

made him, and we conclude that he personifies the evil result of the ill-used power of Capital, and that he is slain with his own weapon, his power being taken from him by the new popular form of government and placed in the hands of Labour.

The old theory of equality is one to which we gladly subscribe, but we cannot forget the everyday fact that in each pan of milk the cream rises to the top, and that intellect and health, and what Mr. William Watson would call the 'poorer virtues,' such as thrift and foresight and prudence, are not distributed equally among men, and that always there will be spendthrifts and accumulators, those who sow and those who reap, those who are born to rule and those who are born to serve. The story of *The Wood beyond the World*, taken as a fairy-tale, is poetical and highly imaginative, but if we are compelled to look into its teaching we are reminded of the mirror in which we now see life darkly, and of an ancient mirror in which the faces look somewhat distorted, though the frame is quaintly set and enriched with jewels; we are delighted when the poet forgets his philosophy, and at no time is his idealism wearisome, nor are we deluged with 'cardinal virtues and deadly sins.'

BEOWULF

1895

72. Theodore Watts, unsigned review,
Athenaeum

10 August 1895, no. 3537, 181-2

We can well imagine that this translation of *Beowulf* into rhymeless alliterative lines will seem uncouth to the general reader whose ear is familiar only with the quantitative scansion of classic movements and the accentual prosody of modern rhyme and blank verse. But if the business of the translator of an ancient poem is to pour the old wine into the new bottles with as little loss as possible of its original aroma, Mr. Morris's efforts have been crowned with entire success.

The archaic atmosphere of an old poem is, of course, the result of its verbal texture no less than of its informing temper, and the antiquated English and antiquated movements of Mr. Morris bring his readers far nearer to the original than any later form could have done. With regard to the metre, the most poetically minded of the commentators on the poem, Mr. Stopford A. Brooke, has some excellent words upon the extreme difficulty of translating *Beowulf*:

Translations of poetry are never much good, but at least they should always endeavour to have the musical movement of poetry, and to obey the laws of the verse they translate. A translation made in any one of our existing rhyming metres seemed to me as much out of the question as a prose translation. None of these metres resemble those of Anglo-Saxon poetry; and, moreover, their associations would modernize the old English thought. An Anglo-Saxon king in modern Court dress would not look more odd and miserable than an Anglo-Saxon poem in a modern rhyming metre.

We have frequently said that the only modern poet who could translate *Beowulf* was the author of *Sigurd*, the one great epic of the

nineteenth century, whose sympathy with the Old English temper is nothing less than marvellous. Yet even for a genius so rare as his, and a knowledge of the subject so exhaustive, the task must have been one of immense difficulty. So powerful is the vision at work in this glorious poem, that it seems the product not of a poetical artificer, but of Nature herself. And in some measure this effect is due to the peculiar happiness of the metrical form in which it is embodied. The last crowning excellence in all poetry is that it shall seem to be inspired, and one of the greatest aids to this is that the struggle between matter and form shall be so little apparent that the movement seems the inevitable outcome of the emotion of him who tells the tale or sings the song.

Every language has, of course, an instinctive leaning towards the rhythmic movement that is natural to its genius. The great qualities of eagerness and dignity which characterize the Homeric poems arise in large measure from the fact that the quantitative hexametrical movement is so natural an expression of the genius of the Greek language that in the Homeric lines it seems to be as inevitable a rhythm of Nature's as the rhythm of breathing. And so, again, in that language whose fecundity of rhymes is so enormous that every man who speaks it is a born rhymers. Even work so artistic as that of Dante seems inevitable in its form, and on that account inspired.

With regard to modern English verse, no student of poetry can have failed to indulge in speculations as to what would have been the course of English metres had not the struggle between the scansion of the native forms and the Romance measures been decided by the advent of the genius of Chaucer, who thus sneers at alliteration: 'I cannot geste, rom, ram, ruff, by my letter.' Notwithstanding that English passed from an inflected to an uninflected tongue, the bias of the English ear remained as strongly towards alliterative bars as is the bias of the Italian ear towards rhyme. Apart from the paucity of English rhymes, the power of the ancestral strain is so great that English poets may, as we have before remarked, be divided into those who are born rhymers and those whose every couplet shows that rhyme is to them not a spur, but a curb. The greatest masters of free rhyming are no doubt Coleridge and Shelley in their best work, but the reason why so few English poets have succeeded in producing much rhymed work that seems free from artifice is connected very deeply and very subtly with the fact that our ancestors found the perfect music in the alliterative movements of *Beowulf*, and afterwards of *Piers Plowman*. Whatever may be said for or against this generalization, however, it is certain that in all languages

not only passion, but all strong emotion, is naturally and instinctively alliterative, and no scansion seems so absolutely the scansion of Nature as that which governs the verses of *Beowulf* and other Old English poems.

Sometimes Mr. Morris does, no doubt, load the second division of the line with too many syllables, forgetting that in this respect there is a great difference between an inflected and uninflected language. Whether the Old English versifier used the short line with only one or two slurred syllables, or the long Cædmonian line where the unaccentuated syllables are many and variable, the music of his lines depended as much on the unaccentuated syllables as on the accentuated ones, and the overloading of a bar seems to have been instinctively neutralized by a free use of liquids. No doubt, as Wright pointed out in his introduction to *Piers Plowman*, the quicker pronunciation of Middle English required a greater number of syllables to fill up the same space of time as that occupied by a line of the same length in what it was once the fashion to call Anglo-Saxon, owing to the more slow and impressive pronunciation of the older language; but Langland always took care of his consonants and liquids, so that there should be no pebbly movement.

With regard to the poem itself, the temper and the execution of *Beowulf* afford another proof how little the growth of civilization and all its accomplishments can do in the way of enriching the vision and the faculty divine.

[concluding narrative section omitted]