

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The diction of the poems was traditional and archaic even at the time they were written down. It is probably true, as Richmond Lattimore says in introducing his *Iliad*, that there is no traditional poetic vocabulary left which is still usable. But in translating Old into Modern English, it seems uneconomic not to take advantage of the many words which have survived virtually unchanged. When I began to translate *The Ruin* five years ago I was fired by the example of Ezra Pound's version of *The Seafarer* (which gives far and away the most concentrated impression of Anglo-Saxon poetry); but half a century has elapsed since *The Seafarer*, and I have discovered, in extending Pound's translation-method to all the best Old English poems, that certain archaisms (the *-eth* form, for example) are no longer generally practicable. So the last poems I have translated are noticeably less archaic in style than the first. But I hope that the principle upon which I decided not to exclude ancient or half-forgotten words if they could still be made to do their job still holds: it is that an old word tensed and tuned in a strict form, can still be made to yield its *virtù*.

In the art of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* the strong and durable frame of the traditional form sustained the vocabulary; in its intricately wrought setting an ancient word shone out like the stones on the Rood's crossbeam. The 'reclamation' policy of William Morris is no longer possible, but I still believe, despite J. R. R. Tolkien's condemnation of 'the etymological fallacy', that the life of a word comes from its root, and that the occasional use of a word in its original sense is one of the duties as well as the prerogatives of a poet. One has to risk making mistakes.

I have, then, retained as much of the metre and the traditional vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon poetry as was feasible, and in order to make this effort worth while, I must further strain the sympathy of the reader by asking him to read these translations *aloud*, and with as much vigour and deliberation as he finds the line warrants. I must also beg him to observe the mid-line pause, *without which the metric is incomprehensible*, and to pitch into the stresses. Such instructions, I am aware, are more proper to music than to poetry; and the poet cannot expect the reader to do his work for him. But Old English poetry was oral, therefore aural; and if the reader can

with the aid of the poems here translated, imagine a *scop*, a harp, and the hall hushed, he will be more than half-way there.

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I have used some key Old English words 'neat' where I could find no modern equivalent. Apart from *cynn* and *scop*, already explained, the most important of them are:

aetheling: son of some *aethel* or noble man, often a royal prince.

burg: a fortified city, root of modern 'borough'.

byrnie: a coat of mail.

Hwaet: an exclamation made at the beginning of a poem or speech to call for attention, possibly accompanied by a chord on the harp.

weard: 'ward', 'protector'; see *hlaf-weard*, p. 63

wierd: this all-important word is related to *weorthan*, to be, become or happen. It means 'what is, what happens, the way that things happen. Fate, personal destiny, death'. Shakespeare's 'weird sisters', descended from the 'fatal sustren thre', the Norns of Norse mythology and the Parcae of Greek, have inherited some of the original force of the word. I spell it 'Wierd' or 'wierd' to distinguish it from the weaker modern adjective.

Anglo-Saxon pronunciation differed considerably from ours, but for the purposes of this book it will suffice to note that the 'c' in which many proper names end was pronounced 'ch', as in 'church'; that the 'æ' diphthong, also common in names, was pronounced as in 'flat hat'; and that 'sc' was pronounced 'sh'. Every vowel is given its full value, so that *Dunnere* in *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, is a three-syllable rather than a two-syllable word.

Finally, I must warn students that all line references are to the Anglo-Saxon text.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

IN twelve years some of the inaccuracies and omissions of the first edition have become obvious, and I am grateful for this chance to make corrections, though I have not attempted to cover my undergraduate tracks. Bibliographical suggestions have been brought up to date. The endings of *The Seafarer* and *The Dream of the Rood* have now been included, at a reader's request. Other shortcomings of the translations, introductions and notes have become clear, but I have not always known how to put a wiser face on early enthusiasms. A fifth passage from *Beowulf* is added, taken from my more recent attempt, a translation different in style from *The Wife's Complaint*, just as that version differs in style from *The Ruin*, translated in 1959. These changes in style have made it difficult to change the translations. If the introductions were to be written today, they too would be different – I have grown to admire *Beowulf* deeply, and to sympathize with Latin Christian literates.

The first edition acknowledged all conscious debts, notably to the University of Oxford and some of its graduates. In preparing a second edition I should again like to offer my thanks to Mrs Radice for her editorial care, and, for lending her excellent ear, to my wife Eileen.

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M.J.A.

The suggestions made in *Further Reading* have been completely revised for this reprint.

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M.J.A.

THE RUIN

THIS description of a deserted Roman city, written on two leaves badly scarred by fire, may well stand at the gate of a selection of Anglo-Saxon poems. The Romans had held this province for four centuries before the Angles came; and they had been gone three centuries when this poem was written. It was to be another three hundred years before the Normans reintroduced the art of massive construction in stone to these islands. The Anglo-Saxons usually referred to Roman ruins as 'the work of the Giants'.

It is probable that the city of the poem is Aquae Sulis, the Roman Bath, and we may imagine the anonymous author walking about the overgrown streets. His thoughts as he does so are very like those of *The Wanderer* and the 'Last Survivor', and *The Ruin* is grouped with 'The Elegies'. But, as Elliot van Kirk Dobbie remarks in his Introduction to *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. III, 'the internal rimes, together with the unusual concreteness of the vocabulary, and the use of words elsewhere unrecorded in Anglo-Saxon set this poem quite apart from the other lyric-elegiac texts in The Exeter Book'. If we wish to tie in this unique poem to the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature, we may think of it as the first of many English meditations on old stones. It compares interestingly with Gray's ponderings upon the 'rude forefathers' of Stoke Poges.

The Ruin

Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst. . . .

Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
the work of the Giants, the stonemiths,
mouldereth.

Rime scoureth gatetowers
rime on mortar.

Shattered the showershields, roofs ruined,
age under-ate them.

And the wielders & wrights?
Earthgrip holds them – gone, long gone,
fast in gravesgrasp while fifty fathers
and sons have passed.

Wall stood,
grey lichen, red stone, kings fell often,
stood under storms, high arch crashed –
stands yet the wallstone, hacked by weapons,
by files grim-ground . . .
. . . shone the old skilled work
. . . sank to loam-crust.

Mood quickened mind, and a man of wit,
cunning in rings, bound bravely the wallbase
with iron, a wonder.

Bright were the buildings, halls where springs ran,
high, horngabled, much throng-noise;
these many meadhalls men filled
with loud cheerfulness: Wierd changed that.

Came days of pestilence, on all sides men fell dead,
death fetched off the flower of the people;
where they stood to fight, waste places
and on the acropolis, ruins.

Hosts who would build again
 shrank to the earth. Therefore are these courts dreary
 and that red arch twisteth tiles.
 wryeth from roof-ridge, reacheth groundwards. . . .
 Broken blocks. . . .

There once many a man
 mood-glad, goldbright, of gleams garnished,
 flushed with wine-pride, flashing war-gear,
 gazed on wrought gemstones, on gold, on silver,
 on wealth held and hoarded, on light-filled amber,
 on this bright burg of broad dominion.

Stood stone houses; wide streams welled
 hot from source, and a wall all caught
 in its bright bosom, that the baths were
 hot at hall's hearth; that was fitting . . .

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Thence hot streams, loosed, ran over hoar stone
 unto the ring-tank
 . . . It is a kingly thing
 . . . city