Swarthmore College

Works

English Literature Faculty Works

English Literature

1982

A Feast Of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs

Craig Williamson , translator

Swarthmore College, cwillia1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit>

Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Craig Williamson , translator. (1982). "A Feast Of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs". *A Feast Of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs*.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/70>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

INTRODUCTION

PROEM

Across time the ox's skin and the dart
Of once-wing from horn to page preserve
The song-smith's hammer, fire, din—
Who were the Anglo-Saxon riddlers
Who locked in the dark mirror of metaphor
A cultural eye, an ageless game?
Children do this and dying men—
Creation sings in the cow's dead skin:
Bound in another, all things begin.

The Old English riddles are a metaphoric and metamorphic celebration of life in the eye of the Anglo-Saxon. Metaphoric because each riddlic creature takes on the guise of another: the nightingale is an evening poet, mead is a wrestler, the sword a celibate thane, the silver wine-cup a seductress. Metamorphic because in the natural flow all creatures shift shapes: the horn turns from twinned head-warrior of the wild aurochs to battle-singer or mead-belly—sometimes it swallows the blood of hawthorn and gives to quill and vellum page the gift of words. The book too has its own beginnings—it sings in riddle 24:

A life-thief stole my world-strength,
 Ripped off flesh and left me skin,
 Dipped me in water and drew me out,
 Stretched me bare in the tight sun;
 The hard blade, clean steel, cut,
 Scraped—fingers folded, shaped me.
 Now the bird's once wind-stiff joy
 Darts often to the horn's dark rim,
 Sucks wood-stain, steps back again—
 With a quick scratch of power, tracks
 Black on my body, points trails.¹

The metaphor of riddles mirrors metamorphosis: all things shift in the body of nature and the mind of man. But the flow, the form and movement, remains. As the mind shifts, it shapes meaning. When is an iceberg a witch-warrior? When it curses and slaughters ships. When is it a great mother? When transformed and lifted, it rains down. There is a primitive participation and poetic synchronicity in this. Man charts the world and the world sings in images his uncharted spirit. The riddles are primitive flower and lyric seed. To us they offer a world in which there is an eye (I) in every other, a charged world where as Walt Whitman says, there is "God in every object."² If we no longer see the tree in the table or sense the sinuous vine in the wine's work or quicken in the bow of the nightingale's song, this may be a world we need.

ORIGINS

The riddles rest in a thousand-year-old vellum manuscript known as the Exeter Book which resides in Exeter Cathedral Library (skin songs in a holy

1. All translations of Old English poetry are my own. The original texts for riddles may be found in my text edition, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); for nonriddlic poems, in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (hereafter *ASPR*), ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-53). Occasionally I have consulted other editions in making my translations from *ASPR*.

2. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," stanza 148, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1973), p. 86.

A Feast of Creatures

house). The scribal hand of the book dates from the late tenth century. Leofric, first Bishop of Exeter, donated the "great English book with variously wrought songs"³ to the cathedral library in the eleventh century. The riddles were probably first written down in the late seventh or eighth centuries—or even in the ninth. How far back into oral tradition some of them go remains an open question. Who first chanted or wrote the riddles we may never know. Cynewulf, whose runic signature appears in two of the Exeter Book poems, was once thought to be author of the riddles; on stylistic grounds this now seems unlikely. Aldhelm of Malmesbury, the seventh-century English churchman who wrote one hundred Latin riddles, may have written some of the Old English riddle-songs. His love of vernacular poetry was legendary. He is said by William of Malmesbury to have charmed Anglo-Saxons into church by chanting Old English songs from a wayside bridge.⁴ Aldhelm sent his Latin riddles and a treatise on verse to King Aldfrith of Northumbria, and the good king (who during his Irish exile turned out verse as the bard Flann Fina) may have responded in kind. The ninth-century soldier-scholar King Alfred, who admired Aldhelm's verse, may have honored his literary forebear with a riddle or two. But these are only guesses—the parentage of riddles is lost in time. Like most of their siblings in the Exeter Book, they remain anonymous voices of an age. As the book or singer of riddle 91 says: "Though the children of earth eagerly seek / To trace my trail, sometimes my tracks are dim."⁵

The manuscript itself is of little help in tracing the origin of riddles. The Exeter Book looks like an eclectic anthologist's choice of Old English verse. The ninety-odd riddles (the exact number depends on editorial grouping of related segments) occur in two main sections. The book also contains religious poetry ranging from the long tripartite treatment of Christ to the Old English "Phoenix" and "Physiologus" (including panther, whale, and partridge); saints' lives such as "Guthlac" and "Juliana"; poems in the elegiac mode (laments with or without Christian consolation) such as "The

3. A description (translated from the Old English) of the Exeter Book which appears in a list of Leofric's donations to the cathedral at the beginning of the book.

4. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1870 [Rolls Series 52]), p. 336.

5. For more on the problems of authorship and date of the Exeter Book riddles, see the introduction to my text edition noted above.

Wanderer," "The Seafarer," and "The Wife's Lament"; the heroic "Widsith" and "Deor"; gnomic and homiletic verse such as "Precepts" and the "Exeter Maxims"; and the lyrically enigmatic "Wulf and Eadwacer," once thought to be a clue to the Cynewulfian authorship of riddles, now held to be a dramatic soliloquy like "The Wife's Lament." The Exeter Book itself is a rare creature—one of four surviving major manuscripts of Old English poetry.⁶ In a medieval world where Latin manuscripts were primarily cherished by the religious scribes who copied them and monastic libraries which held them, and where all manuscripts were considered food for the fire by marauding Norsemen—the survival of the Exeter Book is something of a miracle. The book is scorched and stained and suffers from hard use; some of its pages are missing. Like some bizarrely shape-shifting riddle-creature, it seems to have been used variously as a cutting-board, a hot-plate, a beer-mat, and a filing cabinet for gold leaf. After this inglorious service, it lay song-dormant in library sleep until the nineteenth century when its contents were transcribed, edited, translated, and anthologized.

The poems of the Exeter Book were first edited by Benjamin Thorpe in 1842.⁷ The first systematic attempt to solve all of the riddles came with Franz Dietrich's articles in 1859 and 1865.⁸ The riddles were first edited as a separate text with full critical apparatus by Frederick Tupper in 1910.⁹ Later editions of the Exeter Book by Christian W. M. Grein, Bruno Assmann, W. S. Mackie, and George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, and riddle editions by A. J. Wyatt and Moritz Trautmann helped to establish a text and to provide a proper critical context in which to read the riddles.¹⁰ Riddle translators have included poets and scholars (many of

6. The other manuscripts are the Vercelli Book, the Junius Manuscript, and the Beowulf Codex.

7. Benjamin Thorpe, ed., *Codex Exoniensis: A Collection of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (Society of Antiquaries of London, 1842).

8. F. Dietrich, "Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 11 (1859): 448–90; 12 (1865): 232–52.

9. Frederick Tupper, Jr., ed., *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1910).

10. Christian W. M. Grein, ed., *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: G. H. Vigand, 1858); Bruno Assmann, ed., *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie*, vol. 3 (Göttingen: G. H. Vigand, 1898); W. S. Mackie, ed. and tr., *The Exeter Book*, pt. 2 (London: Early English Text Society, 1934); George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); A. J. Wyatt, ed., *Old English Riddles* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1912); Moritz Trautmann, ed., *Die altenglischen Rätsel: Die*

whom are quoted in the final section of this introduction); translators of the full corpus include Mackie, Paull F. Baum, and Kevin Crossley-Holland.¹¹ My own edition of the riddles appeared in 1977;¹² my translations here are the first to be based on this most recent text. Occasionally, poets like Richard Wilbur have not only translated riddles but written their own (the importance of riddling to a modern poetic tradition is discussed briefly below in the section, "Poetry and the Primitive"). Thus does the Exeter Book offer not only an eye onto the medieval world but an ancient means of perceiving our own.

SOURCES AND ANALOGUES

The Old English riddles are the first and finest vernacular riddles of the Middle Ages. Although little is known about the possible social contexts of oral riddling in early Anglo-Saxon England, the riddles are presumably a wedding of oral practice and Latin literary tradition. Both a religious doctrine and a literary tradition were brought to England by Christian missionaries who carried with the gift of script, the Word of God. But as was true of many other Christian traditions, the literary riddle was transformed by the Anglo-Saxons into something uniquely their own.

The father of medieval Latin riddle poetry is Symphosius, an author of the fourth or fifth century whose identity remains obscure. He composed a century of riddles (set of one hundred), each three lines long, each bearing an entitled solution. His riddles influenced the Anglo-Latin riddle writers—mainly Aldhelm (640–709), Abbot of Malmesbury and later Bishop of Sherborne, who wrote his own century of Latin riddles (and may have written some of the Old English); Tatwine (d. 734), Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote forty Latin riddles; and Eusebius (d. 747), now thought

Rätsel des Exeterbuchs (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1915). For a fuller discussion of the various critical editions, see my text edition of 1977 noted above.

11. Mackie, *The Exeter Book*, pt. 2; Paull F. Baum, tr., *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1963); Kevin Crossley-Holland, tr., *The Exeter Riddle Book* (London: Folio Society, 1978), reissued as *The Exeter Book Riddles* (New York: Penguin, 1979).

12. Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*.

to be Hwaetberht, Abbot of Wearmouth and a friend of Bede, who wrote sixty. Other Anglo-Latin riddle writers include Alcuin, Boniface, and a handful of anonymous poets (possibly including Bede himself). The influence of Latin riddles on the Old English has been somewhat overstated in the past. Three Old English riddles show the direct influence of Symphosius (45, 81, 82); two are translations from the Latin of Aldhelm (33, 38). Elsewhere (for example, in 14, 24, 36, 49, 58, 61, 68, 79, 80, 84) riddle subjects and motifs may be the same, but this could be caused by similar perceptions or a common nonriddlic source such as the natural lore of Pliny or Isidore. And in the case of Anglo-Latin writers, it is often impossible to say of comparative Latin and English passages, which was the likely source and which the derivative.

The Latin riddles are exercises in ingenuity. Each offers its solution in a title, then turns on a simple metaphor or paradox like a small jewel set with wit. The Latin riddles parade without play. They lack the imaginative power which allows the poet to sense, sing, and celebrate the nonhuman world about him. The Old English riddles are projective play. They expand the self and inspire the world (whether bird, shield, bookworm, or storm) with lyrical power. They play with mystery. Consider, for example, the comparative anchors of Symphosius and the Old English riddler:

Anchor

My twin points are bound by an iron bar.
I wrestle with wind, struggle with the sea.
I probe deep waters—I bite the earth.

—Symphosius¹³

* * *

In battle I rage against wave and wind,
Strive against storm, dive down seeking
A strange homeland, shrouded by the sea.
In the grip of war, I am strong when still;
In battle-rush, rolled and ripped
In flight. Conspiring wind and wave
Would steal my treasure, strip my hold,

13. All translations of medieval Latin riddles are my own. The originals may be found in volumes 133 and 133A of the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968). The anchor riddle of Symphosius quoted here is from vol. 133A, p. 682.

But I seize glory with a guardian tail
As the clutch of stones stands hard
Against my strength. Can you guess my name?
—Old English Riddle 14

The Latin riddle is a quick succession of controlled steps. The title gives us the solution; the riddle is a rhetorical show. First we have the creature's shape and composition, next the metaphor of anchor as wave-warrior, finally the paradox of sea-diver and earth-biter. The "I" of the riddle is never in doubt—it is the poet's plain pretense. The "I" of the Old English riddle is unknown, but as the metaphor of the storm-warrior unfolds in lyrical beauty, the eye of the solver is opened to the clutch and roll of the anchor's war-world. Here the eye/I of the creature draws us in to sustained belief. We rage and struggle, seek a shrouded home, battle the wind- and wave-thieves for a clutch of glory and the ship's hold. The treasure of this riddle is its liberative power: it draws us from the bone-house into an iron body and a battle-storm. We have never been in this imaginative world before—it is a dreamlike mirror of our own war-world. The mind rolls, the anchor glories—it is a strange and heartening synchronicity. What we guess finally is what we have become. There is nothing like this in the Latin of Symphosius.

The Latin inkhorn riddle of Eusebius turns on the contrast between present bitterness and past glory, but the contrast is carried to a new elegiac power in the haunting lament of the Old English horn:

Inkhorn

Once a fateful weapon, I rode with the arms
Of the bull, a bold-riding battle-crest.
Now my carved belly holds a bitter drink
Though my belch seems bright, sweet, clean.
—Eusebius¹⁴

* * *

We stood, tall hard twins, my brother
And I—pointed and perched on a homeland
Higher and nobler for our fierce adorning.

14. *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 133: 240.

Often the forest, dear sheltering wood,
 Was our night-cover, rain-shield for creatures
 Shaped by God. Now grim usurpers
 Must steal our homeland glory, hard young
 Brothers who press in our place. Parted,
 We suffer separate sorrows. In my belly
 Is a black wonder—I stand on wood.
 Untwinned I guard the table's end.
 What hoard holds my lost brother in the wide
 World I will never know. Once we rode
 The high side of battle, hard warriors
 Keeping courage together—neither rushed
 To the fray alone. Now unwhole creatures
 Tear at my belly. I cannot flee.
 The man who follows my tracks of glory
 For wealth and power, in a different light
 May find what is wholly for his soul's delight.

—Old English Riddle 84

The Latin creature moves wittily from the bull's battle-crest to a clean belch of wisdom. The clever manipulation calls attention to the poet as manipulator. The voice of the horn is not embodied. Nothing in the language compels us to ride from head to table or to taste the bitter drink. Nothing in the riddle breathes *I am*. The Old English horn creates in its (his) elegiac cry the fierce consciousness of human suffering. The horn-warrior laments a lost, glorious homeland and suffers separation from his twin brother. In his unstable mind history reweaves itself as nightmare—recollection only increases his anxiety and pain. His fate is hard—he guards in his belly a bitter, black treasure which the unwhole quill-birds attack. Even harder is not knowing his brother's fate. Isolated on the board, surrounded by enemies, he is tormented by uncertain memory and by doubts about the nature of fate in an unstable world. Ironically he finds consolation "in a different light" by the end of the poem—the tracks from his belly (in this light *his* tracks) may lead men through letters to wisdom and deep delight. Isolation, suffering, lament for youthful glories and lost kin, recollection turning to nightmare, the progress from melancholy to wisdom—these are some of the characteristics of Old English elegiac

poems like "The Wanderer" and "The Wife's Lament."¹⁵ Certainly the seeds (or perhaps the hybrid blooms) of this tradition are present in the horn riddle. Unlike the Latin effort, this riddle hauls us into the landscape of suffering and forces us to feel with the creature doubt and pain. The poem calls forth our powers of recognition and realization as the Latin riddle does not. This is a more subtle shaping typical of the Old English riddles. The Latin horn is always a creature outside, an *other* manipulated by the poet. The Anglo-Saxon horn in its warlike suffering and sorrow is simply one of us. When we discover his plight, we discover ourselves.

Like the Latin riddles, learned dialogues may have influenced and been influenced by the Exeter Book riddles. In *The Dark Ages*, W. P. Ker calls riddles and dialogues "common forms of instruction and literary entertainment which have a large influence on the culture of the Middle Ages."¹⁶ Of the dialogue he says:

[It] supplied two common rhetorical wants. It was a sort of rhetorical catechism, or a dictionary of poetical synonyms and periphrases, —varieties of *kenning*, to use the convenient and intelligible Norse name. It might also be the frame of a collection of riddles, which were a favourite exercise for fancy and rhetorical skill combined.¹⁷

The use of riddles (or riddlic metaphors) as an important rhetorical device in medieval dialogue may be seen in Alcuin's eighth-century Latin "Dialogue with Pippin" and in the ninth- or tenth-century Old English dialogue poem, "Solomon and Saturn." Alcuin was an English churchman, a writer of riddles, master of the York school, and in the late eighth century,

15. For the characteristics of the Old English elegy, see B. J. Timmer, "The Elegiac Mood in Old English Poetry," *English Studies* 24 (1942): 34-36; R. F. Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961); S. B. Greenfield, "The Old English Elegies," in *Continuations and Beginnings*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966), pp. 142-75; and Rosemary Woolf, "The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and the Genre of *Planctus*," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. L. E. Nicholson and D. W. Frese (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 192-207. Some of my observations on the elegiac horn riddle were first made in formal response to a paper on the same subject by Edith Williams at a special session of the 1978 Modern Language Association meeting. The session devoted to Old English riddles was organized by Tim Lally.

16. W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 86.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Charlemagne's principal educator and head of his palace school at Archen. Alcuin's "Dialogue with Pippin" (Pippin was a son of Charlemagne) shows how the occasional metaphoric play of medieval dialogue could become riddlic. The scholar questions and the boy answers:

What is sleep?—The image of death.

What is man's liberty?—Innocence.

What is the head?—The crown of the body.

What is the body?—The home of the mind.

What is the mouth?—The nourisher of the body.

What are the teeth?—The millstones of our food.

What are the lips?—The doors of the mouth.

What is the throat?—The devourer of the food.

What are the hands?—The workmen of the body.

What is the moon?—The eye of night; the giver of dew; the prophetess of the weather.

What are the stars?—The paintings of the summit of nature; the seaman's pilots; the ornaments of night.

What is rain?—The earth's conception; the mother of corn.

What is a cloud?—The night of day; the labour of the eyes.

What is wind?—The perturbation of air; the moving principle of water; the dryer of earth.

What is earth?—The mother of the growing; the nurse of the living; the storehouse of life; the devourer of all things.

What is a wonder?—I saw a man standing; a dead man walking who never existed.

How could this be?—An image in water.

An unknown person without tongue or voice spoke to me, who never existed before, nor has existed since, nor ever will be again: and whom I neither heard nor knew.—It was your dream.

I saw the dead produce the living, and by the breath of the living the dead were consumed.—From the friction of [sticks] fire was produced, which consumed.

Who is he that will rise higher if you take away his head?—Look
at your bed and you will find him there.

.
I saw a flying woman with an iron beak, a wooden body, and a
feathered tail, carrying death.—She is a companion of soldiers.
[What is a soldier?—A wall of power, the dread of an enemy, a
glorious service.]

What is that which is, and is not?—Nothing.

How can a thing be, yet not exist?—In name and not in fact.

What is a silent messenger?—That which I hold in my hand.

What is that?—My letter.¹⁸

The dialogue begins with plain questions and simple metaphoric answers. When the talk turns to cosmology, the metaphors spin out—answers imitating riddles. What is the eye of night, the giver of dew, the prophetess of weather? The moon. When Alcuin asks, “What is a wonder?” (in the Old English riddles the creature is often a “wonder” or “marvel”), Pippin responds with a true riddle. From that point on the exchange is entirely in riddles—ranging from the slightly bawdy bedroom wonder (probably a pillow) to the philosophical paradox of the apparently real nothing. The dialogue thus becomes a seed-frame for riddles.

The Old English “Solomon and Saturn” is a ninth- or tenth-century poetic dialogue in two parts. In the first part the pre-Christian Saturn, “prince of the Chaldeans,” asks a series of questions about the Pater Noster to which Solomon replies in the light of Christian doctrine. The second and longer section of the poem is a riddlike dialogue on the nature of the world and the shape of creation. Here the questions are sometimes deeply riddlic and may have been influenced by the form and style of the earlier Exeter Book riddles. Two examples may suffice:

Saturn said:

What dumb creature rests in its den

Wise and silent with seven tongues,

18. “Disputation regalis et nobilissimi iuvenio Pippini cum Albino scholastico,” lines 17–20, 28–32, 51–56, 86–87, 90–91, 101, 104–9. For the Latin text, see Walther Suchier, ed., *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. 24, pt. 2, pp. 137–43. The translation quoted is by Sharon Turner (except for bracketed material, which is my own translation) and appears in *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Longman, 1852), 3: 380–82.

Each tongue pointed with twenty blades,
Each blade an angel's wisdom that can raise
The gold walls of Jerusalem and cause
The red rood of Christ, the glory-cross,
The truth-sign to shine? Say what I mean.

Solomon said:

Books are bound with glory—they bode
Good counsel and conscious will.
They are man's strength and firm foundation,
His anchored thought. They lift the mind
From melancholy and help hard need.

.

Saturn said:

What creature walks the world shaking
Its firm foundations, waking sorrow
Like a grim wanderer. No star or stone,
Water or wild beast escapes its grip;
Things great and small, hard and soft,
Submit—it feasts on ground-walkers,
Sky-floaters, sea-swimmers in thousands.

Solomon said:

Age is an earth-warrior with power over all;
In its chains all struggle, in its prison keep.
Working its will, it crushes tree,
Rips twig, whips the standing ship
In the water, beats it to the ground.
It jaws birds, death-wrestles wolves,
Outlasts stones. It slays steel,
Bites iron with rust, and takes us too.¹⁹

In his introduction to "Solomon and Saturn," Dobbie notes that the riddling questions and answers of the poem are much in the style of the Old Norse *Vafthruthnismal* in which Odin and the giant Vafthruthnir

19. "Solomon and Saturn," ll. 230-42, 283-301; *ASPR*, 6: 39-41. In the initial exchange the book with seven tongues is probably the book with seven seals in Revelation. The blades are presumably sharp-edged pages.

engage in a riddlelike contest of wits.²⁰ The questions in the Norse poem are often cosmological and the answers riddles wrapped in myth. For example:

“What is the horse called that draws up day
Each morning for mankind?”

“The sky-horse is Skinfaxi, Shining-mane,
Who draws the glittering day.
The greatest of horses to all heroes—
His mane is a bright flame.”

.

“What is the source of wind that wanders
The waves unseen?”

“The Corpse-Eater Hraesvelg sits in the skin
Of an eagle at the end of heaven.
When his wings beat, wind moves
Over the world of men.”²¹

A similar riddle contest takes place in the Icelandic *Heidreks Saga* (sometimes known as the *Hervarar Saga*) where Odin in the disguise of an old man, Gestumblindi, matches wits with the proud persecutor, King Heidrek. Gestumblindi, accused of crimes, tries to escape royal judgment by stumping the king with a riddle. The disguised god riddles while the king answers:

“What strange marvel
did I see without,
in front of Delling’s door;
two things lifeless,
twain unbreathing,

20. *ASPR*, 6: lv.

21. *Vafthruthnismal*, stanzas 11–12, 36–37 (translation mine). For the original text, see Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1927), pp. 45, 49–50. For a translation of the entire poem, see Henry Adams Bellows, tr., *The Poetic Edda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 68–83.

were seething a stalk of wounds?
This riddle ponder,
O prince Heidrek!"

"Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi," said the king; "I have guessed it. Those are smith's bellows; they have no wind unless they are blown, and they are as lifeless as any other work of smith's craft, but with them one can as well forge a sword as anything else."

.

Then said Gestumblindi:

"What is that creature,
a cover to the Danes,
with back gory,
yet guardian of men;
spears it encounters,
to some gives life,
in its hollow hand
a man holds his body?
This riddle ponder,
O prince Heidrek!"

"That is the shield," said the king. "In battles it often becomes bloody, and it is a good protection for those who are nimble with it."

.

Then said Gestumblindi:

"Four are hanging,
four are walking,
two point the way out,
two ward the dogs off,
one ever dirty
dangles behind it.

This riddle ponder,
O prince Heidrek!

"Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi," said the king; "I have guessed it. That is the cow."²²

Riddlic dialogues like Alcuin's almost certainly took place in the Anglo-Saxon monasteries and in the greater courts as part of the learning process. Whether the game was carried out in the vernacular as "Solomon and Saturn" and the Northern stories suggest is not known—but it seems likely. Elaborate riddle contests are common to a number of cultures and may yet be observed in Britain today.²³

THE VARIETY OF RIDDLES

The variety of riddles may be analyzed in a number of ways. Charles W. Kennedy, for example, concentrates on the identity of unmasked riddle subjects. He says of the riddles:

They constitute a mosaic of the actualities of daily experience: a record of man's observing companionship with bird and beast, a listing of the things of which his daily life was woven, the food and drink that assuaged his hunger and thirst, the tools with which he toiled, his instruments of music, and the weapons and armor with which he fought. . . . The range of subjects drawn from Old English life is notable. Among familiar birds we find the cuckoo, hawk, jay, nightingale, owl, swallow, and swan. The animals of country life are represented by the bullock, cock and hen, dog, hedge-hog, ox, sow, badger, wolf. The list of implements and utensils of rustic life is especially wide-ranging, including the bucket, churn, flail, lock and key, loom, millstone, plow, poker, wine-cask, and wagon. Various food stuffs are mentioned, as are

22. *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and tr. Christopher Tolkien (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960), stanzas 48, 60, 70; pp. 34, 39, 43.

23. See, for example, Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Riddling Traditions in Northeastern Scotland," *Journal of American Folklore* 76 (1962): 330-36.

also ale, beer, mead, and wine. Fishery and the sea are represented by the anchor, boat, fish, oyster, a storm at sea, the wake of a ship. The ever-present threat of violence and war is reflected in the many descriptions of weapons and items of armor: the bow, dagger, helmet, lance, coat of mail, scabbard, shield, sword, and sword-rack.²⁴

Kennedy's list of subjects gives us an insight into the scope of riddlic mimesis, but it ignores the literary masks. The record of subjects is real, but the parade of disguises is surreal. The bagpipe is a bird that sings through its foot, the rake scruffs like a dog along walls, the wine-cup sings a seductress's song, and the bookworm is a plundering beast that wolfs down a tribal heritage.²⁵ Baum classifies riddles according to both subject (e.g., "Natural Phenomena," "Birds," "Music," "Weapons") and technique (e.g., "Chiefly Christian," "Runic," "Obscene"),²⁶ but the problem with this is that riddles often cross categories. The horn, for example, is both battle-weapon and musical instrument; the magpie is a runically riddled bird; the sun is a heavenly body portrayed as the thane of Christ; and the sword is a weapon that refers obscenely to its phallic double. Also, since the Old English riddles, unlike their Latin cousins, contain no entitled solutions, the hidden subjects change over the years with editorial judgments and shifting critical perceptions. Since 1943, nearly half of Kennedy's solutions have been challenged by various critics.²⁷

Whatever the system of subjects, it ought to pose questions about patterns of inclusion. Tools and weapons, instruments of writing and song, animals and birds, heavenly bodies, church-related objects—these are not surprising riddle subjects for the Anglo-Saxons. But why so many birds, so few animals, and no bugs? Where are the traditional Anglo-Saxon "beasts of battle" of the heroic poems—the eagle, raven, and wolf? Why only the domesticated ox and wild fox from the animal world? Where are the dog,

24. Charles W. Kennedy, *The Earliest English Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 134.

25. The French surrealists actually played a riddlic game of disguises called by Breton "One in the Other." See Roger Callois's description of this in "Riddles and Images," tr. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 148–58.

26. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*.

27. Critical debate on each riddle is summarized in my text edition.

goat, deer, and pig? Where are the plants that play such an important part in the medical writings and charms? Why so many ships and no wagon? (Roman roads were falling into disrepair and English rivers, more navigable than their modern counterparts, were regularly used for commercial and personal travel.) Why are tools riddled so often, people so rarely? (Normally people are part of the disguise.) Why Lot and the one-eyed seller of garlic alone among men? Must one be physically or psychically monstrous to be riddled? Why are human abstractions such as *lof* and *dom* (praise and glory), love and death, good and evil—so important elsewhere in the poetry—never riddled? By asking such questions, we may come to discover in the system of solutions a useful set of keys to Anglo-Saxon culture.

In the fields of folklore and anthropology, riddles are normally classified not according to their solutions but according to their descriptive motifs. This system of classification was proposed by Robert Lehmann-Nitsche²⁸ and elaborated by Archer Taylor.²⁹ Creatures in primarily metaphoric riddles are grouped according to their disguises. Creatures disguised as humans, for example, occupy one class; those disguised as animals another. A creature compared to a variety of things (man, animal, plant, object) occupies a different class, as does a creature linked with an erotic double. Since oral riddles are often shorter and simpler than literary riddles, they are more easily classified in this way; but the system may be used to chart the general typology of riddlic descriptions in Old English. The outline below is a modified form of the anthropological model with examples from the Old English riddles:³⁰

1. *Biomorphic group*. The riddle subject is compared to a living creature, but it is difficult to tell whether the creature's disguise is a person, animal, or plant. So the iceberg (66) lives and moves and is paradoxically bone-water, but whether she is disguised as sea plant, crustacean, miraculous

28. Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, "Zur Volkskunde Argentinien, I: Rätsel," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 24 (1914): 240-55.

29. Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951).

30. My categories are based on those of Lehmann-Nitsche, Taylor, and also Charles Scott, who discusses riddle classification systems in "Some Approaches to the Study of the Riddle," in *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture of the Middle Ages and Later*, ed. E. Bagby Atwood and Archibald Hill (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1969), pp. 111-27.

mermaid, or fish is difficult to tell. The bellows (83) is alive and animate with belly and eye, but its exact disguise is undiscoverable.

2. *Zoomorphic group*. The subject is compared to an animal. The rake (32) "scruffs walls / Or drags fields for plunder." And the bagpipe's "shape is strange, / Her beak hung down, her hands and feet / Slung up like a shouldered bird" (29).

3. *Anthropomorphic group*. The subject is compared to a person. This is the most common comparison in the Old English riddles. The shield (3) is a warrior, the nightingale (6) an evening-poet, the cuckoo (7) an orphan, the wine-cup (9) an alluring lady, the iceberg (31) a witch-warrior, mead (25) a wrestler, the inkhorn (84) a separated twin, and so on. The non-human subject taking human disguise is an implicit part of nearly every riddle.

4. *Phytomorphic group*. The subject is compared to a plant. This is an uncommon form in Old English except where objects were in fact initially plants such as the tree turned ram (51) or spear (71), and the reed turned pen (58). The phallus is linked with the onion (23) as part of an erotic riddle (see below), but together they share a vaguely biomorphic disguise.

5. *Inanimate object group*. The subject is compared to an inanimate object. The sword (69) is a treasure, the chalice (57) a gold ring; the river (81) is a house for fish. Certain erotic riddles (see below) utilize inanimate disguises: the helmet and vagina (59) are closely guarded treasures, and the sexual churn (59) is filled with a butter-baby!

6. *Multiple comparison group*. The subject is compared to a variety of things. The tree of riddle 28 is bloom, blaze, traveler, and cross (or cup). The magpie (22) can "bark like a dog, bleat like a goat, / Honk like a goose, shriek like a hawk." The creation riddle (38) is a catalogue of comparative delights—for example:

I am harder and colder than the bitter frost,
The sword of morning that falls on the ground.
I am hotter than Vulcan's flickering fire,
Sweeter than bee-bread laced with honey,
Called as wormwood gray in the forest.
I can gorge like an old giant—bloated,
Bellied—or live sustained without food.

7. *Selected details group.* The riddle enumerates descriptive details, typically of the creature's form or function—in either positive or negative fashion. The uncertain creature of riddle 26 is:

. . . felled, cut, carved,
Bleached, scrubbed, softened, shaped,
Twisted, rubbed, dried, adorned,
Bound, and borne off to the doorways of men.

Another mystery creature (37) seems to function in lively fashion without the necessary prerequisites:

It has no hands or feet
To touch the ground, no mouth to speak
With men or mind to know the books
Which claim it is the least of creatures
Shaped by nature. It has no soul, no life,
Yet it moves everywhere in the wide world.
It has no blood or bone, yet carries comfort
To the children of men on middle-earth.

The details are often selected to produce an implicit sense of paradox and to undermine any consistent sense of disguise.

8. *Neck-riddle group.* Taylor explains the appellation: "Another very curious variety of enigma consists in a description of a scene that can be interpreted only by the one who sets the puzzle. The terms used are not confusing, but the situation itself seems inexplicable. In many northern European versions of such puzzles the speaker saves his neck by the riddle, for the judge or executioner has promised release in exchange for a riddle that cannot be guessed."³¹ The one-eyed seller of garlic (82) is a neck-riddle whose answer we know only because it is derived from the Latin riddle of Symphosius whose answer is passed along in its title.

31. Archer Taylor, "The Varieties of Riddles," in *Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. Thomas A. Kirby and Henry Bosley Woolf (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1949), p. 6.

9. *Arithmetical group*. The subject's form or function is described as an arithmetical puzzle. Strictly speaking, there are no exclusively arithmetical riddles in the collection, but several of the riddles have arithmetical parts. The ship of riddle 34, for example, has "Four feet under belly, eight on its back, / Two wings, twelve eyes, six heads, one track," and the one-eyed seller of garlic (82) has "one eye, / Two feet, twelve hundred heads, / A back and belly—two hands, arms, / Shoulders—one neck, two sides."

10. *Family relation group*. The subject is described primarily in terms of its family relations—often with a bizarre twist. The riddle about Lot and his family (44) falls into this category. Because of Lot's incest, his daughters are also his wives, their sons his sons (and grandsons!), each son an uncle and nephew to the other. Elsewhere in the riddles, family relations are often part of the metaphoric game: the cuckoo (7) is an adopted orphan, water (80) is the mother of earth-creatures, and the inkhorn (84) is a twin separated from its brother.

11. *Cryptomorphic group*. The solution is somehow coded and concealed in the riddle. In Old English this is done with runes or letters in the following riddles: 17, 22, 40, 62, and 73.

12. *Homonymic group*. The solution turns on a homonym. The one example of this is riddle 88 where the solution, Old English *boc*, means both "beech" and "book."

13. *Erotic group*. The erotic double-entendre riddle has both a prim and a pornographic solution. This places the potential solver in a double bind: either his naiveté or his salacious imagination is bound to be exposed. Old English riddles in this genre are 23, 35, 42, 43, 52, 59, and 60. Erotic elements, but without the sustained sense of double entendre, also occur in 10, 18, 40, 61, and 87.

14. *Tricky question group*. Often included in folkloristic categories are not-quite riddles called *joking questions* ("What happens to little girls who swallow bullets?" "Their hair grows out in bangs"); *wisdom questions* ("What is whiter than milk?" "Snow" and "What is blacker than a crow?" "Its feathers"); *puzzles* ("If a chicken and a half could lay an egg and a half in a day and a half, how long would it take five chickens to lay five eggs?" "One day"); and *riddle parodies* ("What is big, gray, lives in trees,

and is dangerous?" "An elephant—I lied about the trees"). Tricky questions rarely form the basis of literary riddles; there are no Old English riddles in this category.³²

As with the previous classification systems, sometimes an Old English riddle falls into more than one group. The *magpie* riddle (22) is cryptomorphic—it also contains multiple comparisons. The onion (23) is erotic—it also seems to cross categories in a biomorphic way (the creature is rooted, shaggy, and a gallant help to women). The one-eyed seller of garlic (82) is a kind of arithmetical neck-riddle. Even so the categories are useful in characterizing most riddle descriptions and in isolating the major riddlic modes. The Anglo-Saxons seem to favor the anthropomorphic mode and to shy away from human solution-subjects. The most common riddlic game is to give something nonhuman a human disguise—thus the reed is a messenger, the ram a warrior, mead a wrestler, the moon a wanderer, and the inkhorn a separated twin. This metaphoric movement carries us out into the Other where we find an image of the self. We escape in the body of wine to find a female temptress. We arch into bow to become a belly laced with slaughter. We hide in the pouch of the bee only to wrestle (as mead) with the mind of man.

Another traditional way of characterizing riddles is according to the narrative stance of each. In some riddles the riddler recounts a "strange wonder"; in some the creature itself sings. The riddles may be divided into projective and nonprojective types. Nonprojective riddles may be further divided into eyewitness riddles (which often begin with the formula, *I saw a creature*), hearsay riddles (which often begin with the formula, *I heard of a creature*), and purely descriptive riddles which begin without reference to the riddler.³³ Examples of nonprojective riddles may be seen in the

32. For more on the folk traditions of not-quite-riddles, see Roger D. Abrahams and Alan Dundes, "Riddles," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 129-43. The examples quoted are taken from this article.

33. Most editors and many critics have remarked on the different voices of the riddles. The terms "projective" and "nonprojective" are my own. I take the terms "hearsay" and "eyewitness" from Ann Harleman Stewart, "Old English Riddle 47 as Stylistic Parody," *Papers on Language and Literature* 11 (1975): 227-41.

openings of the bellows (eyewitness), bread (hearsay), and ox (descriptive) riddles:

I saw a creature with a strange belly
Huge and swollen, handled by a servant,
Hard-muscled and hand-strong, a mighty man.

* * *

I heard of something rising in a corner,
Swelling and standing up, lifting its cover.

* * *

This strange creature, a stripling boy,
Sought sweet pleasure pumping joy.
His nourishing Bess gave him four
White fountains—murmur and roar.

Nonprojective riddles (which constitute half the corpus) often end with some variation of the riddler's taunt, "Say what I mean."

In projective riddles the narrative voice is the voice of the creature quickened by the poetic imagination. Projective riddles often begin with the formula, *I am* or *I was*. The nightingale in riddle 6, for example, sings:

I am a mimic with many tongues,
Warbling tunes, shifting tones,
Jugging the city with head-song.

And the cuckoo in riddle 7 recalls its inglorious beginning:

I was an orphan before I was born—
Cast without breath by both parents
Into a world of brittle death, I found
The comfort of kin in a mother not mine.

Projective riddles often end with a variation of the creature's taunt, "Say who I am."

Thus in half of the riddles the reader identifies with the "I" of the human riddler; in half, with the "I" of the creature. The two narrative stances constitute poles of a perceptual game. Sometimes we escape the bone-house and embody the world; sometimes we see what the world charged with metaphor means. This is an ontological game³⁴—the challenge is either, "Say what I mean," or "Say who I am." Meaning depends upon our manipulation in images of the Other. Being paradoxically demands recognition of what Whitman calls the "radical, democratic Me," in the "conservative Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe."³⁵

METAPHOR AND RIDDLE

A riddle mediates between man and the Other—its voice is sometimes the bard's, sometimes the bird's. We contrive to know the riddler's meaning, the creature's world. Through other eyes we see our own symbolic systems. With reason we separate day from night, man from monster, plant from penis—only to discover in riddles a nightmare of resemblances and crossed

34. For more on poetry as ontology, see John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), and *The New Criticism* (New York: New Directions, 1941). On the "ontological function of metaphor," see Karsten Harries, "Metaphor and Transcendence," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 73–90.

35. Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, vol. 1 of *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 258. The quotation in full is:

The most profound theme that can occupy the mind of man—the problem on whose solution science, art, the bases and pursuits of nations, and everything else, including intelligent human happiness, (here to-day, 1882, New York, Texas, California, the same as all times, all lands,) subtly and finally resting, depends for competent outset and argument, is doubtless involved in the query: What is the fusing explanation and tie—what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side?

The passage is cited in Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 175.

categories. Can the fox be a great mother, the moon a night-bandit, the sword a celibate and serving thane? Can the dead ox revive to carry man (shoes) or sing through its skin the word of God (Bible)? Can a bird be a poet, a bagpipe a bird? This is the power the word confers—especially in the shape of metaphor.³⁶

Disguise and disclosure are the twin movements of metaphor and riddle. Aristotle discovered the poles of the dance. In discussing riddles and metaphors in *The Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, he says:

Good metaphors can usually be made from successful riddles, for metaphors are a kind of riddle.³⁷

The essence of a riddle is to express facts by combining them in an impossible way; this cannot be done by the mere arrangement of words but requires the use of metaphor.³⁸

Most felicitous sayings rely on metaphor and on a capacity to deceive beforehand. We have even more obviously learned something if things are the opposite of what we thought they were, and the mind seems to say to itself: "How true; I was mistaken." . . . Good riddles delight us for the same reason, for we learn something from them, and they are in the form of metaphors.³⁹

Riddles and metaphors disguise one creature in the garb of another. The bird is a poet, the blade is a warrior, the rake is a dog. The real creature is what I. A. Richards calls the *tenor*, the disguise is the *vehicle*; the common *ground* is what makes the comparison, the disguise possible.⁴⁰ The nightingale and poet sing and celebrate beauty, the blade and warrior

36. My discussion of metaphor is based on a number of sources—primarily the *Poetics* of Aristotle, I. A. Richards's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), much of Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on metaphoric systems (see for example *Totemism*, tr. Rodney Needham [Boston: Beacon Press, 1963] and *The Savage Mind* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966]), the recent work of Maranda and Stewart (see articles listed in Selected Bibliography), and my graduate work in anthropology in a course on "The Ethnography of Symbolic Forms," taught by J. David Sapir (University of Pennsylvania, 1969).

37. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1405b; *On Poetry and Style*, tr. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), p. 71.

38. Ibid., *Poetics* 1458a; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 47.

39. Ibid., *Rhetoric* 1412a; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 94.

40. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, especially chaps. 5 and 6.

serve and slay, the rake and dog scruff along the ground. In addition to Richards's triad of terms, there is also what I call the *gap*, those characteristics which separate the true tenor from the vehicle, the real creature from the assumed disguise.⁴¹ By calling the nightingale "bright singer of beauty," we highlight the connection between bard and bird (the ground). By calling the bird a "winged, penless poet," we highlight the distinction (the gap). Ground words reinforce the metaphoric equation; gap words recall the separate worlds of tenor and vehicle. The ground extends a metaphor; the gap produces paradox. An extended image often contains both ground and gap. For example, the rake as dog might be "a one-legged ground-scruffer," the blade as warrior, "a gray battle-thane," or gold as a tyrant, "a bright-cloaked, hammered king." The gap and ground produce the clash and confirmation of metaphor, the collision and collusion of worlds.⁴²

How does this work in practice in the Old English riddles? The lyre (tenor) is disguised as a lady singer (vehicle):

She shapes for her listeners a haunting sound
Who sings through her sides. Her neck is round
And delicately shaped; on her shoulders draped,
Beautiful jewels.

The tenor is hidden, the vehicle highlighted. The ground is plain—both a lady and a lyre may have lovely round necks, may make music for their audiences, may have shoulders decked with beautiful jewels. The gap gives pause—this lady sings through her sides (and the roundness of neck may point more to shape and artisan's craft than statuesque beauty). The metaphor is spun out into a lyrical conceit. The ground gives good reason for the spinning; the gap produces a paradox and gives us a clue.

41. My "metaphoric gap" corresponds in some ways to the oppositional or contradictory elements of riddles identified by Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes in "Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle," *Journal of American Folklore* 76 (1963): 111–18.

42. The "collision" and "collusion" functions of poetic imagery were first mentioned by C. Day Lewis in *The Poetic Image* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p. 72; the functions are also discussed by Harries in "Metaphor and Transcendence," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 73. Two works on the theory of metaphor are most useful: the "Special Issue on Metaphor" of *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978) and Paul Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor*, tr. Robert Czerny et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

Sometimes the gap seems like a chasm from which reality will never be retrieved, as in riddle 7:

I was an orphan before I was born—
Cast without breath by both parents
Into a world of brittle death, I found
The comfort of kin in a mother not mine.

Our sense of logical possibility is constantly assaulted. An orphan is a child. A child must have been born. The sign of a successful birthing is breath. The world of welcome is not that of the dead but the living. The mother of comfort who bears the child must be kin. But the child is a bird, in this case a cuckoo. It is born breathless in an egg, deposited in animated death into the nest of the host mother where it hatches and is nurtured by its foster-mother (at some expense to her own brood). The metaphoric leap predisposes us to a human perception of the riddlic terms. But the bird is and is not one of us.

Sometimes a clashing of metaphors creates the gap, as in the case of the riddlic moon:

I saw a wonderful creature carrying
Light plunder between its horns.
Curved lamp of the air, cunningly formed,
It fetched home its booty from the day's raid
And plotted to build in its castle if it could
A night-chamber brightly adorned.

The moon begins as a horned marauder, perhaps a horn-helmeted Viking or a beast on the hoof. We expect either to plunder, but not to plunder *light*. Then the moon turns metaphorically into a curved lamp. Paradoxically it produces what it steals—light.⁴³ It carries a treasure and is trea-

43. The light carried between the horns of the nearly new moon is actually earthlight, sunlight reflected from earth to moon, what the ballad, "Sir Patrick Spens" calls the "new moon late yestreen / Wi' the auld moon in her arm." The Anglo-Saxons had no cosmological terms for the phenomenon—indeed it appears to have been unrecognized apart from the central metaphor of this riddle. So as Harries says, "What metaphor names may transcend human understanding so that our language cannot capture it" ("Metaphor and Transcen-

sure. In each metaphor a gap provides a clue to the context of the creature and points to the true solution: the marauder's treasure is light; the lamp is a rider of the air. The clash of metaphors also produces a gap. How can a horned creature also be an air-rider and bright lamp? Then the lamp turns plotter and bedroom builder as the metaphoric mode becomes increasingly anthropomorphic. This conceit is spun out as the warrior sun arrives to reclaim its rightful light and drive the plundering plotter off into morning.

In Old English poetry the kernel form of riddlic metaphor is the kenning, a Nordic device for calling something by a name it is not, then modifying it with a contextual clue.⁴⁴ Examples of kennings include bone-house (body), battle-light (sword), heaven's candle (sun), sea-horse (ship), whale's road (sea), and battle-snake (arrow). In each case the tenor is hidden in riddlelike fashion and the vehicle appears as the second element of the compound, the gap (presenting a paradox and giving a contextual clue) as the first element. The two terms of the kenning make up part of the analogy inherent in metaphor according to Aristotle,⁴⁵ so that, for example:

<u>body</u>	::	<u>house</u>
bone		strut

and

<u>sword</u>	::	<u>light</u>
battle		hall

dence," p. 74). Metaphor has often paved the way to scientific discovery. W. V. Quine notes that "metaphor . . . flourishes in playful prose and high poetical art, but it is vital also at the growing edges of science and philosophy" ("Afterthoughts on Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 [1978]: 161).

44. The relationship between riddle and kenning has oft been noted. See, for example: Ker, *The Dark Ages*, p. 87; Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. xiv; Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 134-35; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 280; Agop Hacikyan, *A Linguistic and Literary Analysis of Old English Riddles* (Montreal: Cassalini, 1966), pp. 34 ff.; Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 36 ff. The fullest discussion of the relationship is Ann Harleman Stewart, "Kenning and Riddle in Old English," *Papers in Language and Literature* 15 (1979): 115-36.

45. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 45.

In each case the analogy may generate four separate kennings, each a miniature metaphoric riddle. The kennings are:

1. bone-house (body)
2. body-strut (bone)
3. strutted body (house)
4. house-bone (strut)

1. battle-light (sword)
2. sword-hall (battle)
3. hall-sword (light)
4. light-battle (hall)

Each of the kennings could be spun out into a riddle. For example, we might take *bone* as our solution, and using the metaphor of the body-strut begin:

I am the strut and strength of body,
The unnailed timber of a living house.
I hold flesh, shield lungs, stiffen arms;
I am brain-hoard and hand-shape,
Unknown to the talking and rising tongues.

The riddle spins out the principle of the kenning. Call the creature something it is not. Modify the calling by a catch of contextual truth producing paradox. Metaphorically the bone is a strut, paradoxically a body-strut; metaphorically a timber, paradoxically unnailed. The list of attributes reinforces the real bodily context, but the creature claims to be curiously absent from two tongues (the second of which is the seed of another riddle). By solving the riddle we raise to consciousness not only the bone but the set of kennings implicit in the central metaphor. We discover not only body-strut but house-bone.

This analysis of riddle structure gives us an insight into the relationship between Old English riddles and the maxims or gnomic poems. The maxims which occur in two separate collections⁴⁶ are a series of statements

46. "Maxims I" (Exeter Maxims), *ASPR*, 3:156-63; "Maxims II" (Cotton Maxims), *ASPR*, 6:55-57.

about the appropriate context, action, or condition of a variety of creatures. The poet of the Cotton maxims ("Maxims II") says, for example:

The wild hawk shall dwell on the glove,
The outcast wolf alone in the grove,
The boar in the wood, tusk-strong.
A good man seeks glory in his homeland.
A dagger dwells in the hand, gold-stained.
A gem rides the ring, broad and tall.
The stream is wave-bound to mix with the flood.
The mast stands on a boat, the sail-yard;
The sword on a breast, ancient iron.
The dragon dwells in the cave of jewels,
Old and proud. The fish spawns its kind
In the water. The king deals rings in the hall.⁴⁷

Each creature has its context—a proper place or action. The dragon dwells in the cave, the boar in the wood. A good man seeks homeland glory; a king gives gold rings in the hall. Each contextual pairing constitutes half a kenning. We may complete the kenning by linking two gnomes in a metaphoric equation where the ground makes this appropriate. If the boar in its wood is like the dragon in its cave, then the boar is a wood-dragon and the dragon a cave-boar. Sometimes the linkage is less explicit. The good man may seek glory in his homeland with a dagger as the boar seeks power with his tusks in the wood. A mast may ride on the boat's breast as the sword stands on the breast-deck. And a king's giving of gold rings may be a peculiar form of spawning peace in the hall. The most carefully hidden comparisons (with both ground and gap) make the best kennings, the best miniature riddles. The glove is obviously the hawk's home. But the cave is also the dragon's glove. And the hall is perhaps the king's lair. The wolf is the grove's outlaw; the hawk is a gloved wolf. The dragon is a cave-sword, the sword a hand-dragon—both are ancient and fierce, but one hoards what the other is (treasure). This begins to be a riddle. Sometimes the implicit gnomonic connections create their own tensions. For example, the king in his treatment of gold cannot be both cave-dragon and fertile fish. Each gnomonic

47. "Maxims II," ll. 17–29; *ASPR*, 6:56.

connection charts a metaphoric world at war with the other—the implied kennings clashing like swords:

$$\frac{\text{king}}{\text{hall}} :: \frac{\text{dragon}}{\text{cave}}$$

1. The king is a hall-dragon.
2. The dragon is a cave-king.
3. The hall is the king's cave.
4. The cave is the dragon's hall.

and

$$\frac{\text{king}}{\text{gold}} :: \frac{\text{fish}}{\text{spawn}}$$

1. The king is a gold-spawning fish
2. The fish is a spawn-king.
3. Gold is a king's spawn.
4. Spawn is a fish's gold.

Each of these worlds is a separate perception—kingship as nightmare (the Heremod of *Beowulf*) and wish fulfillment (Beowulf himself, a generous king). Each individual gnomic statement puts a creature in a proper, predictable place. We can all agree that a mast stands in a boat and that a good man should at least seek glory. But the placement of gnomes one against another—colluding, colliding—raises the question of perception. It subjectifies reality. It sparks surreal possibilities so that the wooden gnomes begin to alight with a riddlic fire. All's right with the world, the gnomes want to say. But the wrapped riddles cry that the world is filled with unknown shapes. The tension between gnome and riddle, day-reason and nightmare, seems to fire much of Old English poetry. Certainly it is the tension between the sententious Hrothgar and the surreal Grendel which Beowulf is called upon to resolve. And that leads to the question of whether the hero is not a riddle solver spun out in narrative time.

Riddles have traditionally been considered a minor genre by both folklorists and literary critics.⁴⁸ But Aristotle's insight that "good metaphors can usually be made from successful riddles, for metaphors are a kind of riddle,"⁴⁹ and his dictum that "we learn above all from metaphors,"⁵⁰ constitute an implicit recognition of the importance of riddlic play to the progression of thought. Riddles are common to most primitive cultures.⁵¹ They make a game of probing the normally unconscious categories of perception. They call attention to the arbitrarily shaped and symbolized universe and offer other ways of seeing. The anthropologist Elli Königs Maranda says that "riddles make a point of playing with the conceptual borderlines and crossing them for the intellectual pleasure of showing that things are not quite as stable as they appear,"⁵² and Ian Hamnett likewise notes that "the ability to construct categories and also to transcend them is central to adaptive learning, and riddles can be seen as a very simple paradigm of how this ability is attained."⁵³ Recognizing the separate worlds of tenor and vehicle, real creature and assumed disguise, helps us to understand our conceptual categories. Crossing categories by means of riddles helps us to explore the dark corners of our symbolic systems and recharge the related outer and inner landscapes with metaphoric light. What any culture calls monstrous may be simply an unrecognized riddle, an embodied taboo.⁵⁴ We place the rake and the dog in separate categorical rooms, but both may be found in the dream-house of toothers, ground-snufflers, and wall-skulkers. In each of us there is an unconscious recognition of other ways of shaping—and this dream-house of uncanny shapes⁵⁵ unlocks its doors

48. Charles T. Scott charts some of the reasons for this in "On Defining the Riddle: The Problem of a Structural Unit," *Genre* 2 (1969): 129 ff.

49. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1405b; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 71.

50. Ibid., *Rhetoric* 1410b; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 89.

51. Welsh, *Roots of Lyric*, p. 27.

52. Elli Königs Maranda, "Theory and Practice of Riddle Analysis," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 53.

53. Ian Hamnett, "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: The Function of Riddles," *Man* n.s. 2 (1967): 387.

54. For more on riddle and taboo, see Nigel F. Barley, "Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle," *Semiotica* 10 (1974): 143-75.

55. According to Freud ("The 'Uncanny,'" in *On Creativity and the Unconscious* [New York: Harper and Row, 1958], pp. 122-61), our sense of the ghastly or uncanny derives from

in our myths and songs, poems and stories. Riddles offer a lyric key to the house of dreams, transforming uncanny creatures into recognizable friends.

Northrop Frye argues that "in archetypal criticism the significant content [of poetry] is the conflict of desire and reality which has for its basis the work of the dream."⁵⁶ Poetry may be drawn out in time into narrative romance or suspended in a lyric moment. The poles of poetry are what Aristotle calls *melos* (rhythm, movement, sound) and *opsis* (image, picture, spectacle).⁵⁷ Frye argues that the root form of *melos* in lyric poetry is a charm; the root form of *opsis* is a riddle.⁵⁸ Both draw the reader into the dream world: the charm is a magical incantation that captures and holds; the riddle a kind of illuminated prison (like a manuscript drawing that catches the eye) which entraps till the key (the true solution) is found.⁵⁹

In Old English poetry, riddles and charms combine elements of *melos* and *opsis*: both share a metaphoric world—both rely upon the yoke of images and reins of sound to draw man into that world. But the motive for metaphor, as Kenneth Burke might say,⁶⁰ the strategy, remains distinct. A

a childhood desire to project animate power into the surrounding world of inanimate objects. This "omnipotence of thought" leads to the obvious possibilities of nightmarish monsters and talking trees. Freud sees primitive cultures as locked into this childish state of mind—but if this animation is deeply human, as Freud himself suggests, it may be that primitive myths and riddles are a cultural recognition of the process (as is psychoanalysis in the nonprimitive world). Riddles in particular may be a way of raising to consciousness this impulse to animate the world, and by playing with it in a lyric game, of rendering it delightful, acceptable (making the uncanny canny). Thus we recognize and reaffirm that part of the symbolic process which we first used to meet the world. By playing the childish game of riddles, we discover something of our own roots.

56. Frye, *Anatomy*, p. 105.

57. For a discussion of the oral (rhythmic) and visual (patterned) dimensions of literature, see Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," *Kenyon Review* 13 (1951), especially pp. 101 ff.; also his *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 77 ff. and 278 ff.

58. Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 278–80. For more on the subject of riddles and charms as roots of lyric poetry, see Welsh, *Roots of Lyric*, chaps. 1, 2, and 6.

59. Frye, *Anatomy*, pp. 278–80; see also his chapter on "Charms and Riddles" in *Spiritus Mundi* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 123–47.

60. For "poetry . . . as the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations," see Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3d ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), the title essay. For a larger discussion of motive, see *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969). Motive and metaphor are also treated in *Permanence and Change*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965).

charm is a strategy for action in a sick or unfruitful world. It is man using metaphor like a knife. A riddle is a matching of wits, a game of disguises. It is man playing with metaphor like a lens. A charmist fears and manipulates the Other. A riddler delights in and dances the Other. A charmist is an operator who wields uncanny shapes below the patient's perception. The riddler plays protagonist as he leads us in to the uncanny world and lends us light. The charmist battles unwilling flesh with the power of the word. He moves through the patient's mind. The riddler shows us our eyes altering, our minds manipulating, our words reshaping that Other world. We move singing through the mind of two. The charmist often chants directions ("Take fennel and boil it with paste and bathe it with egg, then put on the salve";⁶¹ or "Turn three times with the course of the sun, then stretch out and say the litany"⁶²), but never challenges, "Say what I mean." His meaning is found in healed flesh, not in the probing and playful mind. He lends us power but leads us to none. In an Old English charm for wens or tumors, the charmist chants:

Wen, wen, chicken-wen,
 Build no house to enter in,
 No town to hold. Go north, wretch,
 To the neighboring hill where your brother waits
 With a leaf for your head. Under the wolf's paw,
 Under eagle's wing, under eagle's claw,
 May you shrivel like coal in the catch of fire,
 Disappear like dirt on the wall, water in a bucket,
 Tiny as linseed, smaller than a hand-worm's
 Hip-bone, smaller than something that is not!⁶³

Here there is magical repetition; here there is also metaphor. There is no riddlic projection (the universe is dangerous) but a "speaking to" the creature. Each metaphor is a kind of trap: the wen is caught in its chicken-skin, its wanderer's cloak, its fire-flesh, linseed body, hand-worm's hip-bone. The ground is implicit; there is no gap. If the tenor is lost to the conscious

61. "The Nine Herbs Charm," ll. 68-69; *ASPR*, 6: 121.

62. "For Unfruitful Land," ll. 39-40; *ASPR*, 6: 117.

63. "Against a Wen," *ASPR*, 6: 128.

mind, the word may win. When the creature disappears, we are left with disguises of our own making—over these we have power. How different is the celebration, the lifting to consciousness, the metaphysical greeting of the Other in riddlic play. The charmist uses uncanny shapes to restore the world to its right flesh. The riddler invites us to witness a lyric epiphany as we see the world of our own shaping and realize that flesh is spirit embodied; spirit, symbolizing flesh. Riddlic poetry brings us to this recognition—we shape the Other and in shaping, embody the Self. Without meeting the creature, we are locked in the prison of reified categories and recognized truth. To grow beyond the known we must enter the riddlic world of unrecognizable shapes and make them ours.

RIDDLE AND QUEST

According to Aristotle, metaphor begins with deception and ends with the recognition of a deeper truth. We doubt the riddlic equation: How can a bagpipe be a bird, the shield a warrior, the moon a plunderer, mead a wrestler? But the dreamwork draws us in. We wander a riddlic landscape dimly charted, haunted by unknown or shifting shapes, full of disguised characters, until we reach a kenning,⁶⁴ a metaphoric way of knowing that carries us beyond the old categories of perception, beyond the dead world of literal truth. "We have even more obviously learned something if things are the opposite of what we thought they were, and the mind seems to say to itself: 'How true; I was mistaken.'"⁶⁵ Bound by our symbols we separate the world into categories: animate/inanimate, subject/object, artifice/artificer, light/dark. Here there is no room for a singing sword, an ox-skin that preaches the Gospel, a quill that tracks culture, and a moth that wolfs songs. Here we do not see that darkness is the owl's light. Like the bird we are blind to the inverse world and must count on metaphor to carry us across. A riddle, a metaphor points to the "thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this."⁶⁶ It liberates us from the prison of reified perception and recalls

64. "Kenning" both in the sense of "knowing, understanding" ("to ken" = "to know") and in the sense of "a paraphrastic naming." Both meanings are related to the Old Norse *kenna*, "to perceive, know, make known, name."

65. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1412a; *On Poetry and Style*, p. 94.

66. Burke, *Grammar*, p. 503.

the metamorphic flow. It offers us a transverse means of crossing the water, of moving to and from what Whitman calls "the other side" of the universe.⁶⁷

Riddles are common not only to medieval classrooms and modern playgrounds, but to primitive transition rites—courtship contests, weddings, funerals, initiation rites.⁶⁸ Often when a man's or a tribe's identity is to be transformed, there are unknown creatures in riddlic guise. The strange world taunts, "Say what I mean," and the solver must discover not only a newly charged world but a newly embodied self. A riddle is a miniature rite of passage, a metaphoric meeting suspended in lyric time. The riddle solver is like a quester entering what Victor Turner calls a liminal world where an old order is suspended and where "monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted."⁶⁹ The riddle solver moves through the traditional phases of the questing hero:

1. Departure from the dead world of reified categories.
- 2a. Confrontation with the metaphoric world of unknown monsters and shifting shapes.
- 2b. Recognition (con-naître = being born with) of the Other and its relation to the Self.
3. Return to the old world with rejuvenative eyes.⁷⁰

The hero's quest in narrative time is the riddle solver's task in the lyric moment—to penetrate the structure of the surreal world, to recognize the uncanny and its relation to the self, to find a solution in the lush world of

67. See the Whitman passage from *Specimen Days* quoted in n. 35.

68. For a summary of the social uses of riddling, see Thomas A. Burns, "Riddling: Occasion to Act," *Journal of American Folklore* 89 (1976): 139–65.

69. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 105; for more on liminality, see also Turner's *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

70. This is a slight modification of the stages proposed by Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites of Passage*, tr. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabriella L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960 [orig. Paris, 1909]). The pattern is best known to students of literature from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949 [Bollingen Series]).

imagery, and to bring back the metaphoric fruit to rejuvenate the dead world.

What sort of monsters inhabit the world of the Old English riddles? A man with one eye and twelve hundred heads, a bird that sings through her dangling foot, a water-witch whose mother is its pregnant daughter, a cock like Christ, and a circle of gold that preaches to men. We even meet an onion and a phallus muscling for attention like twins under a strange riddlic cloak:

I am a wonderful help to women,
The hope of something to come. I harm
No citizen except my slayer.
Rooted I stand on a high bed.
I am shaggy below. Sometimes the beautiful
Peasant's daughter, an eager-armed,
Proud woman grabs my body,
Rushes my red skin, holds me hard,
Claims my head. The curly-haired
Woman who catches me fast will feel
Our meeting. Her eye will be wet.

This double-entendre riddle (which may be part of a courting ritual or an attempt to catch the salacious out like a primitive Rorschach test) plays on the notion of crossed categories. The helpmate is rooted like a plant, shaggy like an animal, held like a tool, and stands like a man. Its bed may be covered with blankets or mulch. Its head may be saucy in a strip or a stew. The crossing of categories forces the reader to play the ontological game of venturing with various ideas of order (proposed and discarded solutions, literal and metaphoric truths) into the riddlic world. It forces us to reexamine our perceptual categories and to accept our links with the nonhuman world about us. The riddler not only describes (and jokes about) the phallic onion; he links human sexuality to the green and mythic world of regenerative power. We move from a complacent, predictable way of knowing, through a stage of suspended animation or unknowing, to a deeper, metaphorically embodied way of knowing both phallus and onion. Perhaps we

are seduced by the voice itself as it starts with a litany of personal power (the subject "I" four times in five lines) and dissolves into a sensuous and surreal cacophony of parts as the warrior woman (cook or seductress) comes to power. The point is not merely to solve the riddle but to ride the dream-horse home to power. "The real answer to the question implied in a riddle is not a 'thing' outside it, but that which is both word and thing, and is both inside and outside the poem."⁷¹ This is the reader's rite of passage—separation from the world of generally accepted ideas of order, transition through an unknown, metaphoric and mythic world populated by weird creatures and strange ceremonies, and return to a newly transformed and embodied world. On the quest we have encountered red, shaggy monsters who are curiously human (they like to help women and are quick to avenge their honor), and humans slightly monstrous like the lady who ravages bodies and claims heads. We have charted the natural world in sexual terms and embodied the sexual world with natural metaphors. We have accomplished what Lucien Lévy-Bruhl calls in primitive culture "participation mystique,"⁷² the interanimation of man and nature, what Léopold Sédar Senghor calls "dancing the Other."⁷³

If the riddle solver is a quester thrust into the moment of metaphor, the hero is a solver whose riddle spins out before him in narrative time. He must leave home, confront the dream world of unreal shapes, recognize and be reconciled with the uncanny or kill it, and come home a conqueror or

71. Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, p. 147.

72. See, for example Lévy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think*, tr. Lilian A. Clare (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926) and *The "Soul" of the Primitive*, tr. Lilian A. Clare (New York: Praeger, 1966). The relationship between the inner world of man and the outer world of nature has always been a prime concern of anthropologists. For Lévy-Bruhl the relationship is pre-causal and empathetic; for later anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, it involves the manipulation of natural symbols to fashion a social mirror. But even in Lévi-Strauss, there is a sense of natural myth as an act of empathetic poetry: the "savage mind" ("la pensée sauvage") is also "the wild pansy." This charting of the human abstract with concrete, natural symbols (what Lévi-Strauss calls the "science of the concrete") is of course a fundamental tenet of all imagistic poetry. It is what T. S. Eliot calls the "objective correlative." And the modern poet's view of "participation" is best put by Yeats in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley: "We are happy when for everything inside us there is a corresponding something outside us" (cited by Richard Wilbur, *Responses* [New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1976], p. 103).

73. Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté I: Négritude et Humanism* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), p. 259.

seed-king of worlds. Like an unknown riddlic creature, Grendel himself crosses categories, and the hero Beowulf must struggle to discover his meaning. As Nigel Barley shrewdly points out:

The occurrence of such monster images [in riddles] is of great interest in view of the Anglo-Saxons' concern with such anomalous creatures. The monster Grendel in *Beowulf* is little more than a totally individuated riddle image. Throughout, he is described in terms of an Anglo-Saxon warrior. He has been exiled with all his kin because his ancestor Cain murdered Abel. He refuses to pay compensation to the dwellers of Heorot. He has a hall. He fights the champion of the Danes. On the other hand, he cannot use weapons, his armour is in the form of scales growing on his body and his hall stands at the bottom of a lake in the wastelands. He is the embodiment of all categorical contradictions—a riddle without an answer. Small wonder then that nineteenth century critics treated the poem as a riddle to be solved and were outraged to find that many solutions fitted.⁷⁴

Apart from the nightmare, can we say what Grendel represents in the daylight world of the hall? Perhaps not—as Karsten Harries says of metaphoric shapes: “What metaphor names may transcend human understanding so that our language cannot capture it.”⁷⁵ Perhaps Grendel’s name means that something is grinding in the halls and hearts of men. Beowulf seems implicitly to recognize this when he promises protection to the sons of Hrothgar and when his report to Hygelac suddenly turns from monsters to the monstrous passions of the Heathobard (and by analogy the Danish) court. Somehow the failed peace-weaving of *Beowulf* lends power to the monstrous dream. And Beowulf’s slaying of the hall-stalkers merely destroys the vehicle and liberates the tenor of feud-hall passion. Beowulf’s battles are no playful, riddlic encounters. The uncanny here has deadly power. There is no conscious raising of the myth, no metaphysical play, no delight in the Other, except as a worthy antagonist. But Grendel as a crosser of categories, a surreal shape, remains a riddle. He is the clawed warrior, the

74. Nigel F. Barley, “Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle,” *Semiotica* 10 (1974): 157.

75. Harries, “Metaphor and Transcendence,” *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 74.

flesh-eater, the uninvited hall-thane. He is music- and man-hater, son without father, the unraveler of peace. Speechless he seems to hiss in the dark as he stalks the hall, "Say what I mean."

RIDDLE AND ROOD

The uncanny may sustain as well as destroy. If we riddle the darkness with unknown shapes, we shape recognition in a sacred riddle. Who existed before his mother was born, walked on water, turned water into wine, was married to all and married to none—who rode on the rood, swordless to slay death? The greatest riddle is sung in flesh. Who plays not, perishes. The first and finest dream-revelation of the cosmic riddle to emerge from Western Europe is the Old English lyric, "The Dream of the Rood." The heart of the poem is a recollection in two frames. The dreamer recounts his midnight vision of the rood sometimes clothed in the light of victory, sometimes stained with a terrible blood. As the dreamer struggles like a narrative riddler to say what the mysterious creature means, the rood rises out of the dream like a personified riddle-creature to recall its passionate history as the Christ-tree:

It was long ago—I remember I was ripped
From the forest's edge, torn from my trunk,
Seized by fierce enemies, sheared and shaped,
Forced to raise hard criminals high—
A dumb show. Swung onto the shoulders
Of cruel men, speared into a hill,
I saw Christ climb like a warrior,
Coming with a king's zeal. The earth shook:
I dared not bend or bow down, killing
Against the Lord's command. I could have crushed
The fierce men—yet I stood fast.
The warrior that was God Almighty stripped
For battle, body-strong and spirit-keen.
He climbed high on the hated swing—
Proud in the eyes of many, mounted the gallows
To save men. I trembled in Christ's clutch:

Unbowed I bore the body of God.
A rood I was raised—I raised the mighty King,
Heaven's Lord, and bent not to earth.
Through my body men drove dark nails,
Blood-iron with a battle-ring: the fierce wounds
Still flow, but my Lord brooked no vengeance.
They mocked us together—I was stained with blood
Borne from the side of God as he sent forth,
His body streaming, a quick spirit.⁷⁶

In its formal structure the poem is a combination of two modes of riddling—in part the dreamer recounts what he saw, in part the creature reveals what it is. In its use of metaphoric disguise and paradox, the poem raises riddle language to the level of sacred mystery. The rood crosses categories: it is tree, artifact, suffering servant, and divine mediator. In this it imitates Christ (as it later exhorts the dreamer to do). In the crucifixion it is paradoxically both servant and slayer—this is the heart of its suffering. As gallows it is a symbol of unholy vengeance; as rood, a token of redemptive love. Christ himself is a riddle incarnate. Like a great warrior (the metaphoric link), he is “battle-strong” and “spirit-keen” (the ground) in service to his lord. Paradoxically he strips instead of arming for battle and embraces his slayer in a self-willed sacrifice that kills death (the gap). The metaphor invites us to be one with Christ; the gap requires us to redefine our traditional notions of heroic action.

Why should the rood imitate Christ and make of the crucifixion a riddle? To allow the warrior to climb to victory? To mediate the awesome and unknown consciousness of a suffering human god? To bring the natural world into the sacred conflict? To convey through the miracle of a talking tree something of the mystery lost in living with the idea of the incarnation? To raise the idea of empathetic play (one in another pretending *I am*) from riddle to redemption? To create in the mystery a metaphor of heaven? However we read the roots of the dream, as the rood exhorts the dreamer “to reveal this vision in words to men,” we are reminded in poetic, religious terms of a primitive truth: Who would know (and be initiated into) the mysteries of the tribe must engage in the play of sacred riddles.

76. “The Dream of the Rood,” ll. 28–49, *ASPR* 2: 61–62.

POETRY AND THE PRIMITIVE:
THE RIDDLIC FUNCTION

Gary Snyder argues in his essay "Poetry and the Primitive," in *Earth House Hold*, that poets, like primitive men, live in a "mythological present in close relation to nature,"⁷⁷ that they *inspire* the world (breathing in the song of grass, wind, crow—breathing out the seed-syllables of power), that they sing in concrete images the vibrant connection, what Snyder calls after Whitman "the inner song of the self, and of the planet."⁷⁸ The poet's function remains that of the paleolithic shaman—he is a shaper whose "mind reaches easily out into all manners of shapes and other lives, and gives song to dreams."⁷⁹ In the dream world of concrete imagery, the poet moves metaphorically toward the Other. Like the Old English riddler, he sings nightingale, fox, fish, bow (once tree), and in singing "makes love to the animals."⁸⁰ Primitive peoples, as Claude Lévi-Strauss has shown, weave a world order out of natural myth.⁸¹ The wildcat's relation to the deer or crow may be the metaphoric embodiment of the relationship between tribes or individuals. But the stories of cat and crow are also celebrations of man's meeting the Other. Snyder says:

People of primitive cultures appreciate animals as other people off on various trips. Snakes move without limbs, and are like free penises. Birds fly, sing, and dance; they gather food for their babies; they disappear for months and then come back. Fish can breathe water and are brilliant colors. Mammals are like us, they fuck and give birth to babies while panting and purring; their young suck their mothers' breasts; they know terror and delight, they play.⁸²

Fish breathe water. Birds brood. Snakes move like a phallic mirror. The otter slips into his watery playground. Nature sings with a man-shaped voice. The African poet Senghor calls this celebration *recognition*—being born with the Other:

77. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 117.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

81. See especially *Totemism and The Savage Mind*.

82. Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 121.

Man lives symbiotically with the Other; he *knows* (*con-naît*) and is *born with* the Other in Paul Claudel's terms. Subject and object are here dialectically face to face in the same act of recognition which is the act of love. "I think, therefore I am," wrote Descartes. The observation has already been made: one always thinks *something*. The black African might say, "I feel the Other, I dance the Other, therefore I am." For to dance is to create, especially when the dance is a dance of love. . . .

This is an *existentialism* rooted in Mother-Earth, blooming in the sun of Faith. This world-presence is the *participation of the subject with the object*, the participation of man with the cosmic forces, the *communion* of man with other men, and finally, with all *beings* from the smallest stone to God.⁸³

This is similar to Richard Wilbur's notion that the poet is like a rain-dancer "trying to establish a *relation* to the rain."⁸⁴ The dance cannot literally create the rain—"it is not a mere imitation, but a magic borrowing of the powers it wants to approach, and a translation of what is borrowed into the language of the dancing human body."⁸⁵ Inspiration is the breath of song. We breathe in the mysterious green—sunlight dancing on the skin of tree or the belly of grass—and breathe out in images the blood-song of oak or the crushed whisper of noon grass. In charging the universe with human shapes, we escape the bone-house to rage with the storm, mother with the fox, clutch light with the moon, court death with the shield, and rise up with the onion or the Gospel skin. Poetry is play, says Johan Huizinga, and never far from its riddlic roots.⁸⁶ "Say what I mean"—"Say who I am." In riddles we shape and celebrate the universe, see and become one with the creatures. We are symbol-makers. We are also, as Snyder says, beautiful animals.⁸⁷

Like the tree, the bird, the moon—we change, but we also chart the changing. We are metamorphic and metaphoric. What we see is in part a function of the way we see. With riddles we celebrate the arms of oak,

83. Senghor, *Liberté I*, pp. 259, 317; the translation first appeared in Senghor's *Selected Poems / Poésies Choiesies*, tr. Craig Williamson (London: Rex Collings, 1976), p. 13.

84. Wilbur, *Responses*, p. 219.

85. *Ibid.*

86. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 135.

87. Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 120.

the horns of moon, the wounds of chalice, the belly of bow, the pregnancy of rain. We rediscover what Whitman calls "God in every object"⁸⁸ and take delight in dancing the Other. This is not just the pleasure of poetry, but a means of metaphoric learning. In the modern world we must riddle more and ruin less. Our task, as D. H. Lawrence says, is to relate to the living universe:

If we think about it, we find that our life *consists in* this achieving of a pure relationship between ourselves and the living universe about us. This is how I "save my soul" by accomplishing a pure relationship between me and another person, me and other people, me and a nation, me and a race of men, me and the animals, me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon: an infinity of pure relations, big and little, like the stars of the sky: that makes our eternity, for each one of us, me and the timber I am sawing, the lines of force I follow; me and the dough I knead for bread, me and the very motion with which I write, me and the bit of gold I have got. This, if we knew it, is our life and our eternity: the subtle, perfected relation between me and my whole circumambient universe.⁸⁹

How do we find the right relation to the universe? By meeting the Other on a metaphoric playground, by making riddles, by listening to crow. Two stories from separate cultures, each with its riddlic connection, point the way. Snyder tells of an Arapaho dancer of the Ghost Dance who returns from his trance to sing:

I circle around, I circle around

The boundaries of the earth,
The boundaries of the earth

Wearing the long wing feathers as I fly
Wearing the long wing feathers as I fly.⁹⁰

88. See n. 2.

89. D. H. Lawrence, "Morality and the Novel," in *Phoenix I: The Posthumous Papers* (New York: Viking, 1936), p. 528. The passage quoted was first published under the title "The Universe and Me," by the Powgen Press, New York, in 1935.

90. Snyder, *Earth House Hold*, p. 123.

And Eido Roshi at a recent talk⁹¹ told a story about a Zen master who was walking along a country road with his pupil:

Suddenly they came upon a goose. The master stretched out his neck and watched intently—and so, watching the master, did the student. The goose suddenly rose, wheeled, and was gone. The master smiled, the student pondered. Suddenly the master turned and asked the student, “Where is the goose?”

Puzzled, the student replied, “The goose is gone, Master.” The master grabbed the student’s nose and gave it a vicious twist. “Onk,” cried out the student in pain.

“Exactly,” said the master and walked on down the road.

How do we meet the Other? Wear feathers, tell riddles, imitate the goose. Honk and fly. Honk and fly.

TEXT AND TRANSLATIONS

The translations in this book are based on the texts of the most recent riddle edition, my own, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). Lost portions of the text are indicated by asterisks: some of these are the result of manuscript aging or mutilation; some are indicated by a gap in the meaning or meter of the text and are probably the result of scribal error. I have tried occasionally to fill in the sense of a lost word and have sometimes gathered together bits of words in order to give a glimpse of meaning to fragmentary passages and to avoid an ungainly succession of isolated words and long lacunae. Readers interested in the exact placement of fragments, lost letters, and lacunae should consult the original Old English edition where the system of elliptical indication is more complicated.

Old English poetry is built on an alliterative, strong-stress pattern. Each line contains four strongly stressed syllables—for example:

91. Eido Shimano Roshi, “Meditation Workshop,” for Professor Donald K. Swearer’s course in “Myth, Symbol, and Ritual in Asian Religions,” under the sponsorship of the Margaret Gest Center for the Cross-Cultural Study of Religion, at Haverford College, 11 February 1980. The story is recounted here as best I remember Eido Roshi’s telling of it.

1	2	3	4
Ic swiftne	geseah	on swaþe	feran
I a swift (thing)	saw	on the road	travelling

The possible alliterative patterns are 2 and 3, 1 and 3, or 1 2 and 3 (as in the example above). The third stress regularly alliterates, the fourth stress rarely. Often there is cross-line alliteration, sometimes assonance, rarely rhyme. The positioning of unstressed syllables is fairly, though not entirely, free. The Old English poetic lexicon was stocked with a wide variety of words for the important commonplaces of the culture—*hero, battle, sea, horse, hall, death* and so on—which meant that the alliterative demands of a particular line could be readily met. But the mead-hall poet's delight is the modern translator's bane—since cultures rarely show linguistic diversity in the same set of terms (the Eskimo needs many words for snow, the Ngoni warrior needs none). Another difficulty is that what was common to the literate Anglo-Saxon, the controlled strong-stress line, often proves strange to modern readers of poetry used to the iambic rhythms of post-medieval poets or the free verse of many modern writers. Occasional modern poets hearken back to the ancient Anglo-Saxon rhythms—W. H. Auden in *The Age of Anxiety*,⁹² Richard Wilbur in "Junk,"⁹³ and Gerard Manley Hopkins in some lines written in sprung rhythm⁹⁴—but mainly the rhythms remain a medievalist's delight. Translators deal with these problems in different ways. Some attempt to keep to the strict Old English meter and dredge up archaic words to meet the alliterative demands. Some scuttle strong stress for the more comfortable iambic pentameter or free verse. Some struggle to make compromises. My own compromise represents a cross between the traditional Anglo-Saxon meter and a looser form used by Aelfric, sometimes called rhythmical prose.⁹⁵ It retains the four-stress line in a loosely alliterative pattern. It builds in abundant cross-line

92. W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (New York: Random House, 1947).

93. Richard Wilbur, *The Poems of Richard Wilbur* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1963), pp. 9–11.

94. For a description of sprung rhythm, see Harold Whitehall's "Sprung Rhythm," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, by Robert Lowell et al. (New York: New Directions, 1945), pp. 28–54.

95. For a description of Aelfric's style, see John C. Pope, ed., *Homilies of Aelfric*, vol. 1 (London: Early English Text Society, 1967), pp. 105–36.

alliteration—especially to bind to the rest of the poem an occasional nonalliterative line. It plays with the possibility of assonance and adds the close repetition of words and morphemes. Occasionally it makes use of perfect or partial rhyme. Take, for example, the *bookworm* riddle (45)—which I quote here in Old English, in a straightforward translation (with some indication of the ambiguities in the original), and in my own poetic rendering:

Moððe word fræt— me þæt þuhte
 wrætlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
 þæt se wurm forswealg wera gied sumes,
 þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
 ond þæs strangan staþol. Stælgieſt ne wæs
 wihte þy gleawra þe he þam wordum swealg.⁹⁶

A moth ate (spoken) words—to me that seemed
 A strange event (weird fate, odd saying), when I heard of that
 wonder,
 That a worm (bug, snake, dragon) should swallow (mentally im-
 bibe) the songs of a man,
 A thief in darkness (ignorance), his glory-fast sayings (munchings),
 And their place (intellectual foundation) of strength. That thief-
 guest
 Was no wiser for having swallowed (mentally imbibed) words.

A moth ate songs—wolfed words!
 That seemed a weird dish—that a worm
 Should swallow, dumb thief in the dark,
 The songs of a man, his chants of glory,
 Their place of strength. That thief-guest
 Was no wiser for having swallowed words.

My poetic translation is written in strong stress meter. It contains two primary alliterative stresses each in lines 1, 2, 3, and 6. The stresses of line 4 are linked by the assonance of “man” and “chants”; of line 5 by the

96. Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 97.

assonance of "strength" and "guest" (or "place" and "strength," depending on the individual pronunciation). Lines 4 and 5 are also linked by the cross-line alliteration in "guest" and "glory." All six lines have an *s* alliterative stress; three lines have a double *w* stress. The sinuous *s* pattern I hope produces some of the ominous overtones of the *wyrm* complex (worm-snake-dragon) in Old English. Verbal repetitions include "songs" (1 and 4), "words" (1 and 6), "swallow"/"swallowed" (2 and 6), and the double "that" of line 2 and triple "of" of lines 4-5. All of these devices help to tighten the translation and in some sense compensate for the loosening which takes place with the loss of primary alliteration in lines 4-5. The translation is occasionally iambic as in "A moth ate songs," or "Their place of strength"; but this momentary pattern is almost always followed by the shock of dense stress, as in "wolfed words," and "thief-guest." I hope this produces a rhythm that rolls back and forth between an ancient and modern mode—it is a rhythm that is influenced by Hopkins's sprung rhythm.

Building into the translation what Fred C. Robinson calls the "artful ambiguities"⁹⁷ of the Old English riddle proves a difficult task. The word-gobbling *wyrm* that steals man's cultural songs from their vellum foundation may mean "bug, worm, snake, reptile, or dragon" in Old English. The dragon that destroys Beowulf is a *wyrm*, but so is the larva that spins silk. Building the bug into a dragon and bringing him down is part of the mock-epic game of the riddle,⁹⁸ but most of this is lost in the innocuous "worm" of modern English. Taking the ravenous possibilities of *fræet*, a word that seems to imply unnatural gobbling, I try to recapture the dragon's ferocity with the phrase, "wolfed words." *Wyrð* is a word whose meaning ranges from "terrible fate" (epic dragons) to "what's happening" (mocking the bug); in the riddlic context it is also a pun on *gewyrð*, "speech." The ambivalent tone is echoed by *cwide*, "songs, sayings," a pun on *cwidu*, "what is munched."⁹⁹ The grotesque irony of this is perhaps conveyed in

97. Fred C. Robinson, "Artful Ambiguities in the Old English 'Book-Moth' Riddle," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation: For John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 355-62. Much of my discussion in this paragraph derives from Robinson.

98. For the various parodic devices in the riddle, see Ann Harleman Stewart, "Old English Riddle 47 as Stylistic Parody," *Papers on Language and Literature* 11 (1975): 227-41.

99. The puns were first recognized by Robinson.

the “weird dish,” since for moderns not only a hard fate but also hot lasagne may be “dished out.” The addition of “dumb” is also an attempt to catch the bovine level of *cwidu* as well as the unspeaking idiocy of the worm. The word *þystru* means either physical or mental “darkness”; *swealg*, “swallow physically” or “imbibe mentally.” These ambiguities are kept in modern English (e.g., “That book left me in the dark.” “Don’t swallow that old line.”). These are just some of the semantic problems any translator must deal with.

Some readers may object to the trade of a wolf for a dragon or the intrusion of a dish—but a translator must attempt to reproduce not only primary meanings, but also ambiguities, textures, and tones. A safe translation is often one that does injustice to the complexity of the original. My goal has been to recreate faithfully the Old English and to shape modern English poems as compelling as the originals. Just as the riddlic game is a mediation between setter and solver, so too the act of translation is a mediation, a dance of two minds. The Anglo-Saxons themselves, often members of a multilingual community, recognized the complexity of translation. King Alfred describes the act metaphorically in the preface to his translations of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*:

So I gathered staves and posts and tie-beams for each of the tools I should work with, and building-timbers and beams for each of the structures I should make—as much beautiful wood as I could carry. Each time I shouldered the wood home I wanted the forest, but it was more than I could carry. In each beam I saw something I needed at home. So I urge those who have knowledge and good wagons to go to the woods where I cut my beams and fetch their own beautiful branches so they can weave lovely walls and shape splendid buildings and bright towns and live there joyfully summer and winter as I have not yet been able to do.¹⁰⁰

Each translator rebuilds the Anglo-Saxon world in his own way. For those interested in the comparative variety of shapes, I include in the next section a collection of *bookworm* riddle translations. Some are pedantic, some are

100. Thomas A. Carnicelli, ed., *King Alfred’s Version of St. Augustine’s Soliloquies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 47 (translation mine).

lively, some are provocative, some sing. Some seem to have been gobbled by a sharp-toothed bookworm and regurgitated. But all of us, scholars and poets, must plead *mea culpa* in trying to translate. Hauling words and ideas from one culture to another is no easy task.

COMPARATIVE TRANSLATIONS:
THE BOOKWORM RIDDLE

A moth ate a word. To me it seemed
A marvelous thing when I learned the wonder
That a worm had swallowed, in darkness stolen,
The song of a man, his glorious sayings,
A great man's strength; and the thieving guest
Was no whit the wiser for the words it ate.¹⁰¹

—Charles W. Kennedy

A worm ate words. I thought that wonderfully
Strange—a miracle—when they told me a crawling
Insect had swallowed noble songs,
A night-time thief had stolen writing
So famous, so weighty. But the bug was foolish
Still, though its belly was full of thought.¹⁰²

—Burton Raffel

A moth ate words. To me it seemed
a remarkable fate, when I learned of the marvel,
that the worm had swallowed the speech of a man,
a thief in the night, a renowned saying
and its place itself. Though he swallowed the word
the thieving stranger was no whit the wiser.¹⁰³

—Paul F. Baum

101. Charles W. Kennedy, tr., *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 41.

102. Burton Raffel, tr., *Poems From the Old English*, 2d ed. (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 93.

103. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, p. 34.

A moth devoured words. When I heard
of that wonder it struck me as a strange event
that a worm should swallow the song of some man,
a thief gorge in the darkness on a great man's
speech of distinction. The thievish stranger
was not a whit the wiser for swallowing words.¹⁰⁴

—Kevin Crossley-Holland

I heard of a wonder, of words moth-eaten;
that is a strange thing, I thought, weird
that a man's song be swallowed by a worm,
his binded sentences, his bedside stand-by
rustled in the night—and the robber-guest
not one whit the wiser for the words he had mumbled.¹⁰⁵

—Michael Alexander

A moth ate words; a marvellous event
I thought it when I heard about that wonder,
A worm had swallowed some man's lay, a thief
In darkness had consumed the mighty saying
With its foundation firm. The thief was not
One whit the wiser when he ate those words.¹⁰⁶

—Richard Hamer

A moth ate songs—wolfed words!
That seemed a weird dish—that a worm
Should swallow, dumb thief in the dark,
The songs of a man, his chants of glory,
Their place of strength. That thief-guest
Was no wiser for having swallowed words.

—Craig Williamson

104. Crossley-Holland, *The Exeter Riddle Book*, p. 70.

105. Michael Alexander, tr., *The Earliest English Poems*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 100.

106. Richard Hamer, tr., *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 107.