

Old English Studies 1901–1975

Literary criticism is scarcely an autonomous enterprise; rather, it is intimately connected with the intellectual currents of the era when it is produced. About these currents several things can be said. One is that they are usually in a state of flux and turbulence. Another is that they are a bit obscure to most persons until they have become passé. At that point they will become increasingly subject to stereotyping by the thinkers of subsequent generations, who will often find it comforting to gaze back at those ideas with a mixture of condescension and contempt. This state of affairs is likely to continue until such time as the ideas in question have been dead and buried so long as to merit an act of archaeological recovery, at which point someone will rediscover them, with mild fanfare, as noteworthy contributions to intellectual history.

Regardless of the truth-value of these propositions, the criticism of Old English literature can be most meaningfully understood when it is seen as a development of – or, sometimes, a reaction against – trends that were influential at an earlier moment in history. The same comment applies to those prior trends. The present guide to criticism will therefore approach its subject by adopting a motto that is ignored at one's peril in literary studies: namely, 'Always historicize.'

Before considering some aspects of the criticism of Old English literature published during the last forty years or so, then, I will first review some leading work dating from the first three quarters of the twentieth century. The writings of the scholars of that period are of interest in their own right. If their work is ignored these days, then that may be owing less to its intrinsic merits (though it cannot all be said to be equally brilliant or meritorious) than to the fact that neither the students of today nor, far less, their teachers, can be expected to have read everything about everything.

The Earlier Twentieth Century

In all respects but one, Anglo-Saxon scholarship was on a fairly sound footing by the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ By that time, the Old English language could be studied under trained professionals at more than four dozen universities located on at least two continents.² By the 1930s and 1940s, moreover, the foundations of the field were beginning to look rock solid. Philological scholarship undertaken on both sides of the Atlantic had gone far to establish the basis for understanding Old English texts at least as far as their linguistic and formal features were concerned. The close relationship of Old English religious literature to the much larger body of Latin Christian literature of the early Middle Ages had been fairly well charted as well, though more nuanced work of this kind remained to be done. Also well charted, as much as could be done given the scattered nature of the evidence, was the deep well, or whirlpool, of stories from the Northern past to which the allusions to legendary history in *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, *The Fight at Finnsburg*, *Deor*, and *Waldere* pertain.

By this time, the great majority of Old English texts that had survived into the modern period had been made available in reliable scholarly editions, thanks in part to two comprehensive series of editions of verse and prose undertaken in Germany, where the Anglo-Saxon period was approached as a branch of Germanic philology. These were C.M.W. Grein's *Bibliothek der angelsächsische Prosa* and his and Richard P. Wülker's *Bibliothek der angelsächsische Poesie*.³ Moreover, certain of the freestanding scholarly editions that date from approximately this same period exemplify editorial practices that have stood the test of time. An example is Felix Liebermann's parallel-text edition of Anglo-Saxon laws, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*.⁴ This magisterial three-volume resource has remained in standard use for over a century, though a consortium of scholars associated with the Early English Laws project currently plans to replace it.⁵ Likewise, the scholars Albert S. Cook, Frederick Tupper, and R.W. Chambers produced outstanding editions of poems from the Exeter Book of Old English poetry, thus setting high standards for the editing of verse. These editions covered respectively the first three items in the Exeter Book (known today as the Advent Lyrics, Cynewulf's signed poem *The Ascension*, and *Christ in Judgement*);

¹ The history of Old English scholarship up to 1901 is treated in my companion volume *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066–1901: Remembering, Forgetting, Deciphering, and Renewing the Past* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

² J.R. Hall, 'Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Nineteenth Century: England, Denmark, America', in Pulsiano & Treharne, 434–54 (at 449).

³ *Bibliothek der angelsächsische Prosa*, ed. Christian W.M. Grein et al., 13 vols (Cassel, 1872–1933); *Bibliothek der angelsächsische Poesie*, ed. Richard P. Wülker, 3 vols (Cassel, 1881–98). This latter publication represented a revision of the two-volume edition with the same title that Grein had produced in 1857–58.

⁴ Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols in 4 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1903–16). The centennial of the publication of this work has recently been the occasion of a celebratory volume, *English Law before Magna Carta: Felix Liebermann and 'Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen'*, ed. Stefan Jurasinski, Lisi Oliver, and Andrew Rabin (Leiden: Brill, 2010). In the first of these chapters Rabin provides a brief biographical tribute to Liebermann.

⁵ For information on the current laws project see www.earlyenglishlaws.ac.uk.

the complete set of riddles; and *Widsith*.⁶ Each of these editions remains a treasure-trove of information sifted by a scholarly mind of great distinction. When one takes into account as well that Eduard Sievers's authoritative German-language grammar of the Old English language, his *Angelsächsische Grammatik*, had been in existence since 1882;⁷ that a complete and, for that time, an authoritative dictionary of the Old English language was at last completed in the year 1921, when T. Northcote Toller brought out the second volume of his and Joseph Bosworth's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*;⁸ and that in 1934 Ferdinand Holthausen brought out a reliable etymological dictionary of Old English, one that has since been supplemented though never replaced,⁹ then it is clear that Old English philological research was solidly anchored by the end of the first third of the century.

The quality of historical scholarship, too, reached a high level during roughly this same period. This is true both of research focusing on textual sources (chronicles, charters, wills, and other documents) and work in such ancillary fields as archaeology, art history, material culture, and place-name studies. Exemplary research in all these areas was conducted in Germany and Scandinavia.¹⁰ The most influential continental scholar to be writing on *Germanistik* during this period – that is, on Germanic antiquities studied along the capacious philological lines established by Jacob Grimm by the mid-nineteenth century – was Andreas Heusler, a philologist and literary historian of the first rank.¹¹ Indispensable guides to research in this area were provided by the entries in Johannes Hoops's *Realexikon*

⁶ Albert S. Cook, *The Christ of Cynewulf: A Poem in Three Parts* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1909); Frederick Tupper, Jr, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1910); and R.W. Chambers, *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912). Cook and his scholarly milieu are the subject of a discerning study by Michael D.C. Drout, 'The Cynewulf of Albert S. Cook: Philology and English Studies in America', *English Studies* 92 (2011): 237–58.

⁷ Eduard Sievers, *Angelsächsische Grammatik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1882 and subsequent editions). This was translated into English by Albert S. Cook as *An Old English Grammar* (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1885); 3rd edn, 1903. The German edition is now superseded by *Altenglische Grammatik, nach der angelsächsische Grammatik der Eduard Sievers*, 3rd edn, ed. Karl Brunner (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1965).

⁸ T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921). This volume represents an indispensable complement to the earlier one, titled *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth*, ed. T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898).

⁹ Ferdinand Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1934); 2nd edn with a bibliographical supplement, 1963.

¹⁰ A helpful review of nineteenth-century European scholarship is provided by Hans Sauer, 'Anglo-Saxon Studies in the Nineteenth Century: Germany, Austria, Switzerland', in Pulsiano & Treharne, 455–71. Sauer takes note of landmark publications of the earlier twentieth century as well, demonstrating their connections with this earlier period.

¹¹ See especially Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Potsdam: Athenaion, 1926), 2nd edn, 1941; this treats Old English poetry alongside Old German and Old Norse literature. For a biographical tribute see Heinrich Beck, 'Andreas Heusler (1865–1940)', in *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, vol. 2, ed. Helen B. Damico (New York: Garland, 1998), 283–96.

der germanischen Altertumskunde, a four-volume encyclopedia featuring articles on all aspects of *Germanistik*. This publication has now been replaced by a magnificent collaborative second edition published in no fewer than thirty-five volumes.¹² Another major contribution to Anglo-Saxon studies in this wider sense was Vilhelm Grønbech's three-volume study *Vor folkeæt i oldtiden* (*The Culture of the Teutons*), published in Danish in 1909–12 and translated into English somewhat later.¹³ This wide-ranging inquiry into ancient social institutions such as the feud, marriage, and gift-giving has retained much of its value despite being based on an obsolete concept of the essentially unitary culture of the early 'Teutonic' (or 'Germanic') peoples. Of additional importance was a study of *Beowulf* by the Swedish scholar Knut Stjerna, published posthumously in 1912, that correlated that poem's references to material culture to finds in prehistoric Swedish Iron Age archaeology, thus filling out our knowledge of 'the world of Beowulf' while at the same time confirming the credibility of the poet's descriptions of weapons and other material objects.¹⁴ Recent discoveries have extended such archaeological connections as these well beyond Swedish soil.

In England, steady advances in historical scholarship pertaining to the Anglo-Saxons reached a high water mark with Frank Stenton's 1943 landmark study *Anglo-Saxon England*.¹⁵ Stenton (1880–1967) was educated at Keble College, Oxford, and was later appointed professor of history at Reading University (1926–46), where he also served as Vice-Chancellor. His detailed account of the period from late Roman Britain up to the establishment of the Norman state was then – and remains today – a remarkable work of synthesis, based as it is on the author's competence in political and constitutional history, social and economic history, the history of Christianity in early Britain, and such other sources as numismatics and place-name studies. One can scarcely conceive of an historian living today who could write a book of similar scope without being dependent on Stenton at many points. Complementing Stenton's historical research was that of Dorothy Whitelock (1901–82), whose year of birth happened to coincide with major celebrations held in Winchester in 1901 to commemorate the

¹² *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Johannes Hoops, 4 vols (Strassburg: Trübner, 1911–19); 2nd edn 1968–2008 (Berlin: de Gruyter). The second edition includes a certain number of articles written in English.

¹³ Vilhelm Grønbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, 3 vols in 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), translated by W. Worster from *Vor folkeæt i oldtiden* (Copenhagen, 1909–12).

¹⁴ Knut Stjerna, *Essays on Questions Connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*, trans. and ed. John R. Clark Hall (Coventry: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1912). This English publication was based on independent articles published originally in Swedish.

¹⁵ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943; 3rd edn, 1968). For an assessment of Stenton and his commanding place among British historians of his era, see Henry Loyn, 'Anglo-Saxon England', in *A Century of British Medieval Studies*, ed. Alan Deyermond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7–26. Another tribute, co-authored by Michael Lapidge and Stenton's wife Doris M. Stenton, is included in *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, ed. Michael Lapidge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 247–83.

millennium of the death of King Alfred the Great. The edition of Anglo-Saxon wills that Whitelock completed in 1930 demonstrated her mastery of early medieval documentary sources.¹⁶ Equally at home in both literary and historical scholarship, Whitelock was appointed Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Cambridge in 1957, holding that post until her retirement in 1969. Leaving aside her other significant publications, her book *The Beginnings of English Society* is admired by many as the best short social history of the Anglo-Saxon period.¹⁷ A third English scholar of this period to make invaluable contributions to Anglo-Saxon studies was N.R. Ker (1908–1982), who has been characterized as ‘the greatest scholar that Britain has ever produced’ in the field of manuscript studies.¹⁸ Born in London though of Scottish family background, Ker graduated from Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1931, and in succeeding years he was appointed successively Lecturer in Palaeography (in 1941) and then Reader in Palaeography (in 1946) at Oxford. His 1941 study *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* sought to reconstruct the holdings of medieval libraries whose contents had since been dispersed or lost. His greatest contribution to Old English scholarship was to come a decade and a half later in the form of his 1957 book *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon*.¹⁹ This supplanted, after an interim of 250 years, the catalogue of manuscripts containing Old English that the antiquarian scholar Humfrey Wanley had completed in 1705. Folded into the Introduction to Ker’s book is a succinct guide to Anglo-Saxon palaeography.

The contributions to Anglo-Saxon studies made by other scholars based in the UK have been celebrated elsewhere.²⁰ Work done by several of them will be noted here in due course.

¹⁶ *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930). Whitelock’s career is reviewed by Henry Loyn in his study ‘Dorothy Whitelock, 1901–1982’, in *Medieval Scholarship: Biographical Studies on the Formation of a Discipline*, vol. 1, ed. Helen B. Damico and Joseph B. Zavadil, (New York: Garland, 1995), 289–311; by Loyn in Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, 427–37; and by Jana K. Schulman, ‘An Anglo-Saxonist at Oxford and Cambridge: Dorothy Whitelock (1901–1982)’, in *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 552–63.

¹⁷ Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956; 2nd edn, 1968).

¹⁸ A.I. Doyle, ‘Neil Ripley Ker, 1908–1982’, in Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, 473–82 (at 482), quoting from an obituary published in the *Bodleian Library Review* in 1983.

¹⁹ N.R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1941; 2nd edn, 1964); *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957). Supplements to Ker’s *Catalogue* are listed in the Select Bibliography at the end of the present book. Ker is the subject of a biographical tribute by Kevin Kiernan, ‘N.R. Ker (1908–1982)’, in *Medieval Scholarship*, vol. 2, ed. Damico (New York: Garland, 1998), 425–37. See also Richard W. Pfaff, ‘N.R. Ker and the Study of English Medieval Manuscripts’, in *Readings: MSS*, 55–77.

²⁰ Particularly in Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*. This book consists for the most part of obituaries, reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy*, of medievalists active during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially during the period 1900–1950.

Literary Criticism: A Slow Start

One area of Old English scholarship in which only intermittent progress was made during the first half of the twentieth century was literary criticism. To a large extent, persons who wrote about Old English literature were doing so in a belletrist manner, praising the poetry, in particular, for its real or imagined virtues and castigating its real or imagined vices. Approaches of this kind tended to shed their appeal as the century progressed. In addition, early twentieth-century criticism tended to be rooted in attitudes that were rapidly losing their persuasive power. Since many critics were subject to late Romantic influences as embodied in such a book as Francis T. Palgrave's *Landscape in Poetry*,²¹ what especially captivated their attention were depictions of nature in its wilder forms. Criticism tended to focus on images of heroic men battling either the elements or each other, when they were not carousing. Moreover, some of this criticism was still anchored in nineteenth-century solar mythology, which tended to allegorize works of imaginative literature as representing the conflict of summer versus winter or of the sea versus the land. Interpretations along such lines began to look increasingly passé in an era when earlier modes of perception were being assaulted by Fauvism, Cubism, Vorticism, Surrealism, and other radical movements in the arts.

Another factor slowing the emergence of literary criticism in the current sense of that term was the connection, among some writers though not all, of Anglo-Saxon studies with racist modes of thought. At least until the outbreak of the First World War, certain writers were frank in their promotion of the idea that practically all good things that pertained to the English, from their language to their moral character and their free democratic institutions, could be attributed to their German heritage. A noteworthy study along such lines was Frances B. Gummere's book *Germanic Origins*, published in 1892 and, tellingly, reissued in 1930 under the less polemical title *Founders of England*.²² Gummere (1855–1919) was for many years professor of English at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, having previously undertaken postgraduate studies at Harvard University and at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, where he earned the doctorate in 1881. In *Germanic Origins*, which was his major contribution to the field apart from his translations of Old English heroic poetry into a vigorous alliterative metre,²³ he argues that the English race, or 'our race' as he more inclusively calls it, is German to its core. In his view the Germanic-speaking ancestors of the English were of pure race, large physique, and passionate disposition, much as the Roman historian Tacitus had described them at the end of the first century AD. The free German was a warrior, 'and in the hour of rage or battle, his blue eyes flashed an uncanny fire' (p. 58). His bleak northern environs had an effect on his character: 'These swamps, these vast and sullen forests' made him 'of fitful and passionate temper, savage, inclined to

²¹ Francis T. Palgrave, *Landscape in Poetry from Homer to Tennyson, with Many Illustrative Examples* (London: Macmillan, 1897).

²² Frances B. Gummere, *Germanic Origins: A Study in Primitive Culture* (New York: Scribner, 1892), reissued as *Founders of England*, with supplementary notes by Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr (New York: Stechert, 1930). My quotations are drawn from the 1930 edition, which is unchanged from the earlier one except for its title and some notes added by Magoun.

²³ Frances B. Gummere, *The Oldest English Epic: Beowulf, Finnsburg, Waldere, Deor, Widsith, and the German Hildebrand* (New York: MacMillan, 1909).

gloom or to unchecked revelry' (ibid.). At the same time, the free German honoured 'the sanctity of the household, and in consequence the inviolable character of marriage' (p. 137). He had a natural 'passion of bravery', and as a chief virtue he cultivated fearlessness in the face of death. At one point Gummere comments as follows about the alliterative metre in which virtually all Old Germanic verse was composed: 'The very meter of their poetry is the clash of battle, and knows scarcely any other note' (p. 232). Thanks in part to such praise as this, Anglo-Saxon studies took on a retrograde appearance in the eyes of scholars who, cultivating a cosmopolitan outlook, turned their critical attention elsewhere.

One factor that contributed to a growing division between Anglo-Saxon studies and later English literary studies was the split that occurred in the liberal arts curriculum at the University of Cambridge when Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947), who from 1912 to 1941 held the post of Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, founded a new academic department focused on the integrative study of Old English language and literature alongside Celtic studies, Old Norse studies, and other kindred subjects including history, prehistoric archaeology, and social anthropology.²⁴ Chadwick is perhaps best known today for his book *The Heroic Age* (1912), which developed the thesis that every early civilization went through a process of evolution that resulted, at an early stage, in a tradition of heroic oral poetry. According to this view, *Beowulf* and other Old English heroic verse could best be studied alongside the Homeric epics, the Old Irish sagas, and similar works grounded in archaic social institutions.²⁵ Regardless of that debatable claim, Chadwick and other like-minded scholars were persuaded that the ancient literatures of the British Isles were best studied in an integrative fashion, and the influence of that idea remains strong today.

The academic unit founded by Chadwick at the University of Cambridge, which continues in existence as the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic (ASNC), has had a major role in advancing Anglo-Saxon studies within a broad interdisciplinary framework, launching the career of many a distinguished medievalist.²⁶ Its influence on the development of Old English literary criticism is another matter. Under Chadwick's arrangement of the disciplines, Anglo-Saxon studies fell outside the curriculum for students concentrating in English. Correspondingly, the study of Old English literature at Cambridge tended to remain untouched by the kinds of questions being asked by leading literary critics, including such a figure as F.R. Leavis (1895–1978), who served for some decades as Director of Studies in English at Downing College, Cambridge. It was Leavis more than any other British intellectual who was responsible for establishing literary criticism as a key element of mid-twentieth-century academic discourse. Although Leavis is associated with no one school of criticism, his writings staunchly proclaimed the value of the study of literature in

²⁴ On Chadwick and his career see the tribute by J.M. de Navarro in Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, 195–218.

²⁵ H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912). A similar evolutionary theory underlies the wide-ranging work of comparative literary scholarship that H.M. Chadwick subsequently wrote in conjunction with his wife Nora Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932–40).

²⁶ Some very distinguished ASNC graduates (including Bruce Dickins, Dorothy Whitelock, and Peter Hunter Blair) are enumerated by Michael Lapidge in his chapter on 'Old English' in Deyermond, *A Century of British Medieval Studies*, 363–81 (at 372–73).

its connection to modern life.²⁷ But Leavis and his followers had little to say about English authors prior to Shakespeare, while Chadwick's concept of Anglo-Saxon scholarship left little room for post-medieval studies. This division became less pronounced when Whitelock in the 1960s brought the Anglo-Saxon tripos back into the School of English, thereby opening up closer communication between Anglo-Saxonists and modern critics.

While the situation at Cambridge was a unique one, it was symptomatic of a larger phenomenon. There existed – and, to some extent, there still exists – an opinion, held by persons situating themselves on either side of an intellectual divide, that the critical methods appropriate to the study of modern literature and those applicable to Old English literature have little to do with one another, given the different character of these two historical periods. Such an attitude persists in certain circles even though some distinguished poets and fiction-writers of the current era have been deeply affected by their reading of Old English literature.²⁸

Two Scholars Representative of their Eras

In order to trace how attitudes towards Old English literature shifted over the first fifty years of the twentieth century – and to trace how in some ways they remained the same – it will be helpful to compare two books published close to the years 1900 and 1950, respectively. Each of these studies shaped the reception of that literature in a manner that must once have seemed definitive. One is by the London-based clergyman Stopford A. Brooke (1832–1916), the other by the American university professor George K. Anderson (1901–1980). These two authors are worth singling out for attention in part because, for the most part, they gave voice to the received views of their respective eras, as opposed to striving for originality. In addition, each of these books was widely read by specialists and non-specialists alike, thereby influencing the tenor of subsequent criticism.

Stopford A. Brooke's survey *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest*, first published in 1898, was often reprinted during subsequent decades on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁹ A native of County Donegal, Ireland, Brooke attended University College, Dublin, before being ordained to the ministry in London, where he lived until his death in 1916. His success as a professional writer can be judged from the fact that sales of a primer that he wrote titled *English Literature* (first published in 1877) topped half a million copies during his lifetime. Significantly, Brooke withdrew from the Church of England in 1880, citing his inability to accept the Church's teachings on the incarnation. To the extent that he continued to preach the faith after that date, he maintained Unitarian sympathies.

Brooke's survey of pre-Conquest literature favours the secular and heroic elements of Old English literature at the expense of its religious ones. In its introductory chapter,

²⁷ Various assessments have been made of Leavis's career and influence; see for example Michael Bell, 'F.R. Leavis', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 7: *Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. A. Walton Litz et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 389–422.

²⁸ See Chapter 11, 'Translating, Editing, and Making It New', where twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors are discussed whose careers were transformed by their study of Old English.

²⁹ Stopford A. Brooke, *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest* (London: Macmillan, 1898), repr. 1899, 1903, 1908, 1912, etc.

Brooke writes in a well-informed manner about the isle of Britain and its ancient inhabitants, from the peoples of the ancient Stone Age to the respective arrivals of Celts, Anglo-Saxons, and Christian missionaries from Rome. Significantly, he speaks of the Anglo-Saxon settlers of Britain as simply ‘the English’, thus emphasizing the continuity of that people up to the present day rather than their continental Germanic origins. Like Gummere, however, he sees those incomers as having formed the nucleus of English national identity well before the arrival of Roman Christianity to Britain’s shores. ‘By that time’, he writes, referring to the arrival of St Augustine’s missionaries in the year 597, ‘the special language, character, customs, ways of thought and feeling of the English people had so established themselves, that they remained [...] the foundation power, the most enduring note in our literature from the poems of Cædmon to the poems of Tennyson, from the prose of Ælfred to the prose of today’ (pp. 19–20). Brooke thus sees no need to credit the Christian church with having had a transformative impact on either the character or the literature of the English.

With a confidence that may now seem excessive, Brooke characterizes the English as having been in their origins ‘a singing folk’ (p. 39). Moreover, he asserts that the earliest English-speaking inhabitants of Britain had worshipped ‘the Heaven and the Earth, the Father and Mother of all things, and their son, the glorious Summer, who fought with the Winter and the Frost Giants’ (p. 41). Brooke thus views certain Old English healing charms as pagan survivals that bear no more than a thin veneer of Christianity. His manner of reading *Beowulf* is along similar lines. He postulates that even though in its present form this work reflects the shaping presence of an eighth-century poet as well as some Christian editing, the main body of the poem arose on the Continent in the form of heathen sagas and lays. Following the German scholars Karl Müllenhof and Ludwig Ettmüller, Brooke identifies the hero of *Beowulf* as, in origin, the ancient god Beowa, ‘the god of the sun and of the summer’. The hero’s battles against Grendel and Grendel’s mother, correspondingly, represent in their core meaning the ancient struggle of summer versus winter. The dragon episode is annexed to the same supposed struggle, ‘the oldest myth in the world’ (p. 59). Brooke associates Grendel and his mother with indigenous inhabitants of the northern regions who, fleeing from invaders, took up their abodes ‘in the dark woods and moors, among the cliffs and caves, beyond the strip of cultivated land along the sea-shore’ (p. 66). There they nursed their grievances, and venturing out from there they made horror-inspiring raids on the newer settlers. Brooke is indifferent to the fact that the *Beowulf* poet twice gives a different account of the origin of the Grendel creatures, ascribing them to the seed of Cain in a manner consistent with a large body of medieval learned writings.³⁰ As for Beowulf the hero, he represents for Brooke ‘the English ideal of a prince and warrior of the seventh century’ (p. 64). The hero’s admirable moral qualities are encapsulated in his unbreakable courage in spite of Wyrð, whom Brooke identifies as ‘the Fate Goddess of the North’ (p. 64).

Literature on Christian themes receives little praise in these pages. Brooke speaks of the ‘dull monotony’ of the biblical verse paraphrase known as *Daniel*, for example (p. 148). In the poems of Cynewulf, likewise, ‘we miss, with some regret, the bold, unconscious heathen

³⁰ Medieval traditions about the descent of monsters from the seed of Cain were discussed in detail as early as 1906 by Oliver F. Emerson, ‘Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English’, *PMLA* 21 (1906): 831–929.

note, the rude heroic strain' of earlier Germanic verse (p. 150). One poem of a religious character that Brooke singles out for praise is *Judith*, though what he finds uplifting in it is not its devotional spirit but rather its joyous treatment of the themes of liberty and patriotism. The ancient Jewish heroine Judith, to him, has a martial character 'like Joan of Arc'; and he adds, as a courteous tip of his hat to the imagined women of Anglo-Saxon England, that 'I do not doubt that there were many Englishwomen of the time capable of her warlike passion, and endowed with her lofty character' (p. 147). Another Christian poem that Brooke praises is *The Dream of the Rood*, which he admires for its blending of Christian doctrine with 'heathen war poetry and myth' (p. 101). His allusion here is to the use of heroic diction in a poem that, in his view, is indebted to the Old Norse myth of the death of Baldr. Ignoring this poem's manifest theological content, Brooke admires the way that Christ is imagined as a hero who meets his death unflinchingly, just as Beowulf does. 'It is the death and burial of an English hero' that the reader can identify with here (p. 101). As for the elegiac poems of the Exeter Book, in his view they have 'few if any connections with Christianity' (p. 152). Likewise, the Exeter Book riddles are 'heathen in heart' (p. 159), including certain ones that are 'of such primæval grossness' that, he infers, they must have been composed by a layman who lived a 'Bohemian' life, singing his riddles from hall to hall (p. 158). What Brooke must be alluding to here are the 'sex riddles', which, despite earlier thinking to the contrary, have recently been shown to have analogues in the medieval learned tradition.³¹

Old English prose has little interest for Brooke. What he most admires about the literature of this period is its poetic depictions of man plunged into the midst of a harsh natural world: 'What is most remarkable in the Elegies, as in many of the *Riddles*, is their pleasure in the aspects of wild nature' (p. 154). He cites for special admiration 'the fierce doings of the tempest and of the frost on the German ocean' in *The Seafarer* (whose Christian elements he views as an accretion), or 'the driving sleet and the snow sifted through with hail' of *The Wanderer* (pp. 154–55).³² In keeping with a trend in early twentieth-century criticism, he sees in these scenes not just a fascination with untamed nature, but also a psychological correlative to the inner state of the poet. In his view, Old English literature deserves to be studied precisely for its parallels with a modern sensibility. This attitude exemplifies a common tendency in belletrist criticism; namely, to be quick to praise those features of a past or foreign literature that are thought to coincide with the sentiments of one's own time and place, while either ignoring or disparaging those elements that resist this kind of assimilation.

Offering a sharp contrast to Brooke's impressionistic style of criticism is George K. Anderson's survey *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons*, published in 1949.³³ Born in 1901, Anderson spent his early childhood in China, Brazil, and Hong Kong before attending

³¹ Note Mercedes Salvador-Bello, 'The Sexual Riddle Type in Aldhelm's Enigmata, the Exeter Book, and Early Medieval Latin', *PQ* 90 (2011): 357–85.

³² Rather than exploring images of untamed nature in Old English literature, Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), directs attention to how poets depict nature in such a way as to define the leading traits of human society, as well as to highlight the workings of God in the creation.

³³ George K. Anderson, *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), repr. in 1962 by Russell & Russell, New York.

Phillips Exeter Academy and then Harvard University, where he earned the PhD in 1925. From 1927 to 1972 he held the position of professor of English at Brown University in Rhode Island. Anderson can be caustic when assessing the merits of Old English literature, almost as if he wished to demonstrate that the evaluation of Old English literature by a learned North American critic writing at mid-century could be hard and objective, free from parochialism, aesthetic effusions, or racist or patriotic biases. Backward-looking in some ways, forward-looking in others, often discerning in the quality of his judgements though not always so, Anderson too expresses the *Zeitgeist* of his book's time and place of origin.

In keeping with accepted views of the early Middle Ages, Anderson regards the Anglo-Saxons as invaders and conquerors who went on to become founders of England. He shares the long-standing conviction that 'it is from these fierce, virile bands of Germanic marauders that the Englishman has derived many of his habits of thought, much of his law and his social usage, the larger portion of his ethnic stock, and the entire framework of his language.' In his view, moreover, 'the Englishman has changed surprisingly little in temperament and in philosophical outlook from his ancestors of a thousand years ago' (p. 3). Since he regards Anglo-Saxon England as firmly separated from the Roman world (p. 10), he tends to minimize the role of Latin education in the making of Old English literature. Instead, he cites as basic strands in the Anglo-Saxons' outlook on life 'the loyalty to king and state, the love of action and adventure, the moral earnestness implicit in the conservative adherence to an established code of conduct'. Unlike Gummere and Brooke, however, he presents an unflattering picture of certain Anglo-Saxon character traits, speaking of 'the grimness at need, the persevering and unimaginative plodding and muddling, the near-fatalistic acceptance of life as a sombre fight that must be endured to the setting of the sun'. These humourless traits, states Anderson – who, we should remember, was writing in pre-Monty-Python days – are 'all part and parcel of the English approach to living' (p. 4).

While asserting that 'the Anglo-Saxon [...] was not entirely an unseeing clod of barbarism', Anderson suggests that 'there was a grim vigor and vitality to his crudeness which can still assert themselves when we read his literature' (p. 16). This is apparently meant as a kind of praise. But the horizons of the Anglo-Saxon were constricted, according to Anderson: 'he possessed also an abysmal ignorance of the world outside his little community, and this ignorance continued among his people as a whole until long after the Norman Conquest' (pp. 20–21). As for the impact of Christianity on early England, Anderson has little to say about it apart from some glowing praise of Bede's Northumbria. While he views the period before the Conquest as scarcely admitting of evolutionary change – 'The social history of the Old English period seems to have been remarkably static' (p. 17) – the coming of the Normans introduced a clean break with the past: 'The Norman Conquest of 1066 is in the nature of a national upheaval and marks the beginning of a new era in English history, the Middle English period. With that period we have here nothing to do' (p. 27). Anderson's acceptance of a binary divide between two periods of history and literature, the Old English and the Middle English, is likely to strike present-day researchers as one of the least helpful of his premises.

In a manner that may seem surprising today but that is in keeping with views held widely during his lifetime, Anderson draws upon environmental determinism as a way of accounting

for the character of the Anglo-Saxons and their literature. Climate and geography strongly affected the authors of that time, in his view (pp. 42–43):

[Theirs] is precisely the sort of literature that one could expect from a people who lived in a damp climate, in raw sea-driving winds, with more than a happy share of foggy, overcast days in which sunlight too often shone feebly or was lost altogether. This literature, in all its forms, is inclined to speak but little of the all too brief northern summer; instead, it is cast in the mood of autumn and winter, to which spring comes but slowly if at all.

Anderson thus relates the more sombre aspects of Old English literature not to medieval Christian pessimism about the things of this world, but rather to the dreariness of the weather. It remains a mystery how these same British Isles also came to produce such authors as Shakespeare, Fielding, and Dickens, among other writers unencumbered by an unrelievedly soggy disposition.

In his concept of Anglo-Saxon poetry as being essentially primitive in spirit, Anderson reveals himself to be a man of his time. 'To the modern reader', he writes, 'it is inevitably the pagan elements in Old English literature which make it most attractive.' An example he cites is the 'tumultuous carnage' of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, a poem that he associates with the pagan past even though it was composed in mid-tenth-century England. Moreover, he sees in this poem an ancient Darwinian pattern, 'the spectacle of the ruthless survival of the fittest' (p. 45). Correspondingly, rather like Brooke, he sees *Beowulf* as 'the characteristic expression of a people in the hero-worshipping stage of their tribal civilization'. Old English poetry in general strikes Anderson as childlike in character: 'it exhibits [...] the childlike love of sound, rhythm, and fancy that is habitually associated with an untutored people' (p. 45). Correspondingly, he finds the alliterative verse form used by the Anglo-Saxons to be in essence a clumsy and ineffective medium, rather than its being the generative force producing the poetry's more flamboyant stylistic effects, as some might think today (p. 49):

As is the case with all such formalistic poetry, the devices frequently get in the way of the poetic spirit, and technique often supplants essential poetry. The exigencies of alliteration, much more formidable than those of simple end-rime, require that the poet use words which alliterate, whether or not the alliterating words are the best that could be used. The repetitiousness clogs the syntax, to say nothing of the metrical movement, of the verses and gives a curious cloudiness or muddiness to many lines of the poetry [...] The general effect rendered is frequently that of great poetic naïveté.

Anderson's negative characterization of the Old English poetic style is understandable, seeing that mid-twentieth-century critics tended to admire poetry marked by terseness, economy, irony, and the use of verse-forms that broke with the requirements of traditional metre. Old English verse could readily be thought to be form-ridden if judged by such standards as these.

The large problem point in Old English poetry, in Anderson's view, is its incongruous mixture of pre-Christian and Christian elements. Assuming that Old Germanic legends, sagas, and lays had been transmitted from the Continent to Britain via oral tradition, Anderson supposes that it was in that insular context, with the advent of a literate clergy, that such poems were 'finally reduced to writing, subject to the philosophical comment or

religious editing natural to their eventual redactor' (p. 58). Accretions, digressions, and modifications had thus come to mar the original narratives. *Beowulf*, in particular, is seen to contain an abundance of 'platitude and of Christian admonition' resulting from this process of redaction (p. 67). Moreover, this process resulted in odd contradictions, as in those passages where 'Fate (*Wyrd*) and her warriors, both the doomed and the undoomed, wrestle with the Christian God for supremacy' (p. 68). Anderson follows a well-established tendency in the modern critical literature to identify *Weird* or *Wyrd*, capitalized so as to personify that entity, as an autonomous pagan power acting independently of God.³⁴ In like manner, the Exeter Book elegies are seen to be essentially pagan in spirit. *The Wanderer* is 'stoical in tone', and only the last few lines of that poem, which are 'weak and intrusive' in Anderson's view, are of Christian inspiration. 'This is one case where pagan negation is artistically triumphant', he writes (p. 159), disregarding the possibility that certain modes of stoicism were valued within the framework of Christian spirituality. *The Seafarer* too, in Anderson's view, is to be read in naturalistic and psychological terms rather than religious ones. The speaker of this poem is 'a man who loves the sea and hates it, who has had cause to remember the sufferings it had wrought on him and so must return to its bosom'. The second half of *The Seafarer* – the overtly Christian half – has little interest for Anderson: 'it is static and pious and has no intimate relation to the earlier portion, although it does not necessarily form any illogical disunity' (p. 161). In sum, in his view, 'for all its pagan vitality', this poem 'did not escape the almost inevitable Christian adulteration' (p. 161). I quote this passage at a certain length because it is so expressive of the dominant critical thinking of its day.

Anderson's book was thus an important publication that will now seem a dated one. At its end, playing devil's advocate perhaps, Anderson remarks that the Anglo-Saxon period was 'Church-ridden', while the literature of that time 'lacks sensuousness and brilliance' and so might be thought to have 'little esthetic appeal' (p. 411). It is not clear if he himself subscribes to these negative assessments or not. The virtue of his book is that he presents a straightforward, learned, and carefully documented overview of a large body of Anglo-Saxon poetry and prose. Moreover, in a marked departure from previous studies of this literature, he devotes no fewer than six chapters to Old English prose, in addition to one on Anglo-Latin literature. Perhaps the main value of Anderson's book lies in these chapters, however cursory some of them are, since Old English prose had been so broadly neglected prior to this time. Indeed, in the closing section of his book, Anderson claims with some confidence that 'the immediate future of scholarly investigations' in Old English literary studies will be devoted to 'the widening of our knowledge of [...] hitherto neglected areas of the field', including 'the nearly forgotten prose', prose homilies in particular. To judge from this reflection, Anderson was something of a prophet.

During the quarter-century following the publication of Anderson's book, from roughly 1950 to 1975, a small revolution occurred in the critical reception of Old English literature.

³⁴ Excerpts from the modern criticism that are expressive of changing attitudes to *wyrd*, fate, and fatalism are gathered together with a running commentary by E.G. Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past: The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism and Anglo-Saxon Trial by Jury* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 85–109. The first half of this two-part book, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, was published on its own in book form in 1975. Stanley exposes the fallacies involved in interpreting *wyrd* as Anderson suggests.

Changes in the tenor of Old English scholarship are perhaps more noticeable during those years than during any other period of comparable length in the history of the field. Later in this chapter I will discuss three or four books dating from 1971–72 that exemplify these many-faceted changes. Before that, however, notice should be taken of certain publications that prepared the way for these developments. This will entail, as well, taking account of the critical reception of *Beowulf* during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the section that immediately follows will deal with some new directions in literary criticism during the years after 1950. This will be followed by a section on *Beowulf* criticism from the earlier twentieth century to the 1970s, with special attention to J.R.R. Tolkien.

New Directions after the Second World War

What is remarkable about Old English literary criticism during the period from about 1950 to 1975 is not just its quality and its diverse nature, but also its plenitude when compared with what was produced during earlier eras. While this phenomenon can be traced on both sides of the Atlantic, it is particularly evident in North America.

To some extent, the explosion in the criticism of Old English literature that occurred after the end of the Second World War can be attributed to social factors affecting North American society at large. One of these was the growth of departments of English, together with the establishment of academic programs in Medieval Studies, as part of an across-the-board expansion of colleges and universities during the late 1940s and 1950s.³⁵ Another factor was a boom in North American scholarly publishing, partly as a result of the founding of a number of new journals specializing in English literature or medieval studies. The post-war absorption of many former members of the Armed Forces into higher education thanks to the enlightened provisions of the GI Bill (the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) had a transformative impact on the university culture of this time, as well. So did the emigration from Europe into North America of numerous persons of intellectual distinction, including (but not limited to) Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. At certain universities, the influence was felt of outstanding scholar-teachers who promoted the study of Old English poetry with attention to its aesthetic qualities, as revealed through close philological analysis. Harvard University, where Francis P. Magoun, Jr, William Alfred, and Morton Bloomfield were influential teacher-scholars, and Yale University, where the beneficent influence of John Collins Pope was felt, offer examples of the importance of this kind of personal contact for young scholars setting out in their careers.

Things were somewhat different in Great Britain. Although such factors as the ones just mentioned can be traced in post-war Britain to some extent, both the depressed economy of the UK during the post-war era and the traditions of scholarship there differed markedly from their counterparts in North America. If a corresponding increase in the volume of Old English literary criticism can be traced in the British Isles at this time, it was less pronounced. Traditional philological and historical scholarship, however, continued to be

³⁵ Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), provides an overview of academic literary studies in the USA from their beginnings through the 1960s, including discussion of the 'great explosion in graduate programs' (p. 155) that began in the 1940s and reached its height in the 1950s and 1960s.

undertaken at a very high level in the UK, while fresh developments in archaeology, including the spectacular discoveries made at Sutton Hoo, East Anglia, in 1939, though published only later, stimulated research in that field while contributing to the public visibility of Anglo-Saxon studies.

One prerequisite for advanced literary criticism at this time was the publication of expert English-language scholarly editions of the surviving corpus of Old English texts. Setting a standard in this regard was the series *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (ASPR), edited by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie in six volumes from 1931 to 1953.³⁶ This is so even though the decision to limit the scope of ASPR to verse texts – a necessary decision, from a pragmatic perspective – leads to certain oddities. The metrical charms published in volume six of ASPR, for example, are abstracted from their manuscript context and hence dissociated from the prose healing texts that surround them. What may be the most important context for their interpretation is therefore missing from this volume. Moreover, the production of critical editions of certain whole manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon period – cover to cover, including both verse and prose and including both Latin and Old English texts where the two languages are used side by side – would provide a valuable complement to the ASPR series and other modern editions. Still, approximately three generations of scholars have by now been well served by these editions. The fact that they are standardized in format and hence amenable to the production of concordances and lexical databases has likewise been a great aid to research. Another major publication series, one that began in the early 1950s and has continued for more than half a century, is *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile* (EEMF). Produced with the aim of preserving a permanent record of manuscripts that were subject to destruction by chance or war, and made at a time before the production of digital facsimiles came within the realm of possibility, these volumes have served as an invaluable resource for specialists and have served to direct scholarly attention to the material text as artefact, a topic of sharp interest in recent years.³⁷

Among freestanding scholarly editions produced during the 1950s and 1960s, two editions of homilies stand out for their importance. These are Dorothy Bethurum's 1957 edition *The Homilies of Wulfstan* and John Collins Pope's two-volume edition *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, published in 1967–68.³⁸ Exemplary as a student edition is John Collins Pope's *Seven Old English Poems*. Now updated by R.D. Fulk and retitled *Eight Old English Poems*, this book is widely admired for its detailed glossary, commentary, and notes.³⁹

While historical research per se falls outside the scope of the present book, literary scholars have reason to be indebted to several mid-century publications for promoting the

³⁶ The six ASPR volumes are listed individually in the Select Bibliography at the end of this book.

³⁷ Individual volumes in the EEMF series, too, are listed in the Select Bibliography.

³⁸ Dorothy Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. John Collins Pope, 2 vols, EETS 259–60 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967–68).

³⁹ *Seven Old English Poems*, ed. John C. Pope (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966); 2nd edn, 1981; subsequently reissued as *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. John C. Pope, 3rd edn, prepared by R.D. Fulk (New York: Norton, 2001). The additional poem in the augmented edition is *The Wife's Lament*. The inclusion of this item is in keeping with self-conscious efforts being made at that time to widen the Old English curriculum so as to include more readings pertaining to women.

understanding of Old English literature within a broad cultural context. One of these, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* by the Cambridge historian Peter Hunter Blair, has long been esteemed for its judicious review of Anglo-Saxon history, social institutions, economy, literature, and learning.⁴⁰ Another volume, the anthology *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock, remains an invaluable compendium of a wide range of both Latin and Old English writings presented in modern English translation, with a substantial introduction.⁴¹ Another outstanding publication dating from slightly later is R.I. Page's *An Introduction to English Runes*.⁴² Page (1924–2012), a native of Yorkshire and a leading expert on Old Norse antiquities, was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Cambridge from 1984 to 1991, serving also for many years as librarian of the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. By cutting through much cant relating to runes and their use, Page's exemplary book has put English runology on a sound footing ever since. In the field of archaeology, the magnificent multi-volume publication *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial* throws a spotlight on the real-world basis of the descriptions of precious material objects that are featured in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems (weapons, jewellery, the harp, the ship, and so forth).⁴³ These volumes were published during 1975–83 under the supervision of Rupert Bruce-Mitchell, the keeper of medieval and later antiquities in the British Museum.

Consciousness of the constructed nature of Anglo-Saxon studies as an academic discipline began to come into focus at roughly this same time. Influential in this regard was a series of articles published by E.G. Stanley in 1964 and 1965 in the pages of *Notes and Queries*. These articles were later gathered together in Stanley's freestanding volume *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (1975), which has since been re-issued in conjunction with a second study by Stanley on a related subject, Anglo-Saxon trial by jury.⁴⁴ Stanley (b. 1923) was Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford from 1977 to 1991. His research had a major impact on the critical reception of Old English literature by showing how deeply the prior reception of *Beowulf* and other heroic and elegiac poems had been entrenched in late Romantic fallacies having to do with heathenism, fatalism, folk poetry, and 'monkish meddling' (as we have seen with reference to both Stopford Brooke and G.S. Anderson). Stanley thus pointed the way to an understanding of Anglo-Saxon literature as largely a creation of the Christian civilization of early medieval Europe with some special insular features of its own, as opposed to representing an imperfect set of survivals from an imagined northern past. In subsequent decades, Stanley's book has stimulated

⁴⁰ Peter Hunter Blair, *Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956); 2nd edn, 1977; 3rd edn with an introduction by Simon Keynes, 2003.

⁴¹ *English Historical Documents*, gen. ed. David C. Douglas, vol. 1: *c. 500–1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (London: Eyre Methuen, 1955); 2nd edn, 1979. Of related interest to Anglo-Saxonists is vol. 2 of this same series, ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, covering the period 1042–1189.

⁴² R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (London: Methuen, 1973; 2nd edn, Boydell Press, 1999).

⁴³ Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, 3 vols in 4 (London: British Museum Publications, 1975–83). Bruce-Mitchell also authored a well-illustrated single-volume guide to the subject: *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial: A Handbook* (London: British Museum, 1968); 2nd edn, 1972.

⁴⁴ See n. 34 above for publishing information.

other scholars to try to recover – and to critique, from a contemporary standpoint – the history of Anglo-Saxon studies as a discipline, going back well beyond Romanticism to as early as the sixteenth century.

Anglo-Saxon studies during the period from about 1950 to 1975 were deeply affected as well by scholarship that cast light into medieval intellectual history, the medieval educational system, and the institution of monasticism. One foundational contribution to medieval studies as a twentieth-century discipline was M.L.W. Laistner's *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, AD 500 to 900*, first published in 1931 and later revised.⁴⁵ Laistner sets the study of the literature of the Anglo-Saxons within the context of an educational tradition that reached England from ancient Rome via the Carolingian Empire. Also important for Anglo-Saxon studies were the publications of the English church historian David Knowles (1896–1974), including his influential history *The Monastic Order in England* (1940).⁴⁶ As a result of such publications as these, it soon became virtually impossible for Anglo-Saxonists to talk about the heroic literature of early England as if its Christian elements were somehow intrusive, the results either of 'scribal meddling' or of a thin veneer of religious sentiments applied to a pagan core. *Beowulf*, in particular, began to be examined anew as a product of the scriptorium rather than of a court culture, or as some combination of the two. Moreover, specialists in Old English literature were affected – some pro, some con – by the provocative claims of Princeton scholar D.W. Robertson, Jr, as expressed particularly in his 1962 book *A Preface to Chaucer*, to the effect that virtually all medieval literature should be construed as the expression of a Christian worldview that differed profoundly from modern secularist philosophies, particularly as regards its reliance on Augustinian doctrines of *caritas* versus *cupiditas*.⁴⁷ While Robertson advanced this sweeping claim chiefly with regard to the later Middle Ages, his arguments had a galvanizing effect among medievalists across the board. Moreover, his work encouraged Anglo-Saxonists to seek out connections between Old English literature and the contemporary visual arts, including religious manuscript illustration, as Robertson had done with regard to Chaucer and the fourteenth century.

One other area of literary studies had a transformative effect on the critical reception of Old English literature at this time: the study of oral poetry and poetics. The main stimulus to research in this area was provided by Harvard professor Milman Parry, a leading Homericist, and his assistant and collaborator Albert B. Lord, whose expertise spanned early Greek studies, Slavic studies, and the comparative study of medieval European epic poetry, including *Beowulf*. Lord's book *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), based on fieldwork undertaken with skilled epic singers in the Balkans, soon became a classic of modern criticism, influencing scholarship in more fields than can be numbered. The oral-formulaic theory and its reception by Anglo-Saxonists will be discussed in a later

⁴⁵ M.L.W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, AD 500 to 900* (London: Methuen, 1931), revised edn 1957.

⁴⁶ David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of its Development from the Times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940–1216* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940; 2nd edn, 1963). Knowles's complementary study *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948–59), deals with the period after 1216.

⁴⁷ D.W. Robertson, Jr, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962).

chapter. The point I wish to make here is that, in a manner analogous to Robertson's thesis, Lord's research energized the field of Old English studies by encouraging Anglo-Saxonists to examine at least the heroic literature of that time as a product of a mentality and a poetics radically unlike those often taken for granted today. The Parry/Lord model of oral-formulaic composition entailed very close attention to the linguistic texture of Old English poetry, especially its stylized diction, and this in itself had a stimulating effect on research. In addition, research into oral poetics encouraged Anglo-Saxonists to look more closely at the interface between literacy and orality, taking account of the functions of oral tradition as a chief vehicle of what is now called 'social memory'.

Changing Currents in *Beowulf* Studies

For understandable reasons, *Beowulf* has often served as the focal point of twentieth-century discussions of the character of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Indeed, this poem has been prominent in discussions of Old English literature ever since 1833–37, when it was edited and translated into modern English by John Mitchell Kemble, for its exceptional literary quality was recognized from the start. So as to highlight important directions taken in *Beowulf* criticism up to about the year 1975, I will single out for discussion four landmark publications that date from the earlier part of the twentieth century.

The first of these studies was R.W. Chambers's *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1921), a book that presents a mine of information about the poem and its historical context. Chambers (1874–1942) taught for many years at University College, London, where he also served as librarian.⁴⁸ Different sections of his book address the poem's historical and legendary elements, its folkloric and mythological affinities, its Old Norse and medieval Latin parallels, and theories as to the poem's origin, date, and structure. Rather than attempting to settle questions relating to the poem's interpretation, Chambers wished to make available to scholars the full range of documentary information upon which critical judgements could be based. Updated editions of his book came out in 1932 and 1959. By the time the third edition appeared, the main body of the book had been augmented by a first supplement (added for the 1932 edition) and a second supplement (written by Oxford professor C.L. Wrenn for the 1959 edition) in addition to the somewhat miscellaneous appendix that concludes the original publication. *Beowulf: An Introduction* has therefore come to resemble an encyclopedia whose constituent parts are joined in an unwieldy fashion. Still it remains an indispensable resource for specialists.

A greater impact on the poem's critical reception was made by Friedrich Klaeber's magisterial edition *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, first published in 1922, with updated versions appearing in 1928, 1936, 1941, and 1950.⁴⁹ In 2008, a trio of scholars brought out

⁴⁸ Chambers was responsible for the revisions made to *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, ed. A.J. Wyatt, new edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914). A biographical portrait of Chambers by C.J. Sissom is included in Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*, 221–33.

⁴⁹ *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber (Boston: Heath, 1922); 2nd edn 1928, issued with a supplement in 1936 and a second supplement in 1941; 3rd edn 1950. The author is known as either 'Friedrich' or 'Frederick' (the Americanized version of his name).

a thoroughly revised and updated version of the book under the title *Klaeber's Beowulf*.⁵⁰ In its successive incarnations, 'Klaeber' (as it tends to be known for short) has proven to be the most influential edition of *Beowulf* ever to see print. Meant especially for the use of postgraduate students, it has at the same time served scholars as a definitive tool for advanced research; and even in those instances where Klaeber's editorial judgements have been challenged, it is his reading of the text that is generally assumed to be the point of departure.

It is worth reflecting that Klaeber (1863–1954) was born in what was then the kingdom of Prussia in the same year, 1863, that marked the death, also in Prussia, of Jacob Grimm (1785–1863), the chief founder of the science of comparative Germanic philology. It is arresting to think that the lives of these two men, taken together, thus span the period from the French Revolution to the thermonuclear age. Something of the spirit of the master can be discerned in the man of later birth. After receiving the PhD at the University of Berlin in 1892, Klaeber accepted an appointment in the Department of English at the University of Minnesota, where he taught for the next thirty-nine years (1893–1931). For most of that period he held the position of Professor of English and Comparative Philology. Always attached to his homeland, after his retirement from teaching in Minnesota he and his wife returned to Germany, where he eventually died in impoverished circumstances after having suffered through both the devastation of the Second World War and the deprivations that attended the Soviet occupation of eastern Germany.⁵¹

The esteem in which Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf* is held rests on his command of comparative Germanic philology as that science had developed by the turn of the century. In addition, Klaeber prided himself on keeping abreast of virtually everything being written on *Beowulf*, and his critical judgements are invariably based on a scrupulous sifting of the evidence. The views he expresses as regards such questions as the poem's mythical or historical content, its structure and unity, its Christian versus pagan character, and its possible date and place of origin therefore called for respect from the time of the book's initial publication. Moreover, his critical judgements have retained their value over the years despite advances that have since been made in ancillary areas of research, including Iron Age archaeology and the comparative study of orality and literacy.

Klaeber viewed with scepticism his predecessors' theories about the poem's relations to a body of ancient Germanic mythology. Moreover, rejecting the idea that the poem had attained its existing shape as a result of the accretion of postulated shorter 'lays' that had once had independent existence, he viewed it as a unity as it stood in the single manuscript in which it is preserved. He thus saw no need for theories of 'monkish interpolation'. Correspondingly, he was able to demonstrate that Christian sentiments, doctrine, and phrasing permeate the text, so that there is no way to excise them so as to reveal a more primitive document.⁵² Moreover, he viewed the

⁵⁰ *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), abbreviated in the present book as '*Klaeber's Beowulf*'.

⁵¹ There is a biographical tribute by Helen Damico, "My Professor of Anglo-Saxon Was Frederick Klaeber": Minnesota and Beyond', in *The Preservation and Transmission of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 73–98.

poem as having been written, most likely in the first half of the eighth century, by a single poet. In his view this poet knew the Bible well, was learned enough to draw on Virgil's *Aeneid* as a source of inspiration, and was conversant with other works of classical or medieval antiquity.⁵³

Klaeber's concept of the poem's authorship is expressed most directly in the following passage:⁵⁴

We may, then, picture to ourselves the author of *Beowulf* as a man connected in some way with an Anglian court, a royal chaplain or abbot of noble birth or, it may be, a monk friend of his, who possessed an actual knowledge of court life and addressed himself to an aristocratic, in fact a royal audience. A man well versed in Germanic and Scandinavian heroic lore, familiar with secular Anglo-Saxon poems of the type exemplified by *Widsið*, *Finnsburg*, *Deor*, and *Waldere*, and a student of biblical poems of the *Cædmonian* cycle, a man of notable taste and culture and informed with a spirit of broad-minded Christianity.

The image of the *Beowulf* poet presented here stands out as distinctive when we recall how that same poet had been imagined in the prior critical literature. In place of the Germanic *scop* or 'singer' of prior scholars, we are asked to contemplate an Anglo-Saxon court poet – 'a man of notable taste and culture' – writing (not singing) an epic poem along Virgilian lines for a cultivated Christian audience. A revolution in the scholarly reception of *Beowulf* was underway, even though not all experts have embraced all aspects of it.

The third of the books singled out for attention here was published six years later. This was William Witherle Lawrence's *Beowulf and Epic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928). Its author, a professor of English at Columbia University, drew on his expert knowledge of the complex world of Germanic legendary history to which the *Beowulf* poet alludes. Distinguishing his own contribution to *Beowulf* studies from that of Chambers, Lawrence makes clear that his aim is to provide a unified and coherent account, accessible to all readers, of how the poet formed his epic by drawing on a variety of constituent elements, whether these elements were originally folkloric, historical, or legendary in character and whether they originally pertained to the Germanic peoples of the Continent or to the cousin peoples of Scandinavia. Rejecting both mythological interpretations of the poem and the theory that the poem had been assembled out of a set of pre-existent heroic lays, Lawrence, following Klaeber, ascribed the composition of the poem to a court poet of the age of Bede living somewhere in the north of England. He attributes the *writing* of it, specifically, to that milieu, for (taking issue with H.M. Chadwick and others) he expresses confidence that the poem can be attributed to a single lettered author, whatever the origin of

⁵² Much of this demonstration of the poem's Christian character was made in Klaeber's articles 'Die Christlichen elemente in *Beowulf*', *Anglia* 35 (1935): 111–36, 249–70, and 453–82, and *Anglia* 36 (1936): 169–99. These studies have been translated into modern English by Paul Battles under the title *The Christian Elements in Beowulf*, Old English Newsletter Subsidia 24 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996).

⁵³ Klaeber's views on the *Beowulf* poet's debt to Virgil found expression in his study 'Aeneis und Beowulf', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 126 (1911): 40–48, 339–59. The extent of classical influence on *Beowulf*, however, remains a vexed point.

⁵⁴ Quotation from Klaeber's 1922 edition of the poem, p. cxxii; the passage stands unaltered in his 1950 edition, p. cxix.

its constituent parts may have been (pp. 287–89). Although an analysis of the poem's Christian elements is far from his purpose, Lawrence views the poem as a unity and its author as a Christian: 'The older idea, that the Christian elements in *Beowulf* are interpolations in an originally heathen poem', he writes, 'is now [...] generally abandoned' (p. 282). While developing his own theory as to how the poem had evolved into its final form, Lawrence thus lends his authority to Klaeber's unitarian views.

One chapter of Lawrence's book that remains of lasting value is the one on 'Grendel and his Dam' (pp. 161–203). Here, drawing on the German scholar Friedrich Panzer's previous study of *Beowulf* in the light of analogous European *Märchen* (folktales) of the 'Bear's Son' type,⁵⁵ Lawrence argues persuasively that the first two parts of the poem – the episodes dealing with Grendel and Grendel's mother, respectively – are a unified conception, for what they represent is an epic elaboration upon a twofold pattern of adventures that is well attested in this folktale type. He was thus able to attribute noteworthy parallels between *Beowulf* and certain narratives from late medieval Scandinavian tradition, including the Icelandic *Grettir's Saga* and the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, not to the direct influence of one tradition upon the other, but rather to their common indebtedness to this underlying pattern. Correspondingly, Lawrence recognized that the third episode of *Beowulf*, the dragon fight, must have separate origins, for nothing like it occurs in the analogous 'Bear's Son' folktales. He thus showed that the structure of *Beowulf* results from the merging of these two elements, the paired Grendel episodes and the dragon fight. As for the plot of the first two-thirds of the poem, it must be regarded as an epic elaboration of what was once a simpler tale localized at the court of the Danish Scylding (Skjölding) line of kings. These observations still stand as steady points in the flux of the poem's higher criticism. While not all the details of his analysis have stood the test of time, including his concept of the poem's Norwegian-style physical scenery, his book helped to establish a consensus upon which later scholars could build.

The most eloquent of the scholar-critics of the next generation was J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973). Since his career is well known in its essentials, it need only be sketched in here.⁵⁶ After spending his early childhood in South Africa, Tolkien was educated at King Edward's School, Birmingham, and thereafter at Exeter College, Oxford, from which he graduated in 1915. Although his academic career was interrupted by military service during the First World War, he afterwards took up university positions first at the University of Leeds and then at Oxford University, where in 1925 he was appointed Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon. He held that post for twenty years, thereupon being named the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, a position that he held until his retirement in 1959. His most famous work of original fiction, his epic trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, was published in 1954–55 after a long period of gestation.

⁵⁵ F. Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte, I: Beowulf* (Munich, 1910). No second volume of this work was published, although Panzer's title anticipates one.

⁵⁶ The bibliography on Tolkien is too large to enter into here. A helpful compendium is the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, ed. Michael D.C. Drout (New York: Routledge, 2007); this includes a number of entries with a bearing on Tolkien's lifelong engagement with Old English language and literature.

While Tolkien never published extensively on *Beowulf*, his love for the poem is evident from his interweaving of echoes from it into *The Lord of the Rings* and other creative works. Moreover, among his papers at the time of his death was a complete translation of *Beowulf*, together with a detailed commentary on that poem. These were only published in 2014, after an interval of over forty years, as edited by his son Christopher Tolkien.⁵⁷ His landmark essay 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' can be regarded as a definitive statement of his views about a poem that he deeply admired and that he regularly taught during his Oxford career.⁵⁸ The essay was delivered to the British Academy in 1936 as the annual Sir Israel Gollancz Lecture. A polished, annotated version of it was subsequently published in volume 22 of *Proceedings of the British Academy*, and this text has often been reprinted.⁵⁹

It matters that Tolkien's essay was originally written for oral delivery, for the key to its subsequent popularity is its masterful rhetoric. The author's deployment of rhetorical tropes starts with the talk's paradoxical title, which plays on the droll conceit that critics and monsters inhabit a single plane. It continues with a lecturer's typical note of self-deprecation, as Tolkien, who had long occupied the Oxford chair in Anglo-Saxon, quotes a squib that a prior scholar once made with reference to a giant of nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon scholarship: 'He may do very well for a professor' (p. 3). The use of medieval-style figures of rhetoric then begins in earnest as Tolkien twice draws on the device of allegory. He does so first with reference to 'lady Historia', who, rather than 'lady Poesia', had served as the poem's fairy godmother ever since the poem's 'christening' at the start of the eighteenth century. Then comes a more elaborate allegory about a man who constructs a tower built up of ancient stones, only to see it pushed over by a bevy of 'friends' who – having no concept of the tower's uplifting purpose – then busy themselves quarrying the rubble for trivial ends (pp. 6–7). The allusion to the lofty poem and its busybody critics is a transparent one.⁶⁰

While there is no need to call attention to all the rhetorical flourishes by which Tolkien's lecture was enlivened for oral delivery, those who have read it with care will recall the author's use of literary allusion and metaphor when he speaks of 'the jabberwocks of historical and antiquarian research' who 'burble in the tulgy wood of conjecture, flitting from one tum-tum tree to another' (p. 8); or his plays on proverbial language (e.g. 'one dragon, however hot, does not makes a summer', p. 10); or the whimsical allusions he makes to Shakespeare's Shylock, or to the Book of St Albans, or to the juxtaposed figures of John Milton and Jack and the Beanstalk (p. 12). These are the gestures of a learned speaker

⁵⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Complete Translation and Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

⁵⁸ Drafts of Tolkien's lecture survive, ones that are longer than the lecture in its published form. These have been edited by Michael D.C. Drout under the title *Beowulf and the Critics, by J.R.R. Tolkien* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2002).

⁵⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', *PBA* 22 (1936): 245–95. The essay was subsequently reprinted by Oxford University Press on behalf of the British Academy as a free-standing publication. The page numbers given in my text refer to that reprint. Other reprinted versions are available in Nicholson, 51–103; Fry, 8–56; Fulk, 14–44; and Donoghue, 103–30 (here without Tolkien's appendices).

⁶⁰ The details of the allegory are neatly explicated by T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 161–63.

addressing an audience made up of equally learned persons who will get the jokes and who will thereby, one hopes, be made receptive to the speaker's serious points. The original medium of these stratagems was the speaking voice, which one continues to hear through the printed version when attentive to its style.

The essay as published in the Academy's *Proceedings* is far more, though, than the record of an urbane talk. It is a well-documented piece of research that engages closely with the experts. While preparing his talk for print, Tolkien added thirty-nine footnotes, some of them substantial, in which he makes specific reference to the prior critical literature. Moreover, accompanying the main text is an eleven-page appendix divided into three parts (pp. 36–47). Analysing the specific language by which the poet describes Grendel, Tolkien first confirms that Grendel is conceived of as a devilish ogre rather than a devil revealing himself in ogre-form. Tolkien then offers a philological analysis of certain terms from *Beowulf* that appear to have Christian significance, including *lof* and *dom*, *hell* and *heofon*, showing that the poet uses these words in a discriminating manner so as to maintain verisimilitude in his depiction of the pagan past. He also offers the suggestion that lines 175–88 of the poem, which tell of the Danes' futile offering of sacrifices to idols, represent some kind of editorial or scribal alteration of the poet's original words. Tolkien's essay can thus be seen to represent not just a personal reading of the poem, but also a closely argued engagement with *Beowulf* studies such as they were by the time of his writing. While gently satirizing 'the critics' of his title, who turn out to be a mostly undifferentiated crowd of pedants, Tolkien also participates closely and passionately in the critical discourse of his day, naming esteemed *Beowulf* scholars by name and expressing judgements that often differ from theirs. As is to be expected of an Oxford don addressing his peers, he chiefly strives to distinguish his own views from those of highly regarded English scholars of the prior generation. It would have been out of place for him to display his wit and learning at the expense of an American scholar such as Lawrence, whom he does not mention, or a German-American scholar like Klaeber, whose work he acknowledges only briefly, chiefly by way of a gracious footnote. Two English scholars whom Tolkien singles out for praise, even while disagreeing with certain of their views, are W.P. Ker (1855–1923), the author of *The Dark Ages* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1904) and other authoritative studies of early medieval literature, and R.W. Chambers.⁶¹ Through these acknowledgements, Tolkien achieves one of his chief aims, which is to justify the close study of *Beowulf* not just for antiquarian or philological purposes, but as a work of literary art worthy of the attention of the leading English intellectuals of his day.

In many regards though not all, Tolkien's view of the poem is consistent with Klaeber's. Both experts subscribe to a unitarian view of the poem: that is to say, each of them views it as a structural unity that is the creation of a single author looking back to the legendary past. As Tolkien puts the matter, the poem was obviously composed by 'an Englishman using afresh ancient and largely traditional material' (p. 8). Like Klaeber, Tolkien ascribes that act of composition to somewhere in the north of Britain during roughly the age of Bede. If there is a difference between Klaeber and Tolkien in regard to their concept of the poem's authorship, it is that Tolkien emphasizes that the poet, writing in the British Isles

⁶¹ Tolkien makes complimentary reference to an essay by Chambers that served as the preface to *Beowulf Translated into Modern English Rhyming Verse*, trans. Archibald Strong (London: Constable, 1925).

long after the Heroic Age had come to an end, had 'an antiquarian curiosity' about that more ancient historical period (p. 22). Moreover, Tolkien characterizes the *Beowulf* poet as having been emotionally attached to the old heroic way of life even while knowing that 'the wages of heroism is death' (p. 27). Views of this kind are never expressed by Klaeber, who regards the hero as essentially selfless and noble, even to the point of being inclined to recognize in him 'features of the Christian Savior'.⁶² While Klaeber thus sees the poet as projecting Christian ideals back into the Germanic past as if in a kind of secular saint's life, Tolkien sees the poet as nostalgically attached to a vanished past even while recognizing that it has rightly been superseded. One might see a parallel here to Tolkien's attachment to his own fantasy world in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien agrees with Klaeber, then, in accepting that the author of *Beowulf* was a literate Christian. All the same, the relatively few references that Tolkien makes to the poet's Christianity are overshadowed by his allusions to Old Norse literature and mythology. Tolkien seems to assume that the poet was familiar with old Northern myths of Thor and Fenrir and Ragnarök, something that Klaeber never takes for granted. Memorably, he treats with utter seriousness the poem's monsters, whom he sees as having once been identical with savage creatures of the old northern faith. Correspondingly, what Tolkien sees at the heart of *Beowulf* is 'the creed of unyielding will' (p. 20). By this phrase he refers to an archaic Northern ideal such as finds expression in the myth of Ragnarök, as recounted in the Old Norse eddic poem *Völuspá*. An almost Nietzschean or Wagnerian quality thus hovers about Tolkien's response to *Beowulf*, aligning his approach in some ways more closely with nineteenth-century mythological interpretations of the poem than with Klaeber's Christian perspective. In Tolkien's view, what the poem is most clearly about is 'man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time'. His capitalization of that last word, in the essay as published, contributes to one's sense that what he most values in this poem is its mythic dimension, its echoes of *Götterdämmerung* – the imagined time when the gods and their human allies wage war against their monstrous enemies until all are destroyed. The hero of the poem, in his view, is the unyielding protagonist of a struggle that is emblematic of the human condition in general: '*he is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy*' (p. 18, Tolkien's italics). How this essentially worldly view of the poem and its hero can be reconciled with one's knowledge that the poet speaks so frequently and directly of God and God's powers is a problem that Tolkien seeks to finesse in terms like the following (p. 23):

[The poet] is still concerned primarily with *man on earth*, rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme no Christian need despise. Yet this theme plainly would not be so treated, but for the nearness of a pagan time.

Tolkien thus comes very close to embracing the notion of the poem's 'Christian colouring' that is often voiced in the earlier criticism. Indeed, the appeal of that idea has remained

⁶² Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn, p. li. Interestingly, Klaeber toned down his wording of this point over time. While in his Introduction to the 1922 and 1928 editions, he states that 'we need not hesitate to recognize' features of the Christian saviour in the hero of *Beowulf*, in the 1950 edition he declares at this point that 'we might even feel inclined to recognize' them.

strong among those who desire a *Beowulf* that is largely expressive of either modern existentialist philosophy or the imputed ideals of a pagan past.

Tolkien's account of the poem's structure and genre has been particularly influential and is worth the close attention it has received among later critics (p. 29):

The general structure of the poem [...] is not really difficult to perceive, if we look to the main points, the strategy, and neglect the many points of minor tactics. We must dismiss, of course, from mind the notion that *Beowulf* is a 'narrative poem', that it tells a tale or intends to tell a tale sequentially. The poem 'lacks steady advance': so Klaeber heads a critical section in his edition. But the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines); B from 2200 to 3182 (the end).

Use of the rhetorical phrase 'of course' near the start of this passage is a deft means of deflecting a reader's common-sense notion that – of course – the *Beowulf* poet does have a sequential tale to tell, so that the poem is indeed a 'narrative'. This is true even though the narrative's progression is often interrupted so that the audience can savour a given moment in the action, or so that the poet can allude to different layers of the past or to future events. Regardless of this point, by focusing on the poem's binary structure, its 'two opposed portions', Tolkien arrives at an original concept of the poem's genre. Rather than being an epic in anything like the usual sense of that term, *Beowulf* is 'a heroic-elegiac poem'. This phrase is chosen with care. More acutely than other readers of the poem, Tolkien had a sense of its tragic dimension, to which he alludes again and again. He found in *Beowulf* an intensely moving awareness of loss and sorrow, something akin to what one encounters not just in *The Wanderer* but also in Sophoclean tragedy or in Shakespeare's late play *King Lear*. The effect of this reading of the poem as 'an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death' is to project *Beowulf* into the company of some of the loftiest expressions of the human spirit.

Much is gained through Tolkien's emphasis on the poem's binary structure, including an enhanced appreciation of the part played by the dragon, whose role as 'a potent creation of men's imagination' (p. 16) seemed to Tolkien to need no defence. Still we may ask: Is anything essential to the poem lost by being projected into this bipartite scheme?

As has since been pointed out, quite a good deal is lost through an analysis along such lines. The poem's central episode, in particular, is largely effaced.⁶³ Tolkien's decision not to engage with the hero's fight against Grendel's mother must have been a self-conscious one, for greater attention to this episode would have weakened the binary opposition of 'two

⁶³ H.L. Rogers, 'Beowulf's Three Great Fights', *RES* n.s. 6 (1955): 339–55, repr. in Nicholson, 233–56, points out that Tolkien's nearly exclusive focus on Grendel and the dragon scarcely does justice to the poem's second main episode. George Clark, too, in his book *Beowulf* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), calls attention to Tolkien's effacement of that episode while offering an incisive critique of additional aspects of Tolkien's essay (at 7–15).

moments in a great life'. Tolkien's concept of *Beowulf* as a 'heroic-elegiac' poem would then have lost much of its authority, for it is in the hero's second great fight that his fortunes reach their apogee: Beowulf achieves the greatest personal victory of his life, purges an otherworldly realm of its monstrous inhabitants, definitively settles a twenty-year feud, cements the good relations of his people with the Danes, is properly rewarded, and proceeds back home with his surviving men unscathed and in triumph. As we all know, this does not mean the end of the poem (though the poem's folkloric analogues do end at this point), for events of a more sombre inflection are to follow. To efface this episode from critical consciousness, however, is to dwell on the poem's dark notes at the expense of its triumphant ones.

Moreover, it is in the hero's second great fight, the one against Grendel's mother, that the poem's Christian elements come especially to the fore. At the moment of the hero's most desperate need, when his uncanny enemy has him down and drives her knife right at his chest (at lines 1545–56), the poet declares that God, who is named three times in this passage, determined his victory. The hero's byrnie holds firm, and he comes to his feet again. Correspondingly, the hero's ensuing victory is accompanied by three miracles. These are the shining of a light like that of the sun (1570–72a); the melting of the blade of the hero's giant-wrought sword like ice in springtime (1605b–11); and the miraculous purging of the waters of Grendel's mere (1620–22). I call attention to these details so as to make clear that Tolkien's analysis downplays the poem's unmistakable Christian elements, which in the passage just alluded to are associated with life, light, warmth, springtime, purity, and joy.

Just as importantly, perhaps, Tolkien's concept of the binary structure of *Beowulf* effaces the poem's connections to the realm of the feminine, just as it downplays those elements of the poem that have to do with courtly decorum rather than the male heroic ethos.⁶⁴ Not only is the remarkable fact obscured that one of the hero's three great antagonists is a she-demon. In addition, Tolkien takes very little notice of the roles played by the leading women in the poem, namely the Danish queen Wealhtheow, the Danish princess Freawaru, and the Geatish queen Hygd. Since his strategy is to emphasize two moments in a male hero's life, Tolkien likewise skirts a topic that was of apparent interest to the poet: namely, court etiquette, or the right conduct of men and women of the ruling class in their everyday dealings with one another. These civic relations include gift-giving, inheritance, the etiquette of speech (including verbal combat), social outlawry (and the redemption of criminals from exile), and the complex tensions attendant upon marital unions involving rival groups. Such matters as these would scarcely make for a compelling poem in the absence of a strong plot, but the poet obviously cared enough about them to speak of them again and again. This is particularly true in the Danish episodes, where women are granted a role that perhaps mirrors their actual role in the upper ranks of Anglo-Saxon society.

While Tolkien's essay deserves admiration for its eloquence and depth of insight, then, it scarcely represents the final word on many issues of importance relating to *Beowulf*. The aspect of his essay that is arguably the most arresting is his praise of the poem as an example of what today would be called 'fantasy literature'. No one writing prior to this time had

⁶⁴ Clare A. Lees, 'Men and *Beowulf*', in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 130–35, repr. in Joy & Ramsey, 417–38, identifies Tolkien's silence concerning female characters as an aspect of his masculinism.

granted nearly so much respect to ‘the monsters’ or had been so keenly appreciative of their role. ‘I would suggest’, he writes, ‘that the monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness’ (p. 19). No one in later years would venture the opinion that a poem recounting a hero’s struggle to the death against otherworldly adversaries should be regarded as a cheap tale unworthy of serious attention.

Reading Tolkien’s essay with hindsight, one can see that the break it makes with the earlier critical reception of that poem stops short of being a decisive one. In particular, Tolkien never seems quite comfortable accepting the poem’s Christian intellectual content at its face value. In the appendix to his essay, he argues that several passages that are couched in overtly Christian terms (lines 181–88 and 1740–60) may have been the result of scribal interpolation. What he seems most eager to celebrate is an ‘*ur-Beowulf*’ of the imagination; that is to say, a poem that historically preceded the extant scribal text. That earlier poem, in his apparent view, can only be recovered through acts of restorative criticism such as the ones he offers in this essay. Favouring a quasi-mythic approach to that imagined earlier *Beowulf*, he sees in it traces of old Northern pessimism and fatalism, much as prior critics had seen in it the workings of Wyrð. This backward-looking quality to his essay, when coupled with its wit, learning, and passion, has doubtless contributed to its appeal in the years since 1936. Just as the public has always preferred the monsters to the critics – for who would not? – many non-specialist readers have remained attached to an essentially pagan and heroic *Beowulf*, while it is only certain specialists who have been content with a *Beowulf* that is just as expressive of the early medieval Christian worldview as is most other Anglo-Saxon verse that has survived, even given that poem’s setting in the Germanic Heroic Age.

Tolkien’s essay is often spoken of as the point of origin for modern critical appreciations of Old English literature. It can more aptly be characterized as a brilliant moment in a scholarly discourse that began well before 1936 and that has continued up to the present day. In any event, mid-twentieth-century writers on *Beowulf* soon adopted the gesture of complimenting Tolkien’s essay before venturing their own individual analyses of the poem.

This is true of a perceptive study that appeared in print just two years after Tolkien’s, namely Joan Blomfield’s 1938 essay ‘The Style and Structure of *Beowulf*’. While acknowledging Tolkien’s influence and speaking of the poem’s structure as being based on balanced contrasts – ‘the ever-present identity of seed in fruit and fruit in seed’ – Blomfield also emphasizes the ‘high degree of abstraction and formalism’ shown in the poem as a whole. The poem, she argues, has an ‘underlying structural unity’ thanks to its thematic patterning, regardless of what Klaeber called its ‘lack of steady advance’.⁶⁵ In her view the poem’s so-called digressions, including moralizing passages, participate in its overall unity by contributing to complex thematic pairings. A more systematic argument along similar lines was advanced by the Swiss scholar Adrien Bonjour in his 1950 book *The Digressions in Beowulf*,⁶⁶ which was based in part on articles he had published previously. Bonjour gives credit not

⁶⁵ Joan Blomfield, ‘The Style and Structure of *Beowulf*’, *RES* 14 (1938): 396–403. Blomfield’s married name was Joan Turville-Petre; under that name she later edited *The Old English Exodus* from the papers of J.R.R. Tolkien (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

⁶⁶ Adrien Bonjour, *The Digressions in Beowulf* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950). Bonjour had previously studied at Harvard University under the direction of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.

just to Tolkien but also to Klaeber, Lawrence, Blomfield, and the learned and influential German scholar Levin L. Schücking for having explicated many aspects of the poem's art.⁶⁷ Bonjour's thesis in brief, for which he argues convincingly, is that 'each digression brings its distinct contribution to the organic structure and the artistic value of the poem' (p. 75).

Such critical terms as these ('organic structure', 'artistic value') are central to Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's purposes in his 1959 book *The Art of Beowulf*, one of the most perceptive studies of the poem's style and aesthetics that has yet been written.⁶⁸ After receiving the PhD from Harvard University in 1916, Brodeur (1888–1971) taught for most of his career at the University of California, Berkeley, where he held appointments in both the Department of English and the Department of Scandinavian Studies, a unit that he helped to found and that is now of international distinction. His book's succinct title underscores the point that *Beowulf* is indeed a work of art whose language, style, and structure repay the closest attention. While Brodeur covers a wide range of topics – the poem's structure and unity, its setting and action, its episodes and digressions, its Christian and pagan elements, its Tolkienesque 'design for terror' in the three monster fights – of particular value are his discussions of poetic diction, including kennings and the use of compound diction, and of the syntactic device of variation, also known as grammatical apposition, by which the same essential idea is repeated two, three, or more times with alternative phrasing. Brodeur clarifies the role of variation as the chief stylistic device by which the poet puts on display his unparalleled store of poetic diction. While Brodeur's book represents a triumph of older philological modes of inquiry, it also contributed to the New Critical modes of analysis that were gaining popularity in the 1940s and 1950s and that Tolkien's essay anticipated to some extent. Brodeur's closing chapter, for example, features the poet's use of anticipation, contrast, and irony – three poetic stratagems that New Critics showcased as aspects of complex literary art.

The methods of the New Criticism are clearly on display in the innovative study *A Reading of Beowulf* by Edward B. Irving, Jr (1923–98), which appeared in 1968.⁶⁹ While New Criticism is a label that has meant many things to many people, what tended to unite the writers, almost all of them North Americans, who were closely linked to this movement was a common distaste for doctrinaire modes of literary scholarship, whether these took the form of aestheticism, Marxism, or old-school philological or historical analysis. Joined with this predilection was a belief that 'literature matters' in modern life, as well as a conviction that the value and meaning of literature can best be ascertained through alertness to the precise verbal features of texts. It is not true that New Critics favoured a revival of 'art for art's sake', or were simply 'formalists', or were opposed to historicism in literary studies, or favoured *explication de texte* merely as a pedagogical device, although statements of these

⁶⁷ Schücking's major contributions to the study of Old English literature include his book *Heldenstolz und Würde im Angelsächsischen, mit einem Anhang: Zur Charakterisierungstechnik im Beowulfepos* (Leipzig: Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1933), and his article 'Das Königsideal im *Beowulf*', *Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association* 3 (1929): 143–54, trans. in Nicholson, 35–49, as 'The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*'.

⁶⁸ Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

⁶⁹ Edward B. Irving, Jr, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

kinds are sometimes heard.⁷⁰ By offering what he calls a ‘reading’ of *Beowulf*, Irving positioned himself to glide past such venerable topics as the poem’s place and date of origin, its mode of composition, its legendary allusions, and its Christian dimension. While acknowledging the work of predecessors at many points, Irving makes no systematic effort to situate his study within the prior discourse of *Beowulf* criticism. As he states in his preface, ‘My intention here was to lighten ship as much as possible in order to move unimpeded toward examining *Beowulf* closely, in its own terms as nearly as I could conceive them, and from several different angles of approach’ (p. vii).

Irving’s starting point is the poem’s hero and the means by which the hero is characterized. Often, Irving shows, this is through the rhetorical device of negation, as in such a statement as ‘Never was he the one to strike comrades over drinks by the hearth’ (2179b–80a). The demonic creature Grendel, too, is shown to be characterized through negation, often with an admixture of irony, as when that creature is described as a mock-thane who ‘wished no peace-settlement with any man of the Danish force’ (154b–55): on the contrary, he ate them whole. In many other ways as well, Irving shows that key elements of the poem’s meaning and artistry are revealed through attention to rhetorical idioms specific to this poem, or to shifts in narrative point of view, or to instances of dramatic irony, or to the kinds of thematic layering and contrast that Joan Blomfield had earlier identified. Never before this time, it is safe to say, had a book-length study of Old English poetry approached its subject in the same close and discriminating manner in which modern works were analysed. In other ways as well, Irving’s book went far to establish a way of reading *Beowulf* that has remained attractive up to the present time. Writing in the Cold War era in a manner that reminds one of Tolkien’s prior meditation on the poem’s tragic dimension, Irving sees in the more violent legendary episodes of *Beowulf* ‘a vision of the perpetual violence which is man’s lot’ (p. 190). If there is a measure of relief from the mood of desolation that pervades the poem’s close, Irving suggests, it is provided by the example of the man Beowulf himself, whom Irving celebrates as ‘the incarnation of the heroic spirit and the radiant centre of the poem’ (p. 246). As for the role of Christianity in shaping the poem’s values, Irving seems to take it for granted but has little to say about it, as is in keeping with late twentieth-century secularist and existentialist philosophies.

Taken together, despite their many differences of detail and emphasis, the views expressed in the books and essays discussed in the present section of this chapter reveal certain common elements. Thanks to the influence of Klaeber and Tolkien in particular, a mid-century consensus had emerged that the poem as we have it is a great work of art that had come into being as a result of the merging of two cultures, one of them ‘Germanic’ and the other one ‘Christian’ (with whatever precise meaning these terms were thought to bear). *Beowulf* was thought to express a synthesis of these perspectives in a traditional verse medium that was epic in scale, dignified in manner, stylistically brilliant, and largely elegiac in tone. A similar revolution in popular conceptions of the poem has never taken place, to judge from journalistic accounts and cinematic versions that project an image of the *Beowulf* story as a crude and violent expression of some Dark Age of the imagination.

⁷⁰ For discussion see René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, vol. 6: *American Criticism, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), esp. 144–58, and A. Walton Litz et al., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 7: *Modernism and the New Criticism*, esp. 181–218.

Key Works from the Early Seventies

The years 1971 and 1972 were unusually fertile ones for Old English literary studies. At least four books published in those two years had a distinct impact in that field, among a wide range of other studies contributing to the advancement of knowledge. Moreover, as we will see, steps were taken in these same two years to establish Anglo-Saxon studies as a recognized academic discipline, with Old English literature assumed to be a key component of that field.

One of these four books was pedagogical in aim. This was a fully refashioned version of *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader* edited jointly by Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler.⁷¹ Cassidy (1907–2000), a native of Jamaica, served for many years as the founding editor of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* while holding the position of Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Ringler, who was then Cassidy's junior colleague at Madison, has since distinguished himself as the author of translations from both modern Icelandic verse and Old English poetry that brilliantly match the technical artistry of the original texts. In 'Cassidy and Ringler's Bright', as it is known for short, a generous selection of Old English prose and verse texts is preceded by a grammar presented in lessons of increasing difficulty. The grammar of Old English is presented within the framework of comparative Germanic grammar, with corresponding attention paid to the phonological changes that distinguish Old English from its closest relatives. This linguistic material is presented in a clear and uncluttered manner, and each chapter is accompanied by 'user-friendly' exercises designed to confirm the philological principles involved. Enhancing the book's value are photographic facsimiles of the manuscript pages on which a number of the reading selections are based. All in all, the book is arguably the finest one-volume introduction to Old English language and literature ever produced; it attests to the high level in Anglo-Saxon scholarship that was taken for granted in North American universities at this time.

Another outstanding book dating from 1971–72 is *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, by Stanley B. Greenfield.⁷² Greenfield (1922–87) enjoyed a long and distinguished career as Professor of English at the University of Oregon. He was a tireless promoter of the study of Old English literature within critical frameworks that had gained a firm presence in English departments by the 1950s and 1960s, including the New Criticism among other schools and approaches. In *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* he relies on methods of close reading so as to probe not just what a problematic passage from the poetry is likely to mean, but what the criteria are for validity in interpretation. His book stands out for the variety of critical methods it puts on display, including historicist, New Critical, linguistic, and oral-formulaic approaches. In his preface Greenfield warns that an indiscriminate attachment to just one stream or type of criticism will 'tend to detract from the

⁷¹ *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd edn, ed. Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler (New York: Holt, 1971). The second corrected printing of this book eliminates certain misprints that found their way into the initial print run.

⁷² Stanley B. Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972). Parts of this book were based on articles Greenfield had placed in leading journals from 1954 to 1967.

special nature, the unique identity, of particular poems' (p. ix). Instead, what he attempts to illustrate is 'the convergence of various kinds of poetic and extra-poetic elements in the immediate text', so that the text, when judiciously explicated, will 'speak to us across the years with the dignity and self-assurance of its individuality' (ibid.).

The six chapters of Greenfield's book examine a number of specimen texts with this factor of 'convergence' in mind. Rather than adopting a set view as to the value of any one critical method, Greenfield shows how a reader's alertness to such factors as generic expectations, syntactic patterns, or modes of medieval allegory may help to confirm, cast doubt on, or complicate one's understanding of a given poem. The passages discussed by Greenfield range from the genre of heroic poetry (*Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Fight at Finnsburg*), to that of elegy (*The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Husband's Message*), to biblical paraphrases (*Genesis A* and *Genesis B*), to poems of a symbolic or allegorical character (*The Dream of the Rood*, *The Phoenix*). Problems specific to language and style remain in the foreground, sometimes leading the author to what he believes to be a secure interpretation but at other times to the conclusion that 'the interpretation of poems is at best a precarious business' (p. 159). Greenfield's imagined dialogue with critics whom he names by name, and whose views he treats with respect even when attempting to refute them, makes this book an apt complement to his 1965 study *A Critical History of Old English Literature*.⁷³ The title of that book alerts readers that the author's subject is both Old English literature itself, in its different types and historical periods, and the critical currents that have shaped the modern reception of that literature.

A third landmark book published in 1971–72 is *Loyalties and Traditions*, an elegant study written by the medievalist Milton McC. Gatch (b. 1932).⁷⁴ After receiving the PhD at Yale University in 1963, Gatch taught for many years as Professor of English at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, where in the course of time he also served as Academic Dean and Provost and as Director of The Burke Library. While his book has the stated purpose of elucidating the early medieval background of Old English literature, it also explicates certain individual texts by projecting the understanding of those works into the realm of Christian monasticism. Rather than dwelling on the Germanic origins of the English, Gatch emphasizes that there were continuities in the transmission of culture from ancient Rome to Anglo-Saxon England. Like many other scholar-critics, he expresses admiration for the aesthetic qualities of Old English literature, *Beowulf* in particular. Reacting against the modern appreciation of these writings chiefly on aesthetic grounds, however, Gatch emphasizes their value for cultural historians, for 'the Anglo-Saxons [...] left the largest, most varied, and oldest body of non-Latin European literature which has survived' (p. 17). The literature that Gatch finds most important in this regard is the corpus of texts written down from the end of the reign of King Alfred to the early eleventh century (ca. AD 900–1020). This emphasis on the late Anglo-Saxon period, the era when most of the extant prose was produced, marks a shift away from earlier scholars' concentration on

⁷³ Stanley B. Greenfield, *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1965). As will be discussed in due time, a second edition of this book appeared in 1986 (the one abbreviated here as 'Greenfield & Calder').

⁷⁴ Milton McC. Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions: Man and His World in Old English Literature* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971).

the 'early' (hence 'heathen' or 'semi-heathen') poetry of the Anglo-Saxons. In this later historical period, as Gatch makes clear, 'Anglo-Saxon culture was a Christian culture' (p. 25); and order to understand it, he argues, the modern reader should try to enter into the thinking of that time. Much of the task of understanding Old English literature is thus seen to be a problem in the history of mentalities. The modern reader may respond sympathetically, for example, to the images of man 'alone and cruelly buffeted by fate and nature' to be found in the elegies, but may find it more difficult to relate to the conclusion, embraced by these poets, that 'the way out of that alienation is through a relationship with the Christian God' (p. 22).

In the first main chapter of his book, Gatch draws upon contemporary theorists to account for the importance of oral heroic poetry as 'the medium of memory' in a traditional society. In his view, the formulaic style of Old English poetry may be an inherent aspect of works 'written deliberately in the manner of the oral poetic tradition' (p. 43). Viewing the Anglo-Saxons as 'Christians of fairly remote German ethnic origins' (p. 60), Gatch discounts the value of Tacitus's *Germania* as a means of understanding their culture. Instead, he sees *Beowulf* and other Old English heroic poetry as possible evidence for myth-making on the part of Anglo-Saxons looking back to a former legendary age. The banqueting scene in Heorot, for example, may be more 'the creation of a fertile imagination working on traditional themes' than it is 'a product either of disciplined historical investigation or of the folk memory' (p. 58). Gatch likewise draws on archaeological and art historical sources to suggest that there was a 'continued interest in Germanic legend' among the Anglo-Saxons 'at a very late period' (p. 33).

In a chapter on 'Early Medieval Christianity', Gatch first gives an account of early medieval monasticism and the system of monastic education, then discusses the system of exegesis that was used to expound the levels of meaning and the spiritual sense of Scripture. The exegetical method 'was literary criticism' for the Middle Ages, Gatch argues: it 'was designed both to expound the profundity of the passages under consideration and to move the audience' (p. 93). Moreover, he shows, this same system of typological or figural interpretation influenced the composition of original texts. Gatch's main exhibit in this connection is Advent Lyric 5 from the opening pages of the Exeter Book. After identifying this poem as a meditation on a Latin antiphon that was sung before and after the Magnificat at the office of Vespers during Advent, Gatch shows that the image of the rising sun that is featured in this lyric has Christological significance, in accord with a medieval tradition of exegesis whereby the rising sun is equated with the acquisition of spiritual knowledge as well as with the figure of Christ. This set of equations, in turn, would have been recognized by early medieval readers as an example of *enigma*, a subtype of the figure or trope of allegory in which 'the meaning of a statement is hidden by the use of obscure analogies' (p. 98, quoting from Bede's treatise *De figuris et tropis*, a common early medieval school text). This trope is just one among many rhetorical figures and schemata that can be identified either in the Advent Lyrics or elsewhere in the Exeter Book. Gatch concludes that though Advent Lyric 5 'appears to be a simple and moving hymn of thanksgiving for the coming of Christ, the Light, into the world', it is also a poem with complex intellectual presuppositions (p. 100). Through this kind of analysis, he argues, the modern reader can be led into an understanding of Old English Christian literature in the terms in which it was produced.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Gatch explores more fully the topic of 'man and his world' in Old English literature, drawing on a variety of source-texts in an effort to

clarify the Anglo-Saxons' basic ideas pertaining to Providence, law, justice, the structure of the cosmos, and the bonds of loyalty – bonds thought to be equally essential to human society and the divine order. The texts he singles out for discussion include not just familiar ones like *The Wanderer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, but also little-known works such as the preface to King Alfred's translation of Boethius's *De Consolatio philosophiae*. Another neglected text to which Gatch directs attention is archbishop Wulfstan's eleventh-century prose treatise *The Institutes of Polity*, a compendium of reflections on secular and canon law. The effect of these choices is to open up a wide perspective as to what constitutes 'Old English literature'. Moreover, through an Appendix that features 'some notes on Anglo-Saxon art and architecture' (pp. 151–67), Gatch reinforces the arguments presented elsewhere in his book through reference to elaborate late tenth-century manuscript illuminations of the Winchester school, as well as to archaeological investigations at Canterbury and Winchester that had revealed the remains of impressive stone churches, as opposed to the wooden buildings that had formerly been associated with the Anglo-Saxons. In sum, Gatch makes such a clean break with prior assumptions having to do with the criticism of Old English literature that a person comparing *Loyalties and Traditions* to Stopford Brooke's *English Literature from the Beginning to the Norman Conquest*, published seventy-five years before, would scarcely recognize that the same subject is being discussed.

The last book published in 1971–72 that calls for attention here is T.A. Shippey's radically innovative study *Old English Verse*.⁷⁵ At the time when this book came out, its author was a relatively unknown scholar in his late twenties. Born in Calcutta (present-day Kolkatta) in 1943, Shippey was educated, like J.R.R. Tolkien, at King Edward's School in Birmingham. After earning the MA degree at the University of Cambridge in 1968, he taught for a while at Oxford University and at the University of Birmingham before being appointed Chair of English Language and Medieval Literature at the University of Leeds. He later held the Walter J. Ong Chair of Humanities at St. Louis University, Missouri, a post from which he retired in 2008. He is widely known for his writings on J.R.R. Tolkien and fantasy literature as well as on Old English literature. Rather than, like Gatch, pursuing the interpretation of Old English verse through an understanding of its Latinate intellectual background, Shippey engages with the corpus of that verse as a meaningful and largely self-sufficient body of writings. Probing that verse for meanings that are not necessarily self-evident, interrogating it at point after point with questions that are either rhetorical or real, he asks how we as modern readers can respond to it in a manner consistent with how it was originally received. As New Critics had long maintained, any such search for meaning requires an alertness to paradox, verbal ambiguity, irony, narrative pacing, and authorial point of view, among other aspects of a work's verbal texture. Moreover, Shippey argues, the analysis of Old English verse requires a sensitivity to the poetics of composition in a social setting dramatically unlike what is taken for granted in the individualistic societies of today, for poetry then was largely a public,

⁷⁵ T.A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972). Six years later Shippey published a short book titled simply *Beowulf* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). This is the most vigorous compact study of *Beowulf* of which I know. It provides a valuable complement to Shippey's discussion of Old English heroic poetry in chap. 2, 'The Argument of Courage: *Beowulf* and Other Heroic Poetry', of his *Old English Verse*.

anonymous, formulaic medium whereby a society defined the bedrock attitudes that allowed it to function with a minimum of friction and a maximum of communal assent.

Shippey's starting point is the seemingly unpromising observation that Old English verse is essentially dead, as far as modern readers are concerned. That is to say, there is no unbroken tradition linking that poetry to the English-language verse that most readers can identify with today. As moderns, therefore, we must approach that literature as if it were the product of an alien time and place, painstakingly reconstructing both its inner poetics and its intellectual content when neither one is self-evident. This could be called the opposite of belletrist appreciations of archaic literature on the grounds that it expresses a spirit 'like our own'.

The first comparison that Shippey makes linking the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons to that of other peoples of the world is arresting, for it has nothing directly to do with ancient Germania or the Latinate Middle Ages. Instead, he asks us to contemplate the performance of oral heroic poetry in Turkmenistan, as witnessed by a nineteenth-century Hungarian traveller who was struck by 'the ardour of the singer and the enthusiasm of his youthful listeners'. These men, 'uttering deep groans, hurled their caps to the ground and dashed their hands in a passion through the curls of their hair'.⁷⁶ Shippey's aim in citing this passage is to bring home the point that the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons too, once had living audiences, even if those people are next to unknown to us today.

The subsequent thrust of Shippey's argument is to read Old English poems not as the discrete and self-contained products of an authorial elite, but rather as parts of 'one body' of verse, one that sometimes defies analysis in the vocabulary of modern criticism. The people who made up the audiences for that verse would have been familiar with its conventions, unlike readers of today, who can easily be misled by inappropriate expectations. As Shippey states at the end of his introductory chapter (p. 16):

What I hope to avoid is the urge to make the unfamiliar conform to the accepted, to label genres and mark transitions. It is worth remembering that no Old English poem has a title in the manuscripts, and that many have only slight indications of where they begin and end. Nor are they arranged as we see them printed, half-line by half-line, but are written out simply as rhythmic prose. Indeed the terms 'prose' and 'poetry' are not Old English ones at all and in this case may not represent the most important distinction; 'song' and 'speech' might be better. It is one more reminder that since so many modern assumptions are wrong it will be as well, so far as one can, to do without them – to seek comparison as well as pursue analysis, and so to see not many individual parts but one body.

It is in this spirit of 'lightening ship', to recall Irving's characterization of his stripped-down method of approaching *Beowulf*, that Shippey then proceeds to analyse the whole body of Old English verse, starting from *Beowulf* and other heroic poetry and moving on to the so-called elegies, to considerations of language and style, to anonymous saints' lives and the saints' lives of Cynewulf, and to the biblical paraphrases of the Junius manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11). The book concludes with discussion of certain verse productions of

⁷⁶ Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 10, with reference to Nora K. Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). The main part of this latter book drew on volume 3 of the Chadwicks' major study *The Growth of Literature*.

the late Old English period, including the *Meters of Boethius*, the historical poems inset into the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and *The Battle of Maldon*.

A keyword in Shippey's analysis of these poems is 'traditional'. In his view, for example, the poems from the Exeter Book that are customarily discussed under the generic term 'elegy' all depend on an 'alternation of involvement and detachment, and share as a basic theme the ability of the mind to control itself and resist its surroundings'. It is for such a reason as this that we can speak of them as a group, Shippey argues, not on account of their conformity to some autonomous concept of genre. 'The group as a whole exemplifies the great strength of a traditional literature', he writes: namely, 'the ability to use common thoughts and images as a springboard, so that poets need only small additions to create great effects without baffling their audiences' (pp. 78–79). As for the 'one body' of Old English poetry, Shippey argues that its many constituent groups are linked to one another through a common formulaic language. 'Any piece of Old English verse', he argues, regardless of how we imagine it to have been composed, 'is liable to resemble others, those others themselves contain echoes from further away, and so on' (p. 95). Here he draws on research into living traditions of oral poetry so as to suggest that in such traditions, a basic conservative impulse coexists with a state of 'permanent flux': that is to say, all the poems in the tradition share certain verbal resemblances, and yet each song is an original, for 'no song is older than the day it is sung' (p. 89). He then asks to what extent such a model of composition as this is relevant to the Anglo-Saxon context. In the end, like Gatch, he is inclined to see the formulaic language of Old English verse as an inherent aspect of the tradition regardless of how a particular work might have been composed. As he writes at the end of the chapter titled 'Language and Style':

Old English verse is strangely homogeneous over a long period; this inner consistency is the result of a mode of composition not present in the modern world, nor understood till recently. That mode is formulaic, expressing itself through pattern rather than through single examples, and it needs to be appraised in the same way. Central to all these points is the conviction that Old English poetry has an individual voice distinct from all others, ancient or modern, though, like the voice of any human being, it is capable of great variation while remaining recognisably 'the same'.

The chief payoff of this approach is that Shippey is able to show the existence of parallels knitting together poems that modern critics have often separated out from one another as belonging either in different historical periods or in distinct generic categories. His discussion of verbal and thematic connections between the 'elegies' of the Exeter Book and the 'wisdom poems' of that same compendium is a fruitful example of this approach (pp. 53–69).

Anyone who studies side by side the three books that have just been discussed – Greenfield's *Interpretation of Old English Poems*, Gatch's *Loyalties and Traditions*, and Shippey's *Old English Verse* – will gain much insight into the state of the art of Old English literary criticism at about the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century. None of these three books, in my opinion, could have been written before approximately this moment in the history of Old English scholarship. Although each study is unique in character and emphasis, the three authors share certain attitudes in common. Each author is deeply persuaded that Old English literature can 'speak' with eloquence – and sometimes, indeed, with wisdom – to readers of the present day, and so it matters greatly that this literature exists. Each of the three authors,

likewise, is committed to analysing Old English literature in terms historically consistent with the culture that produced it. In addition, each is committed to the close reading of the actual words of that literature as a prerequisite to its valid interpretation, regardless of what other guides to its meaning may exist.

Each of these three books established a pattern for other critics to follow. Greenfield's study prepared the way for the rational explication of Old English verse with reference – though never with slavish obeisance – to emergent schools of criticism and theory. Gatch's study nourished what soon became a steady stream of criticism locating works of Old English literature, especially ones of relatively late date, within the world of medieval Christian education and learning. Shippey's book provided a model for critics striving to read Old English poems in period-specific, traditional terms while liberating the criticism of that literature from the tyranny of false pre-conceptions as to its 'proper' style or generic characteristics. Taken together, these three studies indicate how thorough a transformation the criticism of Old English literature had undergone since the time of G.K. Anderson, let alone that of Stopford Brooke.

The year 1972 thus serves as an apt cut-off date for the present discussion of changing currents in the criticism of Old English literature during the main part of the twentieth century. The choice of that date is not arbitrary, for it was in the year 1972 that the annual interdisciplinary journal *Anglo-Saxon England* was founded, edited initially by Peter Clemoes (1920–96), who by then had succeeded Dorothy Whitelock as Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Cambridge. To quote from the front matter of its inaugural issue, *Anglo-Saxon England* was designed to express 'the growing sense of community among scholars working in the various branches of Anglo-Saxon studies in many parts of the world'. This same inaugural notice registered the co-editors' conviction that the different disciplines subsumed in Anglo-Saxon studies 'aid each other and are but aspects of a common interest'.⁷⁷

Since one of the tasks undertaken by the editors of the new journal was to include an annual bibliography of Anglo-Saxon studies at the back of each volume, the standard free-standing bibliography of Old English literary studies, namely the 1980 *Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature* that was jointly prepared by Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson, extends to the year 1972 and not farther.⁷⁸ Moreover, the growing professionalism of Anglo-Saxon studies that is reflected in the founding of *Anglo-Saxon England* and the publication of the Greenfield–Robinson *Bibliography* can be observed in the concurrent efforts that were made by a consortium of scholars to organize an international society whose purpose would be to promote and coordinate research in all aspects of this field. This organization, the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists (ISAS), held its inaugural

⁷⁷ Quotation from the preface to the journal's initial volume (1972), p. ix. At the time of its founding, the journal had twelve co-editors drawn from six different countries of the world, each man an acknowledged expert in at least one branch of Anglo-Saxon studies. It will not do to dwell on the apostolic overtones of this arrangement, as these were probably unconscious. The fact that all thirteen of the original editors were men is more likely to be noticed today than in 1972, when women played a less prominent role in academia across the board.

⁷⁸ Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson, *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). The authors interpret 'literature' in a broad sense so as to include a number of studies in related fields.

conference in Belgium in 1983. Since then ISAS has sponsored a conference every other year in one or another part of the world. Each has featured a certain number of presentations relating to the interpretation of Old English literature, and some of these papers have subsequently been published in *Anglo-Saxon England*. In addition, each conference held since 2001 has been the basis of a volume of critical essays sponsored by ISAS and published by ACMRS in the series ‘Essays in Anglo-Saxon Studies’.

Where, then, did the criticism of Old English literature stand by the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century?

‘Well situated at last’, a dispassionate observer might have said. ‘In a creative ferment’, an optimist might have ventured. ‘In a fix’, I hear someone else saying. Certainly it is true that many useless assumptions had by then been discarded. It was seldom now that one heard any one speak of the essential paganism of *The Seafarer*, or of Grendel as an embodiment of the wintry North Sea, or of the goddess Wyrð in her struggles against the Christian God. But it is also true that this was a time of polemical differences among the experts. To one side, committed oral-formulaicists were ignoring practically all that the Robertsonians had to say, while in the next room, hard-core Robertsonians were discounting practically anything anyone else might have to say. While scholars of a New Critical persuasion were looking at the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text, source hunters were tracking down Latinate models for Old English texts with such assiduity as to leave no time for anything else. Meanwhile many good scholars continued to go about their business, oblivious to these divisions and generally grateful to be so; while hulking over the horizon, peering with a jaundiced eye over fiefs that it knew it would soon possess, was the postmodern giant named Theory.

Some people might think of a situation as confused as this as disconcerting. As for myself, I found it invigorating, back then; and I think of myself as having been fortunate, speaking now with over forty years’ hindsight, to have been able to launch the coracle of my own professional career onto the deeps of English studies in a year – the same year 1972, by happenstance – when all these storms were blowing up in the Old English sector. It has made for a serious learning experience over the years, as many other persons of my generation will affirm.

The subsequent chapters of this book will suggest some ways in which others can participate in a similar learning experience by studying select examples of criticism published during recent decades. The point of this review, it should be understood, is not to encourage readers to reiterate the same discoveries and repeat the same mistakes of the scholars of an earlier generation. Rather, it is to help them to be well situated to make valuable original contributions to Old English literary studies in the years ahead, wherever the path may lead.

For Further Reading

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