

III

The Old Tradition:¹ Poetic Form

Speakings and Writings

Few things of man's begetting outlast for long the times that give them birth, and works of literary art share the fate of the rest. The loss is the heavier when (as in Old English) much of the artistic activity takes the shape of *speakings*; that is, literary compositions designed for oral rendition (sung or said) and as a rule not circulated in written form.² No speakings, of course, could come down to us unless they happened to get recorded, and even then the chances would be all against their survival, for most of the old manuscripts perished long ago, victims of the years.³ One might therefore reasonably expect to find the Old English literary records (or what is left of them) made up chiefly of *writings*; that is, compositions designed for circulation in written form. And when the records are studied, this expectation is more than fulfilled; indeed, the student may seek long before he finds any speakings at all. The few that survive are our oldest literary heirlooms, for the literary art of the English (as of the other Germanic peoples) before their conversion to Christianity found expression in speakings only.

Runes

The English of heathen times knew how to write, it is true. They brought with them from the Continent a *futhark* or runic alphabet of twenty-four letters, and to this in the course of time they added several new signs of their own. But the runes were epigraphic characters, and their use was therefore limited to inscriptions, cut or hammered out on hard surfaces (e.g., the pommel of a sword, the sides of a monumental stone, the top or sides of a box). This kind of writing is obviously not well suited to the recording of literary compositions, which (unless very short) need more space than a runemaster would be likely to find available. Moreover, even if a suitable

¹ The chief work on the Germanic literary tradition is A. Heusler's *Die Altgermanische Dichtung* (Berlin, n.d. but copyright 1926). For the Germanic background in general, J. Hoops's *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (4v, Strassburg, 1911-1919) is useful.

² Speakings are also known as "oral literature," a subject treated at length by H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*. The actual and hypothetical speakings of Old English are discussed in Vol. 1 of this work (Cambridge, 1932). The authors, however, take for speakings many compositions which others interpret as writings.

³ Only eight Old English MSS with much vernacular poetry in them have survived. These are the Corpus MS, more precisely MS CCCC 201, at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (whence the abbreviation CCCC); the so-called Paris Psalter, or MS Fonds Latin 8824 of the Bibliothèque National in Paris; the Vercelli Book, or Codex cxvii of the cathedral chapter library at Vercelli in northern Italy; the Exeter Book, preserved in the library of Exeter Cathedral; MS Junius 11 (often called the *Cædmon MS*) at the Bodleian Library, Oxford; and three MSS in the Cotton collection at the British Museum: Vitellius A xv (2nd MS, the Nowell or *Beowulf* codex), Otho A vi (the Boethius MS), and Tiberius B 1. Nearly all these MSS, moreover, have come down in a more or less damaged or mutilated state.

hard surface could be found, it would hardly be used to put a poem on unless there were some very special reason for making such a record. Be it added that runemasters were few and far between, and presumably drew good pay for cutting an inscription; in other words, epigraphic writing was expensive. The poets, for their part, would naturally be interested in making their compositions known to the public (i.e., in uttering them, or having them uttered, before audiences), not in making records of them which few would see and fewer could read. Certainly no English poems of heathen times have come down to us in the form of runic inscriptions, and we have no reason to think that such poems were ever so recorded in English (though Scandinavian cases of the kind are known).

With the introduction of Christianity a great change took place. The missionaries brought parchment, pen and ink, and the custom of writing literary compositions down. They also brought the Roman alphabet.⁴ The English futhark, epigraphic though it was in origin and history, might perfectly well have been used for writing with pen and ink on parchment, but the foreign missionaries and their English pupils associated the Roman alphabet with this kind of writing and used it, not only in copying Latin texts, but also in making English texts. Yet the old runes were not given up for centuries. They were kept alongside the new letters, and the co-existence of two kinds of writing naturally led to overlapping. On the one hand, letters might be used in inscriptions; on the other, runes might be used in manuscripts. The two runes *thorn* and *wynn*, indeed, were added to the alphabet, as symbols for sounds wanting in postclassical Latin but common in English. And the new practice of recording literary compositions had its effect on native epigraphy: thus, the *Dream of the Rood* won epigraphic as well as manuscript record.⁵

*The
Roman
Alphabet*

In Old English times the Church monopolized the production of manuscripts. A layman might know how to read; he might even be an author (like King Alfred). But it would hardly occur to him to undertake the work of a scribe, any more than it would occur to the ordinary reader or author of today to undertake the work of a printer. The making of manuscripts was in the hands of the Church because the art or craft of writing on parchment with pen and ink was part of the professional equipment of the well-trained cleric, and of him alone. And the monopoly was strengthened by the workings of supply and demand. The Church made manuscripts chiefly though not wholly for her own use; the readers of the day were mostly clerics. Old English literature as we have it (not as it was) therefore reflects the tastes and professional interests of the clergy; from the MSS we get a one-sided picture of the literary art of those days. Poems that the

MSS

⁴ Most of the Old English MSS were written in the so-called insular hand, a minuscule script developed by the Irish out of half-uncial and brought to England by Irish missionaries in the seventh century. Toward the end of the Old English period the insular hand lost favor, and the so-called Caroline minuscule script, already dominant on the Continent, became fashionable in England as well.

⁵ Runes were used for some alliterative verses inscribed on the Franks Casket (eighth century?). Text in Krapp-Dobbie, vi. 116.

clerics for any reason disliked or disapproved of did not get recorded, unless they happened to strike the fancy of some nonconformist scribe or anthologist who had the courage of his heterodoxy. Moreover, since little space was available, items thought of as trivial or as less important stood little chance of inclusion in a MS miscellany. Few things in lighter vein could be expected to come down to us under such conditions, and in fact the tone of the extant literary monuments is prevailingly serious and edifying.

Authors

Departures from the normal pattern we owe, no doubt, to the likes and dislikes of individual makers or takers of MSS. In many cases pride of authorship may have played a part; certainly a clerical author had ways of getting his compositions written down, even if he did not write them down himself, and the bulk of what we have was presumably composed as well as written down by clerics. A few compositions seem wholly secular, and two of them (*Wife's Lament* and *Eadwacer*) purport to be by women. But even here we cannot be certain of lay authorship; in every period of English literature clergymen have composed works secular enough in tone and spirit, and a male author might perfectly well make a woman his mouthpiece. The case is otherwise when the composition is definitely heathen (rather than secular); here clerical authorship must be ruled out. Unluckily no compositions of this kind, on the literary level, have come down to us, except a few spells (or charms), and most of these, in their recorded form, show more or less of a Christian coloring. On the other hand, we cannot safely presume clerical authorship of every work religious in tone or subject. Cædmon was a farmhand (Hild made him a monk *after* God had made him a poet), and other religious pieces besides his may well have been composed by men who had never taken holy orders or monastic vows. Our uncertainties are the greater since in most cases we do not know so much as the name of the author of a given work, and even if we happen to know the author's name we may be little the wiser; thus, our knowledge of the poet Cynewulf is limited to what we can glean from his poems. This want of biographical information, however, need not disturb us overmuch. Literary art in Old English times was highly traditional, and the personal history of the author did not come out in his compositions so markedly as it does in times when originality rather than mastery of a conventional mode wins the prizes.

Old English writings might be in prose or verse; speakings were restricted to verse, in early times at least.⁶ We set the prose aside for the time being. The verse, writings and speakings alike, was regularly composed in the alliterative measure that had come down to the English from their Germanic forefathers. Before taking up the poetic kinds (or genres) cul-

⁶ It seems unlikely that the English of heathen times cultivated the prose speaking or anecdote as a literary art-form; certainly we have no evidence of the existence of such an art-form then, though it may have developed in later times. See C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1939), and K. Malone, *English Studies*, xxiii (1941). 110-112.

tivated in this measure, it will be needful to consider the measure itself, and the style that went with it.

Old Germanic verse makes many problems for the prosodist, and none of the methods of scansion proposed need be taken as definitive.⁷ Here we shall deal briefly with the main points. The rhythm of the verse grew naturally out of the prose rhythm (as we saw above), by a process of metrical heightening and lowering. A metrically heightened syllable is called a *lift* (German *hebung*); a metrically lowered syllable, a *drop* (German *senkung*). Only a syllable that took or might take a main stress in the prose rhythm was subject to metrical heightening; in the same way, only a syllable that lacked or might lack stress in the prose rhythm was subject to metrical lowering. We do not know just how the metrical heightening and lowering were brought about, but time as well as stress played a part, and such verse as was sung or chanted necessarily made use of pitch patterns different from those of ordinary speech. The metrical heightening might be reinforced by alliteration⁸ or rime, giving a *major* lift. A lift not so reinforced is a *minor* lift. The basic metrical unit was the short verse, made up of a varying number of syllables, at least one of which was a lift. Usually the short verse had two lifts. Such a verse might stand alone or in series. We illustrate with a passage from a legal text, *Hit Becwæð*:⁹

*Short
Verse
and Line*

ne plot ne ploh,	nor plot nor plowland,
ne turf ne toft,	nor sod nor site,
ne furh ne fotmæl,	nor furrow nor foot-length,
ne land ne læse,	nor tillage nor pasturage,
ne fersc ne mersc,	nor fresh [water] nor marsh,
ne ruh ne rum,	nor rough [land] nor open [land],
wudes ne felde,	of wood nor of field,
landes ne strandes,	of land nor of strand,
wealtes ne wæteres.	of wold nor of water.

Here we have nine short verses in series. The first six verses make a group, and the last three verses make another group; grouping by twos (giving long verses or *lines*) does not occur in this passage. The verses are not linked one to another by alliteration; each verse is a closed system so far as alliteration goes. Six verses have alliteration, two have rime, and one dispenses with both these aids.

Passages like that from *Hit Becwæð* were exceptional in Old English.

⁷ A recent study: J. C. Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf* (1942). Earlier studies: E. Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik* (1893); A. Heusler, *Deutsche Versgeschichte* I (1925). See also K. Malone, *ELH*, VIII (1941). 74-80.

⁸ Two syllables are said to alliterate if each begins with the same sound. But in Old English verse only lifts were included in an alliterative pattern. Moreover, the consonant combination *sk* (*sc*) for alliterative purposes was reckoned a single sound, and alliterated with itself only; similarly with the combinations *st* and *sp*. On the other hand, all vowels and diphthongs, for alliterative purposes, were reckoned the same sound.

⁹ F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, I (1903). 400. The text was also printed by F. Grendon, *Jour. of Amer. Folk-Lore*, XXII (1909). 179-180. The title *Hit Becwæð* "[he] bequeathed it" comes from the first two words of the text; compare *Habeas Corpus* and the like.

Ordinarily the short verses were grouped by twos, and a given verse occurred as the *on-verse* (first half) or the *off-verse* (second half) of a line. Here alliteration could not be dispensed with, for the line was an alliterative unit. A short verse included in a line is commonly called a *half-line*. A good example of an Old English line of poetry is *Beowulf*, 1725,

hu mihtig God manna cynne
how mighty God to maþkind.

Here *hu mihtig God* is the on-verse, *manna cynne* the off-verse. The two halves of the line are bound together by alliteration: the stave (i.e., the alliterating sound) is *m*. The line has four lifts, two in each half; two of the lifts are major, two are minor. The second and third lifts have no drop between them, but they have a pause between them which separates them more sharply than a drop could do. A more unusual (though not rare) type is *Beowulf*, 2987,

Lifts

heard swyrd hilted, ond his helm somod
hard sword hilted, and his helm besides.

Here the two halves are doubly bound by alliteration: *heard*, *hilted* and *helm* are linked by the *h*-stave, *swyrd* and *somod* by the *s*-stave. There are five lifts: three in the on-verse, two in the off-verse. The first three lifts are juxtaposed, and so are the last two. All the lifts are major. Yet a third type is *Beowulf*, 2995,

landes ond locenra beaga; ne ðorfte him ða lean oðwitan
of land and linked rings; he needed not to blame him for those rewards.

Here we have six lifts, three in each half-line. Three lifts are major, three minor. Each lift is accompanied by one or more drops. Many other varieties occur, but the fundamental features of the line remain the same.

Sievers,
Heusler,
Pope

It is easier to determine the lift-pattern of a line than to divide its half-lines into feet (or measures). Here it is customary to distinguish between the half-lines of normal length (as in *Beowulf*, 1725) and so-called swollen or abnormally long half-lines (as in *Beowulf*, 2995). According to Sievers, a normal half-line had two feet; a swollen half-line, three feet. According to Heusler and Pope, however, each half-line, whether normal or swollen, had two feet. Heusler recognized only one kind of foot: this began with a main stress and included also a subordinate stress. Sievers, however, recognized four kinds of feet. To these he gave no names, but we shall call them classes 1, 2, 3, and 4. In class 1 (e.g., *drýhten* "lord") the stress came at the beginning; in class 2 (e.g., *begóng* "circuit") the stress came at the end; in class 3 (e.g., *féa* "few") the foot was monosyllabic; in class 4 (e.g., *wélþungen* "excellent") the foot was polysyllabic, with initial main stress and medial or final subordinate stress.¹⁰ Both Heusler and Sievers began

¹⁰ Here the acute accent marks main stress; the grave, subordinate stress. Sievers did not include in his system a polysyllabic foot with initial or medial subordinate stress and final main stress: e.g., *fúl aréd* "quite inexorable" (*Wanderer* 5).

the half-line, on occasion, with an *onset* of one or more syllables reckoned as anacrusis: a kind of running start that belonged indeed to the half-line but made no part of the podic pattern. For Heusler this pattern was the same in every foot: two beats to the measure, whatever the number of syllables in the foot. The first or stronger beat coincided with the main stress of the prose rhythm. The second or weaker beat coincided with the subordinate stress of the prose rhythm, if such a stress occurred; otherwise, the weaker beat fell on an unstressed syllable, or on a pause (metrically a rest) in the prose rhythm, and served to heighten the syllable or the rest as the case might be. We illustrate Heusler's system of scansion with the on-verse of *Beowulf*, 1173:

beo wið Geatas glæd be kind to the Geatas.

Here *beo wið* made the onset, *Geatas* the first foot, and *glæd* the second foot. The stronger beats fell on the alliterating syllables. The weaker beat of the first foot fell on the ending of *Geatas*; that of the second foot, on the rest after *glæd*. For Sievers the half-lines fell into five types. In type *A*, both feet were of class 1; in type *B*, both were of class 2; in type *C*, the first was of class 2, the second was of class 1; in type *D*, the first was of class 3, the second was of class 4; in type *E*, the first was of class 4, the second was of class 3. Examples of these types follow, all taken from on-verses of *Beowulf*. The onset is set off by double diagonals; the feet are divided by single diagonals.

<i>A</i> 1987	hu // lómp eow on / láde	how went it with you on the road?
<i>B</i> 1939	þæt hit scéa / denmæl	that it the damascened sword
<i>C</i> 1192	him was fúl / bóren	the cup was borne to him
<i>D</i> 2705	for // wrát / Wédra hêlm	The Weders' lord cut through
<i>E</i> 1160	gléomannes / gýd	the gleeman's song.

Pope's system of scansion may be described as a modification of Heusler's. According to Pope, each half-line had two feet, sung or chanted in 4/8 time (normal verse) or 4/4 time (swollen verse). The first foot of a half-line might be heavy or light. The second foot was regularly heavy. The light foot of Pope answers to the onset of Heusler; its lifts (one main and one subordinate) were both weak, and were excluded from the alliterative pattern of the line. We illustrate with *Beowulf*, 264a:

gebàd wintra wòrn he lived many years.

Here *gebàd* makes the first foot, *wintra wòrn* the second. The first foot is light; it begins with a rest beat which takes the main stress. The second foot is heavy; it has *two* major lifts.

The systems of Sievers, Heusler, and Pope are outlined here for the information of the reader, but the student will do well enough in reading if he follows the natural rhythm of the lines, with due heed given to the lift-patterns and in particular to those syllables which the poets by alliteration and rime marked for heightening.

We have already seen that the short verse, the basic metrical unit, usually occurred by twos—that is, in *lines*, the two parts of which were linked by alliteration. Old English verse in all periods was almost exclusively *linear* (that is, made up of lines). In the oldest linear verse the end-stopped style prevailed: every line ended with a syntactical pause and every sentence made either a line or a couplet (i.e., a two-line unit). This pre-classical style of composition was kept, almost intact, in the mnemonic parts or *thulas* (i.e., metrical name-lists) of *Widsith*, where one sentence runs to six lines but all the others make either a single line or a couplet each. The *Leiden Riddle* likewise was done (though with less strictness) in the old style, and many one-line and two-line units occur in the spells. Otherwise, only relics of the pre-classical style may be found in the monuments.¹¹ Formulas like *Beowulf*, 456,

Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga
Hrothgar spoke, the helm of the Scyldings,

seem to reflect such a style, and other one- or two-line formulas occur in the laws and elsewhere. One might have expected to find end-stopping used a good deal in the gnomic verses, but here the clerical writers have given us the traditional material in remodeled form.¹² A few pieces of gnomic wisdom, however, have come down to us in lines or couplets. *Exeter Gnomics*, 158,

licgende beam læsest groweð
a fallen tree grows least

may serve to illustrate the one-line gnomic, while *Age mec*, 117-118,

biþ þæt selast þonne mon him sylf ne mæg
wyrd onwendan þæt he þon wel þolige

that is best, when one himself cannot
amend his fate, that he then put up with it

exemplifies the two-line gnomic. Somewhat similar in style is the linear formula of consolation used six times in *Deor*. Such formulas, nevertheless, regularly appear in a setting dominated by the run-on style of linear composition. In general, a plurilinear unit of classical Old English poetry was held together, not by uniformities of rhythmical or alliterative pattern, nor yet by uniformities of grouping (i.e., strophic structure), but by the use of run-on lines.

Yet the classical style grew out of the older, end-stopped style of composition, and kept what could be kept of the earlier technic. In the matter of plurilinear units the poverty of the old style was marked: only the two-line unit or couplet existed. The richness of the classical style in plurilinear units is no less marked: we find many such units of three, four, five, six, or

¹¹ The *Riming Poem* relies on rime rather than syntax to mark its three quatrains, 21 couplets and 33 single lines as separate and distinct units, and can hardly be taken as a survival or revival of the old end-stopped style of composition.

¹² See A. Heusler, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, xxvi (1916): 52.

seven lines; indeed, there was no limit to the number of lines permissible in making such a unit. This great change was brought about with the least possible disturbance to the old order. We illustrate with *Beowulf*, 639-641:

Dam wife þa word wel licodon,
gilpcwide Geates. Eode goldhroden
freolicu folccwen to hire frean sittan.

To that woman those words were pleasing,
the proud speech of the Geat. She went, gold-adorned,
the noble folk-queen, to sit by her lord.

Here we have a three-line unit, made up of two sentences, each a line and a half long. Sentences of this length were forbidden to the oldest poets, but it would have been easy for them to say the same thing in two one-line sentences, as follows:

Dam wife þa word wel licodon.
Folccwen eode to hire frean sittan.

These lines bring out, besides, the starkness of the old style. It may well have been a wish to make this style less bare which led to the expansion of the sentences beyond the linear limits; if so, the new plurilinear units were a mere by-product of a process set going for reasons unconnected with plurilinear structure.

In this connection we distinguish two kinds of run-on line. In the first, *Run-On Style* the sentence goes on to the next line without a syntactical pause; in the second, it goes on with a syntactical pause. The second kind of run-on line has obviously kept something of the old end-stopped style, and presumably grew out of the linear sentence. We further distinguish three stages in the development of the run-on style. The early stage is exemplified in the mnemonic parts of *Widsith* (the mnemonic parts, as we have seen, exemplify the end-stopped style). Here the plurilinear units vary in number of lines, but this variation is held within comparatively narrow limits: no unit longer than nine lines occurs. All the natural divisions of the poem end with a line; not one ends with an on-verse (i.e., in the middle of a line). Single lines and couplets make a respectable proportion of the whole. Most of the run-on lines are of the second kind mentioned above; that is, they end with a syntactical pause, though not with a full stop. *Beowulf* may serve to illustrate the middle stage of the run-on style. Here some of the plurilinear units are of great length; their length may be so great, indeed, that they no longer can be felt as units and include diverse matters. Single lines and couplets are infrequent. The fits (or cantos, as some prefer to call them) all end with a line, but some of the natural divisions end with an on-verse: thus, the Finn and Ingeld episodes, and one of the speeches.¹³ Six of the speeches begin with an off-verse. *Judith* exemplifies the late stage of the run-on style. Here one can hardly speak of plurilinear units at

¹³ Line 389. But here the text seems to be defective.

all, or indeed of clean-cut units of any kind, apart from the fits. If we follow the punctuation of Wülcker, only 11 of the 350 lines end with a full stop, and three of these mark the end of a fit. Since the sentences usually begin and end in the middle of a line, the syntactical and alliterative patterns rarely coincide at any point, and the matter is presented *en masse*, so to speak. The verses give the effect of a never-ending flow, but this continuous effect is gained at a heavy structural cost.¹⁴

Variation

So far as one can tell, the technic of adornment or elaboration was essentially the same in pre-classical and classical poetry. The starkness of the pre-classical style went naturally with its end-stopped lines, which left little room for ornamentation, but any room left did not fail to be used. Sheer adornment, it is true, may have been wanting in the oldest poetry: equivalents and attributives may have been put in, first of all, for the sake of the additional information which they gave. But if this was their origin, their original function soon became secondary. The use of equivalents for poetical purposes is technically known as *variation*. We illustrate, first, with a few linear formulas. In *Beowulf*, 3076,

Wiglaf maðelode, Wihstanes sunu,

the on-verse gives us needful information: namely, that the next passage is to be a speech by Wiglaf. The off-verse may be said to give us further information about the speaker, but since this same information had been given to us earlier (in line 2602) the chief function of the off-verse is hardly informative but rather poetic or (if you will) stylistic. More precisely, since we know already that Wiglaf is Wihstan's son, the off-verse serves primarily to repeat the subject in variant form, and, technically speaking, *Wihstanes sunu* is a variation of *Wiglaf*. The repetition includes the predicate as well (for *maðelode* is to be understood after *Wihstanes sunu*), but not in variant form; not formally, indeed, at all. We may therefore put the line into modern English as follows:

Wiglaf spoke, the son of Wihstan [spoke].

It will be seen that the variation, though appositive on the face of it, is felt rather as a repetition that involves the sentence as a whole. The term *apposition* therefore does not adequately describe the device, and the use of a special term *variation* seems quite in order. In *Widsith*, 1,

Widsið maðolade, wordhord onleac,

the off-verse repeats the predicate (not the subject) in variant form, and we may put the line into current speech as follows:

Widsith spoke, [he] unlocked the word-board.

Here the variation can hardly be said to give us any further information, and its function is strictly poetic or stylistic.

¹⁴ In this history a poem in the run-on style the stage of which is not specified may be presumed to belong to the middle stage. See, further, K. Malone, *RES*, xix (1943). 201-204.

In both the examples which we have considered, the variation may be called *inner*, since it varies something already expressed in the same sentence. In *Beowulf*, 360,

Wulfgar maðelode to his winedrihtne,

we have a case of *outer* variation: *his winedrihtne* "his lord" varies something already expressed, indeed, but not in the same sentence; we know only from the context who Wulfgar's lord is. In outer variation no parallelism of grammatical construction is to be expected as between the variation and the thing varied. Even in inner variation, indeed, such parallelism need not be thoroughgoing. In *Beowulf*, 1458,

þæt wæs an, foran, ealdgestreona,

the adverb *foran* varies the adjective *an*, and the line means "that was unique, [that was] to the fore, among old treasures." In *Beowulf*, 2377-2378,

hwæðre he him on folce freondlarum heold,
estum, mid are, oð ðæt he yldra wearð,

"but he backed him up, in the tribe, with friendly teachings, [he backed him up] with kindnesses, [he backed him up] with help, until he grew older," the prepositional phrase *mid are* varies the simple case-forms *freondlarum* and *estum*. Here the variants, though loosely synonymous, are not identical in meaning (a state of things often found in the technic of variation). But more nearly synonymous variants may differ in grammatical construction. Thus, in *Andreas*, 1074b-1076,

him seo wen gelah,
syððan mid corðre carcernes duru
eorre æsberend opene fundon,

"that expectation played them false when the company, the angry spearmen, found the doors of the prison open," the prepositional phrase *mid corðre* varies the nominative plural *æsberend* (here we have also a case in which the variation precedes the thing varied). Such variations in *mid* (or in the simple dative) presumably arose out of ordinary accompaniment: *A with B* was another way of saying *A and B*. When a variation happened to be almost or altogether identical in meaning with the thing varied the machinery of accompaniment might still be used, even though in such cases this machinery perforce lost its proper meaning and became a mere form of words.

Stereotypes of another kind were the *kennings*, a characteristic feature of Old Germanic poetical diction. These arose as variations, but in many cases became so familiar that they could be used without previous mention of the thing varied. A kenning may be described as a two-member (or two-term) circumlocution for an ordinary noun: such a circumlocution might take the form of a compound, like *hronrad* "sea" (literally "riding-place of the whale"), or of a phrase, like *fugles wynn* "feather" (literally

*Kenning*s

“bird’s joy”).¹⁵ Alongside the kenning we find the *heiti*, a one-term substitute for an ordinary noun: e.g., *ash* or *wood* in the sense “spear” (the weapon-name being varied in terms of material, like *iron* for “sword”). The *heiti* differed from the kenning in that it was simplex, not compositional or phrasal, but it resembled the kenning in that it arose as a variation. In their use of kenning and *heiti* the English poets showed a characteristic classical restraint. These stylistic features did not have in England the luxuriant growth that they had in Iceland (whence come their names). One may note in passing that the circumlocutions for verbs, like *grundwong ofgyfan* “die” (literally “give up the earth”), were markedly fewer in number than those for nouns, and did not give rise to a technical term parallel to *kenning*.¹⁶

Poetic adornment might also take attributive form. The adjective in such a phrase as *fealu flod* “fallow flood” is not without descriptive value and presumably came into use, as part of the phrase, because it had descriptive value, but it early became a standing or conventional poetic epithet by virtue of frequent use in such phrases. Many standing expressions like *fealu flod* may be found in Old English poetry. Thus, a *peoden* “prince” is commonly and conventionally illustrious: he is a *mære peoden*. The device is not limited to poetry, of course, but the poets made much use of it and not a few expressions of the kind belong definitely to poetic diction.

Poetical
Diction

In general it may be noted that the vocabulary and phraseology of poetry differed greatly from that of prose. Words and phrases may be marked as poetical by occurrence, dialectal form, or both. Thus, the word *mece* “sword” is doubly marked: it does not occur in prose (apart from glosses) and its dialectal form is Anglian (i.e., Northumbrian or Mercian).¹⁷ Poetic diction, though out of fashion at the moment, is still with us, and the phenomenon, as such, hardly needs explanation here. The Anglian dialectal forms are another matter. Nearly all the Old English poetry extant has come down to us in West Saxon versions. In these versions, however, Anglian forms often occur, and some words, like *mece*, never take the West Saxon form which one would expect in a West Saxon setting. This feature, characteristic of so many Old English poetical texts, is commonly explained on the theory that the poems were first composed and recorded in an Anglian dialect, and that the scribes who made the West Saxon versions sometimes copied an Anglian dialectal form mechanically instead of substituting the equivalent West Saxon forms. Fixed forms like *mece* are explicable on the theory that the Anglian dialects held a certain prestige in metrical composition, and that the fixed forms served to give poetic flavor, for a West Saxon audience at least.

As in any traditional period, so in Old English times poetic effects could

¹⁵ A modern parallel: *Monty's moonshine* “artificial daylight.”

¹⁶ Sometimes *kenning* is applied to verbal as well as to nominal circumlocutions. The most detailed study of Old English kennings is that of Hertha Marquardt, *Die altenglischen Kennningar* (Halle, 1938); see also K. Malone, *MLN*, LV (1940), 73-74.

¹⁷ The corresponding West Saxon dialectal form *mæce* occurs, be it noted, in the prose compound *mæceflisc* “mullet.”

be had, more or less mechanically, by using words and turns of phrase not customary in prose but familiar to the poet's audience as part of the stylistic tradition of poetry. Such words and turns of phrase need not be labeled archaic; certainly they were very much alive in the mouths of the poets and in the ears of their hearers.¹⁸ A given poet was reckoned worthy if he handled with skill the stuff of which, by convention, poems must be made. This stuff was not merely stylistic, however; matter as well as manner was prescribed. And that brings us to another part of our subject.¹⁹

¹⁸ For want of evidence we cannot tell (in most cases) whether a given word or turn of phrase had earlier been used in prose, though now restricted to poetry.

¹⁹ Many stylistic features must here be left out, for want of space. Thus, we include no discussion of familiar rhetorical devices like litotes or understatement. For further discussion, see especially A. C. Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1935) and the pioneer paper by J. Kail, "Ueber die parallelstellen in der angelsächsischen Poesie," published in *Anglia*, XII (1889). 21-40. The most important recent article on the subject is that of L. D. Benson, *PMLA*, LXXXI (1966). 334-341. On the oral-formulaic theory in general, see H. L. Rogers, *English Studies*, XLVII (1966). 89-102.