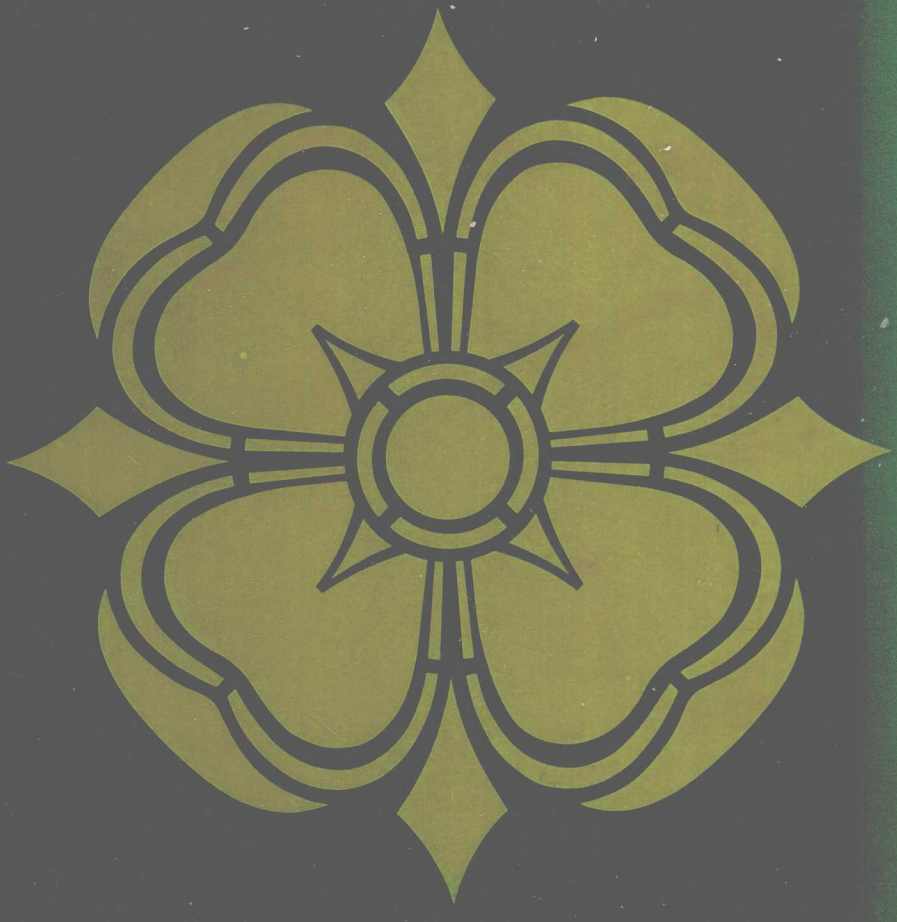
EVERYMAN'S book of ENGLISH VERSE



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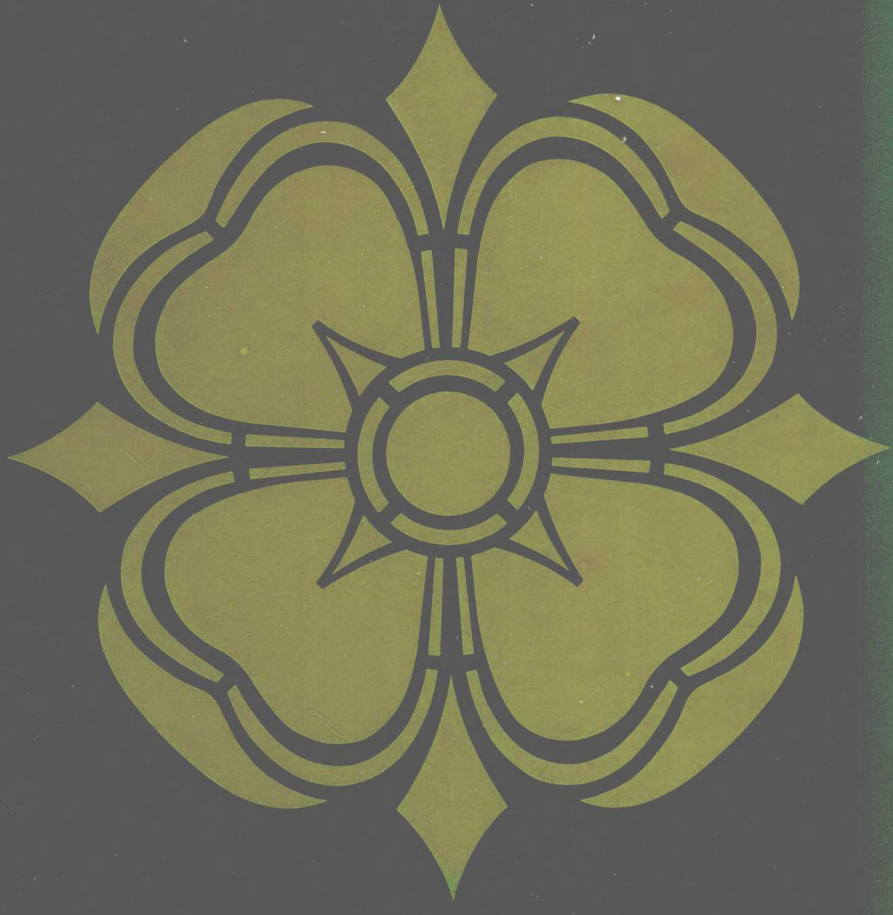

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Introduction

. . . let us realize that great talent is the complement of a great soul; a great gift cannot be grafted upon a spirit that is not great in generosity.

William Soutar, *Journal*, March 1935

'It is a happy thing that there is no royal road to poetry. The world should know by now that one cannot reach Parnassus except by flying thither. Yet from time to time more men go up and either perish in its gullies fluttering *excelsior* flags or else come down again with full folios and blank countenances.' So wrote, in his Journal for 1864, Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the finest of English poets and one of the most neglected in his lifetime. Certainly Hopkins was of their company who flew to Parnassus. He invented a new idiom, both linguistically and rhythmically separate from the manner of the admired poets of his day, and yet its newness seems to us, looking back, to be no restless itch for novelty but a profound rediscovery of ancient powers latent in English speech; just as his strenuous inventiveness seems to us true to the energy and seriousness of the Victorian age, and the delicate accuracy of his observation of natural things true to its spirit of expanding scientific inquiry. In fact, as usually happens with men of genius, it is Hopkins – in his own day seeming so painfully isolated and idiosyncratic – who in retrospect appears to be treading so harmoniously with the *Zeitgeist*, the Spirit of the Age, that he makes everyone else appear out of step.

Let us, then, in settling to enjoy a feast of English poetry, give up at the outset any notion of a formula, a set of rules to which poetry must conform, a definition even. Poetry is a vehicle for the human imagination, in its deepest workings, as that imagination has expressed itself in language. It makes use of conventions because a *con-vention*, a 'coming together', is a useful assembly-point for reader and writer. But once we have assembled and been identified, we have a right to choose the direction of our departure, and for the major poet that direction will always be towards his individual vision. Poetry is a traditional art, but its most sacred tradition is to be original.

1

One of the recurrent questions, wherever poetry is discussed or for that matter practised, is that of the poet's relationship to the world, and to the currents that sweep through the world.

Every age has its over-arching preoccupations: questions, problems, opportunities, which have been ripening in the seed-bed of history and now

suddenly will wait no longer. At the end of the Middle Ages the nodal point was the breakdown of the feudal system and its replacement by money and trade. At the beginning of the modern epoch it was expansion, the outward thrust of the European nations into what they regarded as unclaimed territories, with all the results in terms of jealousy among themselves and hostility from the original inhabitants. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century altered the pattern of men's thinking; it took two hundred years for that revolution to work itself down into a technology that altered every detail of life, so that the nineteenth century saw the upsurge of industrialism with its tension between labour and capital, between the primary producers and the developers, which has led to the political unrest of the twentieth. Standing off at a certain distance, we can see these movements in large outline, and some critics have proceeded on the assumption that the most interesting literature is that in which the patterns are most directly reflected. In its pure form this doctrine is probably too simple-minded to grasp the complexities of any art; people do not spend *all* their time thinking about the dominant issues of their epoch; they fall in love and beget children and laugh and grieve and suffer and die, in much the same ways in one historical period as in another. All the same, it is true that the large issues, the general backdrop against which life is seen, affect everyone's thinking and feeling in subtle ways. Even falling in love is somewhat different in a feudal age from what it is in an age of unrestricted movement between social classes and of easy contraception; even mourning the dead is different in a society that assumes an after-life as compared with one that does not. When we realize this we are in a position to enjoy one of the subtlest pleasures of literature, the appreciation of historical flavour; all wine is made from grapes but each has its own bouquet, and so does each period of art. Poetry is particularly successful in conveying this bouquet because it is adapted to subtle shades of meaning, but to get this pleasure we must read carefully, and in particular remember that words change their meaning in slight and subtle ways. The best companion to a reading of English poetry – in some ways the *only* companion – is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I mean the big one in which each word is given its biography.

Meanwhile one can, with due caution, give qualified assent to the proposition that poetry, like most other things, has more power when it is going with the general thrust of the world. The *Zeitgeist* undoubtedly does exist and speaks through the arts as it speaks through everything else, from philosophy to cooking, from entertainment to agriculture. Thus, Professor W. W. Robson begins his essay, 'The Romantic Poets':

> Even after a century or so of being canonized, embalmed, and petrified in textbooks as the 'Romantic Movement,' the great outburst of English poetry at the end of the eighteenth century has still not ceased to put out vibrations of its power. For the last time, perhaps, in the history of English literature our poetry felt itself moving *with* the forces that move the world; and the

> excitement of this far-off moment can still be felt in the rhythms, the imagery, the mythological creation of the great romantic poets.
>
> (*Critical Essays*, 1966, p. 115)

Even with the safeguarding 'perhaps', one wonders whether the conjecture about 'the last time' is not unnecessarily pessimistic; surely the turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s finds total expression in all Yeats's poetry from *The Tower* onwards, while the anguished and self-questioning 1940s, when men stopped their ears against the howl of war only to hear the silence ringing inside their own heads, is reflected in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. (But perhaps an Irish poet and an American-born British subject do not fit into Mr Robson's notion of 'our poetry'.) Setting these matters aside, we must all recognize the justice of that remark about the great Romantic poets, that their work owes its energy and immediacy, in some ways, to the fact that it is 'moving *with* the forces that move the world'. But what ways?

The answer, clearly, is nothing to do with public acceptance or large, shared general attitudes. Moving with the forces that move the world did nothing to endear the Romantic poets to the world as represented by literary opinion or the book trade. If the sense of a supporting public, the confidence that one is talking to people who are listening, gives strength to a writer (and by general consent, it does), then these great poets must have been nourished from some other source. Blake, the first and in some ways the largest of the Romantic visionaries, produced his life's work in an atmosphere of total neglect. Keats suffered so much critical derision that he was popularly supposed to have been killed by it. Wordsworth finally triumphed over recalcitrant reviewers and an indifferent public, but then he was long-lived and very tough; during most of his life, he had to endure an atmosphere of hostility, misrepresentation and sheer insolence that would be unbelievable if we did not already know it to be the portion of so many major artists. As for Shelley, he of the pure lyric voice and the keenly questing intellect, on the day he was drowned in the Gulf of Spezzia there were no more than fifty people in the world who knew that he wrote poetry; his reputation was that of a political trouble-maker and headlong wife-deserter. To such a *rapport* with the world does one come if one 'moves with the forces that move it'. Only Byron became a best-seller, and the reasons are clear enough, for Byron with his simple poster-colours and broad, vigorous general effects brought Romanticism to a mass public; in the exhausted years that followed the Napoleonic Wars he stalked across Europe, scattering the seeds of a new hope and a new vision in simple, easily assimilated granules.

To think of Byron is of course to think of that other but cognate question, the relationship of the man to the hour. Is it the right hour that calls out the great man, or does the great man step forward and claim the passing hour for his own? Personally I agree with the view that the available stock of human genius stays roughly the same, and issues in achievement according to

the prevailing conditions. I do not, that is, believe that men of genius arise one after another by a kind of divine accident, independent of what is happening around them. The reason why post-Renaissance Europe has had no poet as great as Shakespeare is probably that since Shakespeare's day the conditions for so gigantic an achievement in poetry have not been there. The supreme moments of art always occur when some individual is gifted enough, and lucky enough, to catch the social and historical atmosphere on some kind of rising thermal.

For instance, why is Pope's *Dunciad* so totally a masterpiece? Partly, of course, because Pope was a fine poet, with an exquisite sensibility working to shape the powerful emotional and moral impulses that beat through his frail, crippled body. But it is also clear that *The Dunciad* was composed at its own special moment. Literature, which previously had been a vocation rather than a means of making money, was suddenly ripe for commercial exploitation. In earlier times many writers, like many doctors or lawyers or clergyman, may have been mercenary in their outlook; but this mercenary spirit could not, or not directly, flow through their professional lives as writers. But now came new roads, new communications, great strides in the printing and manufacture of books, and finally the stage-coach, which could carry new books and periodicals to every corner of the country in a few days. At last the writer was face to face with a paying public, and a new type came into existence – the hack writer who produces for the market-place and whose values are those of the market-place. *The Dunciad* is accordingly erected on three pillars. The first is personal: Pope is counter-attacking enemies who have tried to take away his reputation. The second is the European literary tradition whose values and standards Pope continually evokes, as after ten years spent in translating Homer he had a right to do. The third is the new adversary, Grub Street and the penny-a-liner. A few years earlier, this balance would have been impossible; a few years later, it would have lost its novelty. A great poem was written because the right man was in the right place at the right time. Which is not to say that if Pope had not written *The Dunciad* someone else would have written it. That moment in social and literary history would have found its way into literature one way or another, but not necessarily in a major statement; what Pope contributed was his unique individuality. *The Dunciad* is a great and representative eighteenth-century work, but the fact of its being 'representative' does not make it resemble *Gulliver's Travels* or *Rasselas* or 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. The personality and gift of the individual artist is still centrally important.

To convey the spirit of an age, to dramatize its deepest issues and channel its energies, is nearly always a shared task. With the possible exception of Shakespeare, one cannot think of an English writer whose gifts and perceptions are wide-ranging enough to embody all the energies of his time. That part of the earlier eighteenth century that is not expressed in Pope is probably there in Swift or in Fielding. To take another example, if we go back four hundred years from *The Dunciad* we find an epoch, the hungry and

disaster-haunted fourteenth century, in which two great English poets divide the territory between them almost as if by mutual agreement. On one side, it was, however precarious, an old, well-matured civilization; the literate men of that time could look back over three centuries of high mediaeval poetry and philosophy; in Italy, the first tremors of the Renaissance were making themselves felt within Chaucer's lifetime, but in England the fourteenth century represents the moment of poise as an incoming wave hangs before breaking. Chaucer's work, with its formal beauty, its tolerance and irony, its high courtesy of tone (broken only when the proletarian characters set about each other with pelting abuse), represents that face of the late Middle Ages; it is, for all its occasional flights of religious piety, a celebration of the values of this world; its presiding hero is the brave and gentle knight who

never yet no vileynie ne seyd
In al his lyf, unto no manere wight.

Langland, on the other hand, though he is a master of realistic observation, is a penitential religious visionary; the driving force of his great poem is the fear of God and the vision of blessedness. There are many debates in Chaucer's poetry, but none of them is anything like, or is intended to be anything like, the debate between Love, Peace, Justice and 'Book', as they discuss what can be the meaning of the strange light that shines on hell-mouth. (It is here, on pages 57–61.) The urgency of Langland's poetry, its haunting moral earnestness, together with the breadth of his visionary imagination, make him the only English poet to come anywhere near Dante on Dante's own ground. Chaucer, as we can see from his many references, was acquainted with Dante's work and admired it; but it was Langland – much further from Dante's urbane and lettered world, perhaps indeed never having heard of him – who had the temperamental affinity.

2

Thinking of the Middle Ages reminds one that it has been a tradition, since at any rate the seventeenth century, to place the beginning of English poetry, the *fons et origo*, at the point where mediaeval English becomes intelligible to the modern reader with no prior study, just the odd looking-up and some patience; which means, effectively, with Chaucer. Certainly Chaucer was widely influential on succeeding poets; for several generations it was usual to employ his metres and his range of subject-matter. His honorific title of 'Father of English Poetry' is therefore no oddity. On the other hand Chaucer was far from being an innovator; he is, as we have already noted, backward-looking, a late and fine flower of the long mediaeval tradition. That his example prolonged this tradition for at least another hundred years merely indicates the vitality and freshness with which he handled it. By temperament he was the kind of artist who prefers to breathe new life into well-established, even well-worn, forms rather than invent new. If against the background of

fourteenth-century English poetry he appears innovative, that is because the tradition he inherits and passes on is not on the whole an English tradition. The other important poets of fourteenth-century England – William Langland, and the anonymous authors of *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – appear more conservative than Chaucer because their line of descent is straight from Anglo-Saxon. *Gawain* was written in the North-West, a region sparsely populated and less open to cosmopolitan influences than Chaucer's London, while Langland appears to have hailed from the Herefordshire border country. Both these poets use a loosened version of the Anglo-Saxon alliterative metre, whose main procedure was to break the line into two halves with a distinct caesura or hinge in the middle, and alliterate forcibly at four points (two in each half) or three (one in one half and two in the other). By the fourteenth century, the alliterative metre had lost its early strictness, the lines had lengthened and sounded more rhetorical, and the result was a metre admirably suited to serious poetry, possibly the only form of English verse to rival the stateliness of the classical hexameter, that Homeric metre which Coleridge both described and exemplified in two brilliant lines:

> Strongly it bears us along in swelling and limitless billows,
> Nothing before and nothing behind but the sky and the ocean.

In the hands of Langland, the mediaeval alliterative metre is a wonderful instrument. And other poets, whose names have not come down to us, were equally alive to its possibilities.

But strong and full of potentiality as this verse is, it represents the last utterance before a long silence. A new music was in the air, a new measure was dancing its way over the Channel from France. Alliterative verse can be sombre, intricate, grave, tender, urgent; it cannot be epigrammatic or lyrical – at any rate as lyricism was to be interpreted in the next five centuries. People in the later fourteenth century seem to have made the assumption that a North-country poet would naturally write in alliterative verse (Northerners are always more tenacious of tradition, slower to adopt new habits) while a poet from the South, more open to new influences, would rhyme. 'Trusteth wel,' says Chaucer's parson,

> But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man,
> I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre,

though, half inclined as the pious man is to think of poetry as an invitation to hedonism and worldliness, he is fair-minded enough to add at once,

> Ne, God woot, rym holde I but litel bettre.

Perhaps Chaucer's real innovation in English poetry, the respect in which he really *is* the father of what came after, is that he is the first poet – or at any rate the first successful, widely-read poet – to use as his staple rhythm the ten-syllable iambic line, that steady but infinitely variable beat that has

been ever since his day the habitual measure of the English poet when he deals with serious subjects: whether we think of

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
or Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
or The curfew tolls the knell of parting day
or Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness
or The woods decay, the woods decay and fall.

With all honour to the Earl of Surrey, who in the hope of finding an English equivalent for the Virgilian hexameter took to writing those ten-syllable lines without rhyme and thus gave us that 'blank verse' which is the medium of Shakespeare's plays and of *Paradise Lost* – with all honour to him, it remains Chaucer who first widely accustomed the ears of English-speakers to the iambic pentameter and thus created the rhythmic expectations that underlay our poetry for six hundred years and still underlie it, despite the curious twentieth-century pretence that poetry ought to sound like conversation. (Conversation, as a matter of fact, often does find itself using the iambic pentameter.) This being so, it is amusing that the first line of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, the single line of Chaucer that is most often quoted and is known to virtually every literate English person, is also the most frequently misquoted in its rhythm: most people say

Whăn thăt Ăprílle wíth hĭs shoúrĕs sóte,

making a trisyllable of 'Aprille', whereas in fact it should be

Whán thăt Ápríllĕ wíth hĭs shóurĕs sóte,

starting on a heavy syllable, inverting the first iambic foot, and ignoring the redundant 'e' in 'Aprille'; thus demonstrating at the very outset that monotony, the enemy of the iambic line, is an enemy easily enough defeated.

We can see, with hindsight, that the ten-syllable, five-stress line was going to sweep all before it. In the fourteenth century that could not have been so obvious; a reader, or writer, of poetry put his money where his tastes and habits had become preferences, and two hundred years later the matter was still not entirely settled. The sixteenth century saw many interesting metrical experiments, virtually all of them derived from Latin practice, as was natural in an age when every educated person read that language and when the humanists had urged the claims of classical Latin, even more than Greek, as the basis for a whole new European civilization. Edmund Spenser, in his youth in touch with humanistic circles and a friend of the fertile and inventive critic Gabriel Harvey, was an ambitious experimenter with metre and diction, but none of his work is more completely successful, more triumphant on its own terms, than the exquisite short poem 'Iambicum Trimetrum' which will be found on page 114. Here as elsewhere, the search was evidently for a line that should be longer than ten syllables while not sagging or sprawling.

Many poets have found that ten syllables give too little elbow-room, especially in meditative verse or lofty narrative; but the French alexandrine of twelve syllables does not really work in English – it breaks up too easily into two sixes, and begins to sound jog-trot – and the fourteener sounds merely thumping, like a rabbit signalling with its hind feet.

While remaining basically faithful to the ten-syllable iambic, English poetry has returned often to the quest for a viable long line; Arthur Hugh Clough, in Victorian times, made the important break-through of discovering that the Latin hexameter, when written as nearly as possible in English, is actually a conversational metre, giving familiar and ironic effects rather than epic; and in our own century Robert Bridges composed his stately *Testament of Beauty* (1930) in a twelve-syllable iambic deliberately loosened. More recently still, W. H. Auden showed a willingness to learn from alliterative verse, and in later years, was drawn more and more to Latin-based metres. So the poet's search goes on, a search for freedom within the shaping and directing framework of art, which guides and concentrates. To have no art at all, to observe no conventions, may yield a short-term advantage in immediacy, but it will never sustain ambitious work; for, as Robert Frost remarked, 'Writing poetry without metre is like playing tennis without a net.'

3

And this selection? It is an act of homage, an utterance of thanksgiving for the richness and beauty of English poetry, a tribute from an English writer to the great tradition that buoys him up. I have felt free to depart from what seems to be the standard anthological diagram: the most celebrated gems are here, the universally known standards round which any selection must be built, and so is a mass of lesser-known verse (in many cases, I think with perhaps foolish pride, virtually *un*known), including the anonymous, the scurrilous, the randy and the rollicking.

I have also given due weight to the fact that certain important developments in poetry have been introduced first by the English in the guise of jokes and games, and later made a more solemn second appearance in continental European literature where they were expounded *au grand sérieux* and given names ending in -ism. The Victorian nonsense poets, for example, anticipated many of the procedures of Surrealism; Edward Lear, with his dream-imagery and his devastating use of irrational but powerful associative jumps, seems to me an important modern poet – which doesn't mean that one has to read him with a relentlessly straight face.

Other differences from the standard anthologies will be obvious enough. I have not shrunk from taking bits out of long poems. A long poem, by definition, has features that cannot be represented in an anthology – narrative sweep, amplitude, effects that enforce themselves by repetition – but the greatest long poems have short passages of supreme beauty and memorability to which one returns again and again to get that particular

flavour, so that in the end these short passages take on identity in one's mind as separate poems, and I have tried to give a sampling of these. In the same spirit, I have included a few of the greatest speeches from Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare is, out of sight, our best poet, and his best work is in the plays. To represent him, as anthologists generally (and understandably) do, by his non-dramatic work only is to show him as a fine poet among fine poets, but not as the colossus he actually is. Of course no selection can represent Shakespeare as a dramatist – and I recollect, suddenly, that W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson, in their five-volume *Poets of the English Language*, solved the problem of Shakespeare by simply printing *Antony and Cleopatra* in its entirety – but the high moments of a Shakespeare play, even when shorn of their supporting dramatic framework, are so obviously the best things in English poetry that I am simply not going to send this book to the printer without them.

But perhaps the most glaring difference between this anthology and its respected predecessors is that instead of beginning with the sixteenth century, or at the earliest with Chaucer, we begin with a sampling of Anglo-Saxon verse. Since Anglo-Saxon is unintelligible to a modern person who has not formally set out to learn it, this involves the use of translations. To push back the frontier so far might seem extreme or even perverse; after all, the Anglo-Saxons displaced the Ancient Britons, who already had a poetic tradition in their own Celtic tongue; why not translate some of that, if our aim is to represent all the poetry that has been written in this land? The answer is that the living tradition of Celtic poetry is still there on our western flank, as a visit to any *Eisteddfod* will show; we are concerned here with the English tradition, which was fully developed already in the ninth century and gave us masterpiece after masterpiece. The achievement of the Anglo-Saxons is slowly coming to be valued at its true worth; they had certainly a finer civilization than that of the Normans who in an unlucky hour ousted them by a combination of luck and aggressiveness; the Anglo-Saxon poet was as fine a craftsman, and as clearly uttered the innermost thoughts of his people, as the Anglo-Saxon goldsmith or stone-mason. If we begin the story of English poetry with Chaucer, that gives a history of six centuries; in fact, we had six centuries of achievement before Chaucer was born.

If I seem to you too dogmatic in my assertion of the claims of Anglo-Saxon, blame my education in the Oxford of thirty-five years ago. My tutor, C. S. Lewis, was firmly convinced that Anglo-Saxon poetry was the essential key to what followed. He saw in it a melancholy, a yearning, a turning away from *nuance* and irony in favour of emphasis and gravity, that appeared to him characteristic of the English poetic mind whenever that mind is serious rather than playful. To him, anyone who had not made acquaintance with this Englishness at the very beginning of our tradition would go endlessly wrong in trying to account for it later.

'This mere Englishness,' he says (in *Rehabilitations*, 1939) 'is usually called Romanticism by those who do not know Anglo-Saxon. They are fond

of tracing it to the French Revolution or even to the Celtic strain in our blood. They bring far-fetched explanations why the English wrote melancholy poems about ruins in the eighteenth century, not knowing that they had begun to do so in the eighth.'

And in another essay in the same book Lewis returns to the theme: 'The tap-root, Anglo-Saxon, can never be abandoned. The man who does not know it remains all his life a child among real English students.' (Does that mean that most university English departments nowadays are largely staffed by men and women who must always remain children in the presence of real scholars of English? Be careful. The answer may be Yes.)

One of Lewis's reasons for insisting that we go back and start from Anglo-Saxon was that, 'There we find the speech-rhythms that we use every day made the basis of metre.' This is surely so. It is perhaps not too much of a simplification to say that all poetry is a blend of the speaking voice and the singing voice, with the proportions weighted now on one side, now on the other. When the new measures arrived from France, the singing voice became dominant in that great lyrical outburst which takes us from the anonymous mediaeval lyricists through Campion and Peele to Ben Jonson. What Anglo-Saxon verse does so well is to make poetry out of the speaking voice, out of the natural sound of English voices talking to one another: not casually, but gravely and strongly.

Gavin Bone, whose interesting essays in translation appeared posthumously in the mid-1940s, gives an impartial view of the matter, a scholar's view and a practitioner's:

> After all, we have, as some writers tell us, the same fundamental language as the Anglo-Saxons, though theirs was apparently so different from ours. We have the same bold accents, landing with extraordinary fury on fixed points; but we have not now the same pure lingering sonorous vowels for the accents to fall upon. We have lost a number of the thick or splashy consonants, and we have added a number of little words nowadays, that patter along contentedly and get in the way or do their best to ensure that majesty and naturalness shall never in future join together in poetry. Long sonorous vowels and clashing consonants give the original alliterative effect, but we must never forget that this effect cannot be captured in modern English.
>
> (*Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 1943, p. 13)

Perhaps not; Bone is very firm in his opinion, nor is he alone in it; Mr Richard Hamer, an Oxford don of a later generation than Bone's, whose parallel-text translations of short and medium-length Anglo-Saxon poems (in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, 1970) are so effective and helpful, also gives it as his belief that 'an attempt to produce verse similar in form to the Old English is doomed to failure as the structure of the language is now fundamentally different'.