

**The Alliterative Tradition  
and Modernist/Postmodernist  
Poetics**

**Five Translations from  
Old English**

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## The Alliterative Tradition and Modernist/Postmodernist Poetics

The following essay is not a complete survey of the ways that modern poets have used the alliterative tradition and translations from Old English poems to round out their aural vocabularies and educations, but will rather consider the ways that alliteration – derived directly from Old English studies or from experiments made in non-standard metrical forms – have surfaced in late-Victorian and modernist poetics. I will also attempt to trace the arc through which that the type of sound patterning involved in Old English alliteration – “sohte seledreorig sinces bryttan” – has moved as poetry went from being oral, public and mnemonic in structure to page-oriented. The general trajectory will be from the use of alliteration within a tradition of rules that are, after the Middle Ages, generally considered unrefined, appearing only in moments when one’s stylistic guard is down (or employed when attempting to render something from the past), to the use of alliteration outside metrical “rules” to create smaller sound units within the poem, a practice taken to the point of making these smaller units – with their singular gravities – the loci of the meaning of the poem itself. Terminology such as “sense-stress” will be used loosely to describe a poetry that is not iambic pentameter or the four-beat Old English line, but is rather dactylic and prose-like. Otherwise, the essay will not focus so much on specifics of meter as on the way sound pattering works, either for or against the fluidity of the line, in the several poetics considered.

Though alliteration play a very different role in Old English poems than they do in many poems today – in which it can be used

to create an effect of barbarity or severity, as in Ted Hughes, or the sense of free language-at-play, as in the experimentalist Charles Bernstein – it need not be considered an entirely formal, inalterable feature of Old English verse. As Stanley Greenfield writes in his book *The Interpretation of Old English Poems*, there are moments when alliteration, along with alterations of grammar, take on a life of their own, and modify one’s understanding of a poem. He is critical of studies that attempt to fix these deviations against an imagined “normal usage,” since we neither have an idea of what normal usage was in Anglo-Saxon times with the few and arbitrary works that have survived, nor does this sort of fixation necessarily lead to secure conclusions. As he writes, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty’ will continue to disturb critical repose no matter how much more we discover about normal Romantic use of language.”<sup>1</sup> He explores a middle ground, however, and writes:

Old English poetry was much more conventionalized, and thus presumably more predictable, in the expectations of meaning harnessed by its formal features... Deviation also plays a role in this poetry, however. The normal syntactic placing of particles, especially of possessive pronouns and articles, and the normal stress and alliterative patterns of Old English verse have, for example, recently been used by Lydia Fakundiny to show how deviation from the norm not only emphasizes the words in

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Greenfield, *The Interpretation of Old English Poems* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 112.

question but generates implications of meaning. She shows that prose ‘overwhelmingly’ uses these words proclitically, that is, before the substantives they modify, so that such usage may be considered the standard or norm by which their various poetic displacements in syntax and metre may be judged. She further observes that a standard feature of Old English verse form is that substantives take precedence over particles.<sup>2</sup>

Greenfield modifies the theory somewhat by suggesting that one might discover a grammatical “norm” for each work at hand. He then proceeds to show how examinations of word order and alliteration have provided new interpretations – some useful, some not – of lines from *Beowulf* and “The Wanderer.”

Greenfield also considers the role ambiguity and word play – much of it derived from puns (by nature alliterative, though rarely in close proximity) – has played in Anglo-Saxon literature, not only from the mouth of Pope Gregory, but in such places as the homilies of Wulfstan, “The Wanderer,” “The Dream of the Rood,” and the Riddles. The riddle of the swan, for example, contrasts the words “swigap” (silent) and “swogaþ” ([to] sound), in a way that “points up the central paradox of the riddle, the silence of the bird’s feathers when not flying and the (folkloristic) singing noise they make in its flight.”<sup>3</sup> Greenfield’s theory on the usage of such word play derive from William Empson’s “ambiguity,” which he feels should be modified to a theory of the “play of sound and sense,”

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<sup>2</sup> Greenfield, p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> Greenfield, p. 87.

since he feels Empson's idea is too broad, yet too narrow. For example, he feels limiting "ambiguity" to a binary actually opens up interpretation to elements such as the double entendre, which is too simple, and maybe too determinate, for Empson's theory. As Greenfield shows in his many analyses of passages of Old English literature, there was room in the conventional practices of Anglo-Saxon poetry for both deviation and word-play, though one would never suspect that such elements ever became ends-in-themselves for the poets, and that they were always used in the service of a central allegory or meaning. Ironically, however, it is the *conventional* machinery of Anglo-Saxon poetics – the tight sound patterning, the rhythms taking on sense-stress patterns – that will surface as the *unconventional* for poets much later.

It would seem that the most obvious place to begin a look at how "modern" poets have used the tradition of alliteration would be with Hopkins, Pound and Thomas, completely passing over the period from Spenser (despite his deep knowledge of alliterative verse) to Swinburne, assuming it dominated by a smooth, melodic line. But as Walter J. Ong points out in his essay on Hopkins, "Sprung Rhythm and English Tradition," there were aspects of the tradition that survived – though barely – as an undercurrent, so that a writer like Hopkins, who only read much of what was on the "reading menu" of his time, and thus who did not know "how much the forces back of sprung rhythm had normally made themselves felt in English verse,"<sup>4</sup> could yet revitalize it out of what was available – and which he acknowledged was available – to him: songs, "popular saws," and the rhythms of prose novels. He writes,

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<sup>4</sup> *Hopkins: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 158-159.

for example, that Milton “as a young man had, in *Comus*, trafficked in the livening rhythm of the stage, but[...] had turned away to the rhythms of the non-dramatic tradition,”<sup>5</sup> and he looks at a poem of Blake that demonstrates “genuine skeltonics.” Ong also shows how alliteration and counterpointed rhythms are present in lines of Keats’ “Ode on Melancholy” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” along with many lines from Browning’s *Ring and the Book*, which he notes can be broken into four-stress lines due to the concreteness of Browning’s chosen idiom (employing, as it did, much “found” vocabulary). Another example Ong presents is George Canning’s parody of Southey’s experiments in quantitative meter, which “slips into alliteration and a movement not unlike Old English four-stress verse” (the following italics are Ong’s):

*Needy Knife-grinder! whither are you going?  
Rough is the road, your wheel is out of order –  
Bleak blows the blast; your hat has got a hole in it,  
So have your breeches.*

This verse is surprisingly similar to W.H. Auden’s own informal use of Anglo-Saxon poetics, along with their questioning from an anonymous source, the tone of mocking humor, and the suggestion of a quest. In this way, it appears that Spenserian smoothness was already being subverted by poets who did not acknowledge (unlike Tennyson, later) that they were making attempts to reach back in history to Old English verse patterns, but who, for reasons of drama or other effect, tapped this source in the language.

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<sup>5</sup> Hopkins, p. 154

What Ong doesn't note is that these techniques may have surfaced by accident in less "finished" verse, or verse that suffered from hysterics, such as in Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, an interesting omission since there is an entire section of the first part of this poem that can be read in, more or a less, a four-beat stress pattern. The poem, consequently, includes motifs that seem right out of the Old English elegies. The pentameter suffers when Young becomes most passionate about his musings, as if the depth of his self-exposure necessitated a recourse to "sub-conscious" rhythms, often interchangeably with a five-stressed line:

How poor, how rich, how abject, how august,  
How complicate, how wonderful, is man!  
How passing wonder He, who made him such!  
Who centered in our make such strange extremes!  
How different natures marvelously mixed!  
Connection exquisite of distant worlds!  
Distinguish'd link in being's endless chain!  
Midway from nothing to the Deity!  
A beam ethereal sullied, and absorbt!  
Though sullied and dishonoured, still divine!  
Dim miniature of greatness absolute!  
An heir of glory! a frail child of dust!  
Helpless immortal! insect infinite!<sup>6</sup>

This scansion, of course, arguable, and nowhere does he actually adopt a four-stress pattern in a regular way, but there is a real

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<sup>6</sup> *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Cecil A. Moore (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), p. 540, ll. 67-79.



difficulty involved in making these lines work as regular pentameter despite their adherence to a syllable count. There is, also, no attempt to regulate the heavy sound play in a manner fitting to an Eighteenth-century stylist, so that much of the “rum, ram, ruf” of an unrefined verse tradition acquires a presence in these lines, written, ironically, by the man that English and French Surrealists would call their precursor as he tapped into an imagistic unconscious in *Night Thoughts*. It is notable, in general, that Young’s sacrifice of a “taste for smoothness” did not translate itself into great art in this case, and that alliteration remains, in its use in successive lines, still a “ghettoized” form, which it will remain until the revolutions of Browning, Hopkins and Pound. The reasons for this, outside of the fact that such rhythms were against decorum, will become clear when one considers the role that the information of language – whether it be in the form of an esoteric Renaissance vocabulary, the “kenning” and neologisms produced by a quasi-mystical, individualizing sensibility, or the word play necessary for the modernist project of purifying “the language of the tribe” – played in late-Victorian and modernist poetics.

Before getting there, however, it might be useful to see how the tradition of alliteration and sense-stress surfaced, in an altered but foregrounded and refined form, Tennyson’s translation of the Old English “Battle of Brunanburh.” A W. Davis Shaw writes in *Tennyson’s Style*: “As a poet of transition he succeeds in adapting his Romantic heritage only when he presents his sensations as half-seen shapes and wavering forms. Tennyson is a poet of the not-quite-living and not-yet-perished.”<sup>7</sup> He later writes that Tennyson

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<sup>7</sup> William David Shaw, *Tennyson’s Style* (London: Cornell University Press, 1976), p. 52.

“is much better at expressing the frail tentatives of vision,” all of which points to what may be the distinguishing feature of his Old English version of “Brunaburh,” which is that he appears to have been too much involved in the text as history to see the language in its *presentness*, and hence does not approach it on the graphemic or archeological level, or the level on which one approaches a text of a lost or foreign literature, with eyes wide on the strangeness of it. That is, Tennyson’s sense of the wide gap between his own time and that of the poem was fluid and phantasmagoric, possibly because Victorian culture itself maintained an unsure relationship with its past and future – as Arnold’s famous line from the “Scholar Gypsy” suggests. Tennyson, of course, is known for his own elegies based on Greek and Arthurian sources, but he manages to synthesize the two sensibilities – the Old English longing for the heroism of the past with the Victorian longing for cultures of the past – such that his language rarely deviates from, or is incommensurable with, the late-Romantic poetics of his time. Of course, because he himself was no “warrior” but was rather the “saddest of English poets” (Eliot), his poems were amenable to the decadent sensibility that was, later, to become dominant in much of English literary culture (prefigured, of course, in Romantics such as Keats).

Tennyson, in general, can be said to have absorbed the language so that he was not translating so much as being the next oral poet to utter the handed-over work. It is, then, significant that the poem is based on a prose translation by his son, especially considering that his kennings and alliteration don’t derive from specific correspondences with Old English. He didn’t have to deal with the strangeness of Old English, hence making absorption

easier. His version is broken into shorter lyric jabs, and never just flows in the manner of the original; it is divided in numbered sections like *In Memoriam*, thus giving the poem an “epic” quality in the gaps that permit interpretive or historical space to creep in (an effect described in Carol T. Christ’s *Victorian and Modernist Poetics*). He had used the Old English style along with much rhyme, and alluded to this poem specifically, in an earlier poem of his (“Marked how the war-axe swang, / Heard how the war-horn sang, / Marked how the spear-head sprang...” etc.<sup>8</sup>), so that the synthesis that occurs in the actual translation was already anticipated. The role of Spensarian poetics, however, is most prominent in how he chooses to smooth the sound play and frame his verses, most specifically the first section, which ends:

Gaining a lifelong  
Glory in battle,  
Slew with the sword-edge  
There by Brunaburh,  
Brake the shield-wall,  
Hewed the lindenwood,  
Hacked the battleshield,  
Sons of Edward with hammered brands.

The effect of the last line is not unlike the use of the alexandrine to close a verse of pentameter, here acting as a sort of stoppage that reminds the reader that, indeed, this poem is stylistically finished, not an over-emphatic run-on like the verse quoted above from

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<sup>8</sup> This is observed in the introduction to the “Battle of Brunanburh” in the *Collected Poems of Tennyson*.

Young. In an odd way, the regularity of the verses stresses, along with the platitudinous quality of the nouns and sentiments, may be a closer approximation of Old English poetics than later modernist attempts, and it maintains the public, rousing patriotic quality that is part of the original poem. Of course, it is also an adept metrical performance, convincingly imitating but not parroting an Old English sound, making a new work out of an old. But there are moments when Tennyson's virtuosity steps forward and usurps the poem, a quality that is exaggerated, and permitted, by its separation into shorter lyrics, most apparent in section XIV, which becomes its own sub-poem:

Many a carcase they left to be carrion,  
Many a livid one, many a fallow-skin –  
Left for the white tailed eagle to tear it, and  
Left for the horny-nibbed raven to rend it, and  
Gave to the garbaging war-hawk to gorge it, and  
That gray beast, the wolf of the weald.

This sort of writing will resurface in the 20th century in Ted Hugh's famous book-length sequence *Crow*, especially such a phrase as "garbaging war-hawk," suggesting the crossover of nature's natural conservationist, the animal, into contemporary waste culture. There is nothing wrong with Tennyson's foregrounding of talent, of course, but it fails to take advantage of the artifice of the original and its possible effect *on* the poetics of his day, rather than in an easy concord *with* this poetics. The poem, which doesn't strike one as nearly ambitious an effort as Pound's "Seafarer,;" is also useful as a contrast to academic, strictly

literal versions of Old English poetry, since it makes similar choices regarding vocabulary and rhythms, choosing smoothness and transparency over the potential dissonance and opacity that alliteration and grammatical ambiguity can create.

There is enough writing on the uses by Hopkins of the alliterative tradition and his theories of “inscape,” but it might be useful here to offer Tennyson’s translation as a contrast to Hopkins’ later efforts at deriving the concrete *presentness* of words through alliteration and jagged sense-stress rhythms. Ong describes in his book *Hopkins, the Self, and God* the poet’s sense of his “self” and the collapsing of the mind/body dualism that were a part of his beliefs. The “self,” according to Ong, is “nameless,” but it is the unique element (atomic, not a *construct*) that permits an engagement with “otherness” and with God. A useful, but long, paragraph contrasts Hopkins sense of self with those that have become prominent in the 20th century:

If Hopkins is little concerned with self-discovery or the “empirical self,” much less is he concerned with a “bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual movement” within the stream of consciousness, in the midst of which David Hume futilely tries to pin down the self as though it were just one or another of the items in the flow rather than something utterly unique to each separate person. Hopkins’ self is not the self Nietzsche constructs in undertaking to deconstruct the self.

It is the “I” in which all Nietzsche’s deconstruction is enfolded and which the deconstruction never eliminates and, in fact, never even touches. For Nietzsche is deconstructing a fiction, and the “I” is the contrasting reality that shows up fictions as fictitious. The self Hopkins refers to is of course still more remote from later ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss and other semiotic structuralists who would maintain that the self is simply a “crossroads,” a structure of recurrence. The self for Hopkins is something utterly immediate and unavoidable.<sup>9</sup>

The self “utterly immediate and unavoidable” could be exactly what Tennyson, interested in the fleeting perception of crepuscular truths, lacked. Hopkins writes in a letter, “when I compare my self, my being-myself, with anything else whatsoever, all things alike, all in the same degree, rebuff me with blank unlikeness,” which suggests a particular type of relationship to language on its self-individuating level, a level that could only have arisen with print culture, in which reading is a private experience and language is stranded, voiceless (or not embodied by a breathing rhetorician) on the plain of the page. Ong later writes that the “Victorian consciousness was much taken with taut ‘patterned energies’— the knot, the vortex”<sup>10</sup> which he notes plays a role in later Imagist and

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<sup>9</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ong, p. 35.

Vorticist poetics (and which makes its appearance in Tennyson's short, uncharacteristic poem "The Eagle"). What this adds up to – the "immediate" self that permits the deconstruction of fictions, untroubled by the solipsisms of Cartesian philosophy or Bergsonian "flux," along with a consciousness over-explained by Freudian poetics (as with the Surrealists) and still under-explained by Victorian misgivings about historical agency – is a sensibility that approaches language in all its particularizing, leveling-but-hence-liberating, way.

Hopkins never claimed to be an anarchist – though he once apologetically suggested to his friend Bridges that he was a "Communist" – and his attention to pattern and "inscape" always drew him to revision and the exploration of tightly closed forms. Yet the initial engagement of his poetics on the field of language and word perception would have to do, on a preparatory level, with the splitting-off of the words that had henceforth been resting in "Parnassian" (his term for the unique type of poet-speak that each poet develops and generally abuses) idioms and normal English syntax, fettered to its formal, dull chain. Some lines from "Spelt from Sybil's Leaves" suggest how this preparatory particularization worked (the accent marks are Hopkins'):

Our tale, O our oracle! | Let life, waned, ah let life wind  
Off her one skined stained veined variety | upon, all on  
tw6 spools; part, pen, pack  
Now her all in tw6 flocks, tw6 folds– black, white; | right,  
wrong...

There is something of the cut-and-paste method in his use of language, though he could not be considered a proto-Cubist, for the currents that underlie the utterance in the poem are involved in a singular flow that doesn't break from, so much as curve away from and then back into, "normal" syntax and a single perspective. Such a curve is accented, literally, by the use of diacritical marks over the words "skeined" and "veined," marks that do not, for no other reason than sound (as opposed to intentional "meaning"), appear above the word "stained" (unless Hopkins is suggesting that the "veins" are "stains" of some sort, a coloration or illusion, but that is unlikely). This is Hopkins being "alliterative," and yet there is no sense that he is involved in the formal tradition that Tennyson's poem was, and which made the "Battle of Brunaburh" something like a two-lit nostalgic romp. Tennyson's translation can be thought of as a poem in communication with its predecessor, or not free of its pull, whereas Hopkins' liberal use of the latent quality of English verse for alliteration brings the language closer to its realization as an ontologically unique elements in his sensorium.

Ong writes in his study of Hopkins of the distinction between chromatic and diachronic types of beauty, the former being characterized, generally, by "differences that are sliding or unmarked by clear borders" (Aristotelian), and the latter by "clearly disparate, distinct cut-off points" (Platonic)<sup>11</sup>. Hopkins – for all of his pleasure in distinctness, as he notes in journal entries, and his need for scales that are "mathematically fixed and give a standard" – seems to engage in the chromatic (synonymous with "anarchic" earlier) tendency on at least one level of this excerpt from "Spell

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<sup>11</sup> Ong, p. 15.



from Sybil's Leaves," which is in his use of alliteration and rhythm. There is nothing, in other words, in this poem and in much of Hopkins, that suggests he needed the tradition of alliterative verse to operate within his poem – he sacrifices those scales of consonance, and those patterns of stress. A half-line like "part, pen, pack," for example, becomes its own unit within the flow of the verse, "self"-absorbed in a way that resists the normalizing tendencies of the syntax and meaning-level of the poem. The poem, in this way, doesn't "speak to the tradition" like Tennyson's so much as make the tradition itself unique as "other," marking both his poem and those unlike it sovereign beings. In other words, he was more interested than Tennyson in making his poem – and even its separate word-units – speak to *himself*, to realize his own, and its own, singularity on an ontological landscape.<sup>12</sup> Of

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<sup>12</sup> A quote from Hopkins' journals might help make clear this concept, which is elaborated upon at length in Ong's study. He writes: "Part of this world of objects, of this object-world, is also part of the very self in question, as in man's case his own body, which each man not only feels in and acts with but also feels and acts on. If the centre of reference spoken of has concentric circles round it, one of these, the inmost say, is its own, is of it, the rest circles round it only. Within a certain bounding line all will be self, outside of it nothing: with it self begins from one side and ends from the other. I look through my eye and the window and the air the eye is my eye and of me and me, the windowpane is my windowpane but not of me nor me. A self then will consist of a centre and a surrounding area of circumference, of a point of reference and a belonging field, the latter set out, as surveyors etc say, from the former of two elements, which we may call the inset and the outsetting or the display." (Ong, *Hopkins*, p. 40) Language, upon entering this area of the "self," no doubt must become ripped out of normalcy by its engagement with what is clearly a hot center consequently, because of Hopkins' inattention to what he feels is "outside" this self, the energy invested in the interaction with what is inside the circle is total and intense. His metaphor of the surveyor on the "field" is resonant of much postmodern poetics

course, Tennyson was “translating,” but the distinction stands if one considers the changing theories of translation throughout modernism, that permit a greater distinctiveness of language.

Such an engagement as Hopkins’ could have only arisen out of print culture, for he was approaching something like musical Serialism with his poetics, engaging on the level of particular in such a way that threatens mnemonic potential, or rhetorical transparency. In ways that are probably obvious, Pound’s version of “The Seafarer” walks a fine line between Hopkins’ use of word-clusters and Tennyson’s retention of some of the standards of Old English meter. Pound, the arch poetic (at least in theory) and political conservative – nothing like the “intimate” Hopkins – used his studies in Anglo-Saxon literature to preserve and “purify” what he thought were the better qualities of his art, while at the same time distancing himself from the academy and their pedestrian representations of the poetry. As Hugh Kenner writes in a rich paragraph from *The Pound Era*, there was a “vogue” for Anglo-Saxon that led Pound to think very early about how he would approach a translation, and which may have played into his Imagist and Vorticist theories:

If such power, as experience suggests, is latent (though rarely released) in the simplest words, one would like to characterize the words more exactly. Are they the oldest? They ought to be somehow the core of a language, identifiable by tracing its history backward. Mid-19th century

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such as those of Charles Olson, who also approached the word-as-graphemic presence in his famous theories of “Projective Verse.”

England abounded in amiable enthusiasts for Saxon roots. The “fine old fellow / named Furnivall” (1825-1910) whose repute is alluded to in the *Pisan Cantos* [...]; Bridges (who said of the old words ‘We’ll get them all *back*’) admired Doughty, much of whose *Dawn of Britain* Pound read aloud to Yeats one wartime winter; Doughty in turn was indebted to the *Speechcraft* (i.e. Grammar) of William Barnes, who proposed *sunprint* or *flameprint* to replace *photograph*, *sleepstow* for *dormitory*, and *itches* of *suchness* for *degrees of comparison*, drawing always on the “wordstores of the landfolk.” The time’s enthusiasm for Anglo-Saxon studies was transmitted to Pound by Professor Ibbotson at Hamilton; it led in 1911 to his *Seafarer* [Kenner quotes from it] – eloquent eccentricity of diction akin to Hopkins’, though protected by the convention of translation; used once again, explicitly *as* archaism, in Canto I [quotes] and thereafter abandoned. There were less quirky ways, he had decided, to purify English.<sup>13</sup>

Pound was not English, which is perhaps why his didactic stance towards the nature of the original Anglo-Saxon was so absolute and objective. Since he posited his own beliefs as central to the health of the culture, he couldn’t afford to be trivial or eccentric –

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<sup>13</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 108-9.

which he may have equated with the worst of the English character – for he wanted to engage in an active warfare, not a diffident laughter, with literary culture from his position of exile. For these reasons, his “Seafarer” seems a bit claustrophobic at first, taking complaint far from the level of the personal and making it authoritative in a way that precludes sympathy. It seems, consequently, to derive partially from meters and sound-patterns developed in his “Sestina Altaforte,” which presents Piere Vidal saying such things as “Damn it all! all this our south stinks Peace.” As Kenner makes clear, there was much in the air for locating the “great bass” (a musical term of Pound’s) in the language of Anglo-Saxon literature; implicit in the tone of this paragraph, however, is the fact that Pound wasn’t going to find this bass in children’s books, nor was he interested in tinkering revisionism and word-games. He wanted the pure product, the “luminou sdetail” straight from its Medieval heart.

Pound’s “Seafarer,” like the poems of Hopkins, does arise out of an approach to the single word or word-cluster as nexus, so that it is always threatening to collapse in on itself. The distinction, as has already been suggested, is the lack of Arnoldian “sweetness” (and maybe the “light” too) in the verse<sup>14</sup>, but rather a barrage of

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, Pound does not translate the parts that were considered, at that time, additions by clerics, or when he did, he changed any reference to the “Lord” to a “lord.” For this reason, the contrast with Hopkins is especially interesting, for though each was engaged in a give-and-take with the “thingness” of language, there is, in Hopkins, a constant pointing-toward-God as the ultimate receiver of praise – hence creating the arena of “joy” in which his word-play proliferates – whereas Pound was engaged in a notion of cultural “progress,” which demanded an exactitude of presentation, and which was not meant to inspire feelings of religious transcendence – perhaps discouraging against them. Consequently, Pound’s poem does not permit the sort of allegorical interpretation that,

spirants and stresses that send the reader back upon him- or herself, away from the poem, as if the poem engaged in a purposeful alienation. This may be an element of Pound's poetics, as he is concerned with educating the reader in "how to read," and re-finding in the language its original, cleanest qualities. Despite the harsh surface, however, there is another element – its most liberal or "progressive" one might say – that gives it a new sort of sweetness, and that is in its engagement with the original. No doubt, there has been much work by Pound scholars on where he wavers and doesn't waver from the original, and this is no place for even a general summary. However, in general, one can say that Pound finds moments *within* the distance between the texts to create both humor and a micro-gestural music – i.e. existing on the level of the word-cluster – that is elevating when read in conjunction with the Anglo Saxon. For example, here are lines 17-26 from the Old English original:

bihongen hrimgicelum; haegl scurum fleag.

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generally, has been made possible with the acceptance of the poem as a single work. Stanley Greenfield writes in *A Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1968): "It is thus that the first or seafaring portion of the poem passes over into the second or homiletic section... Either we can take the proposed sea journey literally, seeing in it an ascetic resolution to forsake the things of this world for a peregrinatio pro amore Dei, or we can take it as an allegory of man's passage to the land from whence he was exiled in the Fall of Adam, the heavenly patria, his earlier voyaging being an allegory for his life on earth, as in the sea-voyage simile at the end of Christ 11." (p. 221) Pound's version, however, is very consonant with the materialism of the cultural and economic thinking of his milieu, and anticipates later poetics that will court a greater linguistic materiality.

Ðær ic ne gehyrde butan hlimman sæ,  
 iscaldne wæg. Hwilum ylfete song  
 dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleoþor  
 ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor werā.  
 Mæw singende fore medodrince.  
 Stormas þær stanclifu beotan; þrer him steam  
 oncwæþ,  
 isigfeþera; ful oft þret earn bigeal,  
 urigfeþera; ne aenig hleomrega  
 feasceaftig ferþ frefran meahte.<sup>15</sup>

Pound renders this mostly literally, but using much of the sound of the original, in the manner of a “phonetic translation” (a translation that finds English words in the sound patterning of a foreign-language) to suggest to him to some unique solutions, both to the difficulties of translation and to certain grammatical and textual problems:

Hung with hard ice-flakes, where hail-scur flew,  
 There I heard naught save the harsh sea  
 And ice-cold wave, at whiles the swan cries,  
 Did for my games the gannet’s clamor,  
 Sea-fowls’ loudness was for me laughter,  
 The mews’ singing all my mead-drink.  
 Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the sterns  
 In icy feathers; full oft the eagle screamed  
 With spray on his pinion.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Pound has a different take on the grammar as it is presented in Bright’s Old English Grammar & Reader, but it is presented here as it appears in that text.

Pound's syntax, it should first be noted, is ambiguous, but that, taken in the context of Anglo-Saxon studies, represents a truer recreation, or *re*-presenting in the gerund, of the difficulty of reading and understanding the text in its form as given by the scribes. Words like "scur" (not found in general dictionaries – is it made up?) and "mews" (presently "a cage for molting birds"; or is it the sound of mewing?) find a sort of root in the Anglo-Saxon original, though they are clearly deviations from modern English. There are lovely phonetic parallels; for example "Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten" for "Stormas þær stanclifu beotan," which is clearly an "incorrect" translation given the accusative case of "stanclifu." The metamorphic quality of this rendering – metamorphosis will be a central theme in the *Cantos* – becomes an occasion for something like the private glee of an archeologist when the "steam" becomes "sterns," and the hang-up over these particular lines (centered around "bigéal") is solved by making the storms fall in icy-feathers – a beautiful idea, and very *imagiste*, except that it doesn't explain the "dewy-feathered" parallel construct one line later. "Did for my games the gannet's clamor," for "dyde ic me to gomene, ganetes hleopor" is another nice solution, and points to another element of Pound's version, which is the near-absence of the "I" after the first lines (possibly a result of Pound's neo-classical, counter-psychological tendencies, and the admission that he was merely reconstructing an artifact, not creating a personal record, in this poem), the result of which is the rendering of this poem of witness and longing, punctuated often by "ic" and "me," as something of a language-game, embodied only *by* the language. The general effect of this reading-in-conjunction,

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<sup>16</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1926), p. 64.

besides an elevated appreciation of Pound's ear – this is no slavish imitation of a studied tradition, but an entirely agile, polyphonic aesthetic – is that Pound's "Seafarer" becomes *clear* – it opens up, and becomes the story of an individual's engagement with a text and its meanings, in a manner that argues, as Pound intended, for the necessity of a "pure" language, though one that is, on many levels, indeterminate. The poem then loses some of its didactic stance and becomes a rather intimate, often capricious, engagement with the Old English original, the kind we all make in reading a poem with imperfect but giddy understanding of the source language ("I believe my favorite country's German," wrote Randall Jarrell), and hence a reaffirmation, on a personal scale, some aspects of Pound's theories involving "claritas" in which the obscurities, archaisms, not to mention missing "I," initially keep from view.<sup>17</sup>

Pound's poem, then, becomes one with an interior that it attempted to hide behind a Vorticist surface, a poem whose harsh edges tried to quicken the sensibility as the poets of the "nineties" had failed to do, behind the mask of translation (as Kenner suggests in the quote above), but with a soft core. Hopkins, for reasons described by Ong, anticipates this poetics of the surface-

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<sup>17</sup> This double-aspect of Pound's poetics is explored in Charles Bernstein's essay, "Pounding Fascism" in *A Poetics* (Massachusetts: University of Harvard Press, 1992), which explores the fact that Pound's poetics, proposing a highly determinate universe, is finally indeterminate at base. "As Richard Sieburth has noted, the ultimate irony of *The Cantos* is that all its irreconcilable elements can be reconciled only in the abstract, by the authority of the author, on credit. Indeed, the real economy of *The Cantos* is the one Pound constantly struggled to repress and to lay bare: the economy of reader and writer and book the economy of language not as Logos but as exchange." (p. 124)



of-things, or even the “no ideas but in things” (words) of Williams, but for the purpose of exploring the self in its relationship to that only “other” it acknowledges as coming from higher level, which is God. What both poets have in common, then, is the use of the artifice of language foregrounded above traditional meters and sound patterning which would subtract from the poem’s singularity, absorb it in fluid history, but to such an extent that word-clusters acquire their own inner-gravity, and thus begin to construct form around themselves, in ways that resemble musical modernism as in the aforementioned Serialism, or even Minimalism with its recursive repetitions. Though all of this is a long way from Anglo-Saxon poetics as Greenfield describes, clearly something that was implicit in the deviations and puns, not to mention the conventional patternings of alliteration and stress-sense, have been modified to create works of eccentric singularity – a permission granted by print-culture – acting in opposition to Spenserian smoothness. Other poets who took advantage of this “revival” include Dylan Thomas, W.H. Auden, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, though in the progression being described in the present essay they each stand somewhere between Tennyson and Hopkins, for each of these poets created an idiom that incorporates, or absorbs, alliterative techniques rather than foregrounds them as *resistant* elements, a distinction that is useful, perhaps only if one agrees that none of these poets are as eccentric and radical as Hopkins in his use of atomic sound-elements. More radical poets do exist, and it might be useful, to round out this sketch of how alliteration and sense-stressed rhythms “entered the world” of modernist poetics to see how they have continued to be played out in some contemporary experimental writing.

There are two areas in which one can look, the “postcolonial” and the “postmodern” (the two being, of course, complexly intertwined) for the use of both alliteration and the alliterative tradition in an attempt to realize a poetics that deviate from European neo-classical models. Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes in his essay “History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry” of the need to find a language that supports a postcolonial epistemology for poets of the Caribbean educated on English models, writers who found themselves, as a result of crossed connections, trying to mate (for example) descriptions of English weather and its symbolism with Caribbean settings, a sort of miscegenation that creates such oddities as the broken-backed “the snow was falling on the canefields,” an example from a poem by a school-child. Brathwaite writes:

What is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very software, in a way, of the language. What English has given us as the model for poetry, and to a lesser extent prose[...], is the pentameter: “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.” There have, of course, been attempts to break it. And there were other dominant forms like, for example, *Beowulf* (c.750), *The Seafarer* and what Langland (?1332-?1400) had produced [quotes Langland], or, from *Piers the Plowman* (which does not make it into *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*

which we had to “do” at school) the haunting prologue [quotes the first three lines] which has recently inspired Derek Walcott with its first major nation language effort:

In idle August, while the sea soft,  
and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim  
of this Caribbean, I blow out the light  
by the dreamless face of Maria Concepcion  
to ship as a seaman on the schooner Flight.<sup>18</sup>

The suppression of alliterative verse, or its replacement by continental models, is reinscribed in the colonial education of Caribbean poets, who were more attuned to an oral, African tradition, so that Brathwaite’s sense of the value of *Pier the Plowman*, for example, is alive to that historical moment as if it were today. He goes on to write briefly of Chaucer and the entrance of the pentameter, and then of the work of Whitman, Cummings and Moore in American modernism, and continues:

But basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The History of the Voice* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 9.

which approximates the natural experience, the *environmental* experience?<sup>19</sup>

“The hurricane does not roar in pentameters” has become something of the catch-phrase from this essay, and it is interesting that Derek Walcott, in his long poem *Omeros*, a work that mixes the chosen forms of European predecessors such as Homer, Dante, and Shelley, is written in alexandrines! Brathwaite’s essay continues to quote from much Caribbean poetry from the oral tradition, little of which could be considered “influenced” by Anglo-Saxon poetics or veering into anything resembling it, except in so far as it doesn’t employ pentameter, and engages in a “calypso” or dactylic rhythm. Brathwaite’s description of the way poetry operates in his culture invariably suggests how it might have worked in Medieval England, in, for example, his description of the performance of the griot and the intonation of the voice, along with the totality of the communal poetic experience. He writes: “And this total expression comes about because people be in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty (‘unhouselled’) because they come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very breath rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines.”<sup>20</sup> While it would be unwise to use these statements to describe Anglo-Saxon times, something certainly resonates in here with the opening lines of “The Seafarer” or “The Wife’s Lament,” poems which are generally recognized as arrangements of well-known epithets and phrases, but which must have had a deeper psychological resonance in performance *within* the contexts of the

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<sup>19</sup> Brathwaite, pp. 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Brathwaite, p. 18

descriptions in them, so that the level of imagistic recall is (speculatively) more full, not to mention the sense of the real dangers of exile (without cell phones, the internet or central heating).

The important thing, however, is that Brathwaite is clearly aware of the imposition of iambic pentameter on oral poetics, and feels it both politically and artistically – not as some textbook occurrence – and certainly not as some victory of the civilized over the barbaric in letters (as Johnson did, for example, in his famous “Prologue”). As opposed to Hopkins and Pound (and Walcott, too), who wrote with the awareness that their poems were, first of all, *texts*, Brathwaite and other Caribbean poets are clearly “performance” poets, tuned to the unique timbers of words as they *could be* modified in performance though without the specific charting of the page, so that nothing written is for private consumption and interpretation, but is always soon active in the general-made-specific through performance. It is for this reason that much Caribbean poetry does not “work” on the page; in fact, this poetry is circulated on record albums, which have more than an underground existence. One can speculate that because these poems are recorded, such mnemonic structures as regularized alliteration and the four-stressed line (along with iambic pentameter) will probably never become an aspect of the verse, leaving the work free to be improvised or alterable on some level in performance, like jazz.

Alliteration has played a unique role in poetic practices that would be “postmodern” or “experimental,” some of which might be considered a result of Hopkins’ and Pound’s (not to mention Joyce’s and Williams’) engagement with the solidity, the

presentness, the printed word, but which, on the other hand, attempts – like Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons* – to dislocate words from their “established” meanings, and keep the focus of the poem very much on its surface. In this way, poetic practices which are considered “mainstream” and suspect in many ways – perhaps because of the narcissism that is an element of much confession-type writing, or the lack of attention by these poets to the revolution in language that digital media technologies have created, or to the abuse of language by the government and major corporations in their advertising – are subverted along with “highbrow” neo-classical meters that have proven themselves antiquated (incapable, perhaps, of expressing the *media* hurricane). This is no place to elaborate on the reasons experimental poets do what they do, but it is worth looking at the use of language in some of these poems, since they point back to how late-Victorian and modernist sensibilities were affected by the new language technologies of their own time, including the revolutions in philology and historical scholarship that occurred in the nineteenth century. Consequently, such a display will show how alliterative verse on a systematic level – not exploding uncontrollably within a “higher” style, but rather foregrounded as the prime ordering element – has moved a long distance from the ghetto to which it had been relegated.

The following are from two poems by different poets, the first by Charles Bernstein, who is associated with the “Language” school, and the second by a younger writer, Tan Lin, a Chinese-American poet who has found “Language” writing a useful tool for engaging in a guerrilla warfare, of sorts, on contemporary identity politics:

## Virtual Reality

for Susan

*Swear*

there is a sombrero  
of illicit  
desquamation  
(composition).

I forgot to  
get the  
potatoes but the lakehouse  
(ladle)  
is spent  
asunder. Gorgeous  
gullibility –  
or,  
the origin  
of testiness  
(testimony).

Laura

does the laundry, Larry  
lifts lacunas.

Such that  
details commission of  
misjudgment over 30-day  
intervals.

By  
the sleeve is the  
cuff & cuff  
link (lullaby, left offensive,  
houseboat). [...] <sup>21</sup>

### **Talc Bull Dogface**

Ship carp do doped pressure bag go famous pure-fuck  
your shrag  
lozenge movie geisha whittle drip drop.  
Unfold again wrap to pool-shaped hair  
no shirtee mandible say altar tire.  
Okiniwa aisle to stand. Jello wink slant, dew drop carport,  
pounds  
tea rhombus K-Mart pencil I'm ear. Gone flying pan.  
Chopstick blob.  
Anise loopholes frag bastard home sugar hick nerf log.  
[...] <sup>22</sup>

Though neither of these poets is engaged in “purifying the language” of the tribe, and are clearly not pushing for clearer presentation of universal truths, each might be said to want to return the *experience* of language to a pre-societal or (as in Hopkins) psychologically singular state, which is why this poetry resembles, in many ways, the doodling of children (or the writings of the “mad”). Bernstein’s poem – a love poem, it appears, judging

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Dark City* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Tan Lin, *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1996), p. 89.



by the dedication – falls into its structure the way a drip castle does, with its proportions coming out of the accidents of its construction, into what language suggests of and for itself, though of course this is a highly crafted, strategic poem. The derivation of “ladle” from “lakehouse,” for instance, does more than undercut the potential scenic aspect of the poem or flatten its surface, for there is just enough of a context to make the “ladle” (matched with the other parenthetical words, “composition” and “testimony”) suggest the grouping together of disparate elements into a mass, like the ingredients of a soup in a ladle before being served, however arbitrary the confluence. In fact, the poem seems to be, beginning with the word “swear,” about testimony, and the alliteration (not a result of an “oral” tradition but of a sub-conscious associative faculty grounded in both speech and text) serves in this sense to undermine testimony itself, suggesting the way language works to construct its own meanings – a postmodern “old saw” one might say, but suggestive of how far language (or its theory) has come from the days of Chaucer and the “Wife of Bath.”

A similar operative is present in the poem by Lin, which uses alliteration in a far less orderly way, and even makes an effort to avoid any repetition, of both consonants and vowels, in the last sentence quoted here. Lin seems to be interested in a far more primal, or ecstatic, engagement with the sound of words than Bernstein, wanting to raise everyday words to the level of the taboo, so that “Jello wink slant, dew drop carport” becomes as obnoxious as “famous pure-fuck your shrag,” though one really couldn’t say what he “means” by this. The use of the word “slant” in this context is equally meaningless and yet loaded, and Lin proves, in this way, that language, even when entirely divorced

from systematic usage, will produce significances. What he seems to be achieving, in this poem, might be called “Calibaning,” which, in postcolonial theory, is when the language of the colonizer or power-that-be is used, as Shakespeare’s character states in *The Tempest*, only to curse. “No shirtee” and “chopstick blob,” both of which speak a severe disgust with the marginality of Asian cultures in the U.S. – along with the very real problems of language between generations – gives a sort of focus to the effort, but the emphasis is still, as in Bernstein, on a sort of information overload, taking, in a sense, those very Nineteenth-century revolutions in philology and scholarship (including Orientalism) and standing them on their head. A final element, in such lines as “no shirtee mandible say altar tire,” could have to do with immigrants, many well-educated, having to learn a new language in a state of economic panic (“altar tire” suggesting some sort of degrading job), a sort of overload that has been the subject of works by Asian American writers such as Theresa Cha.

Whereas Pound could be said to have been seeking the roots to his culture, and Hopkins to want to make language unique to himself by neologism and “inscape,” Bernstein and Lin could be said, in general, to be exploring the sound-quality of words to create new structures for poetry that – like “virtual reality” itself – are self-contained experiences that work as critiques of the Romantic ideology and Nineteenth-century social science that resulted in the very myth of nationalism and “rootedness” itself. The fact that they turned to the heavily-stressed sound qualities of language relates them, however, directly to the use of the alliterative tradition by Hopkins and Pound, which is that they saw each word as being some sort of nexus, or “vortex,” that could be

contrasted to another word regardless of the demands of formal meters or regular syntax, hence permitting exciting word-clusters and gravitational pulls between words and phrases (like tiny maelstroms) that are generally absent from decorous, conventional verse. In Hopkins and Bernstein, one can see how new sub-structures or groupings are created out of the sound-qualities, so that there is, in the end, something of a troubled smoothness. With Pound and Lin, and to a degree Brathwaite in his theories, the effect is one of wild complaint, a totalizing linguistic assault, and thus an experience that is encompassing and dangerous, in which regularity is constantly sighted and destroyed.

Since Anglo-Saxon verse culture was not text-based, it is ironic that a poem like Bernstein's would bear more resemblance, with its emphasis on consonantal recurrence over rhyme, to Old English poetry than to, say that of Donne or Pope. However, modernist poets do not use alliteration in the manner of Medieval poets – for mnemonic and dramatic purposes– but rather take advantage of the qualities of English vocabulary to render language opaque. The fact that the one oral poet discussed here, Brathwaite, does not use these patternings in his own verse suggests that technology, whether recording or print, has made the need for such structures obsolete, which points, again, to the revolution of values from the time of the Medievals to the moderns. This is not a solid “progression,” a passing of the torch from age to age – Ong describes a near disappearance of stress-sense meters after Spenser – but alliteration will probably continue to develop as poets explore further the way poems operate on microscopic levels on the page, perhaps in conjunction with a revitalized sense of the English “tradition” that doesn't look at the Anglo-Saxon period as an

unrefined, mist-laden “past” but as a synchronous, however estranged, present.

## Five Translations



## The Wife's Lament

I will speak my plight's tale, care-  
wretched, about myself. I can say: what  
woes I've borne growing up, present  
and past, were all less than now. I have  
won, for my exile-paths, just pain.

First, my lord left: over deep seas, far  
from people, and I've grieved each  
morning, where, earth-wide, he could  
be. Then I left: voyaging sought service  
– sad exile – for my woeful desires!

My lord's kin schemed secretly: that  
they'd estrange us, keep us most apart,  
across the earth-kingdom, and my heart  
suffered. My lord bade me: take  
dwelling here. I had few friends in

this land, no devoted comrades – so I  
feel as if lost! I had found a man full fit  
to me, though unfortunate, spiritually  
fraught – a feigning mind, bliss-  
visaged, but planning a crime! Full

oft we vowed we'd never part, not till  
death alone, nothing else; but that is  
changed, our friendship – is now, as if

it never were. I must hear, far and near,  
contempt for my loved. My man

bade me live by the grove's wood,  
beneath the oak tree, in an earth-cave.  
This cave is old – I am all oppressed –  
the valleys dim, mountains steep – a  
bitter home! tangled with vines –

an arid dwelling! The cruelty hits often  
– my lord's absence! On earth there are  
lovers, living in love, they share the  
same bed, meanwhile... I go alone each  
dawn, by the oak and earth-cave,

where I sit, summerlong days. There, I  
might weep my exile-paths, its many  
woes, because an anxious mind won't  
rest, nor this sorrow, which wrests from  
me this life. A young man must be

stern, hard-of-heart, stand blissful,  
opposing breast-cares and his sorrows'  
legions. All world-joy should wake  
from himself, for wide and far, in  
foreign folk-lands, my friend sits

under a hard slope, frosted by storms,  
silenced for a friend, water bordering



his sad-hall! My friend suffers sorrow;  
he know too oft his home was joyful.  
Woe to those who live longing all  
for a loved one.

## The Battle of Brunaburh

That year King Aethelstan, lord of Earls,  
warrior's patron, and his brother also, Prince  
Edmund, gained glory  
eternal by the blade's

edge, at battle in Brunanburh. Edward's  
descendants, they scaled the shield-wall,  
sliced linden with hammer-  
blows – a natural

passion for them, known from posterity, that  
they at war hold firm from danger: land,  
hoard and home. Enemy  
Scots fell dead;

sailors faltered, fated to die. The field  
blackened with men's blood, from time  
when the morning sun – glor-  
ious star! – glided

over the grounds – God's bright candle! of  
the Lord eternal! – till the noble disk sank to  
its seat. Many men, shredded  
by spears, lay

there – Northern men, shattered over shield,  
and scores of Scots, sated with war, ex-

hausted. The West Saxons  
burned, all day, in

troops, a path forward – after the detested  
people! They cut down fugitives fiercely from  
behind with swords grind-  
stone-sharp. The

Mercians refused rough hand-play to none,  
not one hero, who, in ships' wombs, had  
sought land with Anlaf,  
over the sea's

clamor – but doomed in battle! Five young  
kings – enslumbered by the sword! – lay on  
the slaughter-field. And  
seven Earls of

Anlaf! numberless shipmen, and of the army,  
and Scots. The Northerns' leader was pushed  
to flight, forced to the ship's  
prow with a

trifling corps. The ship crowded onto the sea  
– the king flew! forth on the darkening sea,  
salvaged his life. Old  
Constantine also

journeyed north, to his native land! Hoary  
warrior – now, not able to exult in swung  
swords! Thrashed of kins-  
men, thrust from

his friends, beat on the battlefield at war – he  
left his own son, so young! on the slaughter-  
place, wound-ravaged. Gray-  
haired man – he

could not boast of the battle-clash! no more  
than Anlaf! Old wily-one! They could not,  
among such tattered  
squadrons, laugh that

their war-field work was superior – not in the  
rush of standards! in the meeting of spears!  
in the bruising of men! in  
the weapons’

exchange! when, with the kin of Edward,  
they sported on that slaughter-field. Then the  
Normans – arrows’ sad  
survivors! – left in

nailed-ships over Dingsmere, again over  
deep water seeking Dublin – in Ireland, but  
ashamed in spirit. So the  
brothers – King

and Prince both – sought native turf, the land  
of the West-Saxons, cheering war. Corpses  
were left to be mashed  
by the rook, horny-

beaked and dark-coated, and by the dun-  
coated, white-headed eagle – a feast for the  
greedy war-hawk! then that  
gray beast, the

wolf of the wild. Since then, not more have  
fallen on this island, more folk downed than  
by these sword-edges – so  
the book says, and

old wise scholars – since that time when  
Angles and Saxons came hither, from the  
east sought Britain, over  
stretched sea –

proud warmakers! – glorious Earls! – and  
beat the Welsh,  
and found a homeland.

## The Seafarer

May I myself tell a true story: how  
I, on journeys, bore hardship often,  
and for toilsome days, housed  
bitter breast-cares – lived in ships  
of woe, the wrathful tossing of  
waves! I was fear-taunted at  
nightwatch, as the ship's prow  
tossed close to cliffs. My feet –  
fettered by cold, as with chains –  
were frost-ringed. Sorrow groaned  
hot round my heart, hunger tore  
from bowels, spirit stifled by

sea-weariness! A man on land  
doesn't know the life he leads is  
pleasantest. Nor how I, care-  
wracked, on the ice-cold sea,  
survived winter in these exile-  
paths: cut off from kinsmen,  
icicles my companions! Hail flew  
in showers. I heard nothing but the  
sounding sea, the waves ice-cold.

Song of the swan for pleasure, I  
took the cry of gannets, the blabber  
of curlews for laughter, and

the seagull's wail for mead-drink.  
Storms beat the stone-cliffs; there

the tern called them, icy-feathered.

Full oft the eagle cried, dewy-  
feathered! I had no shipmate to  
share such barrenness. That  
man who found life's joy city-  
dwelling, proud and wine-plump,  
without such adversities, cannot  
think how I struggled tired, often,  
on the sea. Night-shadows  
darkened; it snowed from the

north; hoarfrost surrounded  
the earth. Hail fell ground-ward,  
coldest kernel. But then, my  
heart's thoughts urge I leave, live  
the deeps myself, the play of sea  
waves. And mind-lust urges,  
always, my soul: that I go forth,  
seek strangers' territories, far off.  
For there is no man on earth so  
arrogant, nor whose giving is so  
gracious, nor who, youthful, is so  
vigorous, nor who is so deed-

brave, nor whose lord is so  
generous, that he takes to the sea  
indifferent to the Lord's wishes.

His mind is not on harps, or ring-  
receiving, not on a woman's

pleasures, or on ambitions –  
on nothing: just the tossing of  
waves. He has longings always,  
who treks sea-ward. Groves adopt  
a blossom-sheen, the city  
beautifies, and hills self-animate –  
the world rushes on! These

things all urge the eager soul – to  
depart! travel wide on the flood-  
ways. So the cuckoo moans with its  
mournful murmur. Summer's  
harbinger sings, inspires sorrows,  
heart-bitter. That man is  
ignorant, fortunate man! of what  
those undergo who wend exile's  
paths widest. For now my mind  
breaks out of my soul's breast,  
heart amid the sea's flood, over the  
whale's home, and travels

widely the earth's lengths, coming  
back – ravenous and greedy! The  
lone flyer cries, lures me onto the  
whale-way, and the breast over the  
sea-stretch irresistibly. So for me,  
Lord's joy is hotter than this  
dead land-life, that is but fleeting. I  
do not think earth-riches stand



eternally. One of three things,  
    invariably, suddenly, raises doubt:  
disease, age, or sword-violence –  
    takes away life! from the

doomed, the destined to die. So, for  
    each soldier, praise of the later  
living is the best memorial he  
    wins, that, ere he leaves, his earth-  
doings – against enemies' evil,  
    great deeds against the devil –  
make sons of the old praise him; so  
    his praise then lives with the  
angels, eternal glory of life, a joy  
    for heaven's hosts. Those days  
have passed, the pomp of earth-  
    treasures. No kings, emperors,

or patron gold-givers, now, such as  
    there were, when they themselves  
won achievement, lived lordly in  
    fame. Dead is that godly host,  
those joys gone; the weaker thrive,  
    keep this world throbbing;  
they turn it through toil. Fame is  
    thrust down, earth's nobility  
wastes, withers, so it is likewise for  
    many: Age comes... face pales...

white-haired, he moans... old  
friends, prince's sons, he has

known, die! entering the earth. He  
whose soul's vacant, gone, cannot  
taste sweetness, cannot sense  
torture, cannot lift a hand, has no  
light in his mind. Though the  
brother wants to strew his  
brother's grave with gold, bury  
him with bounty that he garnered  
with him, a soul full of sin will not  
be helped by this – by the power of  
God! – though he hid his sin on  
earth when alive. Great is the

Creator's might: he moves the earth.  
He made the ground, the acres of earth  
and the heavens firm. He is a fool who  
is not Lord- fearing: death fells him  
suddenly. He is blessed who lives  
humbly: heaven's mercy finds him  
– a bearing God-given, for  
those born to His bounty. Man should  
steer with a strong soul, hold that  
posture firm, and be loyal to all, and of  
action pure. Man should hold the spirit  
even, equal for loved and loathed, and  
not burn a new-made friend – with

a torch, or on an alter!  
Fate is might: the Creator more mighty  
– than the meaning of any man! Let us  
think where *home* is, then hope to get  
there, to the blessedness that is eternal  
life – in the Lord's love, in heaven's  
heights! Give thanks for the Holy,  
because he honored us,

Prince of Glory! Lord Everlasting,  
and of all eternity. Amen.

## The Dream of the Rood

Listen! I want to tell the best dream, of what I  
dreamt in night's pitch, when all mankind  
is slouched in their couches. I thought I saw the  
finest tree, stretching to sky, compassed by  
light – of crosses brightest! This beacon was all  
gold-strung, fine jewels earth-spread before  
it, and five set in the shoulders' span. All saw God's  
angel there, splendid through

eternity. No, this was no criminal's gallow! Holy  
spirits attended to see it, and all earth's men  
– the entire cosmos! Amazing was this victory beam!  
And I – sullied with sins, dark with stains. I  
saw the Tree of Glory, clothed in garments beauti-  
fully shining, and decked with gold. Gems  
worthily clad this Ruler's tree. Yet, I was able to see,  
through the gold-radiance, the

wretched men's strife it suffered earlier, bleeding  
from its right. I was trembling care-  
wrecked, fearing the wondrous apparition. I saw the  
brilliant beam – alter clothes and colors!  
Now, it was liquid-moist, drenched with blood's  
flow! Now, it was traced with treasures. So,  
lying there a long time, I saw, saddened, the Savior's  
Cross, until I heard it talk. This

best of woods started to speak these words: "That  
was years ago – I yet remember – when I  
was felled by the forest's edge, ripped from my roots.

The strong foes took me, planning a show,  
and ordered me to hold their felons. They carried me  
by shoulder to a hill's stretch, on which I  
was stood; many foes fastened me there. I saw  
mankind's Lord hasten eagerly, for

he wanted to climb onto me! I dared not, then – over  
God's word! – bend or break, for I saw the  
earth's face shimmer. I might have killed all the  
fiends, but stood firm. The young hero,  
who was God Almighty, then stripped, strong and sure of  
mind. He scaled the lofty gallow, bold in  
men's sight, for he sought to save mankind. When  
the Man grasped me – I shook! but

I dared not bend, or fall to the land's length, for I  
had to stand rigid. I was built as a Rood; I  
held the rich King, heaven's Lord; I dared not stoop.  
They drove dark nails through me; on me,  
the wounds can yet be seen, exposed, malicious. I  
dared not complain of any of this. They  
mocked us together, both. I was soaked with blood, that  
spurred from this Man's side,

for he had sent his spirit onward. I lived the worst  
fate on that hill, witnessed the host God

stretched out miserably. Mists' darkness covered the  
Savior, his corpse the shiniest radiance!  
Obscured under clouds, a shadow flew away. All  
creation wept, lamented the King's death:  
Christ was on the Rood. After this, from afar came  
eager ones to the Prince; I saw all

that. Sore, I was care-wracked, but I bent hands-wide  
to the men, avid, humbly. They took their  
Almighty God, held his body torture-heavy. The  
warriors let me stand blood-drenched; I was  
wounded all through with arrows. They laid the  
limb-weary down, stood at his body's head.  
And they beheld there Heaven's Lord; he rested a  
while, weary after the great battle.

They began to build a sepulcher in sight of the  
Cross. They carved it from bright stone, and  
set therein Victory's Savior; they began a dirge, sad  
in this night time. Then they, weary, had to  
leave the fine Being; he rested there alone. So we  
stood there weeping a while, still, after the  
foes' voices grew; the corpse grew cold, lovely Form.  
Then they began to fell us, fold us

earth-towards – a terrible fate! They closed us in a  
deep cave; but the Lord's friends and  
servants learned our location – clothed me with  
silver and gold! Now you must hear, dear

warrior, that I have borne bad men's deeds, the most  
sore cares. The time comes that all men all  
over revere me – on the earth, the entire creation! –  
and send prayers to this sign. On

me, God's Being pained, and for that I am glorious,  
a tower under heaven! and may heal all who  
fear me. Once I became tortures' worst, men's most  
hated, before I opened Life's way – the True  
bearing – to the dwellers of earth. Listen! the Elder  
of wonders chose me over other wild trees!  
Heaven's Guardian! as he had his mother also, Mary  
herself, whom Almighty God

honored over all wife-kind. Now I order, dear  
soldier, that you show this to each man, and reveal  
word-wise: That this is Wonder's tree, on  
which Almighty God suffered, for  
mankind's sins, and Adam's early deeds. He tasted  
death there; but the Lord again rose, with  
his raw might, to help man; He climbed to heaven  
there. Again he will set forth on

this middle-earth, on Doomsday to seek mankind,  
the Lord himself with his angels, Almighty  
God, at Judgment time, and he will judge each of  
them according as they acted here earlier,  
during this flying life. None of them must be  
unheedful of the Creator's words; he asks

many where that man is, who for God's name would  
taste bitter death, as *He* had on this

tree. But they will be afraid; only few know what to  
start to say to Christ. None need be  
fearful, who bear breast-close this finest beacon, but through  
this Rood each soul must seek the Kingdom  
– far from these earth-ways – who, with the Creator,  
wants to live.” I prayed, zealously, to the  
beam with bright mind, for I was alone there,  
companionless. My heart drew

forth to the path-ways; my desire was powerful. It is  
now my life's glory that I seek this signal-  
beam alone, more often than others, and well honor  
it. I have a drive to do this; it crowds my  
mind; now all my solace's hope lies in the Rood. I  
have not many rich friends on these earth-  
lengths, but they have gone forth from this world's  
splendors, sought the king of

wonders, and are now in heaven – with the High-  
father, living in glory! And I live each day  
for when the Lord's Rood – which I saw here earlier  
on earth – will fly me from this fleeting life,  
and bring me... to where there is a great bliss,  
heaven's vision, and God's folk seated at  
feast! A continuous joy! and for me to be set down,  
that I henceforth walk in wonder,



well amid the Holy Ones – and drink of dreams! I  
would be the Lord's friend, who on earth  
pained earlier on the gallow tree, for men's sins – he  
saved us, gave us back life, a heaven-home.  
Joy was renewed – with blessing, with bliss – for  
those in hell's torment. The Son's expe-  
dition was victorious, strong and successful,  
when he, Creator Almighty,

arrived with angels into God's reign, to happiness  
among spirits and the Saints, all already  
living in heaven's splendor, when their Creator came  
– God Almighty – to his own land.

## The Wanderer

The lonely wanderer often wants mercy, God's  
grace, because he, care-heavy, must stir with his

hands through water-ways, the rime-cold sea,  
and journey an exile's paths. Fate is full fixed!

So the earth-stepper spoke, pained with torment  
– of cruelest slaughters, the fall of friends:

“Alone, each morning, I must utter my cares.  
There is no man now alive to whom, openly, I

dare speak my mind. I know now: it is a noble  
trait, that a man binds fast his soul-cage, keeps

in his heart-casement, believe what he will. A  
weary mood cannot fight fate, the mind heaps

no help, because *their* judgment – sadly, deep in  
the breast-coffin – holds him fast! Such the way

I – care-poor, home-barren, orphaned from my  
tribe – must bear in fetters, for the many years

since I buried my gold-friend in dark earth; I,  
wretched, have since trekked full of winter-cares

over the waves' laces, sad for hall-want, seeking  
a treasure-giver, and wherever I might find in a  
mead hall one knowing my *own*, or who would  
console me – friendless – and entertain me with  
joys. He knows who has lived: how cruel care is  
to a friend with no comrades. Twisted gold can't  
quiet this exile, a frozen soul-cage! not all the  
earth's splendor. He remembers the hall-  
warriors, the treasure-receiving, how he in his  
youth was reared on gold, on feasting. Joy is all  
perished. For he knows he must leave a long  
time the counsel of his sacred liege-lord. And  
when care and sleep press upon the lone exile,  
he dreams he grasps and kisses his lord, lays  
hands and head on his knees, such as he did,  
often, in the years past, near the gift-throne.  
Then, the friendless awakes: sees around him  
black waves, the bathing sea-birds, with spread  
feather. Frost and snow falls, and frozen hail.  
Then is the heavy heart wounded, sore for the

beloved. Care is renewed: when thoughts of  
friends muddle the mind, he greets them  
gratefully, examines them eagerly. Man's  
companions swim off, floating, bring no familiar  
speeches. Anxiety is renewed: because he must  
send his exhausted mind often over the waves'  
laces. I can't think – beyond *this* world – why  
this my soul doesn't blacken, when I ponder the  
lives of warriors: how they quit the hall, smart-  
thinking, courageous young retainers. In this  
way earth dies, each of all days falls. But a man  
cannot be wise ere he knows very many of the  
world-kingdom's winters. A man must be  
patient: not too hot of heart, not too quick of  
speech, not too timid at battle, not too wild-  
minded, not too afraid, not too elated, not too  
greedy, and not too fast to boast before he  
*knows*. A nobleman must stand, uttering vows,  
until his bold spirit, through years, knows the  
vicissitudes of his heart. A smart man must

vision the phantasmagoria: when all of this  
world stands, suddenly, in waste, how now in  
various parts of this middle-earth – walls  
smolder, wind-broken, rime-ringed, the  
buildings storm-beaten. Wine-halls molder,  
monarchs lie dream-vacant. Soldiers are dead,  
proud by the wall. War carried some off, fleeing  
on paths; birds carried some off, to their cragged  
nests; the gray wolf shared some with death;  
some, a cheek-stained earl buried in an earth-  
sepulcher. Old Builder, he wastes this earth  
until a time when – clamor-absent, silent of  
citizens – the Giants' works stand idle! He who,  
wise, has considered this creation, and on dark  
life thought deep, cold-in-soul, remembers the  
long-past slaughters often, and says these words:  
'Where went the steed? Where went the youth?  
where went the treasure-giver? Where the  
banquet-halls? Where the hall-spectacles? All  
the bright cups! All the mailed soldiers!

Glorious princes! How that time is gone, grown  
dark under night-dampening, as though it never  
were! Now stands, testament to the loved  
warrior-band, a wall high with wonders, wound  
with snakes. Spears have taken the earls –  
weapons wanting slaughter! Fate so great! –  
storms toss that rocky slope. Snow chokes the  
earth, winter's torture. Evening comes, night-  
shadows darken, and the north sends hale,  
furthering man's torment. All this earth-  
richness is hardship-heavy; faith's making  
drives the heaven-under World. Here property  
passes, here friends pass, here a man has passed on! here  
is a warrior passing! all this earth fundament turns to  
naught!" So said the wise spirit, he sat apart: "Good is  
he who grips faith, nor must a man let feelings burst  
from his bosom too quickly – not till he knows, zealously,  
how to cure them. Well is him who, wretched, seeks help  
from the Heaven-father, who stands as our support."

## **Note on the Translations**





## Note on the Translations

These translations aren't intended be more than prose cribs, and, indeed, they were written first as highly alliterative prose, using tight sentence structure to replace the concision of inflected Old English. They don't, for instance, attempt to recreate the slow-moving quality of the meters, and sometimes seem to run on, regardless of dramatic possibilities. The lines and stanzas are only determined by the length of the words rather than by their syllables or quantities; this is not metered poetry but literally "prose broken into line lengths." Because the prose is alliterative and spare of wasted words, and since each sentence, like a "rhymed prose," constantly reflects back upon and repeats its own sound structures, the breaks that the enjambments create a poetic effect, and often seem to be the fruit of artistic consideration, though they are arbitrary. The stanza shape that worked for each poem was the result of much trial-and-error, for each prose translation acquired its own character, its own beat and flow, as it was revised. For example, the eighth and ninth stanzas from the "Wife's Lament" were originally the sentences:

There, I might weep my exile-paths, its many woes,  
because an anxious mind won't rest, nor this sorrow,  
which wrests from me this life. A young man must be  
stem, hard-of-heart, stand blissful, opposing breast-  
cares and his sorrows'legions.

The stanza shape, as can be seen when this prose form is contrasted with with the final translation, created many counter-

pointed sounds and rhythms, highlighting many rhymes only latent in the prose.

I checked my initial prose translations against several other translations, including Richard Hamer's *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), and R.K. Gordon's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman's Library, 1926). Gordon's translation was surprisingly not helpful, I feel, though it was in prose, but I found Hamer's blank verse translations very accurate (he footnoted every deviation and ambiguity) and readable. A third translation that I looked at was *The Earliest English Poems*, by Michael Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) which I think was highly influenced by Pound (his "Seafarer" "gives far and away the most concentrated impression of Anglo-Saxon poetry") though not always effectively. Most of Alexander's work resembles Pound's "The Return," which is an elaborate metrical experiment, but without the great ear that creates Pound's poem's inner structural integrities. For example, Alexander's "Seafarer" begins (p. 98):

The tale I frame shall be found to tally:  
the history is of myself.

Sitting day-long  
at an oar's end clenched against clinging sorrow,  
breast drought I have borne, and bitterness too.  
I have coursed my keel through care-halls  
without end  
over furled form, I forward in the bows  
through the narrowing night, numb, watching  
for the cliffs we beat along.

I am not sure whether “framing a tale” was an element of the Anglo-Saxon mentality; it seems peculiarly modern, and reminds me of the Eighteenth-century hobby of “framing a landscape,” involving a limning from a larger geographical mass; it seems, in any case, metaphysically incorrect. How the seafarer gets at an “bar’s end” seems odd, too, since he is clearly at the prow of a ship, nor does “coursing a keel through a care-hall” seem possible. This excerpt reads pretty well, but the translations are less effective when changes in meter occur within a poem. His “Dream of the Rood” goes through several metrical transformations as it progresses, beginning kind of jazzy and then breaking into a more standard four-beat line, which is not done very adeptly; it becomes something of a collage text, not representing the forward thrust of the poetry. Perhaps I am unfair and not reading them closely enough, but the deviations from the Anglo-Saxon are discouraging – reading them in isolation might be preferred.

Other translations that I looked at include Charles W. Kennedy’s *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), Raffel’s *Poems from the Old English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960) and Cosette Faust’s *Old English Poems* (Pennsylvania: Darby Books, 1918). I don’t want to comment on all of them, but I do want to note that translations into alliterative verse or something near it, which sacrifice the sort of concision that can be got from tight prose sentence structure, often are not able to get much of the “meaning” of the poem into the translation, and are often sluggish. There is far too much alteration in meaning in the opening of Raffel’s “The Seafarer,” with his unidiomatic use of numbers, and he makes the seafarer a bit of an egoist, or insecure, taking what are conventional

elements of the original and making them emphatic. The opening of Kennedy's translation attempts to specify the specific sensations of the traveler in a way that may be redundant, erasing the ship from line 4 and inserting another "woe":

*Raffel (p. 31)*

This tale is true, and mine. It tells  
How the sea took me, swept me back  
And forth in sorrow and fear and pain,  
Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,  
In a thousand ports, and in me.

*Kennedy (p.19)*

A song I sing of my sea-adventure,  
The strain of peril, the stress of toil,  
Which oft I endured in anguish of spirit  
Through weary hours of aching woe.  
My bark was swept by the breaking seas;  
Bitter the night watch from the bow by night  
As my ship drove on within sound of rocks.  
My feet were numb with the nipping cold...

Raffel was trying, it appears, to create a water-tight novelistic narrative with a multi-dimensional protagonist, which is not a quality of the original; the "in me" is also metaphysically suspect, a bit too Cartesian. Kennedy's is better, but renderings like "the sound of rocks" and "nipping cold" detract from the environmental aspect of the poem, of which he seems not to have been aware.

In any case, I prefer Hamer's blank verse version of these lines, which are useful for the student and yet readable:

I sing my own true story, tell my travels,  
How I have often suffered times of hardship  
In days of toil, and have experienced  
Bitter anxiety, my troubled home  
On many a ship has been heaving waves,  
Where grim night-watch has often been my lot  
On the ship's prow as it beat past the cliffs.

I am not sure about his choice of adjectives, but I respect that many of the words actually appear in the same place that they do in the sentence structure of the translation as they do in the original, and that he uses the second "how" in such a way that recalls, for the Old English reader, the original poem, but without Raffel's "This tale is true, and mine. *It* tells..." as its main clause. The grammatical ambiguity is also suggestive of the reading experience of the original, as it is of the reading of all poems, so that his blank verse seems more like poetry by being *less*.

One quality of my translations that might seem odd is my rendering of hypermetrical lines. I had read an article by Burton Raffel called "*Judith: Hypermetricity and Rhetoric*" in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), which is mainly a consideration of the theory that hypermetricity is used in reflexive or psychological passages in the poem, while sections that convey swift action use the shorter lines, which Raffel argues against as an absolute. I was interested in a statement by Stanley Greenfield in the essay, in which he states

that “even in translation, the shift in stress can be observed at beginning and end, the movement into the short line at the end beautifully coinciding with the quickening of the narrative pace.” (p.125) (The translation was, coincidentally, Raffel’s.) This led me to believe that it was worthwhile to retain some of the transitions into hypermetricity, especially since they struck me as very important at certain moments, like at the end of “The Wanderer” and lines 106-109 of “The Seafarer.” I also rendered lines 92-93 of “The Wanderer” as hypermetric, but that began as an accident which I thought worth retaining (an accident based on looking at the line-lengths as printed letters). I didn’t render any of the hypermetricity of “The Dream of the Rood,” though I wouldn’t mind trying in a revision; it seemed too complicated, and I think the stanza form that I chose for the poem was varied enough to suggest rapid shifts within, an interaction of short and long lines.

Another aspect of these translations concerns “kennings.” One thing I didn’t want (nor felt qualified) to do was use Old English words like “wird” and “aetheling,” as Alexander does in his. However, I think kennings still have a place in contemporary literature, and I have found myself using a few, however ambiguously defined, in my essays (“word-cluster,” for example). To translate all kennings into specific terms, especially Latinate, seems again to run against the grain of Anglo-Saxon thinking, as if these poets were aware of a certain rationalist tradition. Hopkins uses kennings to great affect, and I think it is significant that I use more kennings in my version of “Dream of the Rood,” since it is parts of that translation that reach some of the devotional pitch of a Hopkins poem. A sentence from *A History of the English Language* by Albert. C. Baugh and Thomas Cable (New Jersey:

Prentice Hall, 1978) struck me as relevant to the use of kennings in the context of translation: “[A]n Anglo-Saxon would be like a man today who is learning to speak a foreign language and who can manage in a limited way to convey his meaning without having a sufficient command of the vocabulary to express those subtler shades of thought and feeling, the nuances of meaning, which he is able to suggest in his mother tongue.” (p.64) If this was, in fact, what an Anglo-Saxon poet was doing – creating words that never appeared in normal conversation, and of course never in a dictionary – then these kennings shouldn’t seem too eccentric. I admit that some I came up with are silly (that’s the Hopkins), but I hope to revise them out in the future, along with make each translation as faithful as possible to the literal meanings.

I didn’t try to make the visual descriptions, nor the psychology, any more resonant than in the original, but tried to respect the fact that I may be dealing with epithetic or convention-ruled language. The flatness of the tone, also – with the exception of the exclamation points, which I thought permissible since these poems were probably chanted – allows for the reader to create certain dramatic nuances, without having them imposed. I also didn’t attempt to solve any of the great interpretive debates, since I don’t have the scholarship or experience. Lastly, I don’t propose that this sort of translation could work with poetry that was not, itself, alliterative – the *Duino Elegies*, for example – since the efficacy of the form relies on the fact that the writing operates on the level of the “word-cluster,” with alliteration tying together phrases should they end up appearing in isolation, or uniting them should they be broken by enjambment. The poems that employ the

longer lines are least successful for this reason, I think, because the natural caesura is not respected.

If basing a form on the physical appearance of lines on the page – a form developed by James Laughlin, Kenneth Rexroth and William Carlos Williams, and beautifully exploited by the writers like John Cage and A.R. Ammons – seems odd, it is possible to think of this imposition as similar to the imposition that time itself made on the texts, an entirely arbitrary choice of which works survived, but total in its erasure of the spoken tradition, so that the words as heard are gone. It can also be seen as a recognition of the fact that enjambment as it has been known in lyric and iambic poetry since Chaucer is nothing like that of oral poetry, which lacked the refined measures of the French tradition, and was preserved in a prose form.

*Rutherford, 1996*