

BOOK I

OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE TO THE NORMAN CONQUEST

1. POETRY

THE earliest poem still extant in the English speech is *Widsith*, 'the far-traveller,' recording the journeyings of an imaginary singer among the Teutonic tribes of the continent in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. It gives us an outline, which we may fill in with detail from other poems, such as *Deor's Lament* and *Beowulf*, of the place of the 'scop,' or king's harper and remembrancer, in the social fabric of our ancestors. He appears as the honoured companion of kings, the recorder of heroic exploits, the memoriser of lays and stories of the past, which he chanted in the meadhall after the hunt or the battle. These lays developed, in time, by the passage from mouth to mouth, and, no doubt, by the finer artistic skill of some individual 'scop,' into epic poetry. This may be the evolutionary history of the early English epic *Beowulf*, shaped from pre-Christian lays in Northumberland in the eighth century, though the only MS existing is in a dialect

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of king Alfred's time. *Beowulf* may interest us in various ways: as a story; as a picture of a social system; as a repository of fragments of other Teutonic epics; and as an example of heroic style. Its three thousand lines tell, with many digressions, the life story of Beowulf, who sails from his native Gautland in Sweden to the succour of Hrothgar, a king in Zealand, because his hall Heorot is being ravaged by Grendel, such a monster as vivid imaginations might suppose to inhabit the damp and gloomy forests behind the sea-board. Beowulf, who has the strength of thirty men, tears an arm from the monster and drives the fiend to its lair. Attacks are resumed by Grendel's mother, and Beowulf achieves a second hard-won victory in a cave beneath a lake, powerfully described by the poet. Thus, peace is restored to Heorot, and Beowulf returns to Gautland to become, after many years, its trusted and honoured king. He engages, finally, in a third conflict, with a dragon, keeper of a buried treasure (a common feature of Teutonic stories), in defence of his own hall and country. By the aid of his shield-bearer, Wiglaf, he is victorious, but at the cost of his life. The poem ends with a eulogy of his justice and valour by his thegns over the mound where his ashes are buried.

In all probability, these three splendid fights are based on a myth, or on some folktale, adapted to the hero's story. But we can discern behind these events a strongly marked social economy, at its head the king, round him the thegns, and, more dimly seen, the lower ranks or ceorls. It is a life lived, like the Homeric, in the open, with little enough privacy;

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and the poetry is a poetry of action, devoid of subtleties of thought and feeling, a record of things done. Hunting, feasting, voyages, warfare, savage, and sometimes treacherous, feud, are the chief concerns. There is much about the ocean and ships, but no feeling of affection for the sea, rather the pride of conquest, as in Beowulf's swimming match. Strength, daring and the instinct for command are the most approved qualities, though the hero himself has many gentler traits, and, in a rugged way, is conscious of the lack of wife and children. There are references to institutions like the king's body companions, were-gild or blood-money, the nightly feast in the meadhall, with the gracious figure of the queen, held in highest reverence, pouring out the mead, and bestowing gifts, collar, armlet and mantle upon the hero. Then, benches are pushed aside, bolsters are spread and the thegns sleep with arms at hand. Many arts have developed; the hall Heorot is finely ornamented with gold, rich in famous swords and trophies of adventure, hung with embroidered tapestry; people are skilled in fashioning war-gear, ringed mail and boar-crested helmets; and the art of song is almost universal. They have no humour except that of grim challenge and competitive boasting—a common national trait, not to be judged by our standards. The religious feeling of the poem is, as it were, in two strata, pagan and Christian. The characters submit unprotestingly to 'wyrd,' or fate; and there is both melancholy and dignity in this fatalism, which never condones dishonour. 'Death is better for every warrior than a life of infamy,' is Beowulf's standard. The customs and rites, too, are

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heathen throughout. But the sentiment and reflection are largely Christian; king Hrothgar, for instance, speaks warningly of pride of strength and possessions. We are forced to conclude, therefore, that the poem was still in the process of making when it passed to minstrels who had been influenced by Christianity.

This full, well-ordered life, this grave discourse, these courtly manners, this long-practised art of epic poetry—for it must have taken centuries to perfect the verse-form and establish the current synonyms for hero, sword, sea, ship and the like—show us that we are viewing the advanced civilisation of a race with a great and varied history, the Germania, in fact, of Tacitus. The poem, also, is the repository of fragments of other sagas. We hear of Scyld, a Dane; of Sigemund, father of Sigurd the Volsung; of another Beowulf, a Dane; of Finn, a Frisian, who has some relation with another Old English poem, *The Fight at Finnsburh*, describing a typical fierce onset, with the ringing clash of separate blows, by small bodies of men in a tight corner. *Beowulf* is evidently but a fragment of the great northern *corpus* of stories which includes the *Nibelungenlied*, and the tales told in magnificent narrative prose in the Icelandic sagas. The racial tradition, the dignity and valour of the hero and the style give the poem an epic rank, which its mere story, as it exists to-day, would not win for it. It is written in Old English alliterative measure, in which the rhythm depends upon accent; the line is divided into two parts, each containing two main accents. These accents

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must fall on the emphatic words in the sentence; as a general, but not quite invariable, rule, two of these accented syllables in the first part, and one in the second part, of the line are alliterated, that is, they begin with the same letter (in the case of vowels, any vowel may be supposed to give alliteration with any other). The number of unaccented syllables is indifferent so long as they do not put too large a strain upon the normal rhythm. A line with so much freedom as this adapts itself readily to the poet's moods and purposes; landscape, battle, description of valiant exploits and elegiac meditation are equally well expressed in this vigorous and flexible measure; the style of the poem, in fact, often seems to be greater than its matter. There are few complete similes in the Homeric manner, but the diction is essentially figurative, and some of these figures become picturesque conventions; the sea is the whale-path; a ship, the foamy-necked one; the king, a gift-bestower; an arrow, a war-adder. Furthermore, there is a tendency to excessive use of apposition, which, together with a deficiency of particles, makes the story, however vigorously told, move slowly.

With this early poetry must be classed some short charms or pagan incantations for such occasions as bewitched land or stolen cattle; and of finer quality are five elegiac lyrics, the most original of all Old English poetry.

Lyric
 In *The Wanderer*, the person spoken of, bereft by destiny of his chief and comrades, seeks to evade the bitter companionship of sorrow; a dream restores a momentary vision of joy, but, soon, the solitary

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poet awakens to realise that man is at the mercy of night, storm, winter and mortality. *The Ruin* is a picture of a town (possibly a Roman settlement, such as Bath), laid waste by violence and time; the poet conjures up in imagination its towers, pinnacles, courts, its flowing springs and halls filled with the mirth of warriors; these, he contrasts with the ruined masonry, fallen gates and frost-bespangled lime. *The Seafarer* describes, perhaps in a dialogue, the emotion and fascination of a sailor, lured to the bitter and lonely sea again, in spite of its peril and hardship. *The Lover's Message* and *The Wife's Complaint* are the only Old English verse based on the theme of love; the former is a message carried by a wooden tablet, recalling old affections and bidding the one addressed to join the sender beyond the sea; the latter, the plaint of a woman falsely accused and banished, is full of the despair of separation.

This group of poems, evidently the mere wreckage of a great literature, is decisively pagan in origin; but the Christian elements are intimately fused; there is a kind of compromise between the old and new beliefs. The pagan system of society, art and morals out of which the poems arose suffered three successive shocks from the southern world of Roman culture and religion. The first, at the conversion by St Augustine (though Irish missionaries from Iona had been long at work, and Whitby was a Celtic monastery). The second, at the accession of the scholar-king Alfred. The third, at the Norman conquest. What is left of Old English poetry enables us to mark the encroachment, at first very gradual, of Christianity upon pagan feeling.

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Before the Christian spirit was fully manifested in literature, the church had been established a hundred years. Most Old English poetry was written in the dialect of Northumbria, though preserved for us in the dialect of Saxon Wessex; for Northumbrian civilisation, with its libraries at Jarrow, where Bede dwelt, and at Whitby, was the centre of European culture for a century, and Charles the great found there his educational adviser Alcuin, just before it was destroyed by Danish invasions.

Only two names (one of them, Cynewulf, doubtfully authentic) can be assigned as authors of the Biblical verse of Northumbria, Caedmon and Cynewulf. There is a well-known story, told by the venerable Bede, of how, at Whitby, Caedmon the neatherd, who had not the gift of song, was suddenly inspired to sing about the creation; the song Bede attributes to him is closely parallel to the opening of the poem *Genesis*, which, with *Exodus*, *Crist and Satan* and *Daniel*, forms the school of Caedmon. *Genesis*, to which the picture of Satan's torments in *Paradise Lost* may be indebted, has two parts, divergent in style, *A* and *B*. *A* is a paraphrase of the scriptural text, with expansions of the warlike episodes and the flood; *B*, the finer part, records again the fall of the angels. *Exodus* is a forceful description of the disaster of the Egyptians at the Red sea. *Crist and Satan* gives one of several pictures in Old English of the harrowing of hell.

In this way, the Christian religion first found its lodgement in Old English verse; from the Bible

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were eagerly taken certain stories, especially those animated by a spirit akin to the existing heroic lays; the grim, primitive pugnacity common both to Hebrews of the Old Testament and to our forefathers makes possible such an association of poetry with the sacred book of Christianity as we may see in *Genesis* and *Exodus*.

The later school of Cynewulf, who is supposed to have signed his name in runic characters in
 Cynewulf *Crist, Juliana, Fates of the Apostles*
 and *Elene*, is also responsible for
Andreas, The Dream of the Rood, Guthlac and
The Phoenix. The titles of the poems are indicative of the change in the choice of material; in place of the more ferocious themes of the Old Testament, we find here stories of the New Testament, of saints' lives and of the martyrology; the mystical introspective spirit of Christianity is reflected in them and the pictures of landscape and seascape are gentler. They have, at the same time, a more polished art, though this may seem to be at the cost of the rude vigour of their predecessors. *Andreas*, the story of a voyage of the apostle Andrew to rescue St Matthew, contains a sublime description of storm; *Elene* tells of the finding of the true cross by Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine; its descriptions of the sea and of the embarking hosts close with the poet's conversion and adoration of the cross, a theme dealt with in the dramatic though brief *Dream of the Rood*. The cross speaks with subtle and passionate emotion of the agony it shared with the young hero Christ. *Guthlac* is a martyr's conflict with fiends. *The Phoenix* is the most

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inventive creation of the school, giving to the legend an allegorical significance and a background of exquisite natural and mystical beauty in the sinless land. Some of the *Riddles*, with their finely descriptive effects, may be by Cynewulf. The remaining verse includes a *Physiologus*, which is concerned with the animal symbolism of the art of the catacombs, and a dialogue *Salomon and Saturn*.

Reviewing the poems of the two schools, all written in the alliterative measure, we may see that religious innovations are more vital in the Cynewulfian group; in the Caedmonian, only the matter—the narrative of the *Pentateuch* and the book of *Daniel*—is given from without: the working up is by a poet similar in temper to the composer of *Beowulf*, and everything is translated into terms of the viking heroic age. The Cynewulfian poets, dealing with the contrasted matter of the gospels, remote from pagan sentiment, bring to its treatment a gentler spirit, though they still use some of the phrases of *Beowulf*. The Caedmonian hero wars with his foes and with the sea for fame, admitting no master but fate, and finding battle the necessary outlet for a natural instinct in him; the instinct did not die out of Old English life, for we find it in full activity in the war poetry of the *Chronicle* in the tenth century. The Cynewulfian hero, whether Christ or the saint, battles with fiends or with persecution or with torments for the sake of his fellows and for the glory of God. Thus is indicated the passage into a new world; from the civilisation which lies at the back of *Beowulf* and Old Norse

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verse, the Icelandic sagas and the Old German epic to the civilisation of Latin Christianity.

2. OLD ENGLISH PROSE

We may first name briefly writers in Latin: Gildas author of *The Destruction of Britain*; the shadowy **Latin Writers** Nennius, a historian; bishop Aldhelm; the venerable Bede; and Alcuin, who, in 792, went to serve Charles the great. Bede lived at Jarrow from 672–735, and wrote numerous scientific and theological manuals, all over-shadowed by his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Race* 731. Its five books cover the period from the invasion of Caesar to the year 731. Bede was a writer whose scholarship and discernment entitle him to rank among the great historians of our literature. This wide Latin culture, centred both in Northumbria and at Canterbury, was swept away by the Scandinavian irruptions, and learning did not raise its head again till, a century later, the idealist **King Alfred** sought its alliance in consolidating the kingdom of Wessex. No worker in the cause of education ever faced more disheartening circumstances. In all the country south of the Thames not a priest could be found able to read Latin, and only two north of it. The *Latin Life of Alfred* by the Welsh cleric Asser, and Alfred's own preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, inform us of the enterprises which the king set on foot in his two periods of comparative leisure 888–93 and 897–901. He instituted a court school for the reading of Latin and English, sought out scholars abroad and translated or instigated the