A
CRITICAL HISTORY OF
ENGLISH POETRY

by

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PREFATORY NOTE

ENGLISH poetry may be regarded historically as one of the ways in which the national spirit has expressed itself in successive ages; or as the work of a succession of individual poets, each expressing his own mind and spirit; or as an art with various sub-species—epic, lyric, drama, etc.—each of which has developed in accordance with its own traditions. We shall try to do such justice as our space permits to all these aspects of the subject. Considering, however, that poems are made not by influences or traditions but by men, we shall lay most stress on the second. No doubt every poet is the child of his age and the heir of a particular tradition; but the great poet helps to create the spirit of his age and to mould the tradition he has inherited. Therefore we shall dwell longest on the greatest poets, touching on the minors in so far as they supply important links in the chain of tradition or have themselves left something written which the world has refused to let die. Our plan may make this study less useful as a text-book, but it will help; we trust, to set the history of English poetry in truer perspective.

We have called this book *A Critical History of English Poetry*. But the critic, no less than the poet, is the child of his age; and we are well aware that critics like us, whose taste in poetry was formed in Victorian days, may fail to do justice to the poetry and the criticism of the present generation, between which and the Victorian Age a "shift of sensibility" has occurred comparable to that which took place between the Age of Pope and the Age of Wordsworth.

We are deeply indebted to that fine and generous scholar, Mr. John Purves, for help in preparing this book.

CONTENTS

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ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

WESTERN civilisation arose in the basin of the Mediter-
ranean. · Greece invented science and perfected many of the
arts; Rome gave law ánd order; and from Judæa came a
religion which vanquished the old Aryan nature-worships and
the orgiastic cults of the Orient. By A.D. 350 Greek culture,
Roman law, and the Christian religion prevailed from the
Atlas to the Solway.

But beyond this Mediterranean world, divided from it by
great mountains and rivers, another world lay, very different
in religion and culture and in the structure of its society, a
world where men worshipped not Christ but Odin, and dwelt
not in walled cities under laws but in a sort of semi-feudal
order in clearings of the forest. The Romans called it by the
general name of Germania. From these two worlds, the
Mediterranean and the Germanic, our literature has sprung.

The Roman historian Tacitus, writing about A.D. 100,
declared that Germania had been fettered for two hundred
years; but presently she began to burst her chains and press
upon the crumbling ramparts of the Roman Empire. In
some regions the Germanic invasion was partial or gradual,
infiltration rather than invasion; but on the remote province of
Britain the billow of calamity broke in full fǫrce. By the middle
of the sixth century all the eastern lowlands were submerged
in a flood of Anglo-Saxon heathendom; at the end of it the
invaders broke through to the Irish Sea and the Bristol Channel,
and shattered what remained of the British realm into three
fragments. Wales, the largest of these fragments, long re-
mained unconquered, cherishing her sacred memories.

By A.D. 600, however, Christianity had begun to come back
to Britain, from Rome and from Iona. The two missions
met in Northumbria, which became, and for nearly two cen-
turies remained, the greatest and most civilised of the Anglo-
Saxon kingdoms, the home of famous scholars like Bede and
Alcuin. When Northumbrian civilisation collapsed before
the Danes, the primacy passed to Wessex, where letters re-
vived for a time under Alfred the Great (c. 871 to 900). Most

of the poetry composed in Northumbria has come down to us in the dialect of Wessex.   In the eleventh century England was conquered, first by the Danes, and finally by the Normans. Anglo-Saxon poetry owes nothing either to the conquered Britons or to the conquering Danes: the Norman conquerors destroyed it.

The Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain was only one episode in that Wandering of the Nations which made the Heroic Age of Germania as full of epic material as the Heroic Age of Greece mirrored in the *Iliad*.   Alas! the Germans had no Homer.   Still, they had some native poetry—songs with which their warriors excited themselves for battle and lays in which their scôps extolled ancient heroes—and some of this they brought with them to Britain.   None of the songs survives.   Alfred the Great, we are told, had many *Saxonica carmina* by heart, and Aldhelm sang songs at the bridge-end to get a hearing for his sermons; but Anglo-Saxon lyric is all lost. Of the lays, however, we have some remains.   None of them has anything to do with Britain, though most, if not all, of them were written down here.   *Widsith* describes Continental courts visited in imagination by a 'far-wandering' scôp; *Waldhere* should have told how Walter of Aquitaine withstood a host of foes in the passes of the Vosges; the splendid fragment called *The Fight at Finnesburgh* dealt with the same favourite theme of battle against fearful odds:

> Then cried aloud . the king young in war,
> "No dawn in the East is this . no dragon here flies;
> Nor here are the gables . of this hall aflame .
> But here is hurrying forth . Fowls of prey are singing,
> The grey-coat howls . the war-wood clangs,
> Shield rings to shaft . Now shines the moon
> Wandering through clouds . Now woeful deeds begin,
> That a folk-strife . here will frame.
> But wake now, . warriors mine,
> Don your mailcoats . deem on your prowess,
> Rush to the fore-front . be of good courage."

Finnesburgh was apparently a short lay dealing with a single episode: *Beowulf* is swollen out with three episodes to something like epic dimensions.   It was composed in Britain by a Christian scribe, probably about A.D. 700; but the material from which it was composed belongs to an earlier date and to a distant and a pagan land.   It tells how the King of the

Spear-Danes had his mead-hall ravaged nightly by the fen-ogre Grendel, till the champion Beowulf came from Sweden and destroyed Grendel and his fiendish dam. Returning to Sweden, he succeeded his uncle on the throne, ruled wisely for fifty years, and died at last in combat with a fire-drake that was ravaging his people. *Beowulf* is no *Iliad*. The story is mere folk-lore: Beowulf—the bees' foe, the bear—is one of those folk-tale heroes who have been suckled by a wild beast and imbibed its strength, and his three exploits are too like one another. The story, then, is a poor one, and there is not enough of it: it has to be padded out to 3000 lines with digressions and long speeches. Yet there are noble things in *Beowulf*—not only loyalty and dauntless courage but courtesy in hall and respect for ladies; the style too has a grave dignity throughout; and the figure of the old king going out to fight and, as he knows, to die for his people, is truly heroic. How much of what is noblest in the poem is due to the Christian scribe we cannot tell; but loyalty and courage at least are pagan virtues. *Beowulf*, we have said, is no *Iliad*; yet the hero's funeral—

> Men of the Weders . made thereafter
> A barrow on the sea-cliff . broad and high,
> That wave-farers . might see from far—

is not unworthy to be compared with the funeral which the Trojans held for Hector, the tamer of horses.

With these Heroic poems go a few Elegiac pieces—*The Wanderer, Deor, The Seafarer, The Wife's Complaint, The Husband's Message, The Ruin*—which, if not Continental in origin, still come from the same pagan stratum as *Beowulf*, though some of them have been touched with Christian sentiment. Most of them are laments—the lament of an exile, of a masterless scôp, a hungry sailor on the wintry seas, a wife parted from her husband. They are sombre and fatalistic in tone, but not dismayed:

> That was overcome . so may this be

is the refrain of *Deor*; and the seafarer, lashed with hailstorms, hung round with icicles, with no sound in his ears but the boom of waves and the squawk of the gannet, still feels the lure of the sea. It is a bleak world, the world of *Beowulf* and these Elegies, with its sunless meres, icy seas, and windy nesses; and the cope of doom over all.

Was it this sense of despondency and doom that made the
Anglo-Saxons so ready at last to embrace Christianity? Bede
tells us that when the missionaries came to King Egbert's
court, one of the thanes likened man's life to the flight of a
swallow through the hall, which is seen for a moment in the
firelight and then vanishes again into the darkness. "If these
men", he said, "can tell us aught of the whence and whither,
let us hear them." Once baptised, the Anglo-Saxon poets
turned away from pagan themes: "What has Ingeld to do with
Christ?" said Alcuin: and applied themselves instead to para-
phrases of the Bible story, as in *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Judith*; or lives
of saints like Elene and Andreas; or other religious work such
as *The Phoenix* and *The Dream of the Rood*. But these sons of
sea-rovers did not change their natures completely on baptism;
they are still at their best when they sing of war or of the sea;
their Lord is a man of war, a young hero; the apostles are his
thanes, "strong men in battle", "not slow in the sword-play";
his sea-adventure and his rescue of St. Matthew from the
cannibals make Andreas the most interesting of the saints.

Caedmon (*c.* 675) was the first of these Christian poets, and
Bede tells us how he became one. He was a lay brother in
St. Hilda's Abbey. He had no gift of song, and when singing
began in the hall he would withdraw. One night as he lay
asleep in the stable One appeared to him and commanded him
to sing. At his visitant's bidding Caedmon sang verses that
he had never heard to the glory of the Creator. In the morn-
ing he remembered what he had sung, and thenceforth devoted
his life to turning into Anglo-Saxon verse such portions of
Scripture as the monks translated for him from the Latin. He
sang of the Creation, and the Exodus from Egypt, and the
Passion of Christ; and many other parts of Holy Writ he para-
phrased. So Bede tells us; but scholars no longer believe that
the *Genesis* and *Exodus* which we possess are Caedmon's, if
indeed we possess anything of his.

The only other Anglo-Saxon poet that we know by name is
Cynewulf (*c.* 800), and Cynewulf is only a name. We cannot
identify him, nor be sure that any of the poems once ascribed
to him are his except the four very artificial poems—*Christ*,
Elene, *Juliana*, *The Fates of the Apostles*—into which he worked
his name in runes.

Judith is a brave poem, full of action and passion; but the
other Scripture paraphrases are mostly very prolix, wrapping

up the plain words of Scripture in clouds of metaphor, circum-
locution, repetition, and pious ejaculation. *The Fall of the
Angels*, though inserted in *Genesis*, is based not on the Bible
but (ultimately) on Avitus. Its subject is that of *Paradise
Lost*, and Milton may have read it, or had it read to him, for
he may have known Junius, who published it in 1655. How-
ever that may be, the Satan of the Anglo-Saxon poet is Miltonic
in his unconquerable will and pride. In *The Dream of the
Rood*, by a strange and touching invention, the story of the
Crucifixion is told by the Cross itself in a strain of adoration
unmatched in Anglo-Saxon poetry. For the first part of
The Phoenix Lactantius's *De Ave Phoenice* provided a canvas on
which the Anglo-Saxon poet embroidered his bright fancies;
in the second part the self-begotten bird becomes a symbol of
the resurrection of the body. The joyous piety of *The Phoenix*
and its sunny, flowery Eden contrast strongly with the bleak
gloom of the secular poems.

The *Riddles* in which Anglo-Saxon verse abounds seem also
to be mostly paraphrases, ingenious arabesques on a borrowed
ground, elaborate 'kennings' one might call them. They have
not much merit as puzzles, but the vivid realism of *The Storm*
recalls *The Seafarer*, and *The Badger* shows observation and
imaginative sympathy.

Most of the *Riddles* apparently belong to the ninth century.
In the tenth the old heroic spirit flashed up again for a moment
in two poems dealing with contemporary events. *The Battle
of Brunanburgh* celebrates the victory which the men of Wessex
and Mercia won over the Scots King Constantine and his allies
in 937. It is a savage poem, much more savage than *Beowulf*,
gloating over the slaughtered foe:

> Many a carcase they left to be carrion,
> Many a livid one, many a sallow skin—
> Left for the white-tail'd eagle to tear it, and
> Left for the horny-billed raven to rend it, and
> Gave to the garbaging war-hawk to gorge it, and
> That grey beast, the wolf of the weald.[1]

Maldon, a song of defeat, is far nobler than this yell of triumph.
It tells how in 991 Byrhtnoth, the aged alderman of Essex,
withstood a band of Danish pirates, to whom he had granted
a fair field by allowing them to cross the river. Some of the

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[1] Tennyson's translation.

Saxons fled: the rest fought to the death around their dead leader. Here are the words of Byrhtwold, his old companion in arms:

> Thought be the harder . heart the keener,
> Mood the more . as our might lessens.
> Here our lord lies . hewn to pieces,
> The good on the ground . Grieve may he ever
> Who now from the sword-play . weens to wend.
> I am old in years . hence will I never,
> But here beside . mine own dear lord,
> So loved a man . I mean to lie.

That is English courage, the courage never to submit or yield. We heard the note in *Beowulf*: we shall hear it again and yet again in English poetry.

Anglo-Saxon verse belongs to a type which is found in the early poetry of other Germanic peoples. The norm is a line divided by a strong caesura into two parts, each of which carries two stresses; two or three of the stressed syllables, one or two in the first part of the line and one in the second, should be alliterated, *i.e.* should begin with the same consonant (or group of consonants) or with a vowel, *e.g.*:

> Flo'd under fóldan . nis thæt fe'or heonon.
> [Flood under fields . ne-is that far hence.]

There is nothing exactly foreign to us in all this: all English verse is stressed and much of it is embellished with alliteration. But the sledge-hammer Anglo-Saxon stress could carry so many weak syllables with it that our ears sometimes fail to catch any metrical effect; and for us metre is essential to verse, alliteration only an occasional ornament. Moreover the language is unmelodious, clogged with harsh combinations of consonants: the raven himself sounds hoarser when you call him a 'hræfn'. There are no stanzas, except in a newly discovered poem on the Fasting Seasons. Rhyme occurs now and then by accident or as an added embellishment, but the so-called *Rhyming Poem* is unique.

The diction of Anglo-Saxon poetry is 'poetic diction' in the fullest sense of the term. *Beowulf*, our chief document, is not a primitive poem; on the contrary it presupposes a long stylistic tradition, in the course of which a great stock of periphrastic metaphors ('kennings') has accumulated, which however sterling when new-minted—and 'foamy-throated' is a truly

imaginative epithet for ships—have become mere conventional counters. It was beneath the dignity of poetry to call a thing by its own name if there was a phrase for it in stock; the sun is "the candle of heaven", or "the jewel of the sky"; the sea is "the whale's road", or "the swan's way", or "the seal's bath", and so forth. Also it argued a poverty of invention to say a thing once when you could say it twice:

> The king bade the youths come to him. The bold young men
> obeyed the command:
> The excellent men went as they were bidden: the young men
> came before the heathen.

The divided line no doubt tempted to repetition, which was encouraged perhaps by the practice of Hebrew poetry: not that Hebrew parallelism is ever so childish as this specimen from the A.S. *Daniel*.

Their extant poetry shows the Anglo-Saxons a loyal, daunt- less folk, serious and naturally devout, but heavy and humour- less. But we must remember that much of their extant poetry was composed, and almost all of it transcribed, by monks. If any popular poetry had survived, any of those songs that Alfred knew and Aldhelm sang at the bridge-end, we might have found that England could be merry in season even in Anglo-Saxon days.

EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

THE Norman Conquest brought England more than a change
of rulers.   When the *jongleur* Taillefer rode up towards Senlac
ahead of the invading host tossing his sword in the air and
singing the *Chanson de Roland*, he heralded the coming of a
new culture, a fresh wave of Mediterranean civilisation.

After *Maldon* Anglo-Saxon poetry practically disappears for
two centuries.   When it reappears it is no longer Anglo-Saxon.
Much had happened in these two centuries.   When the
millennium passed and Christ did not come again, Christen-
dom seemed to awake from a long sleep.   The Crusades, in
which this awakening was first manifested on a grand scale,
were in turn a main·cause of its diffusion; they brought the
nations of Western Europe into contact with each other and
with the alien civilisation of the Saracens.   All the channels
of human activity were gradually flooded by a new spirit.   The
Church herself gained new strength and life.   Great school-
men like Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas buttressed
her dogmas afresh with arguments drawn from the Aristo-
telian philosophy which Europe had recovered through the
Arabs.   A new ardour of devotion found expression in the
Orders of the Friars founded by St. Francis in Italy and St.
Dominic in Spain.

But our main centre of interest is Provence.   It was in this
favoured region, enriched with the débris of many civilisations
and shielded by the strong arm of the Counts of Toulouse, that
the new poetry first came to flower.   It was new both in sub-
ject and in form.   It was devoted from the first to the worship
of woman in a sense unknown to the Greeks and Romans.
A cult of Romantic Love, love *par amours*, sprang up as it
were in a night, and aped, if it did not rival, the cults of
Chivalry and the Church.   The speed with which this fashion
spread surprises us less when we remember that in the early
Middle Ages the ruling classes of Western Christendom,
brought together by the Crusades, and united by a common
faith and a common code of Chivalry, came nearer to forming
one great society than they had ever done before or have ever

8

done since.   For all its extravagances and possibilities of sin,
the code of Romantic Love did much to civilise these rough
Frankish barons: manners and deportment, music, dancing,
drawing, and the writing of verse became regular parts of the
knightly education.   Kings competed for the laurel of the
troubadour and queens bestowed it.

In the form of their verse the troubadours owed much to the
Latin hymns of the Church, in which accent and rhyme had
displaced the quantitative prosody of classical Latin verse.
This system was applied to the vernacular and worked up into
a variety of metres and stanzas which have been ever since the
stock-in-trade of European poets.   If England held her own
with the Continent in some things, in vernacular verse she
lagged behind.   The conquered Saxons may have kept up their
old songs, but for more than a century after the Conquest there
was no *written* verse in England, and by the time it came to be
written the language had changed considerably.   That it had
shed many of its inflections was perhaps no great loss; but its
vocabulary too had been sadly impoverished, especially in
culture words, and had to be replenished from French.   Then
it had to learn a new tune, to change its native prosody of
stress and alliteration for the syllabic rhymed system of France.
At first it halts between the two systems, with no sure grasp
on either.   Layamon's *Brut* (*c.* 1205) is alliterated throughout,
but the alliteration is very seldom full and is helped out with
rhyme or assonance.   In the *Bestiary* of somewhat later date
the mixture is different; some sections are alliterated, others
rhymed.   On the other hand the *Ormulum* clings fast to a
rigid syllabic metre without either rhyme or alliteration:
happily Orm found no imitators.   The early rhymed *Orison of
Our Lady* (*c.* 1210) shows how hard the English poet found it
to hold the iambic beat and to tell rhyme from mere assonance.
The French system won first in the East and South—a decisive
victory, for the capital and the Universities were there.   By
1250 Nicholas of Guildford was writing very fair rhymed
couplets in his *disputoison* of *The Owl and the Nightingale*.
By 1300 or thereabout English lyric was beginning to run
smoothly enough in the fetters of rhyme.   In the second
quarter of the fourteenth century Laurence Minot struck his
northern lyre in celebration of Edward III's victories over the
Scots and the French; his songs, though often savage in tone,
are far from rude in form; he has a good command of couplet,

rime couée, and octet in rhyme aptly embellished with alliteration. For while adopting the French system English verse retained some features of the Anglo-Saxon—its love of alliteration and a freedom of substitution greater than French verse allowed. The period of experiment was well-nigh over. How far the old system lived on elsewhere than in the East and South it is hard to say; there is scarcely any evidence of it anywhere between 1210 and 1340; but after that it enjoyed a remarkable revival in the West of England and in Scotland. The authors of *Piérs Plowman* and *William of Palerme* were both Shropshire men; farther north, probably in Lancashire, we find *Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *The Pearl*; while in Scotland alliterative verse survived till the end of the fifteenth century. So much for the formal side of Middle English poetry.

But to follow the history of English literature in the Middle Ages it is necessary to remember that for the first two centuries after the Conquest England was culturally a province of France. It was in this country as well as in France that French poets found patrons and cultivated the new poetry of courtly love and adventure. Educated readers in England read, not English, but Latin and French. Accordingly it will be well to survey briefly the forms and themes which were the fashion, and which, as the English language reasserted itself, passed into English. English poetry begins again in the translation of French romance and allegory.

The trouvères of Northern France had a different kind of poetry from that of Provence and the South, in their *chansons de geste*. The *Chansôn de Roland* which Taillefer chanted was the herald of the great gift of the French conquerors, the gift of Romance. The song tells of the defeat of the rearguard of the army of Charlemagne, a not very historical Charlemagne, in its retreat from Spain led by Roland and Oliver. It is a romantic epic, a Christian epic, but otherwise a lineal scion of the old Germanic lay. Its theme is still war, not love—there is little more love-interest in it than in *Beowulf*. But in the atmosphere of the Middle Ages the love-interest was sure to invade, and in many of the lays that deal with Charlemagne, the *matière de France*, there is love as well as fighting.

But in England, perhaps in Brittany, the Normans became acquainted with another theme, one of Welsh origin, another king to match and even surpass Charlemagne in interest—

Arthur of Britain. The historical Arthur, so far as there was an historical Arthur, was a native of North Britain, who in the sixth century played a part which in Roman times had been played by the Count of the Saxon Shore, leading his mail-clad heavy cavalry against the Saxons, in the days when the British realm still stretched from Strathclyde to Brittany. When that was shattered, the memory of Arthur was still cherished in Wales and Brittany as that of a national hero who slept an age-long sleep in the Isle of Avalon, and would one day return to revive the ancient glory of the British name. And now, in a time of peace, Welsh and Breton legends, and Gaelic legends too brought over by Irish monks, began to swell the general stream of Anglo-French story and poetry, bringing into it new elements of mystery and beauty. But in French hands the more grotesque Celtic element diminished, and the spirit of the whole conformed to the chivalrous fashion of the day. Arthur became a feudal monarch and his mail-clad horse-men feudal knights and lovers, enrolled by him in the Order of the Round Table, vowed to repel the heathen and to redress wrongs. The original story of Arthur and his Queen Guinevere and the magician Merlin and the traitor, the Judas or Quisling, Mordred (a part played in the Charle-magne stories by Ganelon), drew into its orbit many tales originally independent, by enrolling their heroes in the new order.

The well-head of the Arthurian story, which absorbed so many diverse stories, was the work of a Welshman writing as an historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth, anxious to link Wales with the Norman conquerors of their old enemy the Saxon. Just as Virgil had sought to glorify Rome by linking it with Troy through Aeneas, so Geoffrey sought to exalt Britain by deriving its monarchs from a grandson of Aeneas, Brutus by name. Geoffrey eked out his scanty monkish sources from Welsh legends and his own imagination. It was from Geoffrey's *Historia Regum Britanniae* that there came what till Milton's time figured as a part of British history, and included many names still familiar as Cymbeline, Locrine and Sabrina, Lear and his daughters. Here Arthur figures not only as the conqueror of the Saxons, but as a rival to Charlemagne in the range of his empire, and we get the story of his Queen Guna-mara, of Mordred and the last great battle in the West. The book was rendered into Norman-French verse by a certain