Reading Old English Wisdom

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The Fetters in the Frost

Robert DiNapoli

to all my students
including my children,
Jonathan, Miriam, and Rebecca

No grant committees or institutions of higher learning were disturbed in the writing of this book.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

Human beings have employed their thinking to construct machines. By doing so, they have implanted in these machines the powers of reason gained through science. In a sense, therefore, man's power of reason got carried away, escaped from his head and turned into horsepower-years in his physical surroundings, and these horsepower-years having made their escape, now work on autonomously. In the civilized world people are largely fast asleep to these things, with little sense of the dizzy speed at which human beings have in recent decades created a non-human world beyond human control.
. . .
People simply do not grasp the fact that they need to think differently when 79 million horsepower-years are at work outside the human being. This requires us to make space for a quite different kind of thinking. Without turning to spiritual science, the riddles of current events cannot be solved. If human beings mechanize the world around them through external, empirical science, then it is all the more essential that they allow an inner science, a new form of wisdom, to arise within them. And this will be capable of governing and directing what would otherwise overwhelm them.

—Rudolf Steiner, lecture delivered at the Gotheanum in Dornach, 28 November 1920[1]

Here is the test of wisdom,
Wisdom is not finally tested in schools,
Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it,
Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof,
Applies to all stages and objects and qualities and is content,
Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of
        things;
Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it out of
        the soul

—Walt Whitman, *Song of the Open Road*, 6.8-14[2]

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[1] From *Cosmic Spirituality and Human Physicality* (Collected Works 202, trans. Matthew Barton), London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 2004, pp. 33, 36.
[2] From *Leaves of Grass (1891-1892)* in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Prose* (ed. Justin Kaplan), New York: Library of America, 1982.

And I was by him, and intimate,
        I was His delight day after day,
                playing before Him at all times,
        playing in the world, His earth,
                and my delight was with humankind.
                        Proverbs 8:22-31[1]

More than a thousand years ago, writers in what would eventually become England began composing a new kind of poetry. For unknown centuries previously, poetry had played a central role in shaping and preserving the Anglo-Saxons' ancestral culture, as it did in nearly every ancient culture. The first Angles and Saxons migrated to the abandoned Roman province of Britannia after the legions' departure in 410, displacing or suppressing its Romano-Celtic population in the process. Some five centuries later, poets among the Christian monastics of the ninth and tenth centuries, descended from those restless tribespeople, still felt some echo of their ancestors' delight in the memorable play of sound sculpted from (as W.B. Yeats would later characterise it) "a mouthful of air."[2]

At least some of what they wrote (no one knows exactly how much) got copied into manuscripts in the scriptorium ("writing room") of one or another Anglo-Saxon monastery. Their work was unique for its time. The literacy they employed had been established by the church's Roman missionaries, who first arrived in Kent in 597. It was, not surprisingly, almost exclusively Latinate. A few centuries later, Viking raids devastated many better-endowed Anglo-Saxon monastic houses across the ninth and tenth centuries. Those Scandinavian adventurers sought gold and captives, but their marauding inflicted grave collateral damage on the culture of letters that had once nurtured such thinkers and scholars as the Venerable Bede and Alcuin of York.

In the late ninth century, seeking to salvage what he could, King Alfred the Great instituted a series of root-and-branch reforms intended to restore the fortunes and capacities of the Anglo-Saxon church. Among these was a resort to *vernacular* literacy: if too few clerics (and none of the laity) could understand their *Credo* and *Pater Noster* in Latin, then they should have them in their own mother tongue, at least as a stop-gap until

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[1] Trans. Robert Alter, in *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).
[2] "He Thinks of Those Who Have Spoken Evil of His Beloved," from *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899).

the higher Latin literacy could be re-established. As Alfred proposed, scholars translated crucial Latin texts of devotion, doctrine and learning into Old English. Eventually some inspired souls among them seized the opportunity to commit their insights and visions into poems composed in a *native* metre and diction that Germanic singers had been employing for many generations. The result was a new kind of vernacular Christian verse that remained in touch with its pre-Christian roots. Nothing like it was ever attempted anywhere else in Europe at the time.[1]

Centuries later the extant manuscripts from this period were collected and curated by antiquarians, whose holdings found their way into the museums and libraries where they now reside. The poems they contain have been studied, edited and interpreted by generations of scholars, some much more than others. Many readers will have at least heard of *Beowulf,* the most widely (and deservedly) renowned of the lot, but the others remain largely the concern of specialists, little known outside their small professional circles.

Which is a pity, because many of them speak to human concerns that remain of perennial (and sometimes urgent) interest. Their authors' assumptions and beliefs may at first appear alien to modern sensibilities, but the differences of culture and psychology that separate us from them can also throw new light on our own perceptions of our place amidst the churn of space and time. To us moderns, the early medieval mind presents aspects both familiar and baffling. Like a family photograph album retrieved from the attic, it might show us younger versions of ourselves we scarcely recognise, though we possess internalised memories of the scenes in which we appear, which we experienced in the bodies we still inhabit, however altered by the years. It may also hold images of friends and relations who have passed beyond reach of voice or eye, some of whom we may never have met even, but whose impact upon our lives still shapes our thoughts and imaginations.

Old photographs might remind us of long-ago experiences or illustrate our abstract knowledge of family lines and ancestry. But how could thousand-year-old texts hold any mirror up to our present selves?

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[1] The Old Saxon *Heliand* ("saviour") was composed during the reign of Charlemagne a century earlier. It presents a superficially similar amalgam of Christian doctrine conveyed through vernacular diction and imagery. What it achieves, however, is essentially a paraphrased harmony of the four gospels, whose ends are wholly didactic and doctrinal, merely dressed in Old Saxon drag. The poets of Anglo-Saxon England responded far more freely to their native poetics, allowing them to shape their adopted Christian sensibilities much more radically.

We weren't there then. What's it to us? We can answer this question a number of ways, some obvious, some more oblique. First, the obvious:

1. "Genetic" encoding

The language and the literature of Anglo-Saxon England simply bequeathed its influence to later generations, the way the genome of a particular life-form might encode aspects of its prior evolution. No real mystery here, just lines of influence too deeply or subtly embedded for us to notice. The portrait of a thrice-great grandparent may depict no one you actually met, but the features it captures may recall the faces of any number of later relations, your own among them.

2. The nature of the beast

Certain facts of life in this world have impressed themselves on human thought again and again: our need for food and shelter, the tendency of some to force their wills on others, the demands and delights of love, the inescapable certainty of death. Thus almost anything honestly produced by any human agent is bound to reflect these universal human concerns in one form or another, and they present themselves repeatedly at different junctures among the poems this book considers.

On the other hand, a number of specific factors involved in the production of these poems complicate the picture they present:

1. The early medieval scene

The history of Anglo-Saxon England spans a good six centuries and more, from the first arrival of Germanic settlers in the fifth century to the imposition of Norman hegemony in the eleventh. When the missionaries under St Augustine of Canterbury came ashore in 597, the new faith they proposed took hold, after some early advances and setbacks, with a speed and tenacity that no one at the time could have anticipated. It must have produced a psychic concussion: a pagan warrior-aristocracy, shaped by centuries of migration and tribal warfare, began to assimilate the teachings of the early church. These demanded, among other things, that enemies were to be forgiven and a single god worshipped who had humbled himself to become fully human and to submit to an abject death on behalf of all humankind. All of these were antithetical to

the core values that had helped to sustain, across long centuries, the cultures to which they were addressed.

2. A new authority

The establishment of the church in Anglo-Saxon England had consequences in many different spheres. One was the culture of *textual* authority it introduced, grounded in Latin texts such as the Bible and the writings[1] of the church fathers. This tradition drew on ancient Judaism's adoption of the written word as guarantor of its cultural identity in response to the historical traumas of exile and diaspora. Modern notions of something done "by the book" or attested to "in black and white [i.e. in print]" or given an authoritative exposition in *The Fisherman's Bible* or *The Stamp Collector's Bible* all sound a faint echo of the same sensibility. In the pre-literate migratory cultures from which the Anglo-Saxons descended, however, authority derived largely from genealogy and inherited word-of-mouth tradition.

3. Literacy

Evidence exists for the practice of limited forms of literacy among all Germanic peoples. Many had adopted some kind of runic alphabet in the centuries preceding the Anglo-Saxons' conversion. But none used them to write *books* as such. The shapes of some runic characters suggest they were derived from the Roman alphabet: ᚱ/R, ᛒ/B, ᚺ/S, ᛏ/T *et al.*, but they were used primarily to carve names and brief texts onto hard media such as wood, stone and metal. The Old English word *writan* (whence we derive modern English "write") originally meant "to incise" or "to inscribe." The kind of swift cursive writing I am at this moment committing to paper with a ball-point pen would have been wholly impracticable with such techniques. Runic inscriptions recorded names on gravestones and weapons or brief charms: they functioned as labels, notebook-jottings and graffiti. But the literacy brought by the monks embodied a wholly new power of unprecedented reach and fluency. The echoes of its adoption are with us to this day.

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[1] The Old English word *gewritu* ("writings," "scripture," "writ") could denote either.

4. The displacement of the *scopas*

The advent of Christian literacy raises another issue that looms over the interpretation of any Old English poem. The *scop* (pronounced somewhere between "shope" and "shawp," plural *scopas*[1]) was a verbal artist whose medium was the air on which his harp rang and his voice sang. As no historical *scop*'s work was ever recorded in writing, what little we know about it comes by inference from much later echoes of his work. It is likely to have epitomised, recorded and transmitted his people's cultural memory: their values, traditions and history. He was their library, or, if you like, their back-up hard drive, his verse-forms a critical *aide-mémoire*. In the later centuries of Anglo-Saxon England, we find in manuscripts not only heroic and religious narratives but charms, riddles and maxims, and heartfelt laments for the desperately brief tenure of all good things beneath the sun. In short, a whole catalogue of hard-won folk wisdom, much of it inherited from pre-Christian times. Once the *scop* would have been the curator and dispenser of it all. But with the advent of the new literacy and the church's heavy emphasis on textual authority, much of the *scop*'s traditional value would have been diminished and superseded, like an eight-track tape player or floppy drive.

Nevertheless, we can see pretty clearly how the work of later Christian poets still registers the native *scop*'s ghostly presence. The poetry they composed and transcribed in monastic *scriptoria*, as much as it reflects newer Christian values, breathes an older air at the same time. Its metre, diction and manner are all taken from the *scop*'s art. Thus the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England, including the works now classified as "wisdom" poems, occupy a doubled semantic field. Their meanings are conditioned by two very different contexts, their Christian present and their pagan past, in variable proportions. To cite only one example, a poem such as *The Dream of the Rood* (a profound dream-meditation on the crucifixion) is obviously Christian in its inspiration and content, yet the way it goes about its business depends on its reader/hearer's familiarity with the conventions of the old warrior-aristocracy of pagan times.

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[1] The Old English word *scop* may be related (the connection is uncertain) to the verb *scyppan* ("to shape" or "to make"). In Scots Lollands, poets are *makaris* ("makers"), just as in Greek the poet is a *poietes*, from the verb *poiein*, "to make"). Even if impossible to assert with confidence, it's an irresistibly attractive possibility.

Christian? Yes. But aspects of the pre-Christian culture of the poet's ancestors play as central a part in the poem's imaginative economy.

Wisdom traditions have developed in just about every human culture, in both lettered and oral formats. Examples of wisdom texts comprise humble (and perennial) saws such as "a penny saved is a penny earned," of wholly unknown provenance or authorship. Others have survived from the deep past: from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and, in its formative years, Christianity inherited a number of earlier Jewish wisdom texts, both canonical and apocryphal, such as the biblical books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, plus apocrypha such as Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and many others. Given its oral medium, any pre-Christian wisdom tradition among the Anglo-Saxons will have left only indirect traces of its existence, though that existence seems more likely than not. What we actually see in the surviving texts is a tantalising whisper-gallery of hints and possibilities, none of which can be taken as direct evidence. In addition, distinguishing a putative native wisdom tradition from one inherited from Mediterranean or Near Eastern sources is surprisingly difficult. The extant Old English wisdom texts I discuss in this book contain a relatively modest proportion of credal formulation or other overtly Christian sentiment, yet neither do they sound any unambiguously pagan note. Most wisdom traditions tend to emphasise the existential side of human experience over credal or philosophical abstraction. The voices we hear in the texts that follow slide from that of the mead-hall *scop* to that of the monastic Christian poet with surprising ease and agility. Just as often they hover indeterminately between the two.

All of which leads me to a question implicit in the epigraphs with which this prospectus began:
Why?
Which can be expanded thus: why wisdom? why Old English wisdom poetry?

You needn't be a card-carrying anthroposophist to take Rudolf Steiner's point. Not in the new electronic machine age of the internet and the algorithm, the latter's innumerable spawn all busy hoovering up individuals' online searches and purchases and bundling them as profiles for sale to shadowy enterprises looking for traction in our heads. In the psychology of our digitally mediated moment, you become the sum total of your online searches and purchases. No more, no less, as determined

by a number-crunching sub-routine, in what seems a radical reformulation of the notion of the human itself. This suggests to me a powerful (if not exactly demonstrable) likelihood that the voices of experience that emerge out of older and far different human experience can help us both to orient ourselves in our modern moment and to respond to its challenges. Ancient thought of any kind can remind us of what the human has been, of how its psychology has shifted and evolved over time while remaining essentially human throughout. I suspect we're going to need all the reminders we can get.

Thought that has wrestled with the fundamentals of existence, with the particular trials and griefs or aspirations and joys that have struck, shaken, abashed or exalted the human psyche along its road from ancient prehistory to our day, might prove a needful oxygen bottle as the digital waves close over our heads. As Whitman tells us, wisdom cannot be taught, nor (to modernise his point) transferred like a digital download from one point of data-storage to another, but simply to stand in its presence may, in time, induce its semblant in our own thought and imagination and remind us of just who we really are. Better than being epitomised by a data-collecting bot for the benefit of some corporation's bottom line, at any rate. Even better, as the personified Wisdom in the biblical book of Proverbs declares, real wisdom *plays*, in every sense of the word. She plays like a spotlight over the mere facts of experience to illuminate them and to expose their latent meaning. She plays like a concert pianist, lost in the intricacies of the score she transforms from notations on paper into air alive with dancing sound. And she plays like a child in a boundless funfair, cavorting among God's acts of creation like an acrobat, celebrating and singing for joy.

The merest glance both at current events and at the headlines of the past few decades (and farther!) exposes a world desperately in need of true wisdom's play. Individually, we are all, moment by moment, obliged to sift through a torrent of sensory data and experience that pours in like a flood upon our belaboured consciousness, further encroached upon from behind by memories (both summoned and involuntary) that demand their share of our attention.[1] Were it to lack *any* means of coping

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[1] The double whammy of global warming and the current coronavirus pandemic, which looks set to disrupt modern culture's notions of business as usual for years to come and may presage even more violent disruption across future decades, has thrown into stark relief the wisdom-free zone that is the late-capitalist, neo-liberal order. If ever a post-medieval age stood in need of a sharp dose of wisdom, it is ours.

with this wilderness of mere *fact*, the human psyche would be reduced in
a trice to catatonia. In a sense, the twitchy, hyper-stimulated landscape of
the recent digital revolution represents, at its most extreme, a kind of
breach of the mental floodgates and dykes erected by untold centuries of
human struggle in the grip of experience. Wisdom literature represents a
kind of scaffold, an approximate sorting of experience that allows us a
place to stand within its flux and at least try to make some sense of its riot.
The texts I translate and discuss, composed by Anglo-Saxon poets a
thousand years ago and more, are perhaps best read as the record of one
stage in that long psychic project. They constitute only a small sample-
section of Lady Wisdom's repertoire. Small, but rare and therefore
precious.

          I ought to announce at the outset that this is not a formally academic
book. Despite my own academic background and this book's relatively
obscure matter (commonly the object of painstaking scholarly discourses),
it addresses a more general readership. I have sought to read and translate
these poems as intelligibly as I can for a contemporary audience, drawing
on the reflections and speculations these poems trigger in my mind as I
approach them. Many of the assumptions, values and beliefs I bring to
that encounter might have shocked their anonymous authors, but I have
tried to let their words set mine in motion, in something like the spirit of
the wisdom-discourse itself. I can only hope the author of a poem such as
Maxims I might recognise my intentions.

A Note on the Texts

          The translations, unless otherwise credited, are all my own. I have
tried to keep them as close as possible to their originals in terms of syntax
and tone, as far as that can be judged, in a loose unrhymed pentameter
line[1] that affords sufficient freedom of word choice and sentence structure
to let the Old English prosody sing, however distantly, through a very
different modern English medium. The sections of text that head each
discussion will be identified by the relevant line numbers of the original
text in boldface, from which the lineation of my translations will inevitably
stray.

          In preparing my translations I have consulted the editions of George
Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie in *The Exeter Book* (New

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[1] Which I hesitate to call "blank verse." Apologies to Shakespeare, Milton and
Wordsworth!

York: Columbia UP, 1936); Bernard Muir, in *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry,* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994); and Robert E. Bjork (ed. and trans.), in *Old English Shorter Poems: Wisdom and Lyric* (Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

> Frost will freeze, fire dissolve the wood.
> The earth must burgeon; ice will make a bridge—
> water wear a helmet—wondrously
> locking the seeds in the ground. One shall loose
> the fetters of the frost: almighty God.
> *Maxims I*, ii.1-5

The matter-of-fact title of *Maxims I*, conferred on it by modern editors, might lower our expectations of its potential as poetry. The lines I've just quoted might do little to raise them. They appear to make some fuss about straightforward natural phenomena: seasonal temperature variation and the tendency of fire to consume wood and hard frosts to lock the vegetative processes of growth and fruition in the earth. Did the Anglo-Saxons really need a longish poem to remind them of such in-your-face-obvious stuff? Well, as even greeting-card doggerel ("Roses are red, violets are blue . . .") can attest, poetry needn't avoid the obvious just because it's obvious. Broadly speaking, poetry does not communicate information. Its truths are not facts. If it tells you something you didn't know, it's not necessarily because you lacked the relevant data. Instead poetry often addresses the known and the familiar from unexpected angles, allowing attentive readers or listeners to see how the obvious or the ordinary hides unfamiliar or extraordinary elements they'd not seen before. It is perhaps no accident that the great majority of the world's wisdom texts adopt poetic forms.

Wisdom traditions, whether ancient Near Eastern or early medieval Anglo-Saxon, take common phenomena and experiences as mere starting points. Whether offering practical life counsel or proposing deep insights into the origin and structure of the cosmos, wisdom texts seek to identify and celebrate what lies above, beyond or below the world our five senses and personal histories hand us as facts. While this might involve elements of traditional religious discourse, it needn't. Wisdom somehow dances in the gap between the world we experience and our inward experience of that world. Even before we might invoke some notion of deity or spirit, what we take for *our* world or *the* world is both more personal and far

larger and more complex than everyday experience commonly tells us. The sheer scale of the big questions that follow on the heels of such a perception can lead our thoughts in directions common in most known wisdom traditions. The following passage from one of the Bible's wisdom texts is a good example. It comes from the eighth chapter of the Old Testament's book of Proverbs, and in it a gendered wisdom speaks, in her own person, of her role as God's consort in his primordial act of creation:

> The LORD created me at the outset of His way,
>   the very first of His works of old.
> In remote eons I was shaped,
>   at the start of the first things of earth.
> When there were no deeps I was spawned,
>   when there were no wellsprings, water-sources.
> Before the mountains were anchored down,
>   before the hills I was spawned.
> He had not yet made the earth and open land,
>   and the world's first clods of soil.
> When He founded the heavens, I was there,
>   when He traced a circle on the face of the deep,
> when He propped up the skies above,
>   when He powered the springs of the deep,
> when He set the sea its limit
>   that the water not flout his command,
>   when He strengthened the earth's foundations.
> And I was by him, and intimate,
>   I was His delight day after day,
>   playing before Him at all times,
> playing in the world, His earth,
>   and my delight was with humankind.
>   Proverbs 8:22-31[1]

This extraordinary self-portrait is itself an archetypal wisdom text: it embodies distinctive features that can be found in just about any wisdom tradition you could identify. First (and perhaps foremost), it is *personal*. Wisdom is not about abstract philosophising or forensic debate. She is both a person and a personal possession, as intimately known as your best friend or your favourite song. In these lines from Proverbs, Wisdom plays

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[1] Trans. Robert Alter, in *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

the parts of God's chief engineer, personal assistant and playmate in the act of primordial creation itself. In Genesis 1:3, this is narrated as a solo verbal act: "God said: let there be light. And there was light." Well, not *quite.* Turns out he had help. And that help comes not in the shape of angels focused wholly on adoring God and performing his will, but of a *personified* Wisdom who is a friend and consort, a lover almost, who appears to exist coevally with God's own inconceivable eternity. She is a dancer: wisdom is supple, wisdom *moves.* She *plays* in God's presence, and she delights as well to visit the habitations of God's human creations, once they've made their entrance from the wings. Ancient Judaism's patriarchal leanings and its later embodiments in the prescriptive fixities of the law make this characterisation surprising, to say the least. Yet at the same time the rabbis delighted in the play of the dialogic imagination, in which voice answers voice answers voice in a seemingly endless speculative dance. Beyond the gender issue, moreover, the passage from Proverbs demands that we see double, in order to discern a venerable principle of cosmic making that is also a playful, fleet-footed sprite—as if a supernova could also twinkle among the bluebells at the bottom of your garden like a firefly or a fairy.

Wisdom's twinkly flits before the face of God call to mind another fleet-footed figure from Western mythology, the ancient Greek Hermes, known to the Romans as Mercury. His Latin name survives in the English adjective "mercurial," which describes a playfully elusive yet somehow incisive temperament. Romeo's friend Mercutio exhibits a manic, dancing verbal wit (at least until his voice is stilled in the trundling gang warfare between Montague and Capulet). The mercurial soul resembles the chemical element mercury, which shines and dances and cannot be pinned down. Think of its old name "quicksilver": "living" silver, a metal that's also a will o' the wisp, an impish liquid at the temperatures we normally experience in our world. As the Roman Mercury and the Greek Hermes, this mercurial deity is associated with many different spheres of action as messenger, healer and monster-slayer. His winged, serpent-entwined rod, the *caduceus* (which later became an emblem of medical and pharmaceutical practice—a cheerful banner of drug culture, if you like) is both his staff of office as the gods' messenger and an enchanter's wand capable of casting illusion or sleep over susceptible mortals. Across the cultures of the Mediterranean, he has been regarded variously as a patron of eloquence, rhetoric, lying and theft—the kinds of verbal and mental agility that can evade traps set for slow human consciousness by playing with the shifting contours of material reality. In the hybrid Greco-

Egyptian culture that emerged from ancient Alexandria, in its time a crossroads of esoteric traditions rather like New Age California, Hermes came to be associated with the Egyptian god Thoth, the ibis-headed accounts keeper of the underworld also credited with ordaining the orderly progress of the cosmos and establishing human arts such as astronomy/astrology, mathematics and medicine—all things shiny and clever.

Shortly before Christ's advent (its exact chronology is still in question), the Hermes/Thoth association inspired a body of writings attributed to a new figure named Hermes, sometimes surnamed "Trismegistus" ("Thrice-Great"), who, it was claimed, lived in Egypt around the time of Moses. A philosophical mage, something like the pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus or Pythagoras, this Hermes, according to the tradition, authored a number of tracts that comprise elements of quasi-gnostic, quasi-theosophical speculation, along with snippets of traditional wisdom discourses. Modern scholarship understands this "Hermetic corpus" as a well-meaning fraud, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus an earnest fiction invoked to give its later Alexandrian origins the gloss and glamour of deep antiquity. It worked a treat: hermeticism and hermetic thought remained viable players in Western philosophical circles to the end of the Renaissance and beyond. Tricky stuff, however you regard it, but beguiling.

I invoke all these figures—the female personification of wisdom from the Book of Proverbs, Hermes, Thoth, Mercury and Hermes Trismegistus—not because any of them (apart from the lady Wisdom of Proverbs) could have directly influenced the Anglo-Saxon authors whose poems I discuss in this book. I want only to establish what a curious and tangled web of traditions underlies Western notions of wisdom. Whatever that quality or faculty or possession we call "wisdom" actually *is*, it involves far more than just practical life counsel or even consistent teachings. One moment's wisdom can be another's droll foolery, as the renaissance Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus suggests in his toy of comic profundity, *In Praise of Folly*. Or as Plato insinuates in the person of his master Socrates, the world's "wisest man," whose bad-boy heart-throb and alter ego Alcibiades, as we learn from other sources, was implicated in a drunken midnight carouse in which a number of herms (stylised ithyphallic stelae dedicated to, erm, Hermes) around Athens were sacrilegiously divested of their *ithyphalloi*. Frat-boy tricksterdom, indeed, especially given the further jolly japes Alcibiades would later inflict upon the Athenian polity in his brief public career. It is perhaps no coincidence

such figures come to be associated with both wisdom and wiles, profound understanding and deep cunning. Wisdom can sometimes be mad, bad and dangerous to know.

Almost every scholarly discussion of wisdom literature opens with either a tortuous attempt to define just what it is we name with the word "wisdom" or a blunt acknowledgement that such a definition cannot be satisfactorily nailed down. Sensibly, no Old English poet attempts to invoke wisdom in any such rigorous fashion by name. The Old English word *wisdom* occurs frequently in religious poems, especially the longer saints' lives such as *Andreas*, *Guthlac*, *Elene* and *Juliana*, where it routinely names divine wisdom in contrast with a limited human wisdom. It's common in prose texts as well: the tenth-century abbot and homilist Ælfric repeatedly characterises God's *sunu* ("son"), the second person of the trinity, as God's *wisdom*, through whom he accomplished his plan of creation, a part not unlike that of the personified Wisdom who speaks in the Book of Proverbs. The meaning of the Old English word *wisdom* appears to have changed little as it travelled the centuries to become modern English "wisdom," though what exactly both words denote can be questioned: is it a possession or a state? Something the wise man has acquired or a condition the wise woman inhabits? The Anglo-Saxon poems commonly identified as "wisdom" poems in fact use the word *wisdom* relatively rarely, in contrast to its frequent occurrence in more conventional religious discourses.

When Christianity arrived on the shores of Anglo-Saxon England, it brought with it radically different sensibilities from those of the land's Germanic inhabitants prior to their conversion. At least as far as we can tell: we can paint here in only broad and tentative strokes, because we know so little about the psychology of the pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons, but think for a moment of those items of modern English slang and taboo vocabulary identified as "Anglo-Saxonisms" (sometimes qualified as "ripe" or "four-letter") associated with basic bodily functions and crudely material considerations more generally. That popular and instinctive sensibility responds to what linguists characterise more specifically as a bias in Old English vocabulary towards the concrete over the abstract. Though it possesses its share of native abstractions (*wis-dom*, "the condition of being wise," is one of them), its vocabulary is dominated by concrete conceptions—take the humble compound *nas-ðyrl* ("nostril"), whose elements denote, literally, "nose-hole." When you consider further that "drill" and "thrill" both derive from *ðyrl*, you reach an almost bodily sense (ouch!) of just how concrete Old English vocabulary can be.

Common Old English abstractions, such as *wisdom*, stand only one degree removed from concrete, material reality, as their modern English descendants attest (I italicise their suffixes, which derive from the Old English abstract suffixes *-oð*, *-had*, *-nes*, *-scip*, and *-dom*): "leng*th*," "bread*th*," "streng*th*," "neighbour*hood*," "sister*hood*," "child*hood*," "priest*hood*," "bright*ness*," "dark*ness*," "friend*ship*," "free*dom*." All such native vocabulary, though technically abstract, has a more stolid and concrete feel (and commonly fewer syllables) than such airy-fairy imports as "pulchritude," "alacrity," and "contemplation." When, after their conversion and introduction to formal literacy, Anglo-Saxon writers began to adapt Latin theological abstractions into their own tongue, they fell back on their native tendency to coin new abstract vocabulary from existing concrete words: *þrynes* (literally, "three-ness") for *trinitas* ("the Trinity"), *upastige* (literally, "up-climbing") for *ascensio* ("the Ascension"), *up-cynd* (literally "up-kind") for *divinus* ("divine" or "heavenly") or *menniscnes* (literally, "mannishness") for *humanitas* ("human nature" or "human-kind"). Notice how most of the Old English words were eventually replaced by Latin loan-word equivalents, whose greater abstraction must have suggested a greater theological heft. The Old English words for the Latin *coelis* ("heaven" or "the heavens"), *heofon/heofonas*—as abstract a *concept* as any the period affords—still cling to the concrete realm of gravity in their association with the palpably physical verb *hebban* (ancestor of modern English "heave" and "heft"). This tension pulls Old English vocabulary two ways: towards the lived and felt facts of experience on the one hand, and on the other toward the often quite abstract thoughts humans' lived experience can inspire. It lies very near the linguistic heart of the Anglo-Saxon wisdom tradition. So near, in fact, that it remains uncertain whether and to what extent the surviving wisdom poems reflect an inheritance of native lore gathered across unknown centuries of oral composition and transmission, or whether they reflect the influence of imported biblical exemplars such as the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Wisdom. We cannot say. To cite a modern analogue: who can tell where and when the saying "A penny saved is a penny earned" originated? We can record its first known occurrence in manuscript or print, which tells us nothing about how much earlier it may have circulated orally. Or we could cite the introduction of the penny into English coinage as a possible clue, which might suggest the saying is as old as metallic currency. But the word "earn," with its overtones of an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, might suggest a more recent origin in the modern

age of wage labour, with its concomitant valorisation of household economy and daily thrift.

The point in all this digression is a simple one: the fundamental notion of a "wisdom" literature is elusive and hard to characterise precisely. It can be slotted comfortably into the cultures of widely differing times, from the days of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian empires to our present post-industrial modernity. No element of daily conduct is too prosaic or banal for it to consider, nor does the most high-flown metaphysics stand beyond its reach. It can mash up the common, the uncommon and the uncanny in a simple turn of phrase. The Anglo-Saxon wisdom tradition may draw equally on a dimly recalled Germanic antiquity or from even more ancient Near Eastern cultures, rendered vividly present through the new medium of textually mediated discourse and the authority of the Bible. The wisdom of scripture and the church fathers breathed an air wholly different from what the native *scopas* ("poets") would have salvaged out of the deep past in their stores of song, passed down through centuries in oral performance and aural memory. Yet untangling the two inheritances of Anglo-Saxon England's Christian poets is an uncertain undertaking.

On top of this, the "wisdom" (we should perhaps say "wisdoms") recorded in extant Old English poems addresses both universal human concerns and others that may elude modern sensibilities altogether. Modern Western readers respond to the world through a filter of abstractions and categories bequeathed us by Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. Plato directs us to follow the projection of changeless, eternal ideal forms down into the world of messy, mutable particulars. Aristotle starts with taxonomies of particulars, whence he would lead us upward to the ideal forms behind them. This is, of course, a grotesque oversimplification of very complex issues, but it can at least suggest how later intellectual constructs often owe a great deal still to Platonic and Aristotelian traditions: scholastic theology, Linnaean taxonomies of zoological forms, the periodic table, pixelated digital imagery and evolutionary genealogies, to name a random few.

Awareness of this should teach us caution. We ought to approach texts from cultures that carry in their DNA genes from very different intellectual and cognitive *milieux* slowly, with open ears and imaginations. The distant forebears of the Anglo-Saxon poets, whoever they were, could not have been influenced directly by ancient Greek philosophy. Their thoughts would have run in channels different from those that lie beneath the main currents of European thought from Plato's time to ours. The

Anglo-Saxon poets whose works we do possess inherited a dark legacy from their native forebears, "dark" in the sense of largely invisible to us. It came to them embedded in the vocabulary and diction of their vernacular poetic language, even as they appropriated it to give voice to new ideas, beliefs and world views far different from those of their ancestral past. Christianity remade the world everywhere it took hold, but the poets of Anglo-Saxon England, even as they sang and celebrated that new world's beliefs, its saints and its ideals, maintained, perhaps unwittingly, vestiges of the old world that the new had relegated to the past, its use-by date (for them) well and truly expired. About the impacts of the new technology of writing that came bundled with monastic practice as Christianity took hold, we can only speculate. But we can also be only grateful that it preserved these alloys of antique thought and imagination for our contemplation.

The transformation of Anglo-Saxon culture from pre-Christian to Christian would have taken place fitfully. Little of it is clearly visible to us, though it has left behind countless traces we can piece into a broad picture, such as the one I've very briefly sketched here. I am primarily interested in poetry, and all that I've reviewed suggests that the practice of poetry would have been a strangely mixed business in Anglo-Saxon England, as all sectors of society registered and adjusted to the new world that had opened around them. The centuries that followed the initial conversion are crucial for any literary investigation, since they involve the ninth- and tenth-century monastic reforms that led Anglo-Saxon *scriptoria* to devote much more time to the composition, transcription and dissemination of vernacular texts, often translations from key Latin texts such as the Bible and the writings of the church fathers, but including as well the vernacular poetic compositions that frame our entire understanding of Old English poetics.

In those surviving poems we can read a constant negotiation conducted between past and present. On the one hand, the church sought to lead its converts away from the old markers of their pre-Christian antiquity, either violently, by the smashing of idols, the demolition or repurposing of temples and the eradication of sacred groves, or more gently, by appropriating old sites and images and characteristic themes and consecrating them to Christian ends. The process is narrated, with some degree of institutional bias, by the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which, taken with due caution, remains a touchstone of modern historiography. The archetypal conversion story in Bede's *History* takes hold from the top down: missionaries approach

King Edwin of Northumbria and his nobles to make their pitch (England was then a patchwork of smallish kingdoms, more resembling clans or tribes than anything we'd recognise as nation states). Those notables decide, and the commons follow as they will. Or won't—we hear little about how a kingdom's ordinary subjects responded to their ruling elites' decisions in matters of faith.

And nowhere at all do we hear any account of how the advent of all this good news would have sat in the consciousness of the *scopas*, whose lyrics had traditionally recorded the events and key figures who determined the common weal or woe. Once again, any attempt to imagine their situation at the time of the conversion must concede the flimsiness of our present-day knowledge. We simply do not know who these figures were or just how they practised their art. That they possessed an art, highly developed across centuries of oral practice, we can have little doubt. The art of their descendants whose Christian compositions came to be recorded in monastic manuscripts attests to the rich textures and deeply felt patterns of sound, sense and imagination such long practice can develop. But the metamorphosis of the older art into the newer remains invisible to us—only its final effects have reached us in the various manuscripts held in modern museums, butterflies without specimens of cocoon, caterpillar or egg.

The transformation, for anyone who lived through it, must have presented confronting aspects: the free-standing cultural authority of the *scopas* would have to have yielded most of its ground to the new text-based authority of scripture and the culture it supported. In effect, the monastic scribe would have rendered the *scop* redundant in some of his most visible and respected functions. Major elements of cultural memory and identity—religious and historical narrative, speculative and wisdom traditions, medicine, topography and onomastics—would have passed from the *scop*'s care to the scribe's, under the church's overarching authority that laid claim to it all.

These considerations stir behind any modern approach to the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England. In the so-called "wisdom" poems, that stirring is just a little louder than usual. As we shall see, the elusive figure of Wisdom speaks in many tongues and guises. She is the property of no one ideology or belief system, though many claim her as their own. Reading Old English poetic wisdom, we must weigh the claims of the assertive young church authority against other voices, fainter but still powerful, that speak of other wisdoms won in the hard wars of experience

that echo out of a deep past, only partially censored by the new sensibilities that breathed the air of the cloister.

A constant question that haunts any modern reading of such poetry is that of author and audience. Who wrote these poems? For whom? The texts themselves suggest different possibilities. Their mere existence *as* pieces of writing points to the milieu of the Anglo-Saxon monastery and its scriptorium. But their strangely mixed heritage—as far as we can discern it at all—speaks in a chorus of different voices. In *The Fetters in the Frost* I hope to offer readers an accessible introduction to enough of these voices to allow them some sense of the Anglo-Saxon wisdom tradition's polyphonic richness.

My own readings of these texts assume a kind of *faux*-innocence, a knowing unknowingness that seeks to evade the constrictions of rigorous academic discourse by approaching each work as a voice in its own right. While no modern reader can engage them intelligibly without some objective awareness of their time and context, I have tried as much as possible to keep the formal armature of textual criticism, source-and-analogue study and patristic theology out of sight, to attend primarily to the poems' unknown authors' voices rather than to those of modern scholars. In doing so, I will have inevitably committed my share of *gaucheries, naïvetés* and re-inventions of the wheel, but that is a price worth paying in the interest of giving this unique wisdom tradition the scope to sound its extraordinary music of the mind once more.