

X

Literary Prose

*Prose
as an
Art Form*

All compositions in verse may be reckoned examples (by intention, at least) of literary art. This does not hold for prose compositions. In Old English times, even as now, prose was the normal form of non-literary speech and writing, and of the prose works left to us from the period we limit ourselves to those more or less literary in character. The literary prose of Old English is made up, for the most part, of translations or paraphrases of Latin writings. The English did not cultivate prose as an art form until they became acquainted with Latin literature, which gave them both sources and models for prose works of art. These sources and models, chiefly compositions of Christians though they were, had maintained the traditional great prose genres: history, philosophy, and oratory. In addition, minor genres like the epistle were represented. Everywhere, however, new wine had been poured into the old bottles. Thus, the oration appeared as a sermon. It was this Christianized classical tradition which the Roman missionaries brought to England and which the converts and their sons carried on in Latin and English. Throughout Old English times literary prose remained learned and clerical; for the people, verse continued to be the only natural medium of literary art.

*King
Alfred*

In spite of what we have just said, English literary prose owes its start to an unlearned layman. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the golden age of Old English literary culture, the prose writers composed in Latin only, so far as we know,¹ and it was left for King Alfred (849-899) to promote and, finally, himself to undertake composition in English when, in the last two decades of the ninth century, he tried to build up anew that flourishing civilization which the Danish invasions had brought to wrack and ruin. The writings of Alfred and his men must not be thought of as works of art; whatever literary merit they have is a by-product only. They were written as part of an educational program. Alfred hit upon the simple but revolutionary idea of using the mother tongue rather than Latin as the basic medium of instruction, both in the schools and in adult education.

¹ Except for Bede's incomplete translation of the Fourth Gospel, unhappily lost. An Old English *Martyrology* which antedates King Alfred should also be mentioned; ed. G. Herzfeld, *EETS*, 116 (1900). The editor dates the work c. 850 and localizes it in Lincolnshire. F. Liebermann, *Archiv*, cv (1900). 87, gives reasons for localization at Lichfield. The treatise on Kentish and other English saints published by Liebermann under the title *Die Heiligen Englands* (Hanover, 1889) seems to be little more than a ninth-century list, later extended by combination with another (non-Kentish) list. The treatise thus comes under the head of mnemonic prose. In its final form it is to be dated c. 1030.

Unluckily no English schoolbooks or works of reference existed. The King therefore with characteristic energy set out to fill the gap. He began with the history of the nation. We have no contemporary evidence of his part in compiling the Old English *Annals* (the so-called *Chronicles*)² or in preparing the Old English version of Bede's ecclesiastical history,³ but we may reasonably presume (though we cannot prove) that he had something to do with both these undertakings; certainly the earliest extant form of each goes back to the time of Alfred's literary activity, and each was traditionally associated with Alfred.⁴ We are better informed about the Old English versions of two works by Pope Gregory the Great: the *Dialogues*⁵ and the *Pastoral Care*.⁶ The former was translated for Alfred by his friend Bishop Wærferth of Worcester; the latter Alfred himself turned into English with the help of four scholars whom he names in his preface. Here ends what may be called the earlier period of Alfred's literary career. The later period begins with his translation of the world history of Orosius.⁷ Next comes Alfred's major work, from the literary point of view: his translation of the treatise of Boethius on the consolation of philosophy.⁸ Toward the end of his life he composed his *Blostman* ("Blossoms"), culled chiefly from the Soliloquies of St. Augustine.⁹ The twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury tells us that Alfred began but did not live to finish a translation of the Psalter,¹⁰ and it has been conjectured that William is referring to the incomplete prose translation (Psalms, 1-50) recorded in the Paris Psalter; unluckily the MS itself throws no light on the identity of the translator.¹¹ Asser, the biographer of Alfred, tells in some detail, under the year 887, of yet another work: a Handbook which the King in that year began to compile. It seems in fact to have been a commonplace book. Possibly some of the passages entered in this book found place in the *Blostman*; the book as such has not survived.¹²

Gregory

² Ed. C. Plummer, *Two of the Saxon Chronicles [A, and E] Parallel, with Supplementary Extracts from the Others* (2v., Oxford, 1892-1899); H. A. Rositzke, *C text* (1940, in Förster's *Beiträge zur englischen Philologie*, xxxiv); E. Classen and F. E. Harmer, *D text* (Manchester, 1926); A. H. Smith, *The Parker Chronicle* (1935); trans. G. N. Garmonsway (1953).

³ Ed. T. Miller, *EETS*, 95-96 and 110-111; J. Schipper, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, iv. See also F. Klaeber, *Anglia*, xxv (1902), 257-315; xxvii (1904), 243-282, 399-435.

⁴ According to Gaimar's *Estorie des Engles* (twelfth century), lines 3451ff., Alfred had an English book written, consisting of events and laws, etc.; the reference is evidently to some MS (like the Parker) in which the annals are followed by legal texts. We have two Old English references to Alfred as translator of Bede: (1) in an eleventh-century MS of the Old English translation Alfred is named as translator; (2) Ælfric in his homily on Gregory the Great speaks of Alfred as translator.

⁵ Ed. H. Hecht, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, v. See also P. N. U. Harting, *Neophilologus*, xxii (1937), 281-302.

⁶ Ed. H. Sweet, *EETS*, 45 (Part II) and 50 (Part I).

⁷ Ed. H. Sweet, *EETS*, 79 (Part I: Old English text and Latin original). The second part has never come out.

⁸ Ed. W. J. Sedgfield (Oxford, 1899).

⁹ Ed. H. L. Hargrove, *Yale Studies in English*, xiii; W. Eadter, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, xi.

¹⁰ *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, II. iv (sec. 123).

¹¹ Ed. J. W. Bright and R. L. Ramsay, *The West Saxon Psalms* (Boston, 1907); see also J. H. G. Grattan, *MLR*, iv (1909), 185-189.

¹² An English translation of Æsop's fables is attributed to Alfred by Marie de France in the epilogue of her *Esope* or *Fables* (twelfth century), and Miss Helen Chefeux in her study

Asser

Asser, who wrote in 893, might have been expected to mention any books that Alfred had written or inspired up to that date. He actually mentions only Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*, but some version of the *Annals* must have been known to him, since in his biography he includes much annalistic matter up to the year 887. From Asser's silence we are bound to infer that the *Pastoral Care*, and of course all the works of Alfred's later period, were written after 893. The Bede, too, was presumably finished after 893, though quite possibly begun much earlier. It is best described as a revision of the original, made to fit the work into Alfred's educational program. Much was left out, condensed or summarized, while other parts were translated literally, to the sacrifice of English idiom now and again. In boldness of excision the translator reminds one of Alfred, but his literal renderings are less reminiscent of the King, who worked by paraphrase despite a few Latinisms. The other two translations of the earlier period, those from Gregory, show less literalness, but greater fidelity to the texts, since they omit little and add little. Wærferth might be expected to understand his text better than Alfred understood his, but in fact the King does better than the bishop, thanks, no doubt, to the help he got. The works of the later period are marked by great boldness in the treatment of the text. Alfred felt free not only to omit but also to insert almost at will. Thus, the geographical chapter in Orosius struck him (rightly enough) as deficient when it came to Germany and Scandinavia. He therefore interpolated the famous account of the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan, together with a long and valuable section on Germanic and Slavic tribal geography in the ninth century.¹³ In all his writings the King was concerned, not so much to reproduce his originals faithfully as to produce books good for his subjects and simple enough for them to understand. Through these books he hoped to give them an education at once practical and liberal. The history of the English nation and of the world, the principles of philosophy and the principles and practice of Christianity, such was the reading-matter to be pondered by English youths and men engaged in learning how to read and write their mother tongue. And in the *Dialogues* of Gregory he even provided edifying escape literature: stories of the wonders and miracles wrought by God and by saintly men of old.¹⁴

Bede

Dialogues,
Pastoral
Care

Orosius

Alfred did his paraphrases in prose. To the *Pastoral Care*, however, he added two passages in verse: one of 16 lines at the beginning (between preface and table of contents) and one of 30 lines at the end. Moreover,

of the fables depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry (*Romania*, LX [1934]. 1-35, 153-194) makes it seem likely that the designer(s) of the tapestry drew on this lost English version of Æsop. For the so-called *Proverbs of Alfred* see below, p. 152.

¹³ The latest discussion of King Alfred as geographer is that of R. Ekblom, *Studia Neophilologica*, xiv (1942). 115-144; reviewed by F. Klacber, *ibid.*, xv. 337-338. See also A. S. C. Ross, *The Terfinnas and Beormas of Ohthere* (Leeds, 1940), and K. Malone, *Speculum*, v (1930). 139-167 and viii (1933). 67-78.

¹⁴ Bede's *History* is largely made up of like stories, of course. Alfred himself wrote a brief preface for Wærferth's translation of the *Dialogues*, and the translator added a preface of his own: 27 lines of verse in which he sings the King's praises.

after he had finished his prose rendering of Boethius, he made a verse rendering of most of the metrical parts of this work.¹⁵ For the metres of Boethius, then, we have two Alfredian versions, one in prose and one in verse. The verse rendering depends on the prose, not directly on the Latin metres, and there are indications that when Alfred did the verses his prose rendering had been finished and set aside long enough to grow cold in his mind. Alfred was not a man trained in literary composition, and neither his prose nor his verse merits much praise as such. At times he rose above himself and gave us prose passages worthy of a skilled craftsman, but these passages are the exception, not the rule. His accomplishment stands out more clearly when we consider his work in the large. Though he began to write late in life, and had no tradition of English literary prose to feed on, he managed to overcome many of the ills that beset the beginner, and, in hours snatched from his manifold duties as head of the state and father of his people, he was able to produce a body of writings impressive in quantity, expressive of his personality, and readable enough. Moreover, in his later period, at least, he showed a remarkable independence of his originals. Most important of all, he gave prestige to prose composition in English, and thereby opened the way to the cultivation of important literary genres hitherto neglected.

Boethius

In the year 891 some compiler, probably a cleric in King Alfred's service, finished a set of annals devoted chiefly to the history of the English from their settlement in Britain to the year of compilation, though not without record of other events in Britain and elsewhere (the earliest event recorded is Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain). The compiler used various sources, such as earlier annalistic matter, genealogies, Bede's *History*, and oral reports. A number of copies of his text seem to have got into circulation; in all likelihood King Alfred had them made and distributed among his bishops (or abbots), with instructions to keep them up to date.¹⁶ Certainly his educational program would require some such distribution, and we know that he so distributed the *Pastoral Care*. None of these original copies of the *Annals* survive, but the seven extant versions all descend in one way or another from the compilation of 891. As time went on, entries were added in various MSS by successive annalists. The *A*₁ text (CCCC 173) was carried down to 1070; the *A*₂ text (Otho B xi), to 1001; the *B* text (Tib. A vi), to 977; the *C* text (Tib. B i), to 1086; the *D* text (Tib. B iv), to 1079; the *E* text (Laud 636), to 1154; the *F* text (Dom. A viii), to 1058. The *Annals* thus record contemporary events of the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, besides the earlier events which the original compiler set down from various sources. For the historian of England these *Annals* are obviously of the first importance. Here we are concerned with them as literature. One goes to annalistic writing with no high expectations; the form

The
Old
English
Annals

¹⁵ Preserved in MS Cotton Otho A vi.

¹⁶ Continuations, compiled at some center (presumably Winchester), seem to have been set out from time to time; but the matter is too intricate for treatment here. The *Old English Annals* are often called less accurately the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

does not lend itself well to artistic effects. The early annals in particular give us, for the most part, mere lists of events, not narrative accounts, and the annalist for 755, who tried his hand at narration, did a bungling job, though he had a stirring story to tell (that of Cynewulf, Cyneheard, and Osric).¹⁷ The narrative passages grow better in the ninth-century annals; the writers usually express themselves clearly and simply enough, and show some skill in avoiding the monotony so often found in annalistic writing. With the death (in 924) of King Edward the Elder, however, the *Annals* begin to languish, and they do not regain their Alfredian vigor and fullness until the reign of King Æthelred the Redeless (979-1016), when a truly literary historical prose emerges and maintains itself to the end of the Old English period. Evidently a traditional craftsmanship had begun to take shape in the midst of political disaster. Moreover, expertness in prose composition was not peculiar to the later annalists; it marks other writings of the period as well. If Old English poetry flowered in the late seventh and eighth centuries, Old English prose flowered in the late tenth and eleventh. We therefore reckon classical, not the early prose of Alfred and his men, but the late prose of the annalists and of other writers taken up below.¹⁸

Æthelwold

We have seen that the politically glorious tenth century was marked by a decline in English prose, while Æthelred's calamitous reign and the triumph of the Danes in the eleventh century did not keep English prose from reaching heights of achievement worthy of the name classical. Alfred had laid the foundations on which the classical Old English prose writers built, but it was the monastic reform movement of the tenth century, led in England by Dunstan, Æthelwold, and Oswald,¹⁹ which produced and cherished the builders. Æthelwold himself set going the second or classical period of Old English prose with a translation of the *Rule of St. Benedict*²⁰ which he made about 960.²¹ The extant copies of this work all go back to a text made for nuns, but the original text presumably was made for monks weak in Latin. In a historical appendix, found in one MS only,²² Æthelwold explains that the translation owed its existence to King Edgar's initiative, and it seems evident that the King in having it made was following the example set by his great-grandfather. Æthelwold goes on to apologize for the translation, which he thought of as a concession to weakness (strict disciplinarian that he was), but the Alfredian tradition proved strong enough to overcome whatever scruples he may have had. Indeed, he did his work in the spirit of Alfred: his version of the *Rule* is a paraphrase, not a literal rendering, and

¹⁷ See F. P. Magoun, *Anglia*, LVII (1933). 361-376, and C. L. Wrenn, *History*, xxv (1940). 208-215.

¹⁸ See C. L. Wrenn, *Trans. Phil. Soc.* for 1933, pp. 65-88.

¹⁹ Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury (d. 988); Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester (d. 984); Oswald, Bishop of Worcester and Archbishop of York (d. 992).

²⁰ Ed. A. Schröer, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, II.

²¹ Schröer, p. xviii. But F. Tupper, *MLN*, VIII (1893). 350, dates the translation about 970.

²² Cotton Faustina A x. Old English text and modern rendering in T. O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, etc., III. 432-444. The appendix may have been composed by 970, though Liebermann, *Archiv*, CVIII (1902). 375-377, dates it after the death of Edgar in 975.

shows everywhere his concern to make things clear and simple for the reader. The smoothness and general competence of Æthelwold's English may reflect, more or less indirectly, the schooling he got under Dunstan at Glastonbury; certainly he was a man schooled and trained, not a self-taught writer like Alfred.

We come now to the leading prose writer of the period: Ælfric²³ *Ælfric* (c. 955-c. 1020), sometime pupil of Æthelwold at Winchester and lifelong disciple of his old master. Ælfric's many writings include homilies, pastoral letters, lives of saints, versions of books of the Bible, learned works of various kinds—a whole library to meet practical needs of the Church in his day. We pass over his *Grammar* and *Glossary*, with their pendant the *Colloquy*, in spite of their great cultural interest,²⁴ and begin with the 120 sermons, in three series of 40 sermons each, which he wrote between the years 990 and 998²⁵ while a monk at Winchester or Cernel. The first and second series go by the name *Homiliae Catholicae*; the third series is called *Passiones Sanctorum*. These serial titles, however, cannot be taken strictly; saints' lives are included among the homilies, and homilies among the saints' lives. Each sermon was written for use on a suitable day of the Church year; thus, the sermon on Gregory was to be preached on March 12 (the day of that saint). Through his vernacular sermons Ælfric sought to make things easier for the preachers, who could use the discourses which he provided, without having to wrestle with the Latin originals, the meaning of which, in spots at least, those weak in Latin might find it hard to fathom. For sources Ælfric drew on the abundant stock of sermons and other religious writings available in Latin; he made particular use of Gregory, Bede, and Augustine. He treated his sources with great freedom, adapting the material to the needs of English pastor and flock. All three series are marked by good construction and clear, happy expression; as W. P. Ker has said, Ælfric is "the great master of prose in all its forms."²⁶ The series differ somewhat in style. In the first, alliteration is used now and then to heighten the effect; in the second, this device is used more freely; in the third, many passages are written in a rhythmic alliterative prose which some scholars have wrongly taken for verse and even printed as such. Ælfric in his rhythmical effects was following a fashion of his time, found in Latin prose and carried over into vernacular composition.²⁷ We note also, as we proceed from series to series, a shift of balance: the story looms larger, the mor-

²³ See C. L. White, *Ælfric, . . . (Yale Studies in English, II)*. Ed. *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, 1 (Grein), III (Assmann), IX (Fehr), X (Crawford); *EETS*, 76, 82, 94, 114 (Skeat), 160 (Crawford), 213 (Henel). For other editions see *CBEL*, I, 89-92. Miss Dorothy Whitelock, in *MLR*, XXXVIII (1943), 122-124, points out the inadequacy of the evidence for the date of Ælfric's death.

²⁴ Ed. J. Zupitza, *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar* (Berlin, 1880); G. N. Garmonsway, *Ælfric's Colloquy* (1939). These works may have grown out of his experiences as teacher of oblates at the monastery of Cernel in Dorsetshire (987-989). See above, p. 18.

²⁵ The first series was finished in 990 or 991; the second, in 992; the third, between 993 and 998. See K. Sisam, *RES*, VII (1931), 16-18, VIII (1932), 55, 67-68.

²⁶ *English Literature, Medieval*, p. 55.

²⁷ G. H. Gerould, *MP*, XXII (1925), 353-366. Cf. also A. Cordier, *L'Allitération latine* (Paris, 1939).

alizing commentary smaller. The saints' lives in particular²⁸ tend to become tales of wonder not unlike the legends of Middle English times.

Alongside the three series of sermons we set, as a fourth major work of Ælfric, the so-called *Heptateuch*, an English version of the first seven books of the Bible. This version seems to have been made in several stages. Genesis was translated in 997 or 998, at the instance of the ealdorman Æthelweard, to whom its epistolary preface is addressed. For the same nobleman, and presumably at about the same time (if not earlier), Ælfric turned Joshua into English. The exact times and occasions of composition cannot be given for the other books of the *Heptateuch*, but the whole was hardly complete by 1005, when Ælfric became Abbot of Eynsham in Oxfordshire. The seventh book, Judges, was not included in the B text (MS Claudius B iv), and though included in the L text (MS Bodley Laud Misc. 509) it is there set off from the rest by a blank page; presumably Judges was first composed as an independent work, or as a fellow of the homilies on other books of the Bible: Kings and Maccabees, incorporated into the third series of sermons; Job, used in the second series; Judith; and Esther. The whole Bible was summarized by Ælfric in a treatise (really two treatises) on the Old and New Testaments written for a certain Sigwerd, and this treatise has been taken for an introduction to the *Heptateuch*, though its place in the MS (Bodley Laud Misc. 509) does not support the theory. Introduction or no, the treatise was composed later than the *Heptateuch* proper; not earlier than 1006, not later than 1012. If we compare Ælfric's *Heptateuch* with the original we find it a volume of selections; large parts of the scriptural text are omitted. This holds least for Genesis, though even here omissions may be noted. In general, Ælfric left out things which he thought unsuitable for an English layman. Incidentally he thereby made his version more readable. Whatever he chose to translate he reproduced faithfully, with due regard to English idiom. He made much use of alliteration and rhythm here as elsewhere. For the latter part of Genesis, and perhaps for Exodus and Leviticus as well, Ælfric had before him an English translation made by somebody else; this translation he seems to have incorporated (in somewhat revised form) into his own version. His procedure here is indicative of the man: he saw no reason to work out a fresh version when one already existed which with a little patching could be made to serve. His sermons meant more to him. Here he was capable of discarding earlier work of his own for the sake of giving more adequate treatment to a theme. Thus, the *Hexameron*, a homily on the Creation, treats more fully a theme which he had already used in the *Catholic Homilies*, and the MS evidence suggests that Ælfric wrote the *Hexameron* to take the place of this earlier creation sermon.²⁹

In general, Ælfric's literary activities grew out of practical needs or de-

²⁸ On their form, see D. Bethurum, *SP*, xxix (1932), 515-533.

²⁹ The name *Hexameron* was traditional; Ælfric presumably got it from Bede. The six parts implied answer to the six days of Creation but Ælfric gives us much not mentioned in the Bible; his chief extra-biblical source was Bede.

mands; here he followed the tradition of Alfred, whose writings he knew. Sometimes Ælfric himself took the initiative in meeting such needs. In other cases he wrote to order: thus, bishops would commission him to prepare pastoral letters for use in their dioceses, and patrons (as we saw above) would ask him for English renderings or summaries of Holy Writ. Whatever the circumstances, his work shows a high level of competence, and often rises to æsthetic heights in its kind. Ælfric's artistic achievement, however, should not make us lose sight of the didactic purpose and effect which, for him, alone gave point to the labor of composition. The things he wrote proved, in fact, so well adapted to the needs of pastoral and monastic instruction that they withstood the cultural collapse brought on by the Norman Conquest, and kept alive till better days the tradition of English devotional prose.

The chief literary contemporary of Ælfric was his superior and friend *Wulfstan*,³⁰ Bishop of London (996-1002), Bishop of Worcester (1002-1016), and Archbishop of York (1002-1023). He died in 1023. He is best known as a homilist. Indeed his literary fame rests mainly on a single homily composed in the troublous year 1014: the eschatological *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*.³¹ He begins conventionally enough with the statement that "this world is in haste, and it draws nigh to the end." In other words, Doomsday is almost upon us. The evils of the time drive the preacher to his fateful conclusion, evils which he proceeds to particularize in vigorous speech. The English by their sinful ways have called down these evils upon themselves, and unless they repent and turn from wickedness to righteousness they will have every reason to quake before the judgment which is at hand. This powerful and timely sermon, thundered from the pulpit by Wulfstan himself or by some other clerical orator, might well have brought an eleventh-century congregation to sackcloth and ashes. Even today, after more than 900 years, its fiery periods stir the heart. The sermons of Ælfric were written to instruct; those of Wulfstan, to move; both homilists in the process produced works of art unmatched in their respective kinds. Wulfstan has aptly been compared to an Old Testament prophet; certainly he speaks with prophetic eloquence and zeal. The canon of his works remains a problem.³²

The *Blickling Homilies*,³³ a batch of 19 sermons in a MS of c. 970 and named (by modern scholars) after the former home of the MS, antedate the homilies of Ælfric and Wulfstan. Their literary merit is small, and we need do no more than mention them here. The 23 prose pieces of the Vercelli Book, a collection made c. 1000 if not earlier, are mostly homilies,³⁴ but include a fragmentary life of St Guthlac.³⁵

*Blickling
and
Vercelli
Homilies*

³⁰ See A. [S.] Napier, *Wulfstan* (Berlin, 1883); D. Bethurum, *PMLA*, LVII (1942). 916-929.

³¹ The best edition is that of D. Whitelock (1939).

³² But see K. Jost, *Anglia*, LVI (1932). 265-315.

³³ Ed. R. Morris, *EETS*, 58, 63, 73. See also A. E. H. Swaen, *Neophilologus*, xxv (1940). 264-272, and R. Willard, *Univ. of Texas . . . Studies in English*, 1940, pp. 5-28.

³⁴ Ed. (first half only) M. Förster, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, XII.

³⁵ A fuller text of the prose *Guthlac* is recorded in MS Cotton Vesp. D XXI. Edition, based on both texts, by P. Gosser, *Anglistische Forschungen*, xxvii (Heidelberg, 1909).

A number of other homilies and legends have come down to us, singly and in groups. Some of them still await publication.³⁶ We do not treat them in this history, but pass on to the gospel translations and other prose works. The West Saxon version of the four gospels³⁷ is commonly dated *c.* 1000. The translation, idiomatic but faithful to the Vulgate text, bears comparison with the Authorized Version of 1611 in literary quality.³⁸ The so-called Lindisfarne and Rushworth gospels are only glosses, and do not concern us here. The same may be said of the many glossed texts of the Latin Psalter. Such works as the penitentials attributed to Archbishop Egbert of York³⁹ likewise have little or no literary interest; they are essentially (ecclesiastical) legal texts. The many legal documents of Old English times have already been looked at (above, pp. 35-38) for the metrical bits which they incorporate. We omit from this history any consideration of legal prose. The *Handbook* of Byrhtferth,⁴⁰ and other works of interest to the historian of science,⁴¹ we likewise omit. The translation of that famous medieval collection of proverbs known as the *Distichs of Cato*⁴² may be worthy of mention. The most notable piece of late secular prose, however, is the Old English version of the Apollonius of Tyre story.⁴³ This romance of classical antiquity, deservedly popular in the Middle Ages, found an English translator even though it served for entertainment pure and simple. Unluckily only a fragment of the translation has survived. Its author shows considerable skill in that difficult art; his version reads well and gives us some idea of what the English literature of entertainment might have become but for the Norman Conquest. Of less interest are two secular prose pieces recorded in the Nowell codex:⁴⁴ the Old English version of *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, and a piece known as *Wonders of the East*. Both these pieces, along with *Apollonius* and many a saint's legend, show a taste for Oriental wonders and adventures, a taste which the crusades were destined to whet.

Summary

During the late tenth and eleventh centuries, the classical period of Old English prose, many writers were active and much good prose was written. Homiletic prose in particular reached heights of achievement comparable to the masterpieces of modern times. Historical prose, too, flourished, and

³⁶ On the unpublished homilies of MS CCCC 41, see R. Willard, in Förster's *Beiträge zur englischen Philologie*, xxx (1935). 2.

³⁷ Ed. J. W. Bright (4v, 1904-1906). On the Vulgate text used by the translator, see H. Glunz, in Förster's *Beiträge*, ix (1928) and *Kölner anglistische Arbeiten*, xii (1930).

³⁸ Here may be mentioned the Old English version of the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus. Text and discussion by W. H. Hulme in *PMLA*, xiii (1898). 471-515 and *MP*, i (1904). 579-614. Ed. E. J. Crawford (Edinburgh, 1927).

³⁹ Editions: *Poenitentiale* by J. Raith (1933); *Confessionale* by R. Spindler (1934).

⁴⁰ Ed. S. J. Crawford, *EETS*, 177 (1929). See also H. Henel, *JEGP*, xli (1942). 427-443. and *Speculum*, xviii (1943). 288-302.

⁴¹ Many texts may be found in O. Cockayne's *Leechdoms, Wort-Cunning, and Starcraft* (3v, Rolls Series, 1864-1866); see also G. Leonhardi, *Bibl. der ags. Prosa*, vi (1905), and H. Henel, *EETS*, 213 (1942).

⁴² Ed. J. Neuhab, *Der altenglische Cato* (Berlin, 1879). See also G. Schleich, *Anglia*, iii (1880). 383-396.

⁴³ Ed. J. Zupitza, *Archiv*, xcvi (1896). 17-34. See also P. Goepf, *ELH*, v (1938). 150-172.

⁴⁴ Ed. S. Rydins, *EETS*, 161 (1924).

a beginning was made with scientific prose. Moreover, prose writers even ventured into the realm of fiction, territory hitherto monopolized by verse. Had this rapid development kept up, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries might have been as glorious in English literature as they actually were in Icelandic. But William of Normandy won at Hastings. King Alfred, the noblest Englishman of them all, had laid out the garden of English prose. Ælfric and his fellows brought it to high cultivation, and extended it with new plantings full of promise. The Normans laid it waste, and slew its keepers.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ A. Brandl sums up the matter thus (*Grundriss*, p. 1133): "In the last phase of Old English culture, creative power was still active in the most diverse fields. In poetry the rise of rime was opening the way to a flowering of song. In prose, a homiletic style of singular force and vigor had grown up, and at the same time story telling made its way in a fullness comparable to the period of the crusades. In science, meager though the achievement, the zeal of the students was worthy of praise, while not only a great man [Ælfric?] but also an organization extending over the whole country provided for popular education. It was no tired, late autumnal culture but a field freshly sown with many promising seeds upon which fell the foreign rule of the Normans like the snows of winter." Less authoritative but of particular interest to Americans is the judgment of Ralph Waldo Emerson (*English Traits* [Boston, 1903], pp. 60-61): "... Twenty thousand thieves landed at Hastings. These founders of the House of Lords were greedy and ferocious dragoons, sons of greedy and ferocious pirates. They were all alike, they took everything they could carry, they burned, harried, violated, tortured and killed, until everything English was brought to the verge of ruin...."