Anglo-Saxon Literature

BEDE (ca. 673–735) and CÆDMON’S HYMN

The Venerable Bede (the title by which he is known to posterity) became a novice at the age of seven and spent the rest of his life at the neighboring monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Although he may never have traveled beyond the boundaries of his native district of Northumbria, he achieved an international reputation as one of the greatest scholars of his age. Writing in Latin, the learned language of the era, Bede produced many theological works as well as books on science and rhetoric, but his most popular and enduring work is the Ecclesiastical History of the English People (completed 731). The History tells about the Anglo-Saxon conquest and the vicissitudes of the petty kingdoms that comprised Anglo-Saxon England; Bede's main theme, however, is the spread of Christianity and the growth of the English church. The latter were the great events leading up to Bede's own time, and he regarded them as the unfolding of God's providence. The History is, therefore, also a moral work and a hagiography—that is, it contains many stories of saints and miracles meant to testify to the grace and glory of God.

The story we reprint preserves what is probably the earliest extant Old English poem (composed sometime between 658 and 680) and the only biographical information, outside of what is said in the poems themselves, about any Old English poet. Bede tells how Caedmon, an illiterate cowherd employed by the monastery of Whitby, miraculously received the gift of song, entered the monastery, and became the founder of a school of Christian poetry. Caedmon was clearly an oral-formulaic poet, one who created his work by combining and varying formulas—units of verse developed in a tradition transmitted by one generation of singers to another. In this respect he resembles the singers of the Homeric poems and oral-formulaic poets recorded in the twelfth century, especially in the Balkan countries. Although Bede tells us that Caedmon had never learned the art of song, we may suspect that he concealed his skill from his fellow workmen and from the monks because he was ashamed of knowing “vain and idle” songs, the kind Bede says Caedmon never composed. Caedmon's inspiration and the true miracle, then, was to apply the meter and language of such songs, presumably including pagan heroic verse, to Christian themes.

Although most Old English poetry was written by lettered poets, they continued to use the oral-formulaic style. The Hymn is, therefore, a good short example of the way Old English verse, with its traditional poetic diction and interwoven formulaic expressions, is constructed. Eight of the poem's eighteen half-lines contain epithets describing various aspects of God: He is Wærd (Guardian), Meotol (Measurer), Wælde-Fæder (Glory-Father), Drithen (Lord), Scyppen (Creator), and Freo (Master). God is hæofromnes Wærd or mancynnes Wærd (heaven's or mankind's Guardian), depending on the alliteration required. This formulaic style provides a richness of texture and meaning difficult to convey in translation. As Bede said about his own Latin paraphrase of the Hymn, no literal translation of poetry from one language to another is possible without sacrifice of some poetic quality.
Several manuscripts of Bede's History contain the Old English text in addition to Bede's Latin version. The poem is given here in a West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation. In Old English spelling, a (as in Caedmon's name and line 3) is a vowel symbol that represents the vowel of Modern English aet; b (line 2) and ð is a vowel symbol that represents the vowel of Modern English ðæt; ð (line 2) = ð in (line 7) both represented the sound th. The spelling ðæ (line 1) = ðæ; ð (line 1) = ð in ðæ; ðæ in ðæ; ð (line 2) = ð. The large space in the middle of the line indicates the caesura. The alliterating sounds that connect the half-lines are printed in bold italics.

From An Ecclesiastical History of the English People

[THE STORY OF CAEDMON]

Heavenly grace had especially singled out a certain one of the brothers in the monastery ruled by this abbes1 for he used to compose devout and religious songs. Whatsoever he learned of holy Scripture with the aid of interpreters, he quickly turned into the sweetest and most moving poetry in his own language, that is to say English. It often happened that his songs kindled a contempt for this world and a longing for the life of Heaven in the hearts of many men. Indeed, after him others among the English people tried to compose religious poetry, but no one could equal him because he was not taught the art of song by men or by human agency but received this gift through heavenly grace. Therefore, he was never able to compose any vain and idle songs but only such as dealt with religion and were proper for his religious tongue to utter. As a matter of fact, he had lived in the secular estate until he was well advanced in age without learning any songs. Therefore, at feasts, when it was decided to have a good time by taking turns singing, whenever he would see the harp getting close to his place, he got up in the middle of the meal and went home.

Once when he left the feast like this, he went to the cattle shed, which he had been assigned the duty of guarding that night. And after he had stretched himself out and gone to sleep, he dreamed that someone was standing at his side and greeted him, calling out his name. "Caedmon," he said, "sing me something"

And he replied, "I don't know how to sing, that is why I left the feast to come here—because I cannot sing."

"All the same," said the one who was speaking to him, "you have to sing for me."

"What must I sing?" he said.

And he said, "Sing about the Creation."

At this, Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator, which he had never heard before and of which the sense is this:

Nu sculon herigean 
Now we must praise
heofonríces Weard
heaven-kingdom's Guardian,

Meotodes meahtе the Measurer's might
weorc Wuldro Fæder the work of the Glory-Father,
ece Drihten eternal Lord,
He ærest sceop He first created
heofon to hrofe heaven as a roof,
ða middangærd then middle-earth
ece Drihten eternal Lord,
frin foldan for men earth,
and his modgepanc and his mind-plans,
swa he wundra gehwæs when he of wonders every one,
He ærest sceop He first created
iella* bearnum for men's sons
halig Scyppend holy Creator;
moncyynnès Weard mankind's Guardian,
after teode afterwards made—
Frea ælmihtig Master almighty.

This is the general sense but not the exact order of the words that he sang in his sleep;2 for it is impossible to make a literal translation, no matter how well-written, of poetry into another language without losing some of the beauty and dignity. When he woke up, he remembered everything that he had sung in his sleep, and to this he soon added, in the same poetic measure, more verses praising God.

The next morning he went to the reeve,3 who was his foreman, and told him about the gift he had received. He was taken to the abbess and ordered to tell his dream and to recite his song to an audience of the most learned men so that they might judge what the nature of that vision was and where it came from. It was evident to all of them that he had been granted the heavenly grace of God. Then they expounded some bit of sacred story or teaching to him, and instructed him to turn it into poetry if he could. He agreed and went away. And when he came back the next morning, he gave back what had been commissioned to him in the finest verse.

Therefore, the abbes, who cherished the grace of God in this man, instructed him to give up secular life and to take monastic vows. And when she and all those subject to her had received him into the community of brothers, she gave orders that he be taught the whole sequence of sacred history. He remembered everything that he was able to learn by listening, and turning it over in his mind like a clean beast that chews the cud,4 he converted it into

3. I.e., established the beginning of every one of the wonders.
4. The later manuscript copies read upon, "earth," for ildja (West Saxon ildja), "men's."
5. Bede is referring to his Latin translation, for which we have substituted the Old English text with interlinear translation.
6. Superintendent of the farms belonging to the monastery.
7. In Mosaic law "clean" animals, those that may be eaten, are those that chew the cud and have a cloven hoof (cf. Leviticus 11:3 and Deuteronomy 14:6).
sweetest song, which sounded so delightful that he made his teachers, in their turn, his listeners. He sang about the creation of the world and the origin of the human race and all the history of Genesis; about the exodus of Israel out of Egypt and entrance into the promised land; and about many other stories of sacred Scripture, about the Lord's incarnation, and his passion, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven; about the advent of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the apostles. He also made many songs about the terror of the coming judgment and the horror of the punishments of hell and the sweetness of heavenly kingdom; and a great many others besides about divinity and justice in all of which he sought to draw men away from the love of sin and to inspire them with delight in the practice of good works.²³

³. The suffering of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his death.
⁴. The great majority of extant Old English poems are on religious subjects like those listed here, but most are thought to be later than Cædmon.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

The Dream of the Rood (i.e., of the Cross) is considered the finest of a large number of religious poems in Anglo-Saxon. Neither the author nor his date of composition is known. It appears in a late-ninth-century manuscript located in Verceil in southern Italy, a manuscript made up of Old English religious poems and sermons. The poem may antedate its manuscript, because some passages from the Rood's speech were carved, with some variations, in runes on a stone cross at some time after its construction early in the eighth century; this is the famous Ruthwell Cross, preserved near Dumfries in southern Scotland. The precise relation of the poem to this cross is, however, uncertain.

The experience of the Rood, often called “tree” in the poem—its humiliation at the hands of those who cut it down and made it into an instrument of punishment for criminals and its humility when the young hero Christ mounts it—has a suggestive relevance to the condition of the Dreamer. His isolation and melancholy is typical of exile figures in Anglo-Saxon poetry. For the Rood, however, glory has replaced torment, of Christ's entry into heaven with the souls he has liberated from Hades reflects the Dreamer's response to the hope that has been brought to him. Christ and the Rood both act in keeping with, and yet diametrically opposed to, a code of heroic action; Christ is both heroic in mounting and passive in suffering on the Rood, while the Rood is loyal to its lord, yet must participate in his death.

The Dream of the Rood

Attend to what I intend to tell you; a marvelous dream that moved me at night when human voices are veiled in sleep.

In my dream I espied the most splendid tree, looming aloft with light all around, the most brilliant beam. That bright tree was covered with gold; gemstones gleamed fairly fashioned down to its foot, yet another five were standing high up on the crossbeam—the Lord's angel beheld them—

cast by eternal decree. Clearly this was no criminal's gallows, but holy spirits were beholding it there, men on earth, all that mighty creation. That tree was triumphant—and I tarnished by sin, begrimed with evil. I beheld Glory's trunk garnished with grace, gleaming in bliss, all plated with gold; precious gemstones had gloriously graced the Lord God's tree. Yet I could see signs of ancient strife: beneath that gold it had begun bleeding on the right side. I was all bereft with sorrow; that splendid sight made me afraid. I beheld the sign rapidly changing clothing and colors. Now it was covered with moisture, drenched with streaming blood, now decked in treasure.

Yet I, lying there for a long time, sorrowfully beheld the tree of our Savior until I could hear it call out to me, the best of all wood began speaking words:

“That was years ago—I yet remember—that I was cut down at the edge of the forest, torn up from my trunk. There powerful enemies took me, put me up to make a circus-play to lift up and parade their criminals. Soldiers bore me on their shoulders till they set me up on a mountain; more than enough foes made me stand fast. I saw the lord of mankind coming with great haste so that he might climb up on me.

1. The translation by Alfred David is based on Eight Old English Poems, 3rd ed., edited by John C. Pope, revised by R. D. Fulk (1990). 2. This longer line and the two following, as well as lines 20–23, 30–34, 39–43, 46–49, 59–70, 75–76, and 133, contain additional stresses and are designated “hypermeter.” Less than 500 such lines survive in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry. 3. The translation follows R. D. Fulk's, with the addition: “behold on him angel dryhtnes.” 4. Constantine the Great, emperor from 306 to 337, erected a jeweled cross at the site of the crucifixion, transforming the Roman “felon's gallows” from a symbol of shame into a universal icon of Christian art. 5. According to biblical tradition, following John 19:34, Christ was wounded by the centurion's lance.