ROBINSON, Fred C. 1993: *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English*. Oxford, B. Blackwell. IX + 335 pp.

Blackwell has published a nicely-presented collection of essays on Old English by Fred Robinson under the title *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English.*

Professor Robinson is a distinguished philologist well known in the last three decades for original and stimulating works on Old English language and literature. Most scholars and students of Old English studies knows, among many other of his works, *A Guide to Old English* (with Bruce Mitchell) 5th ed. Blackwell 1992, his book *Beowulf and the Appositive Style, A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the End of 1972*, and his edition of *Old English Poetic Texts,* vol. XXIII, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile (with E. G. Stanley).

The volume under review divides twenty three essays into five parts, including three new articles on the literary interpretation of *Beowulf*, a commentary and analysis of Ezra Pound's translation of the *Seafarer*, and a brief history of composition in Old English after the Anglo-Saxon period. The rest of the essays are reprinted, some with revisions. In some cases there is an "Afterward 1992" in which he draws attention to a study of the essay which appeared since the original essay was published. The twenty three articles collected here vary in length but not in quality because Robinson's detailed analysis provides useful insights into Old English language and literature. Though the volume varies widely in terms of subject and approach, most of the articles deal with literary interpretation, historical and cultural background, as well as significance of names and naming.

The first part deals with literary interpretation of *Beowulf*: "The Tomb of Beowulf", "Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence", "History, Religion, Culture: The

Background Necessary for Teaching Beowulf", and "An Introduction to Beowulf". The titles of the essays are explicit enough to show what they are dealing with, sometimes with textual evidence, sometimes with the analysis of the background of the most important epic poem written in Old English.

The first essay, "The Tomb of Beowulf", gives the title to the volume, and it shows the vast scholarship of the author. Robinson suggests that the second rite described at the end of *Beowulf* may have had a significance beyond confused redundancy.

> I shall supply evidence to suggest that at least some in the poet's audience would have seen in the final ceremony of the poem suggestions of an apotheosis. King Beowulf's bereaved subjects, I will suggest, are so overawed by their fallen leader's accomplishments and so unwilling to accept the finality of his death hat they turn desperately to the pagan resources available to them to accord him ultimate veneration and, perhaps, recruit his protective force beyond the grave. Such an act would be a closing parallel with the act of the Danes at the beginning of the poem in lines 175-88, where in a time of crisis they turn to their heathen gods with propitiatory sacrifices. (6)

Robinson shows how the cultural background in Anglo-Saxon England causes the Anglo-Saxons to be familiar with the concept of deifying a deceased hero, such as Beowulf, in order to see whether manifestations of tomb cult and of apotheosis in their culture bear any resemblance to the event described at the end of *Beowulf.*

In the following two articles Robinson studies the marvelous elements in *Beowulf*, reconsidering textual evidence, and the usefulness of knowing history, religion and culture as the background necessary for teaching *Beowulf.* The author suggests doing an exercise in order to project oneself imaginatively into another people's mind and language. This exercise constitutes one of the greatest rewards of literary study; the world of Beowulf, says the author, "is worth the effort" (51)

The last article of the first part was originally the "prologue" of *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North* by Marijane Osborn. According to Robinson, the poet of *Beowulf* was able to establish at the end of the poem a place for the noble pagan in the collective memory of Christian Anglo-Saxons. After reading the poem we are left with a delicately-poised contradiction and a sad uncertainty which for many centuries has darkened men's broodings about the after-life. Based on this fact, the author observes the analogy of the conflicting feelings in *Beowulf's* poet and the Spanish writer and philosopher Unamuno who presents the subject of life after death in a moving philosophical meditation in his book *Del sentimiento traågico de la vida.* (On the Tragic Sense of Life). Unamuno acknowledges that there may after all be no afterlife, and hence no meaning in human existence; this realization urges the author to the following sentence *Y si es la nada lo que nos estaå reservado, hagamos que sea una injusticia esto.* (And if it is oblivion that is reserved for us at the end of this life, then let us act in such a way that this will have been an injustice!) Reflecting on this philosophical thought, Robinson writes:

> The devout Christian who composed Beowulf could never have uttered directly such a desperate sentiment as this, but through the indirections of poetry he has suggested something very like it. (67)

The second Part of the volume offers various literary interpretations on some Old English poems, but chiefly on *The Battle of Maldon*: : " Two Aspects of Variation in Old English Poetry", "Understanding an Old English Wisdom Verse: Maxims II, lines 10 ff.", "Artful Ambiguities in the Old English Book-Moth Riddle", "God, Death, and Loyalty in the Battle of Maldon", "Some Aspects of the Maldon Poet's Artistry", "Literary Dialect in Maldon and the Casley Transcript", "Lexicography and Literary Criticism: A caveat". All these articles cover a broad range of topics and they seek to reaffirm the enduring value and indispensability of traditional methods of study Old English: paleography and codicology, textual study, language, and literary

analysis, in a word, "close reading". All these articles are well known as they were published in some of the most renowned and quoted journals, and in certain books containing Old English essays. Some of these articles are frequently quoted, for example, "God, Death and Loyalty in the Battle of Maldon", while others are less well-known as "Understanding Old English Wisdom Verse®" In this article, however, we can find out a perfect example of "close reading", and Robinson gives us an acute interpretation of the poem *Maxims II* ; the author analyses lines 10 ff. *soth bith swicolost, sinc lyth deorost, gold gumena gehwam.* "Truth is most tricky; treasure, gold, is most precious to every man". Robinson recalls a text written in *Libro de Buen Amor* by the Spanish poet Juan Ruiz who expresses with wry wit the miraculous powers of money:

> Fazié muchos priores, obispos e abades
> arçobispos, dotores, patriarcas, potestades;
> muchos clerigos necios daåvales denidades;
> fazié verdat mentiras, e mentiras, verdades.
> "It made many curates, bishops and abbots, archbishops, savants, patriarchs, potentates; it gave high honors to many simpleton priests; it turned truth into lies, and lies into truths"

Robinson points out that the text from Old English *Maxims II* is probably the Anglo-Saxon version of the sentiment expressed by the Spanish poet, that money makes truth out of lies and lies out of truth.

Modernist concerns with feminist studies are not overlooked in this volume, in fact Robinson makes tentative explorations in some of the newer directions which literary investigation have recently taken. The following essays are introduced in Part III: "The Prescient Woman in Old English Literature", "The Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship", "A Metronymic in The Battle of Maldon ?", "European Clothing Names and the Etymology of Girl".

In the first article Robinson shows various examples of the effect of the Germanic conception of woman on an Anglo-Saxon audience's understanding of a work of literature. His analysis is clever and penetrating, and demonstrates the association between women and wisdom. It is interesting to take into account what Robinson says at the end of this essay:

> Nothing is to be gained and something will be lost if we pretend that our modern way of viewing women in the role of counsellors and prophets is the same as an Anglo-Saxon's would have been. Remembering the difference between the two will improve our understanding of a literature which, though it has often been described is quintessentially masculine, is in fact concerned extensively with women. (163)

Robinson in the essay "Old English Poetry: The Question of Authorship" analyses the possibility that some Anglo-Saxon Women might have written some literary texts, and he suggests that women writers and poets among the Anglo-Saxons would not be an isolated phenomenon in the Germanic world. The author quotes an Anglo-Saxon nun of Heidenheim, named Hygeburg, who composed hagiography, and a nun named Berhtgith who wrote poems, and Edward the Confessor's queen Edith who was celebrated and distinguished for verse and prose, among others. We know that Old English literature is anonymous in most cases, but as the author of this article says:

> We should not pretend to know that women did not write them (Judith, the Riddles, poems in which the speaker is a woman, various liturgical and religious texts and meditations, etc.) But we should not pretend to know that women did not write them and continue to read these poems with the tacit assumption that they are all the products of male authorship. (169)

Part IV deals with names and onomastic interpretations in Old English literature: "The Significance of Names in Old English Literature", "Personal Names in Medieval Narrative and the Name of Unferth in Beowulf", "Anglo-

Saxon Onomastics in the Old English Andreas", "Some Uses of Name-Meanings in Old English Poetry".

It is known that many writers have used fictive names, (even modern writers like Henry James, Nabokov, etc.), as a literary device and means of expressing judgments about their characters. Robinson studies the significance of certain names in Old English epic as Unferth, one of the most ambiguous characters in *Beowulf;* the author also analyses the onomastics in Old English religious poems like *Andreas* and *Exodus,* and bases his ideas in the commentaries of the Fathers, such as the Spanish scholar Isidore of Seville who spells out the connection among the various significations of Seth's name. Robinson suggests to study medieval onomastics bearing in mind the difference between the literary names of the Old English literature, subtle, learned, artful, and that of our own writers today tending to be spontaneous and obvious, and the author concludes: *We must study to understand and appreciate these distinctions before we can fully reclaim this important aspect of the Anglo-saxon aesthetic mode.* (218).

In Part V Robinson groups essays on Old English in the 20th century: "The Might of the North: Pound's Anglo-Saxon Studies and *The Seafarer*", "Ezra Pound and the Old English. Translational Tradition", "The Afterlife of Old English: A Brief History of Composition in Old English after the Close of the Anglo-Saxon Period" and "Medieval, the Middle Ages".

The first two articles deal with Pound's translation of *The Seafarer*. It is known that some poets, such as R. Lowell, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and W. S. Merwin, among others, knew and were influenced by Pound's *The Seafarer*. Robinson analyses this translation and tries to answer the question: "Why did Pound succeed where so many before him had failed?". After a close study of the translation, Robinson concludes with this sentence: *Genius discerns possibilities in material which others had found unpromising and by renovating it lends it greatness.* (274).

In the essay "The Afterlife of Old English" the author gives a survey and brief history of some texts written in Old English after the Norman Conquest.

It is worth mentioning Robinson's comment on the poem *Beowulfes Beorh* written in Old English by the famous scholar N. F. S. Grundtwig in 1861. In this text Grundtwig regrets England's alienation from its northern origins and expresses the hope that through poetic monuments the English may rediscover their Germanic brotherhood with the Danes.

Robinson's concern in the last essay is with terms "medieval" and "Middle Ages", not with the period itself. He offers observations on the pronunciation and spelling of these terms as well as on their origin and the puzzling question: why English has a plural noun, "Middle Ages", whereas other major European languages have a singular, for example, "Edad Media" in Spanish. In dealing with the origin of the term Middle English, he mentions among others Julian of Toledo in the seventh century who speaks of his time as a "tempus medium", but as the author points out, the context of this phrase shows that this is not our concept; in fact, the Fathers of the Church are referring to the "middle" as the period between the Incarnation and Judgment Day. Finally, Robinson gives some attention to the meaning, and popular usage of terms like "medieval" and "Middle Ages" in various languages of Europe, and he draws some conclusions from this.

A list with 44 entries of essays and notes by Robinson, not included in the volume, closes *The Tomb of Beowulf*; there is also a list of Memoirs of Old English and medievalist scholars written by the author in various journals.

The volume is superbly laid out and printed, and remarkably free of misprints. Those who love Old English, and readers in general, can appreciate how Robinson displays his usual clarity and masterly common-sense in arguing for the simplest explanation, but even those who disagree with Robinson in some respects will find these essays impressively-argued and well-documented. The author is to be congratulated on bringing a work to a successful volume that he himself calls *a number of previously published essays which I think still to be of interest to students of Old English*.

Taken altogether, the volume under review mirrors the richness of mind and spirit of its author and the volume leaves one with admiration for the quality of Robinson's works; in this book, in one way or another, he expresses his ideas and feelings on Old English summed up in the following lines from an interview with him at Yale few years ago:

> The one branch of English literature which is least vulnerable to this attack, however, is, I believe, Old English, because scholars and students of Old English literature have never been persuaded to abandon the primary texts and go over to "theory". If we medievalists continue to put literature in the center and to explore what the great writers of the past have had to say, then I believe we can be a light unto other literary scholars, showing them the way to recover from this malaise of nihilistic "theory" which has poisoned literary study in the past decade.
> *(SELIM* 1(1991) p. 147)

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