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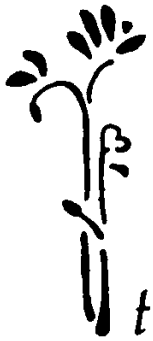

the Beowulf *Poet's Sense of History*

I don't know how humanity stands it
with a painted paradise at the end of it
without a painted paradise at the end of it
Ezra Pound, *Canto* LXXIV

Awareness of historical change, of the pastness of a past that itself has depth, is not instinctive to man; there is nothing natural about a sense of history. Anthropologists report that the lack of historical perspective is a feature of primitive thought, and historians that its absence characterizes medieval thinking: Herod in the Wakefield Cycle swears "by Mahoun in heaven," the medieval Alexander is a knight, and heathen Orléans boasts a university.[1] Morton Bloomfield has shown that a sense of history, even a tentative, underdeveloped one, was a rare thing in fourteenth-century England, and that Chaucer's attention to chronology and his preoccupation with cultural diversity have affinities with aspects of the early Italian Renaissance.[2] But what in the Anglo-Saxon period stimulated a monastic author to stress the differences between ancient days and his own, to paint the past as if it were something other than

the present?[3] The *Beowulf* poet's reconstruction of a northern heroic age is chronologically sophisticated, rich in local color and fitting speeches. The poet avoids obvious anachronisms and presents such an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around A.D. 500 that his illusion of historical truth has been taken for the reality.[4]

The poet's heroic age is full of men both "emphatically pagan and exceptionally good," men who believe in a God whom they thank at every imaginable opportunity.[5] Yet they perform all the pagan rites known to Tacitus, and are not Christian. The temporal distance between past and present, acknowledged in the opening words of the poem—"in geardagum" ("in days of yore")—is heard again when Beowulf, as yet unnamed, makes his entrance. He is the strongest of men "on þæm dæge þysses lifes" ("on that day of this life" 197, 790).[6] The alliterating demonstratives stress the remoteness of the past, here and later when a hall-servant in Heorot looks after all the visitors' bedtime needs "swylce þy dogore heaþoliðende habban scoldon" ("such as in those days seafarers were wont to have" 1797–98). The descriptive clause distances but also glosses over, shadowing with vagueness an unknown corner of the past. The poet is so attracted by the aristocratic rituals of life in the hall, so intent on historical verisimilitude, that he imagines everything, even basic human needs, to have changed over time. His proposition that golden tapestries hanging in the hall were a wondrous sight for the partying sixth-century retainers is quickly modified in the direction of reality: "þara þe on swylc starað" ("for those who look upon such things" 996); even in Heorot not all beefy breakers-of-rings in their cups would have had an eye for interior design. The vividness of the past underlines, paradoxically, its distance.

The *Beowulf* poet has a strong sense of cultural diversity, as strong perhaps as Chaucer's. Three times in the "Knight's Tale" Chaucer explains the behavior of characters with the clause "as was tho the gyse"; in "The Legend of Cleopatra" he has Anthony sent out to win kingdoms and honor "as was usance"; and in "The Legend of Lucrece" he notes approvingly that Roman wives prized a good name "at thilke tyme."[7] The Old English poet maintains a similar perspective. He praises the Geats for their ancient custom of keeping armor and weapons at their sides at all times: "They

were always prepared for war, whether at home or in the field, as their lord required" (1246-50). He has Hrothgar admire their steadfastness, the dependability of men who live blameless "ealde wisan" ("in the old fashion" 1865). When the dragon's ravages begin, the poet makes the aged Beowulf fear that he has transgressed "ofer ealde riht" ("against ancient law" 2330): pagans have their own moral code, separating them from the author and us. The poet emphasizes cultural differences not only between present and past but also between coeval peoples. He depicts the Swedes and Geats as more authentically primitive, more pagan in outlook and idiom, than the Danes. When a roughhewn Beowulf arrives at the Danish court he puts himself in the hands of a skilled local who "knew the custom of the retainers" (359). Ongentheow, the grizzled king of the Swedes, threatens to pierce ("getan" 2940) captives on the gallows for the pleasure of carrion birds.[8] The Geats consult auspices (204); Beowulf, like the Scandinavian heroes of old, trusts in his own might (418, 670, 1270, 1533); the messenger imagines a raven boasting to an eagle of carnage-feasts (3024-27); and Hæthcyn's slaying of Herebeald (2435-43) imitates a fratricide in the Norse pantheon: euhemerism becomes, in the poet's hands, an aid to historical research.[9]

The poet's sense of anachronism is revealed in his characters' speeches, utterances that avoid all distinctively Christian names and terms. The actors themselves have a sense of the past and of the future. They are able to look back two generations, tracing the origins of the feud between the Geats and the Swedes (2379-96, 2472-89, 2611-19, 2379-96). They can also forecast the feuds of the next generation. There is a fine display of chronological wit when Beowulf, on the basis of a piece of information picked up at the Danish court, turns the Ingeld legend into a political prophecy, a sequence of events likely to occur in the near future (2024-69). The poet's sense of historic succession is so strong and the internal chronology of the poem so carefully worked out that his audience knows why Hrothulf and Heoroweard have to be kept in the wings a little while longer. After Beowulf's death, it is clear even to the messenger that Eadgils is not likely to sit for long on the Swedish throne without avenging his brother's murder on

the new king of the Geats, son of the slayer. The poet does not make earlier Danish and Germanic heroes like Scyld, Heremod, Finn, Offa, Sigemund, Eormenric and Hama contemporaneous with the sixth-century events narrated, but sets them in a distant mirror, conveying the illusion of a many-storied long-ago. Such chronological tidiness is all the more remarkable for its appearance in a poetic vernacular that has no distinctive future tense, and whose chief adverbs of recollection and continuation—"þa" and "siððan" ("thereupon": looking forward; "at that time," "from the time that": looking back)—are almost always ambiguous.[10]

Philosophically, in order to have a sense of history at all, the *Beowulf* poet had to hold certain premises about man and his role on earth. Despite his professional concern with the timeless, he had to be engaged to some extent with the things of this world; he needed a positive attitude toward secular wisdom and some notion of natural law. Above all, he had to believe that pagan Germanic legend had intellectual value and interest for Christians. These concepts were available to twelfth-century humanists. Christian Platonists like William of Conches, Bernard Silvestris, and Alan of Lille shared an unpolemical attitude toward the pagan past and stressed the importance of earthly understanding as the base of all human knowledge.[11] But in the central theological traditions of the early medieval West and, more specifically, in the teachings of Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin, there is no trace of this liberal mentality.[12] No contemporary of these three concerned himself with man on earth, looking upon heathen virtues and customs with an indulgent eye, and had his vision survive. The patristic tradition that pagan story is diabolically inspired, that unbaptized pagans lie lamenting in hell, was too strong.

Purely from the perspective of the history of ideas, the *Beowulf* poet's chronological acrobatics and fascination with cultural diversity, his positive view of those who lived "while men loved the lawe of kinde," needs explanation.[13] We cannot, wielding editorial knives, remove these ideas from the text the way other late-seeming growths have been excised solely on the grounds that the poem is early.[14] "It is a dangerous principle to adopt in literary investigation that nothing we do not readily understand can be rationally explained. We must as a working principle assume that

everything in a work of art is capable of explanation even at the cost of oversubtlety and even error . . . . We must not assume, unless we are finally forced to it, that the writer or composer did not know what he was doing."[15] Professor Bloomfield offered this guidance in a review of Kenneth Sisam's *The Structure of Beowulf*. Sisam contends that "great difficulties stand in the way of all explanations that make the poet a deep thinker, attempting themes and ways of conveying them that might be tried on a select body of readers in a more advanced age."[16] The fact remains, however, that the poem, for an early composition, is full of oddly advanced notions. Twenty years ago Morton Bloomfield observed that "ealde riht" ("old law" 2330) in *Beowulf* referred not to the Mosaic Code, the Old Law, but to natural law, and noted that the moral laws of the Old Testament were often equated with this natural law, "although in general this equation is later than the early Middle Ages."[17] More recently, he has seen behind Beowulf's single combat with Grendel the concept of the *iudicium Dei*, a calling upon God to decide the justice of an action: "Let wise God, the holy Lord, adjudge the glory to whichever side he thinks fit," says Beowulf (685–87); the champion will rely in the coming struggle on the judgment of God (440–41).[18] Something like the judicial duel appears to have been a feature of medieval Scandinavian society. Yet all the early evidence for trial by combat from Tacitus to Pope Nicholas I is Continental; there is no documentation for multilateral ordeal in England before the Norman Conquest. The *Beowulf* poet's use of the form and spirit of the judicial duel, whether he derived the concept from Tacitus, from the Franks, or from the Danelaw, emphasizes—like his auguries, sacrifices, and exotic cremations—the temporal and cultural distance between the pagan Scandinavian past and the England of his own day. His backward glance is both admiring and antiquarian.

Anglo-Saxon scholarship has done its best to read *Beowulf* as the seventh and eighth centuries would have. Because Aldhelm and Bede insisted that the only suitable subject for poetry was a religious one, and because secular epics and long historical poems only started to appear in the later ninth century, Margaret Goldsmith had little choice but to interpret *Beowulf* allegorically.[19] Alcuin's only known

comment on heroic literature in ecclesiastical contexts is an orthodox denunciation of it as a heathen distraction.[20] W. F. Bolton's new book on *Alcuin and Beowulf* discovers, predictably, that the great schoolmaster would have found Beowulf guilty, flawed, vengeful, incapable even of protecting his people.[21] Charles Donahue attempts to account for the existence of an eighth-century Old English poem about noble pagans by invoking Irish views of pre-Christian goodness, legends that tell of virtuous pagans and their natural knowledge of God.[22] Yet the stories of Cormac and Morand that he cites are not easy to date (that of Cormac is surely no earlier than the last quarter of the tenth century), and Donahue concedes that they are "later than *Beowulf* and can be viewed only as parallel developments of that early insular Christian humanism . . . ."[23] Patrick Wormald has recently located a social and cultural context for the composition of heroic literature in the aristocratic climate of early English Christianity, in the integration of monastic and royal houses.[24] Yet the aristocratic nature of the early English church is, if anything, more pronounced with the passage of time, reaching a kind of culmination under the successors of Alfred.[25] The "vast zone of silence" Wormald observes existing between Bede and the *Beowulf* poet[26] may be due not only to Bede's fundamentalism but also to the centuries separating the two authors.

When in the Anglo-Saxon period did pagans become palatable? A positive attitude toward the pagans of classical antiquity is visible in translations of the Alfredian period. While the real Orosius, writing in the first decades of the fifth century, was as reluctant as Bede to say anything good about those who lived before the Christian Era, the Old English paraphrase of *Orosius* from around 900 contemplates with pleasure the bravery, honorable behavior, and renown of several early Romans, adds references to Julius Caesar's clemency, generosity, and courage, and even suggests that in some of their customs the Romans of the Christian Era were worse than their pagan ancestors.[27] Unlike his source, the Old English translator does not think in an exclusively religious way: what matters is how rulers of the past served God's purpose, not whether they were Christians or pagans.[28]

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by King

Alfred himself, resorted to pre-Christian human history and to pagan mythology for some fifty illustrations, finding archetypal patterns in the behavior of a Nero or a Hercules just as the *Beowulf* poet locates exemplary models in Heremod and Beowulf. In the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the *Consolation* enjoyed a considerable vogue among Carolingian commentators, at least one of whom, Remigius of Auxerre, Alfred may have used.[29] Alfred thrusts aside much of Remigius' Neoplatonic speculation along with his scientific and theological information, but is quick to insert commentary material having to do with classical myths. He occasionally gives a pagan analogy for a Christian concept, something Alcuin never managed to do.[30] Alfred's story of Orpheus teaches that a man who wishes to see the true light of God must not turn back to his old errors.[31] Boethius' tale of Jupiter overthrowing the giants who warred on heaven is shown by Alfred to reflect—*secundum fidem gentilium*—Nimrod's building of the Tower of Babel and God's subsequent division of tongues.[32] Alfred stresses the underlying truthfulness of Boethius' pagan fables. The details of Hercules' taming the Centaurs, burning the Hydra's poisonous heads, and slaying Cacus are skipped, but the myth itself is universalized into a philosophic reflection on life and on the meaning of victory and defeat: good men fight for honor in this world, to win glory and fame; for their deeds, they dwell beyond the stars in eternal bliss.[33] Circe in Alfred's paraphrase is no longer the wicked enchantress of Boethius, but a vulnerable goddess who falls violently in love with Odysseus at first sight; she turns his men into animals only after they, out of homesickness, plot to abandon their lord.[34] Alfred, like the *Beowulf* poet, looks for the moral and psychological laws of things, tries to understand and learn rather than condemn. Only once in his paraphrase does he abandon the world of classical paganism for a Germanic allusion; it is a small step, but full of significance for the future of Old English poetry. He translates Boethius' "Where now are the bones of faithful Fabricius?" as "Where now are the bones of the famous and wise goldsmith Weland?"[35]

When in the Anglo-Saxon period could a Christian author exploit pagan Germanic legend for its intellectual and moral values? Seventh- and eighth-century sources furnish evidence that English monks were overfond of harpists,

secular tales, eating and drinking; but such worldly tastes provoked the scorn and hostility of their superiors: "What has Ingeld to do with Christ? The House is narrow, it cannot hold both. The King of Heaven wishes to have no fellowship with so-called kings, who are pagan and lost."[36] But by the late ninth century, even an archbishop—Fulk of Rheims, who recruited Remigius of Auxerre, corresponded with King Alfred and sent Grimbald to him—could in one and the same sentence refer to a letter of Gregory the Great on kingship and to "Teutonic books regarding a certain King Hermenric."[37] A century and a half later, puritanical youth can be seen shaking its fist at reckless middle age in a letter that one cleric of Bamberg Cathedral wrote to another complaining of their bishop, Gunther, who spent all his time reading of Attila and Theodoric when not composing epics himself.[38]

The *Beowulf* poet insists on the virtue and paganism of his characters, and is unusually explicit about their heathen rites, describing them lovingly and at length.[39] A slender tradition of extolling the good customs of Germanic pagans can be traced in Roman authors, but this tradition does not enjoy a continuous run through the medieval period. The first known use of Tacitus' *Germania* after Cassiodorus occurs in the mid-ninth-century *Translatio Sancti Alexandri* by the monk Rudolf of Fulda.[40] This work, commissioned by the aristocratic abbot of the monastery of Wildeshausen in Saxony, opens with a description of the moral practices and brave deeds of the early pagan ancestors of the Saxons. Bede, monk of Wearmouth-Jarrow and historian of the English church and people (c. 731), is reticent about the doings of the Anglo-Saxons before their conversion and shows no inclination to celebrate heathens or their habits.[41] Widukind, monk of Corvey and historian of the Continental Saxons (c. 967), does not hesitate to do so. He borrows Rudolf of Fulda's account of pagan institutions and shapes the heathen past of his nation into a carefully contoured whole. He develops a single thread of historical tradition into a complex narrative, incorporating heroic dialogue, vivid details, and dramatic scenes, in much the same way that the *Beowulf* poet seems to have worked.[42] Widukind saw his efforts in recording the deeds of the Saxon leaders (*principum nostrorum res gestae litteris . . . commendare)* as equal in

value to the service he earlier performed with his two lives of saints. He wrote his history, he said, partly by virtue of his monastic calling, partly as a member of *gens Saxonum*.[43] One historical sense seems to beget another: Widukind, like the *Beowulf* poet, learned much from classical historians, including the art of depicting people whose behavior made sense within the framework of their age and culture.

The *Beowulf* poet's attribution of monotheism to his good heathens is sometimes taken as revealing his ignorance of Germanic paganism, sometimes as a sign of his inability to see the past as anything other than the present. Like Widukind, he mentions pagan error, briefly and in passing (175-88), before depicting noble pagan monotheists for some three thousand lines. In the Alfredian *Orosius*, as in the fifth-century original, God is shown to have always guided the world, even in pagan times. But the paraphraser adds a few touches of his own: the pagan Leonidas places his trust in God; even Hannibal is heard to lament that God would not allow him domination over Rome.[44] The *Beowulf* poet, too, makes his heroes refer again and again to the power and providence of a single God, and he takes Beowulf's victory as a sign that "God has always ruled mankind, as he still does" (700-02, 1057-58). The Danes' hymn in Heorot to a single Almighty (90-98) expresses a Boethian wonder at seeing an invisible God through his creation. Wiglaf's contention that the fallen Beowulf shall for a long time "abide in the Lord's keeping" (3109) suggests a Boethian philosophy of salvation, of individuals ascending by reason alone to a knowledge of one God. It was probably Remigius of Auxerre who around 900 compiled a short treatise on the gods of classical antiquity, announcing—in the final paragraph of his prologue—that a single divine being lay behind the multiplicity of Greek and Roman names for the gods.[45] Renewed contact with the texts of late antiquity, especially Macrobius, Martianus Capella, and Boethius, ended by making some men at least think in a less narrowly religious way.[46] The *Beowulf* poet allows glimpses of a *paradiso terrestre* in the distant past—brief, transitory but glowing moments whose thrust is to remind his hearers of all the unfulfilled potential of their pre-Christian heritage.

What emerges from a sufficiently intense concern for history in any literary work is a series of projections

inevitably focused by the particular anxieties of the writer. Alfred's *Boethius* reveals that king's fascination with the psychology of the tyrant, his concern for the proper uses of power and wealth, and his insistence, against Boethius, that temporal possessions can be put to good ends.[47] The *Beowulf* poet seems especially concerned to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable aggression, to place the warlike activities of his pagan hero in an ethical context. Beowulf resorts to arms out of concern for the defenseless and for the common good, not exclusively out of lust for conquest, ambition, or vengefulness. He is heroic and pious, a pagan prince of peace.[48] Christianity in the early barbarian West may have thought it was being assimilated by a warrior aristocracy, but it ended up—even before the Crusades—accommodating itself to the heroic values of the nobility. The blending of the two cultures would have begun at the time of conversion, but it was an extended process. At one stage, revelry in the hall, vowing oaths of fidelity to a lord, ambushes and plundering and slaughter, all the duties and responsibilities of heroic society were seen as demonic and damnable, as in the eighth-century *Life of Guthlac* by Felix of Crowland.[49] In the Old English *Guthlac A*, the poet even sends in devils to remind the royal saint and hermit of his secular obligations, to tempt him with the hall-delights long abandoned after a warlike youth (191–99). The heroic life is the opposite of the life that leads to salvation.

The synthesis of religious and heroic idealism present in *Beowulf* was probably not available to monastic authors at an early date. In the 930s, Odo of Cluny wrote his *Life of St. Gerald of Aurillac* in order to demonstrate for his own aristocratic circle how a layman and noble lord, a man out in the world, could lead a holy existence.[50] Odo gives moral and religious dimensions to Gerald's lifelong martial career. The warrior soothes the suspicious, squelches the malicious, and puts down the violent who refuse to come to terms; he does this not for personal gain but in order to achieve peace for his society. So Beowulf restrains, one after the other, coastguard, Unferth, and Grendel, making friends of two potential foes and ridding Denmark of monsters who pay no wergild. Ottonian Saxony as portrayed by Widukind is—in the heroic cast of its values and the ferocity of its feuds—very close to the world of *Beowulf*.[51] Tenth-century monastic

narratives seem, like *Beowulf*, able to find a place for heroic values—even fighting and the bonds of kinship—within a Christian framework. In Hrotsvitha's *Gongolfus* the ideals of a warrior's life are fused with the Christian goal of *caritas*, while Ruotger's *Life of Bruno*, archbishop of Cologne and brother of Otto the Great, reports with some understatement that "priestly religion and royal determination united their strength" in him.[52] Like these works, the Old English poems that we can date to the tenth century set up no unresolvable contradictions between piety and the heroic life. *The Battle of Maldon*, composed after 991 and regarded as the finest utterance of the Anglo-Saxon heroic age (and most "Germanic" since Tacitus), contains a prayer by a warlord soon to be venerated by the monks of Ely.[53] *The Battle of Brunanburh*, from around 937, is red with blood, God's rising and setting sun, and a historical perspective reminiscent of manifest destiny. *Judith*, probably from the same century, focuses on a prayerful heroine who chops off heads with only slightly less savoir-faire than Beowulf. Between *Bede's Death Song* and *Maldon* something happened to Old English poetry, whether we call this something rebarbarization or adapting Christian models for a new and only partly literate secular aristocracy. New syntheses were becoming possible. Unlike Anglian stone crosses of the eighth century, English religious sculpture after the Danish invasions was able to draw, like *Beowulf*, on pagan myth and heroic legend.[54]

In still another area, the vision of the *Beowulf* poet seems to derive from contemporary concerns, from a need to establish in the present an ideological basis for national unity. I suggested in an earlier paper that the *Beowulf* poet's incentive for composing an epic about sixth-century Scyldings may have had something to do with the fact that, by the 890s at least, Heremod, Scyld, Healfdene, and the rest, were taken to be the common ancestors both of the Anglo-Saxon royal family and of the ninth-century Danish immigrants, the *Scaldingi*.[55] The *Beowulf* poet admires kings who, like Hrothgar, have regional overlordship of surrounding tribes and who, like Beowulf, are powerful enough to keep neighbors in check. A key political catchword—"þeodcyning" ("great" or "national king")—is prominently displayed by the poet in his opening sentence.

He depicts the Danish nation's former glory in a time when powerful kings had been able to unite the various peoples of the land, something that did not occur with any permanence in Denmark or England until the tenth century.[56] The *Beowulf* poet does his best to attach his pagan champion to as many peoples as possible—Danes, Geats, Swedes, Wulfings, and Wægmundings—as if to make him the more authentically representative of the culture and traditions of central Scandinavia: an archetypal Northman. Epics have their propagandist appeal. There is a relationship, however indirect, between Virgil's account of the majesty of Rome's legendary past, the glory of her ancient traditions, and the Augustan program to bring back a "pristine" patriotism and code of morals. Both the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf* are in some sense historical novels, mythically presented, philosophically committed, and focused on the adventures of a new hero.[57] Both poets project onto the distant past features of the society of their own day, consciously and deliberately, in order to provide a sense of continuity. Virgil's Rome is grounded in an earlier Rome; the *Beowulf* poet anchors the West Saxon *imperium* in a brilliant North Germanic antiquity. By the twelfth century, the Normans were very French; yet the more French they became, the more they stressed their Danish ancestry and the heroic deeds of their founding dynasty.[58] By the first quarter of the tenth century, the Danes in England were working hard to be more Christian and English than the English: at mid-century both archbishops of England, Oda and Oskytel, were of Danish extraction.[59] An Old English poem about northern heathens and northern heroes, opening with the mythical figure of Scyld from whom the ruling houses of both Denmark and England were descended, fits nicely with the efforts of Alfred and his successors to promote an Anglo-Danish brotherhood, to see Dane and Anglo-Saxon as equal partners in a united kingdom.

The sadness, the poignancy, the *lacrimae rerum* we associate with *Beowulf* come from the epic poet's sense of duration, of how "time condemns itself and all human endeavor and hopes."[60] Yet though Heorot is snuffed out by flames and noble pagans and their works perish, the poet does not scorn the heroic fellowship whose passing he has had to tell. There is still something left worth ambition:

"The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past."[61] The last word in the poem is uttered by sixth-century Geats who commend Beowulf as "lofgeornost" ("most intent on glory"). Lady Philosophy assured Boethius (II, pr. 7) that the praise won even by noble souls is of slight value: only a small part of a tiny earth is inhabited, and by nations differing in language, custom, and philosophy; even written eulogies fail because time veils them and their authors in obscurity. King Alfred did not entirely accept her last point. He argued that the fame of a great man can also fade through a kind of *trahison des clercs*—"þurh þa heardsælþa þara writera ðæt hi for heora slæwðe 7 for gimeleste 7 eac for recceleste forleton unwriten þara monna ðeawas 7 hiora dæda, þe on hiora dagum formæroste 7 weorðgeornuste wæron"[62] ("through the bad conduct of those writers who—in their sloth and in carelessness and also in negligence—leave unwritten the virtues and deeds of those men who in their day were most renowned and most intent on honor"). The purpose of *Beowulf*, as Morton Bloomfield has often reminded us, is heroic celebration, to present the deeds of a great man in order "to give his audience new strength and a model."[63] Those of us who were privileged to be Professor Bloomfield's students at Harvard know what such a model can be worth.

Roberta Frank

[1]Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969), pp. 1–6; Michael Hunter, "Germanic and Roman Antiquity and the Sense of the Past in Anglo-Saxon England," *ASE* 3 (1974), 45–48.

[2]"Chaucer's Sense of History," *JEGP* 51 (1952), 301–13; rpt. in Morton Bloomfield, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 13–26.

[3]In assuming that literate composition indicates authorship by a cleric, I am following, among others, C. P. Wormald, "The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its Neighbours," *TRHS*, 5th ser., 27 (1977), 95–114.

[4]On the use of *Beowulf* as a historical document, see J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," *PBA* 22 (1936), 245–51; sep. rpt. (London, 1937, 1958, 1960), pp. 1–6; Robert T. Farrell, "*Beowulf*, Swedes and Geats," *SBVS* 18 (1972), 225–86. Kemp Malone found the most remarkable feature of *Beowulf* to be its "high standard of historical accuracy": the anachronisms "that one would expect in a poem of the eighth century" are missing ("Beowulf," *ES* 29 [1948], 161–72, esp. 164). But the *Beowulf* poet occasionally nodded; see Walter Goffart, "Hetware and Hugas: Datable Anachronisms in *Beowulf*" in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase, Toronto Old English Series, 6 (1981), pp. 83–100.

[5]Larry D. Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*" in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. Robert P. Creed (Providence, 1967), p. 194.

[6]The same line is used to place Grendel's downfall in the distant past (806). Citations of *Beowulf* refer to Frederick Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1950).

[7]Morton W. Bloomfield observes that Chaucer employs "as was tho the gyse" to qualify pagan funeral customs (line 993), sacrificial rites (line 2279), and cremations (line 2911) (*Essays and Explorations*, p. 21). Citations from *The Legend of Good Women* are to lines 586 and 1813 in the second edition of F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957).

[8]Hans Kuhn relates Ongentheow's threat (*getan* = **gautian*) to a boast by the pagan tenth-century skald Helgi trausti Ólafsson: "I paid to the gallows-prince [Odin] Gautr's [Odin's] sacrifice" ("Gaut," *Festschrift für Jost Trier zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Benno von Wiese and Karl Heinz Borck [Meisenheim, 1954], pp. 417–33).

[9]Ursula Dronke points out that *Beowulf* contains human analogues for two additional mythological incidents recorded in

Norse poetry ("*Beowulf* and Ragnarǫk," *SBVS* 17 [1969], 322–25). On Scandinavian heroes' faith in their own *megin* (OE *mægen*), see Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London, 1970), p. 404. A raven, "oath-brother of the eagle," converses again in a section of the tenth-century pagan Norse *Hrafnsmál* (or *Haraldskvæði*) attributed to the skald Þórbjǫrn Hornklofi.

[10]Noted by E. G. Stanley, "The Narrative Art of *Beowulf*," in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (Odense, 1979), pp. 59–60.

[11]See Ursula and Peter Dronke, "The Prologue of the Prose *Edda*: Explorations of a Latin Background" in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni* (Reykjavík, 1977), pp. 169–70.

[12]See H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, Eng., 1932–40), 1:556–57; Patrick Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy" in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Robert T. Farrell, British Archaeological Reports, 46 (1978), pp. 42–49.

[13]Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, line 56 (*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. [Boston, 1957]).

[14]Kenneth Sisam long ago interpreted the Scyld Scefing preamble to *Beowulf* as a contemporary allusion to the West Saxon dynasty; but since he took *Beowulf* as a whole to be seventh or eighth century, the opening episode had to be a late, post-Alfredian addition: better a composite poem than a Viking one. See Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies," *PBA* 39 (1953), 287–346, esp. 339. The Offa digression of *Beowulf*—a probable allusion to the great ancestor of the Mercian house—would have flattered not only Offa of Mercia but also the descendants of Alfred who had succeeded to the rule of Mercia and who were themselves descendants of the Mercian royal line. But commentators, reluctant to look outside the age of Bede, either reject the Mercian associations of this digression or declare it, too, a later interpolation. See the important article by Nicolas Jacobs, "Anglo-Danish Relations, Poetic Archaism and the Date of *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration of the Evidence," *Poetica* (Tokyo) 8 (1977) [1978], 23–43. Jacobs demonstrates that no linguistic or historical fact compels us to anchor *Beowulf* before the tenth century.

[15]*Speculum* 41 (1966), 368–71.

[16]*The Structure of Beowulf* (New York and Oxford, 1965), p. 77.

[17]"Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems," *CL* 14 (Winter 1962), 36–43; rpt. twice in its entirety, and partially in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), p. 370.

[18]"Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgment of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum* 44 (1969), 545–59.

[19]*The Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* (London, 1970).

[20]*Alcuini Epistolae*, 124, ed. Ernest Dümmler, MGH, *Epistolae* IV.2 (Berlin, 1895), p. 183.

[21]*Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1978), esp. pp. 152–54, 165–70.

[22]"*Beowulf*, Ireland, and the Natural Good," *Traditio* 7 (1949–51), 263–77; "*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance," *Traditio* 21 (1965), 55–116.

[23]"*Beowulf*, Ireland, and the Natural Good," p. 277.

[24]"Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," esp. pp. 49–58.

[25]According to Wormald, "the aristocratic climate of early English Christianity is, if anything, more apparent in the age of Offa than in the age of Bede" ("Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," p. 94). Royal and monastic interests seem even more closely integrated in the age of Athelstan. Accompanying that king on his military expedition to Scotland in 934 were the two archbishops, fourteen bishops, seven ealdormen, six jarls with Norse names, three Welsh kings, and twenty-four others including eleven royal thegns. One of Athelstan's laws commanded that every Friday at every monastery all monks were to sing fifty psalms "for the king and those who want what he wants. . . ." See P. H. Sawyer, *From Roman Britain to Norman England* (New York, 1978), pp. 126, 192, 243. For a glimpse of aristocratic climates in tenth-century Saxony, see K. J. Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony* (London, 1979).

[26]"Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," p. 36.

[27]See Dorothy Whitelock, "The Prose of Alfred's Reign" in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), p. 91. For the Old English text, see *The Old English Orosius*, ed. Janet Bately, EETS, s. s. 6 (Oxford, 1980), p. xcix; for the Latin, *Pauli Orosii Presbyteri Hispani adversum Paganos Historiarum Libri Septem*, ed. Karl Zangemeister, CSEL, 5 (Vienna, 1882).

[28]See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 145–46.

[29]Kurt Otten surveys attempts from Schepss (1881) to Courcelle (1937) to locate the Remigian commentaries available to

Alfred (*König Alfreds Boethius*, Studien zur englischen Philologie, N. F. 3 [Tübingen, 1964], pp. 4–9). See also Brian Donaghey, "The Sources of King Alfred's Translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," *Anglia* 82 (1964), 23–57. Pierre Courcelle favors a ninth-century commentary by an anonymous monk of St. Gall (*La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire: antécédents et postérité de Boèce* [Paris, 1967]). But even if Alfred (d. 899) did not have access to Remigius' work in its final Parisian form (c. 902–908), he could have followed a version modelled on Remigius' earlier teaching at Auxerre and Rheims. See Diane Bolton, "Remigian Commentaries on the *Consolation of Philosophy* and their Sources," *Traditio* 33 (1977), 381–94, and "The Study of the *Consolation of Philosophy* in Anglo-Saxon England," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 44 (1977), [1978], 33–78.

[30]Bolton, *Alcuin and Beowulf*, pp. 139, 177.

[31]*Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii Philosophiae Consolatio*, ed. L. Bieler, CC, 94 (Turnhout, 1957), III, m. 12, lines 52–58; *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius' De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1900), p. 103, lines 14–16. Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, p. 133.

[32]*De Consolatione Philosophiae*, III, pr. 12, lines 64–65; *King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 99, lines 4–20. Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, pp. 129–32.

[33]*De Consolatione Philosophiae*, IV, m. 7; *King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 139, lines 5–18. Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, p. 38.

[34]*King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 116, lines 2–34.

[35]*De Consolatione Philosophiae*, II, m. 7; *King Alfred's Old English Version*, p. 46, lines 16–17.

[36]See n. 20. The Council of Clovesho (746/7) specified that priests were not to chatter in church like secular poets (*Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs [Oxford, 1869–78], 3:366); for additional examples, including one from the early eleventh century, see Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," pp. 51–52.

[37]The reference is to Eormenric of heroic legend and *Beowulf* (1201). Flodoard, *Historia Remensis Ecclesiae*, IV.5, ed. J. Heller and G. Waitz, MGH, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum (in folio), 13 (Hanover, 1881), pp. 564, 574.

[38]Carl Erdmann, *Studien zur Briefliteratur Deutschlands im elften Jahrhundert*, Schriften des Reichsinstituts für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde (=MGH), 1 (Leipzig, 1938), p. 102; K. Leyser, "The German Aristocracy from the Ninth to the Early Twelfth

Centuries: A Social and Cultural Survey," *Past and Present* 41 (1968), 25–53.

[39]On the poet's featuring of pagan elements, see Benson, "Pagan Coloring," pp. 193–213.

[40]Rudolf of Fulda, *Translatio Sancti Alexandri*, ed. B. Krusch, Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, 1933, pp. 405–36.

[41]See Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," pp. 58–63.

[42]Larry D. Benson, "The Originality of *Beowulf*" in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, Harvard English Studies, 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 1–43.

[43]*Widukindi Monachi Corbeiensis Rerum Gestarum Saxonicarum Libri Tres*, ed. H.-E. Lohmann and P. Hirsch, 5th ed., MGH, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum (Hanover, 1935), Bk. I, chs. 1–15. On Widukind, see especially Helmut Beumann, *Widukind von Korvei* (Weimar, 1950), and "Historiographische Konzeption und politische Ziele Widukinds von Korvei," *Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo* 17 (Spoleto, 1970), 857–94.

[44]*The Old English Orosius*, 49.1–3; 103.27–29.

[45]*Scriptores Rerum Mythicarum Latini Tres*, ed. G. H. Bode (Cellis, 1834), 1:74. See Ursula and Peter Dronke, "The Prologue of the Prose *Edda*," p. 166.

[46]John Scotus Eriugena, whose teaching is reflected in the school of Auxerre, wrote commentaries on all three authors. On his life, see E. Jeauneau, *Jean Scot, Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, SC, 151 (Paris, 1969), pp. 9–50, and *Jean Scot, Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean*, SC, 180 (Paris, 1972), pp. 11–21.

[47]Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, pp. 99–118.

[48]See especially Levin L. Schücking, "Das Königsideal im Beowulf" in *MHRA Bulletin* 3 (1929), 143–54; rpt. *EStn* 67 (1932), 1–14. English trans. as "The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*" in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Nicholson, pp. 35–49. Robert E. Kaske, "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," *SP* 55 (1958), 423–56; rpt. in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, pp. 269–310.

[49]*Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge, Eng., 1956), pp. 81–83. See E. G. Stanley, "Hæthenra Hyht in *Beowulf*" in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, Ore., 1963), pp. 136–51, and Colin Chase, "Saints' Lives, Royal Lives, and the Date of *Beowulf*" in *The Dating of Beowulf*, pp. 161–71.

[50]Odo, *Vita S. Geraldi Aureliacensis Comitis*, PL 133:639–703. See Carl Erdmann (*Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens* [Stuttgart, 1935]), trans. M. W. Baldwin and W. Goffart, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 87–89. Odo was among Remigius' students at Paris (*Vita Odonis Abbatis Cluniacensis*, ch. 19, in J. Mabillon and L. d'Achery, *Acta Sanctorum Ordinis S. Benedicti* [Paris, 1668–1701], VII.124).

[51]Leyser, passim.

[52]*Hrotsvithae Opera*, ed. P. Winterfeld, MGH, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum (Berlin, 1902), pp. 35–51; *Ruotgeri Vita Brunonis Archiepiscopi Coloniensis*, ed. Irene Schmale-Ott, MGH, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum, n. s. 10 (Weimar, 1951), p. 19.

[53]See Rosemary Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*," *ASE* 5 (1976), 63–81.

[54]E.g., Wayland in Leeds Parish Church, Thor in Gosforth Church, and Sigemund at Winchester Old Minster. See Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London, 1980).

[55]"Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*" in *The Dating of Beowulf*, pp. 123–39 and Alexander Murray, "*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy," pp. 101–11 in the same volume.

[56]See discussion in Horst Zettel, *Das Bild der Normannen und der Normanneneinfälle in westfränkischen, ostfränkischen und angelsächsischen Quellen des 8. bis 11. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1977), pp. 69–84. On West Saxon hegemonial tendencies during the first half of the tenth century, see E. E. Stengel, "Imperator und Imperium bei den Angelsachsen," *DAEM* 16 (1960), 15–72; J. L. Nelson, "Inauguration Rituals" in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 68–70.

[57]See Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain* (New York, 1966), p. 19. Tom Burns Haber makes one of several attempts to list verbal echoes and narrative parallels between the two poems (*A Comparative Study of the 'Beowulf' and the 'Aeneid'* [Princeton, 1931]). Recent publications demonstrating Virgilian influence on the narrative structure and perspective of *Beowulf* include Theodore M. Andersson, *Early Epic Scenery: Homer, Virgil, and the Medieval Legacy* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1976), pp. 145–59, and Alistair Campbell, "The Use in *Beowulf* of Earlier Heroic Verse" in *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge, Eng., 1971), pp. 283–92.

[58]R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London, 1976), pp. 27, 54.

[59]Oda, bishop of Ramsbury under Athelstan and archbishop of Canterbury from 940–958, was the son of a Dane who came to England with the first settlers. Oskytel, kinsman of Oda, was the archbishop of York. Oda's nephew was St. Oswald, prominent founder and renovator of monasteries. See J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Oswald and the Church of Worcester*, British Academy Supplemental Papers, 5 (London, 1919), pp. 38–51. The Danes appear to have been widely accepted in English society from at least 927 onwards; see Jacobs, p. 40, and R. I. Page, "The Audience of *Beowulf* and the Vikings" in *The Dating of Beowulf*, pp. 113–22.

[60]Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History" in *Essays and Explorations*, p. 25.

[61]Max Horkeimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York, 1972), p. xv.

[62]*King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius*, p. 44, lines 1–4.

[63]*Speculum* 41 (1966), 369.

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[1]*ELH* 17 (1950), 163–90.

[2]References to the B-text are to George Kane and E. T. Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London, 1975); to the A-text, George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version* (London, 1960); and to the C-Text, W. W. Skeat, ed., *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman . . . Text C*, EETS, 54 (London, 1873).

[3]Skeat refers to an explanation of *vix* given by Wycliffe, who reads it as V + I + X, signifying the five wounds of Jesus Christ: V = 5, I = *J*(esus), X = *Ch*(rist). "And so þis resoun seiþ þat þe just man shal be saved by þe V woundis of Iesus Crist oure Lord" (*Vision*, Pt. IV, EETS, 67 [London, 1877], p. 300, n. to C 16.23). But whether or not Langland had this in mind, his joke remains; Skeat's explanation no more replaces Langland's text than exegesis replaces the Bible's.

[4]See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Helene Iswolksky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 413–15.

[6]The quotation is repeated in a more obviously fitting context after B 11.279 in MSS OC^2, but is probably a scribal addition: see *B Version*, p. 221.

[7]The sentence occurs in Book iii, ch. 18, of Innocent's *Of the Wretchedness of the Human Condition*.

[8]"MSS R and F in the B-Tradition of *Piers Plowman*," *TCAAS* 39 (1955), 199, n. 47.