem. The Cross could speak in stone, I found, just as it does on vellum. On the one hand I was thrilled to be present so far back in time that I was reading runes (!), but on the other hand I realized I had been praising the poet for an originality that wasn't his. Michael Swanton points out that "the attribution of personality to inanimate objects was an Anglo-Saxon commonplace" (105) – look at names for and the honored history of swords, for instance – so perhaps it was not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon England for the Cross to tell the story of the Crucifixion. Perhaps I was again (sigh) using modern standards to judge ancient people. Old English poets were not expected to be original. "Innovation, per se, was mistrusted," Michelle Brown reminds us (91). Written poems arose from oral poems; the runic alphabet preceded the Old English alphabet; *traditio* trumped *innovatio.* Old English poetry was not a spontaneous combustion from genius but an alchemy of ingredients from the past.

I was slower to recognize another ingredient in that alchemy: Latin. The poets and scribes were, it is widely accepted, monks, and literacy for a long time meant proficiency in Latin more than in Old English, even in, or maybe even especially in, the cloister

schools (LeClerq 141). Monastic libraries contained, besides books for the Christian community (service-books for liturgical performance, legendaries for reading aloud in the refectory, monastic rules, martyrologies), books for the school room and for private meditation (Lapidge 35), including copies of Vergil, Ovid, and other Latin secular writers. Their study was justified on the theological grounds that "everything that was true or good or simply beautiful that was said, even by pagans, belongs to the Christians," as LeClerq tells us (145), though he adds that the monks readily condemned "the immorality of certain texts, Ovid's, for instance; he was known to be dangerous" (149).

The monks were great copyists, and copying is a great learning tool. ("One can, of course, wonder what went on in the imaginations of the monks who slowly copied out Ovid's *Art of Love* or the comedies of Terence," LeClerq slyly comments [155].) Was it from Vergil that the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* learned zeugma and chiasmus? (See Pasternak, "Stylistic," for examples.) Was it from Latin poets that Anglo-Saxon poets developed an ear for techniques such as envelope structure – the *Wanderer* beginning and ending with a reference to *are* (mercy); four lines of *The Battle of Maldon* enveloped by *þa stod on stæðe* (Then he stood on the shore [25a]) and *þær he on ofre stod* (When he on the bank stood [28b])? When Adeline Courtney Bartlett, who first named this pattern "envelope structure," points out that "decorative detail seems to have been of paramount concern [to the Anglo-Saxons]," she adds, "In this respect, of course, the Anglo-Saxons were in entire accord with post-classical Latin rhetoric" (108). If post-Insular manuscript art was deeply influenced by classical sources – "[By the ninth century] the beast-heads in the initials chew upon fronds of classical acanthus," as Michelle Brown inimitably puts

it (85) – could those sources not also have influenced the structures and techniques of poetry? No less than oral traditions, a classical tradition underlay the sophistication of Old English poetry.

I was also fascinated by the Anglo-Saxon dualistic way of thinking, such as their concept of living simultaneously in past, present, and future (see Meditation 1). This monastic way of thinking permeates the poetry. In *The Dream of the Rood*, for instance, the dreamer sees the cross bejewelled, girded with gold, and shining with joys, but at the same time, "through the gold," he can see "all the former strife of the wretched ones (*Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte / earmra ærgewin*) – i.e., Adam and Eve. Here the poet simultaneously conflates the Crucifixion, the Fall, and the contemporary world. In lines 98-105, he fuses still more: original sin, the Crucifixion, the resurrection, the Ascendance, the Day of Judgment, and as always, the present moment. To the Anglo-Saxon, it is all happening now.

Simultaneity is also expressed in an embrace of dualities (as discussed in Meditation 7): the Cross at once an instrument of murder and of salvation, the dreamer asked to make his private vision public ("[Though] reading the poem, like having the original vision, may be a private and singular experience, the whole community of faith can become similarly enlightened through its sharing," Britt Mize points out [178]), the icon of the cross both worn on the breast and kept, iconographically, *in* the breast, and the poem partaking of both religious ritual (in references to the creed, for instance) and poetic art. These dichotomies – art/religion, spirit/materiality – were accepted as

simultaneous dualities, not, as Heather Maring reminds us, in the manner of today's distinctions, which were established in the Enlightenment [6]).

Just as *The Dream of the Rood* functions simultaneously as both religious and artistic performance (Maring 9), in *Maxims I Part I*, as James Earl says, "traditional worldly values are nested comfortably inside a transcendent Christian context" (*Thinking* 65). We see this dualistic mind-set again in the Seafarer's one foot in the physical world, the other in the spiritual world, the way I stood, once, on the northernmost tip of Denmark, with one foot in the North Sea and the other in the Kattegat, the waters swirling visibly different below me. That's the Old English poet, only he isn't looking at his feet in two worlds at once but at the sky that arches over everything, allowing all that ambiguity and temporal difference to exist at once.

Thus I was finding the cultural tendrils of my studies pulling at me with surprising strength. Beyond the fiction of the heroic society, which was created by poets from the fabric of some truth, lay runes and scops, monasteries and villages that informed the poetry as much as lords and thanes did. And even the world of lords and thanes, I discovered, could be glitteringly fascinating (see Meditations 3, 4, and 10). The dynamism of those centuries – the movements from orality towards literacy, from paganism to Christianity, from many individual warring kingdoms to a unified England – was catching me by the throat.

But the tendrils with the strongest pull, those that enwrapped me most tenderly but most tightly, winding me into a garden of delights from which there was no escape, had their roots deep in the language. My enthusiasm for the poetry wanes when I read it in

translation. Old English poems sound stilted and clumsy in Modern English, like an actor pretending that his costume has actually turned him into a king. Why do the poems sound so immediate and fresh in Old English? How can this poetry, with its tired cliches about heroic culture and its endless praises of God, create such powerful expression that I, inimical to heroics and cold to religion, would be so drawn to it? How can such a concrete language express such complex abstract thoughts? How come this poetry has such power and passion even today, twelve to fifteen hundred years after some scribe meticulously – and beautifully – inscribed it on vellum?

"All good poetry," says Wordsworth, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Or listen to Hemingway: "All you have to do is write one true sentence." Or Goethe: "First and last, what is demanded of genius is love of truth." Powerful writing comes from expressing most honestly the truth about our feelings. To read these Old English poems is to feel the overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility as the poet seeks to express in words a deeply-felt passion – a half-mythical world, a religious fever, an emotion. At least, that's how I see the poems. That's how I read their power.

The Dream of the Rood, for instance, is a religious poem. It might as well be about monsters and magic, for all I care, but for the poet, the subject matter – the cult of the Cross, the horrors of the Passion, the dedication of a life to God – is, of course, precisely the point (and it's specious of me to talk about separating subject from poem, anyway). He is writing with his entire soul, expressing ardently what he *knows* to be true. Thus the standard heroic vocabulary that he uses – *efstan elne micle* (hasten with great

courage [34]), *strang ond stiðmod* (strong and unflinching [40]), *on þyssum lænum life* (in this fleeting life [109]) – achieves a double power belied by its overused status: one, that the language comes from the stylus of a man who believes in the actuality of his words, not just their metaphorical meaning, and two, that the "overused" images have meta-references that opened vast landscapes to the original audience that we, today, can only glimpse in twinkling glimmers.

When the Cross tells the dreamer that Christ came forward to climb on it, for instance, his language doubles the power of the image. *Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes/* ***efastan elne*** *mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan* (Then I saw the lord of mankind hasten to climb on me with great courage [34b-35]) – this sentence not only presents a stirringly proud picture of Christ striving forward to meet his death, a picture that the poet vividly sees happening in actuality (This Is What Happened!), but it also associates Christ with the bold, unflinching Anglo-Saxon warrior of other poems – warriors who hasten (*Þa ðær wendon forð wlance þegenas/unearge men* ***efston*** *georne* (Then the proud thanes, bold men, went forth, hastened eagerly [into battle] [*The Battle of Maldon*, 205-206]) and warriors who have great courage (*Ic gefremman sceal eorlic* ***ellen*** ["I shall do earl-worthy courageous deeds," Beowulf boasts [636]). For the Anglo-Saxon audience, the repeated phrases, no doubt long used by oral poets, would have served as allusions that opened vistas of meaning and evoked emotional responses, in the same way that, when Prufrock says, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," an enormous deluge of meanings descends on us as readers. I may have no rapport with the poet's experience of the Passion, but I can identify with the emotional depth of the experience. And one of the

thrills of reading Old English poetry is to begin to feel, if ever so slightly, the far reach of the poetry through its meta-language, a ghostly whisper of the emotive response of the Anglo-Saxon audience.

Thus the language of the Old English poets – in *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Phoenix*, and other poems – achieves power through the honesty and sincerity of the expression. The Seafarer's hardships, the Wanderer's despair, the *Dream of the Rood*'s dreamer's religious zeal – there is nothing false, immaterial, or shallow about these expressions. They are as immediate as Hopkins's outbursts: "Look! Look at the stars!" or Rumi's ecstasy: "Let the beauty we love be what we do./There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground" or Ashberry's insights: "For although memories, of a season, for example,/Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure/That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting."

But the power of poetry is created by more than a poet's passion. It takes more than "I believe! I believe!" or "Life is hard!" to make good poetry. Old English poets (the best of them) are artists of the highest order, which means that they are craftsmen. They work the craft of poetry as intricately as the goldsmith the interlace of a brooch. I first began to sense that artistry when Dr. Earl, teaching *The Dream of the Rood*, drew diagrams of the poem's structure on the board. He drew circles within circles: the outer circle the dreamer telling us his experience, inside that the Cross telling the dreamer *its* experience, inside that the experience of Jesus on the cross; the Cross telling the dreamer to tell the story of the Cross, which is what the dreamer is doing by writing the poem, he the word-bearer, who received the vision during the time when people, word-bearers (*reordberend*), were

asleep – the poem pulling us in through one circle after another and pulling us out again. Here – so early in our poetic tradition (as, indeed, even earlier in Homer and other ancient literature that used a structure of concentric circles) – is all the complexity of *Wuthering Heights* with its multiple narrators and parallel stories that I diagram on the board for students. Not only is there a layering of narration, but there is a diagrammable movement of outer experience to inner experience, layers of empathy (the Cross takes on the pain of the Crucifixion to take it away from Christ just as Christ takes on the pain of death to redeem mankind from death), layers of irony (the Cross, the emblem of murder, becomes the symbol of salvation), layers of language (heroic, religious, legal, personal). The *Dream* poet achieves poetic coherence not by developing the poetry in terms of cause and effect, temporal sequence or other logical connections, Carol Braun Pasternak tells us, but by using structural patterns marked by parallelism and contrast to create "several distinct poetic experiences that depict the idea of the Cross" ("Stylistic" 407).

The poetry has an immediacy that belies its temporal and geographic distance from today's readers. One day in Old English I, Prof. Bayless handed out a description of Cnut's ships from an eleventh-century Latin manuscript, the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*:

> So great, also, was the ornamentation of the ships, that the eyes of the beholders were dazzled, and to those looking from afar they seemed of flame rather than of wood. For if at any time the sun cast the splendour of its rays among them, the flashing of arms shone in one place, in another the flame of suspended shields. Gold shone on the prows, silver also flashed on the variously shaped ships. So great, in fact, was the magnificence of the fleet, that if its lord [Cnut] had desired to conquer any people, the ships alone would have terrified the enemy, before the warriors whom they carried joined battle at all. For who could look upon the lions of the foe, terrible with the brightness of gold, who upon the men of metal, menacing with golden face, who upon the dragons burning with

> pure gold, who upon the bulls on the ships threatening death, their horns shining with gold, without feeling any fear for the king of such a force?

I could easily imagine the terror that struck into the hearts of the English villagers as they stood on the bluff and watched such ships approaching, the glinting helmets and arms, the dragon prow, the powerful pull of the oars – imagine it! The immediacy of the image sent a chill down my own spine. Something of the same effect must have been behind the decision for the University of Oregon Ducks to wear helmets with mirrors at the 2012 Rose Bowl. The stadium lights struck gleaming spears of color off the helmets as the Ducks, big, strong, and powerful, ran onto the field. Surely terror pierced the hearts of the opponents.

That description of Cnut's ships, though prose, illustrates the immediacy of the poetry. When, deep in my graduate school career, already firmly committed to the study of Old English, I first read *The Wanderer*, I came to class with stars in my eyes. "What did you think of *The Wanderer*?" Dr. Earl asked, generally, and I said, "Why would anyone study any other poem after reading this one?" The other students looked puzzled. Dr. Earl looked both amused and curious, but when he asked why I felt that way, I stumbled. I wasn't ready then to defend the instinctive private response with a reasoned public response, but I think now that it was the immediacy of the poetry – its vividness – that so captivated me. The Wanderer has lost his lord, his beloved friend-lord (*winedryhtnes leofes*); he no longer enjoys the companionship of the duguth in the hall; he is in exile on the sea, alone and friendless, glory behind him and emptiness in the future. Then:

þinceð him on mode þæt he his ondryhten
clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo lecge
honda and heafod, swa he hwilum ær
in geardagum giefstolas breac. (41-44)

It seems to him in his mind that he
embraces and kisses his lord, on whose knee
he lays his hand and his head, just as in earlier times,
in yesterdays, he enjoyed the gift-throne.

The image of the man laying his head and his hand on the knee of his lord, presumably in a ceremony in the mead-hall, is a powerful expression of the close bonds between a lord and his thane. Nor is the Wanderer simply *thinking* about this moment with his lord. He is reliving it there in his boat. But then the vision disappears (*Donne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma* – Then afterwards the friendless man awakens [45]), and the Wanderer sees nothing around him but the birds splashing and dipping in the gray waves as the hail falls. This loss and its sudden, sharp re-realization stab like wounds in his heart. *Our* hearts are seared. The birds float away, not giving, in the poet's laconic litotes, "very many word-utterances" (*Fleotendra ferð no þær fela bringeð/cuðra cwidegiedda* [54-55a]) – i.e., saying nothing. Because people are known as *reordberend* (word-carriers), the lack of spoken words intensifies our sense of the Wanderer's loneliness in exile.

This is remarkably concrete writing. As Earl says about the opening lines of *Beowulf*, "There is much puzzlement in these lines, but little abstraction" (*Thinking* 9). It is true that the *Wanderer* poet uses a word for the abstract concept "sorrow" (*sorg*) (though even that could be considered concrete, if you think of emotions – joy, sorrow, love, hate, enthusiasm, lethargy, disgust – as concrete), but the power of this passage comes from the concreteness of the language. "Show, don't tell," implore our writing

teachers – or, as Mark Twain says (showing, not telling), "Don't say the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream." Because Old English is a concrete-noun-based language, its poetry is full of old ladies screaming (so to speak). In the above passage of *The Wanderer*, thirty words in the eighteen and a half lines are nouns. (Only sixteen are verbs.) Of the thirty nouns, one, used twice – *sorg* (sorrow) – is abstract. All the other nouns are grounded in thingness – the friend-lord, advice-words, sleep, the solitary man, knee, hand, head, gift-throne, and so on. The Wanderer's utter loneliness and despair are exquisitely evoked through these nouns.

Proof of the concreteness of the language is that in our own Modern English the abstract nouns are predominantly Latin-based, while our concrete nouns are mostly Old English in origin (see Earl *Thinking* 78). Think about it when nouns come your way. Or take the above paragraph as a test of the theory. These are the abstract nouns in that paragraph: concept, power, concreteness, thingness, loneliness, despair, proof, solidity, origin. Seven of these nine nouns derive from Latin (or Latin via French). Only "thingness" and "loneliness" are Old English in origin, the first coming from a very concrete Old English noun, *þing*, meaning "assembly," and the other being a contraction of two Old English words, *all ana*, meaning "all by oneself," so in the end, the two Old-English-based abstract nouns come from Old English concreteness.

Then look at the concrete nouns in the same paragraph: poet, word, passage, language, teacher, lady, line, lord, sleep, man, knee, hand, head, gift-throne, picture. Of these, "poet," "passage," "language," and "picture" are Latin in origin, and of those, "passage" and "language" are just about as abstract as they are concrete, since they evoke

very little image. The rest are from Old English: "teacher" from *tecan* (to point out); "word" from *uord*; "lady" from *hlæfdige* (loaf-kneader) and "lord" from *hlæford* (*hlæfweard* – loaf-keeper); "knee" from *cneo*; "head" from *heafod*, and so on. The theory seems to hold true: Old English is a language of exceptional concreteness. And from that thing-based language comes a poetry of searing emotional beauty. The Old English poets understand Robinson Jeffers: "Things are the hawks' food,/and noble is the mountain."

Once these four tendrils – language, craft, honesty, and concreteness – had pulled me into a study of Old English poetry, I found, to my surprise, that the poets could also speak to me with *what* they were saying as well as *how* they were saying it. Through the mists of the intervening centuries and out of their cultural persuasions so different from my own, they were my soul companions, even though my situation is not theirs, any more than their answers to our common spiritual and existential searches are mine. They find an answer in God, I in nature. I live in the woods, where my soul takes sustenance from nature; they take comfort in human habitations – the hall, the monastery – that protect them from the threats of nature and provide essential human companionship. In *The Wife's Lament*, *The Wanderer*, and *Beowulf*, exile from society – solitude – is the worst of fates – "for heroic society, the solitary figure is invariably suspect and probably vicious, an object of fear and distrust," Michael Swanton says (61), though for both the Seafarer and the monk of *The Dream of the Rood*, as for me, solitude is a deliberately chosen path, a religious one for them, a balm from the clamor and noise of the world for me.

In all cases, their impassioned cry for a meaningful existence strikes a deep chord in me. For many years I have lived in a little house on the mountain (and I live there still)

because I, like Thoreau, wanted "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." This life I live has been the best way I have found to live deep. Therefore I resonate with characters in literature who delve, no matter how painful the journey, no matter the level of success or loss, into their deepest passions, who struggle to live a meaningful life. If Catherine's wild, fervent love for Heathcliff and her heartbreaking resignation to marriage with dull Edgar speak to my own desire to live true to that which I love, is it no wonder I respond to the Wife's similar heartbreaking resignation to the forced separation from the man she loves?

Ful oft wit beotedan
þæt unc ne gedælde nemne deað ana
owiht elles; eft is þæt onwhorfen,
is nu swa it no wære
freonscipe uncer. (21b-25a)

Full often we vowed
that nothing but death alone would divide us,
nothing else. Afterwards is that turned around.
It is now as if it never were,
our friendship.

If I thrill to Quentin telling Shreve the story of his family in the South, full of Faulkner's Big Words of how a person should live ("courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty") because I, too, search for what makes a person good, is it no wonder I thrill to the Wanderer as he contemplates, in his loneliness on the sea, how a wise man should behave?

Wita sceal geþyldig,
ne sceal no to hatheort ne to hrædwyrde,
ne to wac wiga ne to wanhydig (65b-67)

A wise man must be patient.
He must he not be too hot-hearted, nor too hasty of speech,
nor too weak in battle, nor too dark-minded

(etc.; he goes on in like manner for fifteen lines). If I love Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry for its depth of expression of spiritual agonies because I, too, have known that

"…the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there,

is it no wonder I hear a ring of truth when the Seafarer expresses a like spiritual agony?

Þæt þa mon ne wat
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ
winter wunade wræccan lastum (12-16)

This the man does not know –
the man to whom things happen most fair on earth –
how I, deep in misery, endured the ice-cold sea,
endured winter in the tracks of exiles.

My point is not that I like to dwell in existential darkness and soul-frenzied passion but that I resonate with impassioned living. Thomas Berry, a twentieth-century monk who wrote *The Dream of the Earth*, said that in the human species "the universe comes to itself in a special mode of conscious reflection" (16). To me the Old English poets exemplify exactly that: a special mode of reflection of the universe's consciousness, a relationship between the self and the higher realities – call them God or nature or the universe – as they, the poets, delve into the question of what it means to be human and how to find meaning in life: Beowulf fighting threats from without; the Seafarer deliberately choosing the hardships of life at sea; the dreamer of the rood's Passion dedicating his life to seeking the Tree of Victory (i.e., the cross; i.e., Jesus the Redeemer).

“To be a reflection of consciousness for the universe” is a good condensed phrase for that to which I have dedicated my life.

One reader of my book, *Living with All My Senses: 25 Years of Life on the Mountain*, told me, "Reading these essays makes me glad to be human." I treasure this response, especially since we live in a world in which all too often we feel more like Huck Finn, who, watching the deceits of the King and the Duke, said, "It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race." The Old English poets make me glad to be human. For all the years of my adult life, I have been learning to live a life the most consonant with my own soul. And that, I think, is what the Anglo-Saxon poets, in the poems I respond to most deeply, are also doing.

I am not sure if I have done the tough critical work in this afterword that James Earl asks for, but I have tried to bring to consciousness my unconscious relations with the poems. I have tried to express and explain my intuitive reactions and the poems in relation to my values, and that's a pretty hard thing to do. But I wanted you to glimpse some of what sparked a passion in me for this poetry, why I find it both beautiful and compelling. If you are an undergraduate, I hope you are inspired to look into the language yourself. If you are a university professor, I hope my experience has given you some insight into new ways to approach teaching Old English poetry. If you are an Old English scholar, I hope these pages have nudged you in new directions of thought. And if you are simply a reader who likes poetry and language, who reads widely for the joy of learning, who has a lively curiosity for new ideas and for old, mysterious cultures, I hope you have found in these pages some of the joy I find in the language and its poetry.

APPENDIX A

SOME TRANSLATIONS OF *THE PHOENIX* 291-313

Charles W. Kennedy (2000)

That fowl is fair of hue before, gay with varied colours on its breast; its head is green behind, varied wondrously, blended with scarlet. The tail is fairly divided, part brown, part crimson, cunningly beset with brilliant spots. Its feathers are white behind, the neck green under and above, and the nib gleameth like glass or gem; the jaws are fair within and without. The nature of its eye is stark, in hue most like to stone, or gleaming gem, when set in a golden goblet by cunning of smiths. Rough about its neck it is like unto the circle of the sun, brightest of rings woven of feathers Comely is the belly underneath, and wondrous fair, bright and lovely. The shield is wrought with beauty above the fowl's back. The legs are grown with scales, the feet are yellow. The fowl is single in its beauty, most like the peacock, winsomely grown, as the writings tell.

S. A. J. Bradley (unknown date)

The bird is handsome of colouring at the front, tinted with shimmering hues in his forepart about the breast. His head is green behind, exquisitely variegated and shot with purple. Then the tail is handsomely pied, part burnished, part purple, part intricately set about with glittering spots. The wings are white to the rearward, and the throat, downward and upward, green, and the bill, the beautiful beak, inside and out, gleams like glass or a gem. The mien of his eye is unflinching, in aspect most like a stone, a brilliant gem, when by the ingenuity of the craftsmen it is set in a foil of gold. About the neck, like a circlet of sunlight, there is a most resplendent ring woven from feathers. The belly below is exquisite, wondrously handsome, bright and beautiful. The shield above, across the bird's back, is ornately yoked. The shanks and the tawny feet are grown over with scales. This bird is in every way unique of appearance, nearest in likeness to the peacock, blissfully mature, of which writings speak.

A. K. Gordon (1926)

The bird is ever fair of hue, bright with varied shades in front round the breast; green is its head behind, wondrously mingled, blended with purple. Then the tail is beautifully divided, part brown, part crimson, part artfully speckled with white spots. The wings are white at the tip and the neck green, downward and upward; and the beak gleams like glass or a jewel; bright are its jaws, within and without. Strong is the quality of its eye and in hue like a stone, a bright gem, when by the craft of smiths it is set in a golden vessel. About its neck like the round of the sun is the brightest of rings woven of

feathers. Of rare beauty is the belly beneath, wondrous fair, bright and gleaming. The covering above, over the bird's back, is joined together with rich array. The legs and yellow feet are overgrown with scales. The bird is wholly peerless in aspect, like a peacock of fair growth, of which writings speak.

Burton Raffel (1960)

The phoenix's breast is a flickering rainbow
Of color, bright and beautiful. The back
Of his head is green, delicately, wonderfully
Mixed with purple, and his tail is spread
In lovely divergence, some parts brown,
Some purple, some incredibly spattered
With shining spots. His wings whiten
At the tip, his neck is green below
And above, his beak gleams as though set
With glass or jewels, and his jaws shine
Inside and out. His eyes are strong
And glow as gloriously bright as gems
Held by some wondrous art in sheets
Of thinly-hammered gold. A garland
Of feathers flares around his neck
Like a ring around the sun.
His stomach
Is brilliant and bright, nobly worked.
His shoulders and all his upper back
Are feathers; scales cover his legs
And his red-yellow feet. This is a bird
Unlike all others, or like the thousand-eyed
Peacock that scholars describe, growing
And strutting through an aura of color and delight.

J. Leslie Hall (1902)

Phoenix is in front fair to look upon,
His bosom embellished with a blending of colors:
On the back of his head, green and crimson
Blend together in beauty and harmony.
The tail of the bird is beautifully mingled,
Brown and purple, with plashes of brightness
Beauteously embellished. The bird's wings are
White at the tips, his neck green both
Above and beneath, and his neb glisteneth

Like glass or gem, his beak fair to look on
Within and without. His eyeball (?) is strong,
In form and in shape a stone resembling,
A glittering jewel, when in golden vessel
By the craft of the smiths ‘tis set cunningly.
His neck encircling, like the sun’s halo,
Is the brightest of rings woven of feathers.
Beauteous his belly is, bright and gleaming,
Marvelous sheen. The shield, above, on the
Back of the Phoenix is joined with ornaments.
The legs of the bird are with scales covered,
His fallow feet. The Phoenix is wholly
Lovely to look on, likest the peacock
Blooming in bliss, as the books tell us.

APPENDIX B

THE SEAFARER, COLOR-CODED FOR INTERLACE

Mæg ic be me sylfum soþgied wrecan,
siþas secgan hu ic geswincdagum
earfoðwhile oft þrowade,
bitre breostceare gebiden hæbbe,
gecunnad in ceole cearselda fela,
atol yþa gewealc. Þær mec oft bigeat
nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan
þonne he be clifum cnossað Calde geþhrungen
wæron mine fet, forste gebunden
caldum clommum, þær þa ceare seofedun
hat ymb heortan. Hungor innan slat
merewerges mod. Þæt se mon ne wat
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð
hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ
winter wunade wræccan lastum,
winemægum bidroren,
bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag.
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
urigfeþera. Nænig hleomæga
feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte.
Forþon him gelyfeð lyt, se þe ah lifes wyn
gebiden in burgum bealosiþa hwon,
wlonc ond wingal, hu ic werig oft
in brimlade bidan sceolde.
Nap nihtscua, norþan sniwde,
hrim hrusan bond, hægl feol on eorþan,
corna caldast.
Forþon cnyssað nu
heortan geþohtas þæt ic hean streamas,
sealtyþa gelac, sylf cunnige.
Monað modes lust mæla gehwylce
ferð to feran þæt ic feor heonan

elþeodigra eard gesece.
Forþon nis þæs modwlonc mon ofer eorþan
ne his gifena þæs god ne in geogupe to þæs hwæt
ne in his dædum to þæs deor ne him his dryhten to þæs hold
þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe,
to hwon hine Dryhten gedon wille.
Ne biþ him to hearpan hyge ne to hringþege
ne to wife wyn ne to worulde hyht,
ne ymbe owiht elles, nefne ymb yða gewealc.
Ac a hafad longunge se þe on lagu fundað.
Bearwas blostmum nimað byrig fægriað,
wongas wlitigað, woruld onetteð.
Ealle þa gemoniað modes fusne
sefan to siþe, þam þe swa þenceð,
on flodwegas feor gewitað.
Swylce geac monað geomran reorde,
singeð sumeres weard, sorge beodeð
bitter in breosthord. Þæt se beorn ne wat
esteadig secg, hwæt þa sume dreogað
þe þa wræclastas widost lecgað.
Forþon nu min hyge hweorfeð ofer hreþerlocan,
min modsefa mid mereflode
ofer hwæles eþel hweorfeð wide,
eorþan sceatas, cymeð eft to me
gifre ond grædig gielleð anfloga,
hweteð on wælweg hreþer unwearnum
ofer holma gelagu. Forþon me hatran sind
Dryhtnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif,
læne on londe. Ic gelyfe no
þæt him eorðwelan ece stondeð;
simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce
ær his tidege to tweon weorþeð:
adl oþþe yldo oþþe ecghete
fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð.
Forþon þæt bið eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
lof lifgendra lastworda betst,
þæt he gewyrce, ær he on weg scyle,
fremum on foldan wið feonda niþ,
deorum dædum deofle togeanes,
þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen
ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum
awa to ealdre, ecan lifes blæð,

dream mid dugeþum. Dagas sind gewitene,
ealle onmedlan eorþan rices;
nearon ny cyningas ne caseras
ne goldgiefan swylce iu wæron
þonne hi mæst mid him mærþa gefremedon
ond on drythtlicestum dome lifdon.
Gedroren is þeos duguð eal, dreamas sind gewitene,
wuniað þa wacran ond þas woruld healdaþ,
brucað þurh bisgo. Blæd is gehnæged,
eorþan indryhto ealdað ond searað
swa nu monna gehwylc geond middangeard.
Yldo him on fareð, onsyn blacað,
gomelfeax gnornað, wat his iuwine,
æþelinga bearn, eorþan forgiefene.
Ne mæg him þonne se flæschoma, þonne him þæt feorg losað
ne swete forswelgan ne sar gefelan,
ne hond onhreran ne mid hyge þencan.
Þeah þe græf wille golde stregan
broþor his geborenum, brygan be deadum
maþmum mislicum þæt hine mid wille,
ne mæg þære sawle þe biþ synna ful
gold to geoce for Godes egsan,
þonne he hit ær hydeð þenden he her leofað.
Micel biþ se meotudes egsa for þon hi seo molde oncyrreð.
Se gestaþelade stiþe grundas,
eorþan sceatas ond uprodor.
Dol biþ se þe him his Dryhten ne ondrædeþ: cymeð him se deað unþinged.
Eadig bið se þe eaþmod leofaþ cymeð him seo ar of heofonum.
Meotod him þæt mod gestaþelað forþon he in his meahte gelyfeð.
Stieran mon sceal strongum mode ond þæt on staþelum healdan;
ond, gewis werum wisum clæne,
scyle monna gehwylc mid gemete healdan
wiþ leofne ond wið laþne bealo
þeah þe hine wille fyres fulne
oþþe on bæle forbærnedne
his geworhtne wine. Wyrd biþ swiþre,
meotud meahtigra þonne ænges monnes gehygd.
Uton we hycgan hwær we ham agen
ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen
ond we þonne eac tilien þæt we to moten
in þa ecan eadignesse,
þær is lif gelong in lufan Drhytnes,

hyht in heofonum. Þæs sy þam halgan þonc
þæt he usic geweorþade, wuldres ealdor,
ece Dryhten in ealle tid.
Amen.

APPENDIX C

CRITICAL EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Critical editions

Krapp, Geroge Philip and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed. *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition*. New York: Columbia UP, 1931-53..

Muir, Bernard J., ed. *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*. Vol. I, Texts, Vol. II, Commentary. Exeter: UP, 1994.

Fulk, R. D., Robert E. Bjork, John D. Niles, ed. *Klaeber's* Beowulf, Fourth Edition. Toronto: UP, 2008.

Klinck, Anne L. *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992.

Mitchell, Bruce, and Fred C. Robinson. Beowulf*: An Edition with Relevant Shorter Texts*. Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 1998.

Translations

Beowulf translations are myriad. Here are some recommended ones:

Heaney, Seamus, tr. Beowulf*: A New Verse Translation*. Bilingual edition. New York: Farrar, 2000.

The current most popular translation, though it is uneven, to my ears, sometimes cheeky and colloquial, sometimes formally heroic.

Chickering, Howell D., tr. *Beowulf*. New York, Doubleday, 1977.

Obviously an older translation, but still reliably consistent and the one I turn to most often. This, too, is a bilingual edition.

Osborn, Marijane, tr. Beowulf: *A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*. Berkeley, U of CA P, 1983.

My favorite. The translation is lively but not cheeky, and the illustrations from Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Scandinavian artifacts are marvelous.

Other Old English Poetry

Gordon, R. K., tr. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. London: Dutton, 1954.

Another old translation that holds up well. The main advantage of this book is that it contains all the poetry (epic, religious, elegiac, etc.). Because they are prose translations, they are of more limited use for the scholar but are a good introduction to the general reader to the material.

Delanty, Greg, and Michael Matto, ed. *The Word Exchange: Anglo-Saxon Poems in Translation*. New York: Norton: 2011.

The editors selected contemporary poets to translate one poem each for this anthology. Thus we are treated to a variety of poetic responses to the original material, some closer to the Anglo-Saxon poet's language and ideas than others. This is the best book currently available for reading the poems. A further advantage is that the book is a dual language edition. Altogether a gem.

APPENDIX D

GLOSSARY

alliteration	the repetition of beginning sounds of words: e.g., from *The Ruin* – ***w****rætlic is þes* ***w****ealstan*
alliterative line	the obligatory form of Old English poetry, consisting of two half- lines with three (or four) alliterating words, two of which must be in the first half-line and one (or two) in the second half-line: e.g., from *The Ruin* –***w****rætlic is þes* ***w****ealstan* ***w****yrde gebrœcon.*
anaphora	repetition of words at the beginning of lines: e.g., in *The Seafarer* – ***forþon*** *cnyssa*ð *...,* ***forþon*** *nis þæs modwlonc ...,* ***forþon*** *min hyge hweorfe*ð
comitatus	the tight-knit companionship of warriors who serve their lord
duguth	the group of warriors who pledge loyal service to their lord on the battlefield and who create, along with their lord, a camaraderie in the hall that is at the center of Anglo-Saxon society
envelope pattern	a poetic pattern in which a phrase or idea begins a passage and occurs again at the end of the passage, enclosing the intermediate lines within the envelope of that idea
eth [*ð*]	one of two "th" letters of the Anglo-Saxon alphabet
Exeter Book, Junius manuscript Vercelli Book Nowell Codex	the four manuscript books that contain all the Old English poems we know
flyting	a battle of words, insult answering insult
gnome	a wise saying that declares a universal fact
hapax legomenon	the term for a word that occurs only once in the entire Old English corpus

interlace	a term referring to the interweaving of elements in Anglo-Saxon art, as seen in the complex pattern of interlaced legs and tails of border-art animals in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. The term is also applicable to the complex interweaving of variations in Old English poetry and even to the same sort of interweaving of plot in *Beowulf*.
kenning	a compound expression, usually a noun made from two independent nouns, creating a metaphorical name for something. “Whale-road” for “sea.” “Bone-house” for “body.”
litotes	a literary understatement, giving something emphasis by presenting its diminishment or an affirmative is expressed by a negative of the contrary, as in “He is not a bad king,” meaning, “He is a great king.”
prosopopoeia	personification; from Greek, “to make a mask”
scop	the Anglo-Saxon bard; the poet-singer of the oral tradition. (Pronounced “shope.”)
Sutton Hoo	the tomb of a seventh-century king in Suffolk, found in 1939 and containing weapons, battle gear, personal ornaments, and many other items
thane (or “thegn”)	the warrior who served his lord
thorn [þ]	the other “th” letter in the Old English alphabet. Eths and thorns are not used with any noticeable difference between them in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. The choice may simply be the copyist’s.
variation	the poetic device of parallel phrases in apposition to each other – two, three, or more variations of a statement, listed one after the other, usually with slightly different connotations to enrich the original statement
wergild	the set price a killer pays in compensation to the family of the person he killed

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