

IV

The Old Tradition: Popular Poetry

Thulas

The oldest Germanic verses extant are two metrical lists of names, recorded in works of the first and second centuries of our era. Such a metrical list is technically known as a *thula*.¹ Tacitus in his *Germania* (A.D. 98) gives us a two-line thula the names of which appear, of course, in Latinized form.² This thula has for us a special interest for another reason: it is our first record of the English name. The thula reads thus:

Reudingi, Auiones, Anglii, Varini,
Eudoses, Suardones, Unithones.

A like thula, giving our earliest record of the Saxon name, is set down in the *Geography* of Claudius Ptolemy (c. A.D. 150):³

Saxones, Sigulones, Sabalingii, Cobandi,
Chali, Phunusii, Charudes.

In both cases the alliteration shows that we have to do with verse, and verse of this kind is well evidenced, later on, in vernacular sources. Thus, the pedigree of King Cynric of the West Saxons is given metrical form in the following thula:⁴

Cynric [wæs] Cerdicing, Cerdic Elesing,
Elesa Esling, Esla Gewising,
Gewis Wiging, Wig Freawining,
Freawine Friðugaring, Friðugar Bronding,
Brond Bældæging, Bældæg Wodening.

The King's descent from Woden could be told in correct verses all the better for being fictitious—the names were chosen to fit the alliterative rules. More elaborate are the three thulas of the sixth century incorporated in *Widsith*. The first of these (lines 18-33 of the poem) falls into two parts: a five-couplet unit and a six-line unit. The first couplet may serve to show the structure and subject-matter of this thula:⁵

¹ The term comes from Iceland, where the genre flourished. The metrical name-lists of *Widsith* were first called thulas by Heusler and Ranisch, *Eddica Minora* (1903), p. lxxxix.

² Cap. 40. For a full discussion of the passage, see K. Malone, *Namn och Bygd*, xxii (1934), 26-51. For the Latin text, see p. 317 of the standard edition of the *Germania*, that of R. P. Robinson (1935).

³ II, 11, 7. See K. Malone, *Namn och Bygd*, xxii (1934), 30-31.

⁴ *OE Annals*, ed. Earle-Plummer (1892), pp. 16 (A.D. 552), 20 (A.D. 597). See also R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf, An Introduction* (2ed., 1932), pp. 316-317. The suffix *ing*, used 10 times here, means "son of."

⁵ *Widsith*, ed. K. Malone (1936), pp. 67-68; see also pp. 12-20.

Ætla weold Hunum, Eormanric Gotum,
Becca Baningum, Burgendum Gifica

Attila ruled the Huns, Ermanric the Goths,
Becca the Banings, Gifica the Burgundians.

The first thula is a list of kings; each king (30 are listed) is identified in terms of the tribe he rules. The second thula, as we have it, consists of twenty lines (57-64, 68-69, 75, 79-87): ten single lines and five couplets. Its first two lines (a couplet) sufficiently indicate its pattern:

Ic wæs mid Hunum ond mid Hreðgotum,
mid Sweom ond mid Geatum ond mid Suþdenum

I was with the Huns and with the Hreth-Goths,
with the Swedes and with the Geats and with the South-Danes.

This thula is a list of tribes (54 are listed), given in terms of the personal experiences of the speaker. The third thula as it stands is made up of nine lines (112-118, 123-124), of which the first reads

Hehcan sohte ic ond Beadecan ond Herelingas
I sought out Hehca and Beadeca and the Herelings.

This thula gives us a list of 28 men (presumably heroes); as in the second thula, they are listed in terms of the personal experiences of the speaker.

Such terms are to be taken as no more than a part of the mnemonic machinery. In general, thula composition seems to have had a highly practical purpose: that of making it easier to remember the names listed. It follows that the names in the lists were thought worth remembering, and in fact the mnemonic material given in the thulas is weighty matter. It meant much to a West Saxon king that he trace his descent from Gewis, the eponym of the tribe, and from Woden, the chief god of the tribe. We have reason to think that his political hold would have been strengthened likewise by belief that he had Wig and Freawine for ancestors, and we may presume that some of the other names in his genealogy were meaningful to our forefathers even though they are only names to us. In sum, the thula which gave Cynric's genealogy was a political poem of the first importance. The upstart West Saxon dynasty gained thereby in rank and worth: thenceforth its kings could face as equals the kings of the ancient Mercian house.⁶ The importance of the thulas of *Widsith* lay elsewhere. The first thula embodied historical, the second ethnological lore; the third seems devoted to figures of story rather than (or more than) history. And many names in all three presumably brought to mind in the hearer things that we miss, or know little of. The artistic worth of a list has always lain in the associations which its names evoke. Every name is an allusion for those who know it, and a series of names makes a series of allusions. The names gathered in the thulas of *Widsith* stand for a world now long for-

⁶ Compare the Chadwicks, *op. cit.*, p. 271, note 2.

gotten, the Germanic world of the migration period. Much of that world still lived in the England of the *Widsith* poet, and the old thulas had then a rich allusiveness which we see but darkly and know but in part.

Runic
Poem

Beside the thulas we set the *Runic Poem*, another example of mnemonic verse.⁷ Its practical value for would-be runemasters is comparable to that of ABC poems for learners of the alphabet. The runes were learned by name, and in a fixed order. The name of the rune gave one the clue to its phonetic value, and its place in the sequence gave one the clue to other values which need not be gone into here. It seems altogether likely that the runes from the first were learned by means of a poem in which each rune-name began a section, though in the original poem the sections may have been quite brief—possibly no more than a short verse each. From this original poem the three runic poems extant were presumably descended. For the Norwegian and Icelandic runic poems we refer the reader to the edition of Dickins. The English poem is much more elaborate than the other two. We illustrate with the first section, devoted to the first rune:

Feoh byþ frofur fira gehwylcum;
secal ðeah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dælan
gif he wile for drihtne domes hleotan.

Valuables are a joy to every man;
yet every man must needs be openhanded with them
if he is minded to win favor with the Lord.

Feoh is the name of the *f*-rune, and accordingly begins the section and sets the stave for the first line of the section. Moreover, the section has *feoh* for its theme. This theme is treated in a manner reminiscent of the riddles. We can turn the section into a riddle, indeed, by putting *ic eom* for *feoh byþ*:

I am a joy to every man;
yet every man must needs be openhanded with me
if he is minded to win favor with the Lord.

The poem is 94 lines long. It consists of 29 sections, devoted to as many runes: 19 three-liners, seven four-liners, two two-liners, one five-liner (the last section). The section quoted above is representative of the whole, though the run-on style is much more pronounced in some of the other sections. The two-liners make up in length of line for shortness in number of lines. The *Runic Poem*, like the thulas, started as a speaking, but in its present form it is better classified as a writing. Its literary elaboration may well have taken place under the influence of the riddles, of which more anon. If so, the poem as it stands hardly antedates the eighth century and may be much later. The eleventh-century MS Cotton Otho B x in which the poem came down was lost by fire in 1731, and for our text we must rely on Hickes.⁸

⁷ The best ed. is that of B. Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems* (Cambridge, 1915).

⁸ G. Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus* (Oxford, 1705), I. 135.

Another notable piece of mnemonic verse, the Old English *Menologium* or calendar poem,⁹ is recorded in the eleventh-century MS Cotton Tiberius B 1. This MS is commonly localized at Abingdon, but there are indications that the menologist himself lived in Kent; note, for instance, the poet's special knowledge of the Canterbury minster (line 105). The poem is 231 lines long. It is written in standard Old English (i.e., West Saxon) of the later period, and the poet seems to have flourished c. A.D. 1000. At the end of the poem we are told what practical purpose it is meant to serve: "now ye can find the feast days of the saints that one is duty bound to keep in this kingdom (i.e., England) nowadays." For sources the menologist presumably used church calendars and the like. The want of English saints in the poem¹⁰ indicates that one was not then duty bound to keep their days; the older saints were more important. But the poet gives much that he need not have included: the four seasons and the English names of ten of the twelve months, with striking poetical descriptions of nature attached.¹¹ We think it possible that in making his poetical calendar he drew not only on Latin sources but also on a now lost native mnemonic poem of popular character, a poem in which the months and seasons (but not the saints' days) were named and characterized by descriptions not unlike those of the *Menologium*.¹² This possibility must serve as our excuse for considering the Old English calendar poem in the present chapter. In any case the menologist was no mere clerk, learned in Church Latin only. He was steeped in classical Old English poetry, as his style and choice of words reveal. Yet another example of mnemonic verse, Cynewulf's *Fates of the Apostles*, will be taken up with the other works of that poet.

The English of old, unlike their Continental contemporaries, made legal records in the mother tongue as well as in Latin. The laws of King Æðelbirht of Kent were set down in English as early as A.D. 602 or 603, and this king's example was widely followed by English rulers of later times. Many charters, wills, and other legal documents in the vernacular have come down to us as well.¹³ One of these, *Hit Becwæð*, is metrical through-

Legal Verse

Hit Becwæð

⁹ Ed. R. Imelmann (Berlin, 1902); Krapp-Dobbie, vi. 49-55. See also H. Henel, "Ein altenglisches Prosa-Menologium," in (Förster's) *Beiträge zur englischen Philologie*, xxvi (1934), 71-91. The work which Henel here edits is obviously a prose companion-piece to our poem, though it cannot be reckoned literary and therefore will not be taken up in our chapter on Old English literary prose.

¹⁰ One English saint (Cuthbert) appears in the prose *Menologium*; see Henel, p. 71.

¹¹ The months are not named (whether in English or Latin) in the prose *Menologium*, though the seasons are duly named (in English).

¹² The seasons in Old English: *winter*, *lencen*, *sumor*, *hærfest*. The months: earlier and later *iula* (Dec. and Jan.), *sol* month (Feb.), *hlyda* (Mar.), *caster* month (Apr.), *brymilce* (May), earlier and later *lipa* (June and July), *weod* month (Aug.), *halig* month (Sept.), *winterfylleð* (Oct.), *blot* month (Nov.). The menologist gave only the Latin names of January and July, but the English names can readily be inferred from those of December and June.

¹³ The best English editions of the laws are those of F. L. Attenborough, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings, edited and translated* (Cambridge, 1922), and A. J. Robertson, *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I, edited and translated* (Cambridge, 1925). A more complete edition is that of F. Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen* (3v, Halle, 1903-1916). Most of the charters and wills may be found in the volumes of A. J. Robertson (*Anglo-Saxon Charters*, Cambridge, 1939) and D. Whitelock (*Anglo-Saxon Wills*, Cambridge, 1930); these may be supplemented by A. C. Napier and W. H. Stevenson, *Craw-*

out.¹⁴ It falls into 46 short verses, nine of which were quoted above (p. 23). The text gives us the answer of a nameless landowner to some plaintiff who had laid claim to the defendant's land. It is addressed, not to any court but to the plaintiff, who is told his claim has no merit and is urged to drop the suit. More precisely, the defendant says: (Sec. 1) that the previous owner, now dead, had a clear title; (Sec. 2) that he, the defendant, got it from the previous owner; (Sec. 3) that he, the defendant, would never give it up to the plaintiff; (Sec. 4) that he would keep it all his life, just as the previous owner had done without challenge to his ownership. The fifth and last section reads:

Do swa ic lære:
 beo ðe be þinum and læt me be minum;
 ne gyrne ic þines,
 ne læðes ne landes,
 ne sace ne socne,
 ne ðu mines ne ðærft, ne mynte ic ðe nan ðing.

Do as I say: keep to thine and leave me to mine; I crave nothing of thine, neither ground nor land, neither sake nor soke; neither hast thou need of mine, nor have I aught in mind for thee.

The text is one of A.D. 1000 or thereabouts. For the historian of literature its chief interest is metrical; note in particular the author's use of rime instead of alliteration to bind together the two halves of the line *beo ðe ... minum*, a use familiar in Middle English but rare in Old English alliterative poetry. As a piece of self-expression, too, the poem is worthy of note. The author speaks vigorously and to the point and makes his case come alive.

Many other legal texts are metrical in spots. Short verses, alone or in series, are scattered here and there through the prose, and sometimes one comes upon a line or even a series of lines. Thus, the author of *Gerefa* brings his treatise to a metrical end:¹⁵

Fela sceal to holdan hames grefan
 and to gemetfæstan manna hyrde.
 Ic gecende be ðam ðe ic cuðe;
 se ðe bet cunne, gecyðe his mare.

Many things are required of a loyal overseer
 and dependable director of men.
 I have set forth [the subject] as best I could;
 Let him who knows [it] better make more of it known.

Jord Collection of Early Charters and Documents (Oxford, 1895), and F. E. Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1914). The earlier collections of Thorpe, Kemble, and Birch are also still useful, though they must be used with caution.

¹⁴ See also Heusler, *Altgerm. Dichtung*, p. 66. For a contrary view, see Liebermann, III. 236.

¹⁵ Liebermann, I. 455.

The following passage from *Rectitudines* may also be quoted:¹⁶

Laga sceal on leode luffice leornian,
lof se ðe on lande sylf nele leosan.

The laws of the realm he must lovingly learn
who is unwilling to lose his good name in the land.

In the *Gerefa* passage the third line has only three lifts and the fourth follows an alliterative pattern quite unusual though probably old,¹⁷ while in the *Rectitudines* passage the alliteration foreshadows Middle English and ignores classical Old English practice. Such irregularities are common in the linear verse of legal texts. By its end-stopping too this verse is marked as non-classical; here it harks back to earlier times. The short verses usually have a two-beat pattern. Examples: *ægðer ge dæde ge dihtes* "both in act and in aim" (with alliteration); *æt ræde ne æt dæde* "by rede nor by deed" (with rime). As the examples indicate, we have to do with traditional formulas of one kind or another. Such tags are still common in legal phraseology, though the modern tags more often than not are without alliteration or rime, and consequently are not thought of as verse. Want of rime and alliteration in an Old English tag does not mean, of course, that the tag is unmetrical; it means that we cannot be sure of the tag's metrical character unless the context points to metrical treatment. The stock of verse formulas varied more or less down the centuries; some old formulas went out, and others came in. Thus the tag *ne sace ne socne* in *Hit Becwæð* is late. Metrically speaking, nevertheless, it is of a piece with prehistoric English formulas, and its introduction cannot be looked upon as a metrical innovation. Setting their age aside, we classify the formulas in terms of the relationship between the members. This relationship may be of sound or sense. In terms of sound, the two members of a typical formula may be free (e.g., *ne gyrne ic þines*) or bound by rime (e.g., *landes ne strandes*) or alliteration (e.g., *ne plot ne ploþ*). Again, they may be symmetrical (e.g., *ne turf ne toft*) or asymmetrical (e.g., *ne furh ne fotmæl*). A symmetrical formula may be simple (e.g., *ne ruh ne rum*) or compound (e.g., *on ceapstowe oððe cyricware* "at marketplace or churchmeeting"). The members of a compound formula may be linked by a common first element (e.g., *oferseah and oferhyrde* "oversaw and overheard") or second element (e.g., *on scipfyrde, on landfyrde* "in ship-army, in land-army"); here the relationship is one of both sound and sense. The same holds of complete identity (e.g., *hand on hand* "hand in hand") and partial identity in asymmetrical formulas (e.g., *ne cyse ne cyslyb* "nor cheese nor cheese-rennet"). So also in cognate constructions (e.g., *to ræde gerædan* "advisably advise, wisely decide"). Meaningful relationships may be of contrast (e.g., *ær oððe æfter* "before or after") or of likeness (e.g., *healdan and wealdan* "hold and

Tags

¹⁶ Liebermann, I. 452. Other single or double lines will be found in *I Cnut*, 2 and 25 (Lieb., I. 280 and 304); *II Cnut*, 38 (Lieb., I. 338); *X Ædelred*, Prol. I (Lieb., I. 269); *Excom.*, 2 (Lieb. I. 438); *Gebyncðo*, 3 (Lieb. I. 456); etc.

¹⁷ See K. Malone, *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, XLVIII (1937). 351-352.

rule") or of mere association (e.g., *manige menn* "many men"). Other classifications might be made (have been made, indeed),¹⁸ but these will serve well enough to bring out the characteristic features of the short verses.

The metrical formulas here taken up belonged, for the most part, to everyday Old English speech, which made more use of short verses, and had a greater awareness of the metrical side of speech, than is the case in current English. If these short verses may be counted by the hundred in legal writings, the reason is not far to seek: everybody uses stereotyped expressions but the legal mind has a particular fondness for them. It was above all in legal texts, then, that these fragments of popular metrical speech found place and held out against the literary verse and prose which imposed itself nearly everywhere else.¹⁹ Yet in a few spells and sayings likewise the popular verse-form managed to keep a precarious foothold.

Versified wisdom, like versified tags and name-lists, is old in English; older than the language, indeed. But it had to pay for the privilege of written record. The clerics who wrote down what we have of it made fewer changes, interestingly enough, in the spells than in the sayings. They presumably feared that a spell would not work unless they kept the old wording, while they knew a saying would hold good whatever the wording.

We begin with the supernatural or magical wisdom of the spells (or charms). In Grendon's collection,²⁰ thirteen are wholly or partly in English verse. Of these, two (A 21 and 22) are obviously variants of the same spell. We thus have twelve spells to consider. Two survive in MSS of the tenth century;²¹ nine are recorded in MSS of the eleventh century;²² one, written in a hand of c. 1100, occurs in a MS of the tenth century.²³ We have no way of knowing who made these spells, when or where they took shape,

¹⁸ Liebermann, II, 77-78. See also D. Bethurum, *MLR*, xxvii (1932), 263-279.

¹⁹ See below, p. 101, for the rhythmical prose of Ælfric.

²⁰ F. Grendon, "The Anglo-Saxon Charms," *Jour. of Amer. Folk-Lore*, xxii (1909), 105-237. Item A 15 II of the collection is not a spell but the legal poem *Hitt Becwæð*, which we took up above.

²¹ From BM MS Regius 12 D xvii we have *Wið Waterælfadle* "against waterelf sickness" (Grendon, B 5, p. 194; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 124-125). From BM MS Harley 584 we have *Wið Cynnel* "against scrofula" (Grendon, A 9, p. 170; see also F. P. Magoun, Jr., *Arkiv för nordisk Filologi*, LX [1945], 98-106).

²² From BM MS Cotton Caligula A vii we have *Æcerbot* "acre-boot, field-remedy" (Grendon, A 13, pp. 172-176; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 116-118). From BM MS Harley 585 we have: (1) *Wið Færstice* "against a sudden stitch in the side" (Grendon, A 1, pp. 164-166; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 122-123), here called *Stice*; (2) *Wið Dweorh* "against a dwarf" (Grendon, A 2, p. 166; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 121-122); (3) *Wið Ceapes Lyre* "against loss of cattle" (Grendon, A 22, p. 184; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 123), here called *Lyre* when distinguished from its variant *Peofend* but otherwise called *Bethlem*; (4) *Nigon Wyrta Galdor* "nine wort spell" (Grendon, B 4, pp. 190-194; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 119-121), here called *Wyrta*; (5) *Wið Lætbyrde* "against slow birth" (Grendon, E 1, pp. 206-208; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 123-124), here called *Lætbyrd*. From the Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 41 we have: (1) *Wið Ymbe* "against a swarm of bees" (Grendon, A 4, p. 168; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 125); (2) *Siðgaldor* "hap spell" (Grendon, A 14, pp. 176-178; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 126-128); (3) *Wið Feos Nimunge Garmund*; (4) *Wið Ceapes Peofende* "against cattle theft" (Grendon, A 21, p. 184; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 126), here called *Peofend* when distinguished from its variant *Lyre* but otherwise called *Bethlem*.

²³ *Wið Wennum* "against wens" (Grendon, A 3, p. 166; Krapp-Dobbie, vi, 128), BM MS Regius 4 A xiv. This spell will here be called *Wenne*.

and how (if at all) the originals differed from the texts we have, apart from the ordinary linguistic changes down the years. We do not even know whether our texts were drawn from oral or written sources, though their ultimate source was presumably oral tradition. Strictly Christian spells like *Bethlem* may go back to a heathen original, but we need not make this presumption, since such spells might perfectly well have come into being in Christian times. Heathen elements in the spells are presumably old. Christian elements may reflect substitutions or additions. Much of the matter cannot be tied to religious belief, and is better classified as pseudo-science. In this history we take up the spells as examples of literary art, and leave to others the manifold non-literary problems which a student of spells must face.²⁴

Our spells make a literary group of their own, not only in subject-matter but also in versification and style. They reflect a tradition independent of classical Old English poetry, but allied to legal verse and to pre-classical end-stopped linear verse.²⁵ Nearly all our twelve spells include prose as well as verse. In the verse parts a line may be followed by a short verse, a short verse by a line. Alliteration may be heaped up, or may be wanting. A line may be made up wholly, or almost wholly, of lifts. The three-lift verse, too, is in use here: a verse-pattern longer than the short verse but shorter than the line. A poem may show much greater variety in line pattern than would be possible in classical poetry. Run-on lines are rare. The familiar classical device of variation is avoided. We find, instead, repetition, and serial effects not unlike those achieved in the thulas of *Widsith* or in certain passages of *Beowulf* (e.g., lines 1392 ff., 1763 ff.). The *epitheton ornans* and other commonplaces of the classical style are likewise rare in the spells. These vary much in literary merit, but they all have freshness and go. We will look at a few of them.

The 13-line spell *Wenne* is marked by humor and lightness of touch. We quote in modernized form the first four and the last three lines:

Wenne

Wen, wen, wen-chicken,
 here thou shalt not build nor have any homestead,
 but thou shalt [go] north from here, to the near-by hill.
 There thou hast a wretch of a brother. . . .

Do thou become as small as a linseed grain,
 and much smaller, like a handworm's hipbone,
 and become so small that thou become nothing at all.

Note the humorous shift of stress in *chicken*, a shift which makes the word rime with *wen*. The thrice repeated *become* is also of stylistic interest. But the reader can make his own commentary.

²⁴ There is a useful study by F. P. Magoun, Jr., *Archiv*, CLXXI (1937), 17-35, with bibliography; see also L. K. Shook, *MLN*, LV (1940), 139-140.

²⁵ Traces of strophic arrangement have been found by I. Lindquist (*Galdrar*, Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift, xxix [1923]), and F. P. Magoun, Jr. (*ESL*, LXXII [1937], 1-6).

Bethlem

The two variants of *Bethlem* have some importance for the textual critic, and are therefore given here (the same translation will serve for both):

Lyre

Bæðleem hatte seo buruh,
 Pe Crist on acænned was.
 Seo is gemærsod geond ealne middangeard.
 Swa þyos dæd for monnum mære gewurþe.

Peofend

Bethlem hattæ seo burh ðe Crist on geboren wes.
 Seo is gemærsod ofer ealne middangeard.
 Swa ðeos dæd wyrþe for monnum mære.

Bethlehem is called the town that Christ was born in.
 It has become famous the world over.
 So may this deed become famous in men's sight.

Lyre gives us the better text, but the two non-classical verses with which it began displeased somebody, and he made them into one line by putting *geboren* for *acænned*. Evidently a Christian spell could not always hold its own against the classical tradition.

Garmund

The following passage from *Garmund* is quoted for its metrical and stylistic features:

Garmund, godes ðegen,
 find þæt feoh and fere þæt feoh
 and hafa þæt feoh and heald þæt feoh
 and fere ham þæt feoh

Garmund, God's thane,
 find the cattle and bring the cattle
 and have the cattle and hold the cattle
 and bring home the cattle.

Here the alliteration, the two three-lift verses, and the repetitions are worthy of special note. The appeal to Garmund was addressed, one may suspect, to Godmund in heathen times.

Lætbyrd

The verses of *Lætbyrd* have power and poetry beyond expectation. We find space for a couplet only. A woman unable to feed her newborn child takes "part of her own child's caul," wraps it in black wool, and sells it to chapmen, saying:

I sell it, may ye sell it,
 this black wool and seed of this sorrow.

Siðgaldor

The four long spells are *Siðgaldor* (40 lines), *Æcerbot* (38 lines of verse and much prose), *Wyrta* (63 lines of verse, followed by a short prose passage), and *Stice* (27 lines of verse, preceded and followed by a few words of prose). Of these, the first seems wholly Christian; in style as well as

matter it stands closer to classical religious poetry than do the other spells. Among other things it gives us lists of biblical worthies, a feature reminiscent of the thulas. Except for a few lines it has little artistic merit. *Æcerbot* is Christian for the most part, but has passages (often quoted) that almost certainly go back to heathen times. Thus, the line *eorðan ic bidde and upheofon* "I pray to earth and to high heaven" has a strongly Christian context but nevertheless is unmistakably heathen. The famous line,

Erce, Erce, Erce, eorþan modor,

whatever it means, surely appeals to mother earth, and the noble, hymn-like passage,

Hal wes þu, folde, fira modor,
beo þu growende on godes fæþme,
fodre gefylled firum to nytte,

Hale be thou, earth, mother of men,
be thou with growing things in God's embrace,
filled with food for the good of men,

takes us back to agricultural fertility rites, solemn ceremonies of immemorial antiquity.

Wyrta names nine worts or plants that have virtue against poisons (particularly snake-bite), aches and pains, infections, and demons.²⁶ We are told that these nine worts counteract as many devils, poisons and infections, but no list of nine devils is given. We do get a list of nine kinds of poison, followed by another list of six kinds of swelling or blister:

Now these nine worts are potent . . .

against the red poison, against the *runtl*²⁷ poison,
against the white poison, against the blue poison,
against the yellow poison, against the green poison,
against the dark poison, against the blue poison,
against the brown poison, against the purple poison;

against worm-swelling, against water-swelling,
against thorn-swelling, against thistle-swelling,
against ice-swelling, against poison-swelling.

Next comes a passage devoted to the cardinal points:

if any poison come flying from the east
or any come from the north
or any from the west over the people.

Nothing harmful was expected from the south, it would seem. The passages quoted show the serial effects characteristic of the literary art of the spells, an art marked by repetition and parallelism. The versification, too,

²⁶ On the names of the worts, see H. Meroney, *MLN*, LIX (1944), 157-160.

²⁷ The meaning of *runtl* is unknown, but it seems to be a color word.

with its mixture of line and short verse, is interesting. Running water also has virtue, against snake-bite at least, and a couplet is added accordingly:

Ic ana wat ea rinnende
and þa nygon nædran behealdað.

I alone know running water
and that [i.e., running water] nine adders look to.²⁸

The boast befits our learned spellman, but boasting is a conventional feature of spells as of epics. The best known passage in this spell, however, has yet to be quoted:

A snake came creeping, tried to slit a man open.
Then Woden took nine glory-rods;
then he struck the adder, so that it burst into nine.

This narrative or "epic" passage, done in the pre-classical end-stopped style, is a precious relic of English heathendom; unluckily we do not know the Woden myth which it summarizes.

Stice

Wyrta has come down to us markedly imperfect; perhaps the disorder was there from the start. *Stice*, however, is well built as it stands. First come some directions, in prose. Then we get a pseudo-scientific explanation of the stitch: spear-casts made by evil spirits (female, it would seem) cause these sudden pains, and the magic weapon must be drawn out of you before you can get relief. This explanation is given in highly poetical dress: the women, loud and bold, have ridden over the hill, overland; you must protect yourself to stave off this attack. Here the spellman inserts, for the first time, the oft-repeated curative formula,

ut, lytel spere, gif her inne sie!
out, little spear, if thou be in here,

which also serves as a kind of refrain, marking the end of the passage. But your shield fails you: the magic dart pierced you

when the mighty women drew up their forces
and [when] they hurled yelling spears.

The spellman now comes to help you. He promises to fight the evil spirits with weapons of his own:

Six smiths sat,
murderous spears they made;
out, spear, not in, spear!

If there be in here a bit of iron,
the work of a witch, away it shall melt!

The incantation then proceeds in serial form (compare that quoted above from *Wyrta*). The whole makes a little masterpiece of its kind.

²⁸ The second line of this couplet agrees in alliterative pattern with the last line of *Gerefa* (see above, p. 36).

So much for the spells. We go on to the sayings. The term *sayings* is here taken to mean versified words of stock everyday wisdom: short, pithy, homespun generalizations about the common concerns of life, whether proverbial, descriptive, or moralizing. The sayings that won record in Old English times are found (1) imbedded here and there in a number of texts, and (2) brought together in gnomic poems. Four such poems are extant. Three of them are recorded in the Exeter Book, a MS of c. 980;²⁹ they go by the collective name *Exeter Gnomics* (206 lines in all, as usually reckoned), and are distinguished by the letters *A, B, C*. The fourth, set down in the eleventh-century MS Cotton Tiberius B 1, is called *Cotton Gnomics* (66 lines).³⁰ The imbedded sayings must first, of course, be winnowed out. Here the author or compiler of the text may help us. Thus, the compiler of the (Latin) laws attributed to Edward the Confessor quotes

Bugge spere of side oððe bere
buy spear from side or bear

as a proverbial expression current among the English.³¹ In the same way, a nameless correspondent of St. Boniface (the great English missionary of the eighth century) calls the following couplet *saxonicum verbum*:

Oft daedlata dome foreldit,
sigisitha gahuem; suuyltit thi ana.³²

Oft a sluggard puts off decision,
Lets all his chances slip; so he dies alone.

More commonly, however, no such help is forthcoming, and we must go by internal evidence alone. A gnomic passage once found, we need to know besides (if possible) whether the generalization was original with the author or common literary property. The latter is normally to be presumed, in virtue of the traditional and conventionalized character of Old English literary art. And sometimes we have special reasons for coming to this conclusion. Thus, *Beowulf*, 1384b-1385,

selre bið æghwæm
þæt he his freond wrece þonne he fela murne
it is better for every man
to avenge his friend than to mourn [over him] much,

²⁹ Facsimile edition: *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* (London, 1933). Printed edition with Old English text and modern English rendering: Part 1, by I. Gollancz (*EETS*, 104); Part II, by W. S. Mackie (*EETS*, 194).

³⁰ The four gnomic poems are best studied in the edition of Blanche C. Williams, *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon* (New York, 1914). Here, too, Miss Williams gives a thorough treatment of the imbedded sayings.

³¹ Liebermann, *ed. cit.*, 1. 638-639. The popular character of this saying is reflected in its metrical form; note the rime *spere—bere* and the irregular alliteration. The saying seems to mean "pay wergeld or take the consequences," though the reference may equally well be to Danegeld or to tribute generally.

³² H. Sweet, *Oldest English Texts*, p. 152. The couplet (which we may name *Verbum*) is obviously early, and keeps something of the old end-stopped style, but has a classical and even bookish ring; note in particular the use of variation. We reckon it a writing, not a speaking.

fits Old Germanic morality but clashes with Christian morality. It seems unlikely, then, that the pious poet himself gave birth to this generalization; the chances are that he was quoting a stock piece of popular wisdom, handed down from heathen times.³³

In studying the four gnomic poems we have to consider not only the individual sayings which these poems embody but also the poems as such. These are primarily compilations of traditional sententious wisdom, but the clerical compilers have more or less remodeled their material to make it fit the classical run-on linear style (though now and then they fail to do this and the older versification stands out). Sometimes, too, we find a single saying expanded or developed at some length, and not a few passages are homiletic or reflective rather than gnomic in character. Christian piety has made its way into the gnomic matter besides, and the poems as a whole give us a remarkable mixture of old and new. While the nature of the material makes a clean-cut structural pattern impossible, most of the sayings fall, more or less loosely, into groups, and certain passages are built up systematically enough. The sayings are so little organized in the Cotton Gnomics that the old term "gnomic verses" seems appropriate; the gnomic monuments of the Exeter Book, however, are properly poems rather than mere collections of verses.³⁴

*Bede's
Death
Song*

Markedly different from all these is that famous piece of pious wisdom, the so-called *Death Song* of the Venerable Bede (d. 735), preserved to us by having been quoted in the *Epistola Cuthberti de Obitu Bedae*.³⁵ The modern rendering which follows is based on the text of the *Epistola* found in MS St. Gall 254 (ninth century):³⁶

Before the needful journey [i.e., death] no one becomes
wiser in thought than he needs to be
to think over, ere his going hence,
what of good or evil about his spirit,
after his day of death, may be decided.

This five-line poem of a single sentence evidently belongs to the classical, not the pre-classical style of composition. The thought as it stands is Christian, and Bede had Doomsday in mind. Yet the point of view needs but a slight shift to give us words that would befit Bede's heathen forefathers, who prized above all else that good name after death which may be had by living worthily, and not otherwise. An old ideal of conduct here held its own by taking new shape.

³³ For the sake of completeness we mention here two metrical proverbs, recorded in the BM MSS Cotton Faustina A. x and Regius 2 B. v. One proverb comes to two lines, the other to one line of verse. They are based on Latin originals. Texts in Krapp-Dobbie, vi. 109.

³⁴ For a study of the structure of one of these poems, see K. Malone, *MA*, xii (1943). 65-67.

³⁵ The standard study of Cuthbert's letter is that of E. V. K. Dobbie, *Columbia Univ. Stud. in English and Compar. Lit.*, cxxviii. (1937). 49-129.

³⁶ The *Death Song* has been edited by A. H. Smith, *Three Northumbrian Poems* (1933), but this edition needs a few corrections in the light of Dobbie's study.