



# At the Limits of Knowledge: the Iron Poetics of Old English Verse in the Nineteenth Century

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## ABSTRACT

Scholars in recent decades have critiqued the notion of Old English as a poetry of iron: evoking a hypermasculine, primitive past, the metaphor is emblematic of outdated practices in the field. This article builds upon these critiques, while showing that they oversimplify the metaphor's function in disciplinary history. Part I traces desires and unknowns in the nineteenth century that made iron embody Saxon poetry's primitive artlessness. From these struggles, Part II turns to draw forth a counter-narrative, in which Bosworth's metaphor of the hammering smith served to clarify difficulties of metrical knowledge c.1825. Part III then situates a later extension of iron imagery in the potentialities of late nineteenth-century iron architecture. Examining the challenges that early scholars faced helps us better perceive the literary, linguistic, and political ramifications of their solutions. Spotlighting the metaphor's changing relationship to beauty versus utility also points forward, as we imagine new metaphors that might once more be productive for conceptualising poetic structure.

The elusive rules of Old English verse style have occasioned many metaphors in the history of the field. John Leyerle likened the structure of the poetry to the interlace of visual art; J. R. R. Tolkien before him famously described *Beowulf* as the 'tough builder's work of true stone'.<sup>1</sup> Such acts of imaginative naming are a strategy of mastery, attempting to access the power and essence of a poetry that comes to us, across many centuries, without an *ars poetica*. A survey of this Rumpelstiltskinesque history would furnish many curiosities, for scholarship on the language of Old English verse – rich in metaphoric compounds, composed in unquantifiable measures, dressed in words and syntax unfamiliar to prose – attests to the myriad ways imagination flourishes at the limits of knowledge.

But how does a metaphor catch the imagination? What makes a given trope cluster in particular historical moments? In the early nineteenth century, a new image suddenly came to dominate descriptions of Old English: left and right, students of the literature could hear that Anglo-Saxon verse had the strength of iron, that its sound was the banging of hammers, the crash of swords. As Francis

<sup>1</sup> J. Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1967), 1–17; J. R. R. Tolkien, 'Prefatory Remarks on the Prose Translation of *Beowulf*', in *Beowulf and the Finnesburh Fragment*, trans. J. R. C. Hall (London, 1950), pp. ix–xliii.

Gummere described it, ‘The very metre of their poetry is the clash of battle, and knows scarcely any other note.’<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I would like to trace some of the ways in which one prolific metaphor mediated and stretched the way Old English poetry was read and imagined in the nineteenth century. This early life of the iron metaphor is important, not least because it flourished during the disciplinary formation of Old English studies, when most of the corpus, and also the linguistic knowledge for interpreting it, was taking shape. What further makes the metaphor unusual among others is the field’s apparent consensus on its demise. Writing in 2012, Roy Liuzza chose iron as his emblem for a simplistic and outdated vision of Old English verse – and with it, the notion that early English literature, like the earliest phases of human life, is immature, primitive, and incapable of artistry.<sup>3</sup> So Eric Stanley, whose work has influentially challenged the Romantic and Teutonic imaginary that shaped foundational assumptions of the field, writes that an iron poetics tuned the ears of readers ‘deafened by the imagined din of battle’, thus unable to appreciate the poetry’s subtler reflections.<sup>4</sup> Of the racial essentializing behind assessments such as Gummere’s above, John D. Niles has lamented: ‘Thanks in part to such praise as this, Anglo-Saxon studies took on a retrograde appearance in the eyes of scholars who, cultivating a cosmopolitan outlook, turned their critical attention elsewhere.’<sup>5</sup> As a governing metaphor for the field, iron has come to represent the most outdated modes of early English literary study, the narratives it reinforces of antiquarianism, nationalism, primitive purity no longer generative for our time.

Yet the metaphor has more than one story to tell, and its early history continues to matter precisely because of its entanglement with these aforementioned narratives from which we wish to break. In this, I build upon work that has shown the value of re-examining the field’s governing imagery. Emily Thornbury, for example, has examined the ways in which an aesthetic of the text-as-ruin underwrote the way early editors handled the imperfections of surviving manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> Eric Weiskott has examined how the casting of alliterative verse as if a biological species – a metre that experienced both a ‘death’ and a ‘revival’ – solidified a narrative of ruptures and decline that ultimately misrepresents the relationship between metre, language, and

<sup>2</sup> F. Gummere, *Germanic Origins: a Study in Primitive Culture* (New York, 1892), p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> R. Liuzza, ‘Iron and Irony in *Beowulf*’, in *Beowulf at Kalamazoo: Essays in Translation and Performance*, ed. J. K. Schulman and P. Szarmach (Kalamazoo, MI, 2012), pp. 50–68.

<sup>4</sup> E. Stanley, ‘Aesthetic Evaluations of the Sound of Old English: “About the Anglo-Saxon tongue there was the strength of iron, with the sparkling and the beauty of burnished steel”’, in *Essays for Joyce Hill on her Sixtieth Birthday*, Leeds Stud. in Eng., ns 37 (2006), 451–72, at 465.

<sup>5</sup> J. D. Niles, *Old English Literature: a Guide to Criticism with Selected Readings* (Chichester, 2016), pp. 8–9.

<sup>6</sup> E. Thornbury, ‘Admiring the Ruined Text: the Picturesque in Editions of Old English Verse’, *New Med. Lit.* 8 (2006), 215–44.

time.<sup>7</sup> In each of these cases, the metaphor is bound up with the limits of what is known and unknowable; they reveal how the ghosts of metaphors past perpetuate outdated frameworks of knowledge even after the field itself seeks to move on.

The iron metaphor, likewise, is not just something to be seen beyond.<sup>8</sup> The metaphor's plasticity, enabling it to mean many different things, allows us to see how knowledge of a field is codified out of the intersections of analysis and imagination. It helps us understand the struggle nineteenth-century readers faced in coming to terms with Old English poetry, and the ramifications of their solutions for subsequent scholarship. The metaphor shows how Old English metre gripped imaginations precisely because its form resisted easy exposition. Changing technologies in iron architecture further brought new possibilities to bear on old tensions between art and utility, refinement and strength. In striving to comprehend the poetry's pastness, the metaphor itself was changing with the colours of modernity: iron connected past and present through imagery that mattered deeply to both, but in different and unstable ways. In underscoring how the metaphor served as a way of experiencing and theorizing about the poetry, we see alternative trajectories within a history that later became monolithic. Recognising points where Old English verse form was unnecessarily masculinised also draws forth alternative possible conceptualisations of the poetry's structure, helping us to imagine new material metaphors that can once more be productive for scholarship going forward.

#### I: THE METAPHOR AS PUREST AMALGAMATION

Multiple narratives converge to shape our imagination of Old English verse as a poetry of iron. Some of its most eloquent expressions can be found, for example, in the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges. In 'A Un Poeta Sajón', the poet laments to his distant Saxon counterpart:

Lento en la lenta sombra labrarías  
Metáforas de espadas en los mares  
...  
Ahora sólo eres tu cantar de hierro.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> E. Weiskott, 'Alliterative Meter and English Literary History, 1700–2000', *Eng. Lit. Hist.* 84 (2017), 259–85.

<sup>8</sup> I allude here to the seminal scholarship of Lakoff and Johnson, first published in 1980, which illuminates the metaphorical grounding of conceptual structures and metaphor's epistemological power as a form of 'imaginative rationality'. See the second edition, G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL, 2003), esp. pp. 139–46, 185–94, and the new afterword contextualising later scholarship by the authors and others thus inspired. My allusion here is to the original afterword, p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Borges, 'A Un Poeta Sajón', from his *Selected Poems 1923–1967*, ed. N. T. di Giovanni (New York, 1972), p. 218. 'Slow in the thick shadows you would forge, | Metaphors of swords on

The turns of Borges's verse – where the idea of an 'iron song' stands in as both presence and absence, holding together an imagination about the language, the poet, and a sense of history – exemplify dynamics we see throughout nineteenth-century scholarship, how the heroic content that came to be emblematic of Old English verse could readily blend into and give shape to reception of its poetic form.<sup>10</sup>

Wielding swords and welding words: the poet is a Weland-like craftsman in a heroic world. Yet very little of the surviving corpus is actually battle poetry, and the early English themselves did not, in fact, tend to speak of poetry-making as metalwork. While Old Norse poetry did compare poets to iron-working smiths, what little the Old English poets said suggests more a vision of weaving.<sup>11</sup> The *scop* that accompanies Beowulf on his expedition to the mere, for example, 'entwined his words' ('wordum wrixlan', *Beowulf* 874a); his words are 'expertly fastened' ('soðe gebunden', *Beowulf* 871a).<sup>12</sup> Megan Cavell's work on weaving and binding images in the corpus has shown that their application to poetic craft emphasises intricate movement rather than forceful blows.<sup>13</sup> Language art more broadly was portrayed as a careful 'fitting together' ('gefegan') of raw materials, a verb that applied variously to skilled construction in wood or stone, the human body, the biblical ark, to grammatical parts of speech and to song.<sup>14</sup> In these flashes we find a subtle, reflexive language for poetic art, with skill and intricacy ('searu') always at the forefront – but not, it seems, one that was imagined with pounding energy. Reading over the shoulders of past Anglo-Saxonists, we learn that metaphors about early English style have always said more about its readers than about the poetry itself.

Borges' Saxon poet succinctly illustrates the iron metaphor's rootedness in Romantic medievalism, imaginatively identifying the Anglo-Saxon past with a fusion of the heroic and poetic spirit.<sup>15</sup> In this, he also continued a vision that has

the vast seas ... | Now you are only your song of iron', translation from R. Frank, 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', *Bull. of the John Rylands Lib.* 75 (1993), 11–36, at 36.

<sup>10</sup> On Borges's study and use of Old English, see M. J. Toswell, *Borges the Unacknowledged Medievalist: Old English and Old Norse in his Life and Work* (New York, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> See R. Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: the Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Ithaca, NY, 1978), pp. 33, 91–2; and M. Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 2, 39, 83–96 *et passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Quotations from *Beowulf* are from *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, Fourth Edition*, ed. R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (Toronto, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Cavell notes, even when poets describe iron weaponry, they hew close to a language of weaving to emphasise the weapon's workmanship and value. M. Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: the Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto, 2016), pp. 47–91, *et passim*.

<sup>14</sup> *Dictionary of Old English: A to I Online*, s.v. 'fegan' and 'gefegan'.

<sup>15</sup> For an early and influential formulation, see T. Percy, 'An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England', in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of our Earlier Poets*, 3 vols. (London, 1765), I, xv–xxiii. Consider also depictions of King Alfred by,

been in place since the second half of the eighteenth century, which located the ideal Saxon poet-figure in a world seemingly untouched by Christian learning, composing apart from the technologies of writing.<sup>16</sup> Ironwork, in this light, embodied the ‘simplicity and strength’ that was vital to a vision of early England as the nation’s childhood.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the language of iron may also have found new imaginative force in light of contemporary developments in archaeological science, for it was in the first half of the nineteenth century that the field of archaeology was developing its modern periodization. That extracts of early medieval poetry were often termed ‘specimens’, as Chris Jones has shown, attests to the close affiliation between the ‘fraternal disciplines’ of philology with the archaeological and palaeontological sciences: ‘it was a period when geology and poetry could easily be bedfellows, when the past was vividly read in the sedimentary layers of libraries and cliff-faces alike.’<sup>18</sup> In 1793, James Douglas had excavated an intact grave of an Anglo-Saxon warrior at Chatham, which, as Donna Beth Ellard has shown, was buried with an iron sword and iron spearhead that Douglas manipulated to shape the warrior’s Saxon identity.<sup>19</sup> Later in the Victorian period, Danish archaeology would recover artefacts placing Germanic peoples of the

e.g., Henry James Pye in *Alfred: an Epic Poem in Six Books* (London: 1801), p. 132; and by William Wordsworth in Ecclesiastical Sonnet, XXVI, first published in *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (London, 1822), p. 28. For treatments on the theme more broadly, see E. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge, 1975); and Frank, ‘The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’, pp. 20–24; L. Pratt, ‘Anglo-Saxon Attitudes? Alfred the Great and the Romantic National Epic’, *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. D. Scragg and C. Weinberg (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 138–56. On Borges’s own Romantic vision of medieval literature, see Toswell, *Unacknowledged Medievalist*, pp. 49, 84–100.

<sup>16</sup> Percy, ‘Essay’, xv; also T. Warton, who altogether omitted Old English poetry from his *History of English Poetry* because it was not native and ‘pagan’ enough. See Warton, ‘Preface’, pp. v–vi and Diss.I.e.3 in *History of English Poetry* (London, 1774). In the nineteenth century, see, e.g., J. Grimm, *Deutsche Grammatik* I (Göttingen, 1819), lxvii; and B. ten Brink, *Geschichte der Englischen Litteratur* I (Berlin, 1877), 35. On the idealisation of the oral poet, see Frank, ‘The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’, pp. 11–36; and J. D. Niles, ‘Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet’, *Western Folklore* 62 (2003), 7–61.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Jones, *Fossil Poetry: Anglo-Saxon and Linguistic Nativism in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2018), p. 145. Thomas Love Peacock’s ‘iron age of poetry’ is not about the Saxon past but exhibits many of these aforementioned qualities. See T. Peacock, ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’, published in 1820 and reprinted in *Peacock’s Four Ages of Poetry. Shelley’s Defence of Poetry. Browning’s Essay on Shelley*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford, 1921), pp. 3–19.

<sup>18</sup> For example, G. Ellis, *Specimens of the Early English Poets* (London, 1790). As Jones also notes, the Society of Antiquaries journal, in which J. J. Conybeare published many findings on Old English, was named *Archaeologia*. Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>19</sup> J. Douglas, *Nenia Britannica: or, A Sepulchral History of Great Britain* (London, 1793), p. 2. See D. B. Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures* (Goleta, CA, 2019) pp. 129–42; also Niles, *Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 172–4.

Migration Period in the Iron Age.<sup>20</sup> Iron, in this light, was thus not merely an imagined heroic medium but also a new conceptual order for organising knowledge about the past.<sup>21</sup> We can glimpse an analogous vision at work, I think, in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1838 article, in which he reviewed the latest Old English scholarship, strung together into a landscape with iron as its leitmotif.<sup>22</sup> Longfellow's essay informed readers that Anglo-Saxon warriors fought with iron sledge-hammers, that 'the structure of the verse; the short exclamatory lines, ... and the general omission of the particles gives great energy and vivacity. They ring like blows of hammers on an anvil.'<sup>23</sup> *Beowulf*, which the essay describes in detail, 'is like a piece of ancient armour; rusty and battered, and yet strong. From within comes a voice sepulchral, as if the ancient armour spoke.'<sup>24</sup> Longfellow's iron poetics cast the poetry as a kind of rusty specimen to be unearthed and interpreted. It both recalled and confirmed a centuries-old folk etymology, that 'Saxons' derive their name from 'seax, a sword'; they are thus 'the men of the sword'.<sup>25</sup>

Longfellow's depiction of a clanging soundscape, drawing a close parallel between the warriors who fought with sledgehammers and the word-smiths who forged poetry with them, was influential.<sup>26</sup> We can hear its echo, for example, in the 'iron on iron clang | hammer on hammer bang' in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the Nydam Boat, unearthed 1859–1863 by Danish archaeologist Conrad Engelhardt, and Danish artist Lupalu Janssen's paintings of the Migration Age based on archaeological finds in Thorsbjerg bog and Nydam. See H. Williams, 'Digging Saxon Graves in Victorian Britain', in *The Victorians and the Ancient World: Archaeology and Classicism in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, ed. R. Pearson (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2006), pp. 61–80; Niles, *Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 350–2.

<sup>21</sup> For deeper reflection in this vein, especially on ways this conceptual order served purposes of racial and nationalist identity-making, see Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures*, pp. 101–7, 129–45.

<sup>22</sup> [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow], 'Anglo-Saxon Literature', *The North Amer. Rev.* 47 (1838), 90–134. The piece was originally printed anonymously, but later twice repackaged by Longfellow in collections of general literary criticism. Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 117–8. On Longfellow's place in early English studies in North America, see M. Mora and M. Gómez-Calderón, 'The Study of Old English in America (1776–1850): National Uses of the Saxon Past', *JEGP* 97 (1998), 322–36; Niles, *Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 272–86.

<sup>23</sup> [Longfellow], 'Anglo-Saxon Literature', p. 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> W. Swinton [and W. Whitman], *Rambles among Words: their Poetry, History and Wisdom* (London, 1859), p. 208. Jones provides a history of this etymological association, dating back to the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, in *Fossil Poetry*, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Liuzza offers a positive assessment of Longfellow's translation of *Beowulf* as 'a serious effort to understand the poem in its own idiom'. See R. Liuzza, 'Lost in Translation: Some Versions of *Beowulf* in the Nineteenth Century', *ES4* (2002), 281–95, esp. 288–90. The Saxon hammering also appears in one of Longfellow's own poems, 'The Arsenal at Springfield'. In the poem, the parallel formulation between 'the Saxon hammer' and 'the Norseman's song' clinches the iron imagery as both martial and poetic, at once a people's signature weapon and its representative soundscape.

*Harold*, when a thane breaks into performance of (a fabricated) *The Battle of Brunanburg*.<sup>27</sup> As Roberta Frank observes, this hammering pulse served to primitive the poetry's accentual rhythm by aligning it with other primitive arts, 'attributing to it the beat of drum-language'.<sup>28</sup> Its echo could be heard well into the twentieth century, for example, in Michael Alexander's memorable schematization of the alliterative long line: 'BANG...BANG: BANG...CRASH'.<sup>29</sup> In these, iron becomes the central communicative material through which all aspects of the Anglo-Saxon past becomes potentially intelligible: the rusted armour, horse-riding warriors wielding iron sledge-hammers, the very sounds and structure of the poetry.

Yet as we can also surmise in Longfellow's description, the imagery of iron spoke simultaneously to that which *resisted* intelligible explanation; for another aspect of what the clashing hammers and swords often described was the emphatic impression the poetry made, and a sense of its unwieldiness.<sup>30</sup> Metre posed a particular problem: professional study of Old English poetry had begun only a century earlier, and its rules were mostly still opaque.<sup>31</sup> George Hickes, whose seminal *Thesaurus* of 1705 offered the first systematic description of Old English poetic style, had sought to explicate Saxon metre through a classical, quantitative framework.<sup>32</sup> Yet as Hickes's scansion fell apart in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the suspicion grew that perhaps Old English poetry had no stylistic etiquette at all.<sup>33</sup> John Josias Conybeare in 1813 gave this assessment: 'In making so large demands upon the credulity of his readers [Hickes] was, though

<sup>27</sup> Tennyson would later produce an English translation of the actual Old English poem, but the supposed 'extract' as performed in *Harold* contains nothing of the Old English poem. See Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 118–9, 235–61.

<sup>28</sup> R. Frank, *The Etiquette of Early Northern Verse* (Notre Dame, IL, 2022), p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> M. Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (Berkeley, CA, 1970), p. 18. Just three years earlier, Spaeth's *Old English Poetry* was reissued, also reiterating the 'hammer-blow style of the Anglo-Saxon'. D. Spaeth *Old English Poetry* (New York, NY, 1967); first published 1921. Frank notes both Spaeth and Alexander's uses of the trope in *Etiquette of Early Northern Verse*, p. 7 and p. 178 n. 57.

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the history of the study of Old English style and the particular difficulties it posed, see D. Calder, 'The Study of Style in Old English Poetry: a Historical Introduction', *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. D. Calder (Berkeley, CA, 1979), pp. 1–65.

<sup>31</sup> The earliest post-medieval engagement with Old English was political and theological rather than literary. See R. C. Payne, 'The Rediscovery of Old English Poetry in the English Literary Tradition', in *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: the First Three Centuries*, ed. C. T. Berkhout and M. Gatch (Boston, MA, 1982), pp. 149–66.

<sup>32</sup> G. Hickes, *Linguarum veterum septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archaeologicus*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1703–5), I, 186–9.

<sup>33</sup> I. Cornelius, 'The Accentual Paradigm in Early English Metrics', *JEGP* 114 (2015), 459–481. On the aesthetic and political determinations behind Hickes' own judgements of Old English verse style and its difficulties, see S. Lerer, 'The Anglo-Saxon Pindar: Old English Scholarship and Augustan Criticism in George Hickes's "Thesaurus"', *MP* 99 (2001), 26–65.

unconsciously, laying the foundation of future scepticism.<sup>34</sup> Even as later readers began to turn their attention from quantity to rhythm, the irreducibility of Old English verse lines to predictable stress patterns made the poetry seem recalcitrantly irregular. In 1805, Sharon Turner – whose *History of the Anglo-Saxons* influentially shaped nineteenth-century knowledge of early England – thus sums up his chapter on versification: ‘When their words would not fall easily into the desired rhythm, they were satisfied with an approach to it, and with this mixture of regular and irregular cadence all their poetry seems to have been composed.’<sup>35</sup> Being of ‘an uncultivated age’, as Conybeare and others would conclude, Saxon poetry ‘would scarcely demand any higher degree of correctness’.<sup>36</sup> Old English poetry thus appeared at best a coarse, approximate art, if indeed art at all.

Other noted deformities include the poetry’s tendency to omit sentence particles, and a preference for parataxis over hypotaxis – stylistic choices that withhold syntactic connectives and depend on the reader to supply otherwise unspoken logical relations. Turner explained that ‘The omission of these particles increases the force and dignity of the phrase, but requires a greater exertion of the mind to comprehend the sense.’<sup>37</sup> A few years earlier in 1801, George Ellis had declared the resulting ‘abrupt transitions’ to be ‘the universal characteristic of savage poetry’.<sup>38</sup> The inversion of word order further strengthened, for other readers, the feeling of untethered content being hurled about. J. R. Green’s presentation in his *Short History of the English People* is a catch-all of the familiar clichés, explaining that the poetry was:

powerful without beauty, obscured by harsh metaphors and involved construction, but eminently the verse of warriors ... The very metre is rough with a sort of self-violence and repression; the verses fall like sword-strokes in the thick of battle.<sup>39</sup>

In Green, we see the way technical incomprehension and unmet aesthetic expectations get absorbed into the battlefield din. As a metaphor for the poetry, the clashing of hammers and swords served to suggest a kind of inarticulate energy of a nation in its youth.

<sup>34</sup> J. J. Conybeare, ‘Observations on the Metre of the Anglo Saxon Poetry’, *Archaeologia* 17 (1814), 257–66, at 257.

<sup>35</sup> S. Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 4 vols. (London, 1799–1805), IV, 417. Citations from Turner are from this edition except where otherwise noted.

<sup>36</sup> Conybeare, ‘Observations’, p. 266.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, *History*, IV, 375. Liuzza succinctly sums up Turner’s position: ‘clearly he wanted to like *Beowulf* but was not entirely able to explain why or how he should like it’. Liuzza, ‘Lost in Translation’, p. 283.

<sup>38</sup> G. Ellis, *Specimens of the Early English Poets*, 2nd edn, 3 vols. (London, 1801), I, 13. On this disjunctive quality of the poetry and its association with Pindar via Hickeys and Ellis, see Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 72–3.

<sup>39</sup> J. R. Green, *Short History of the English People* (London, 1874), p. 27.



A particular point of difficulty was the poetry's tendency for periphrasis and apposition, repeating an idea through synonyms and metaphoric compounding.<sup>40</sup> Turner had chosen *Caedmon's Hymn* to illustrate this feature, though as the warrior image came increasingly to dominate impressions of Old English poetry, illustrations of this technique began to foreground an association with the brute force energy of the battlefield.<sup>41</sup> Gummere, for instance, drew forth from the metaphoric elaboration and redoubling a slovenly forcefulness:

Much repetition, variation, ceaseless forward-and-back: such are the chief characteristics. Speaking of a sword, the poet tells us 'the battle-gleam was unwilling to bite'. 'Battle-gleam' is a vivid trope for literal 'sword'; but by the time the poet reaches his verb, he has forgotten his noun, and does not stop to ask how a 'gleam' can 'bite'...<sup>42</sup>

Gummere follows the German linguist Wilhelm Scherer in pronouncing that 'the Germanic nature was fond of raining its blows on the same spot'.<sup>43</sup> 'Our old metre inclines', he writes, 'like our ancestors themselves, to violence. ... [T]here is an eternal leaping back and forth, but there is little actual advance'.<sup>44</sup>

That such conjuring of battle din muddied poetic form with ideas about national character perhaps needs no elaboration. Yet I describe these aspects of style at some length because, I think, the technical and aesthetic difficulties they posed were crucial in spurring the imagination in more ways than one, and are responsible also for a very different kind of engagement with the metaphor which I shall consider later. For now, we might turn this characterisation of barbarism around, to note that the impression of Old English as an iron poetry was as much a response to the heroic content as to the alterity of the poetry's formal contours, its unfamiliar noise. The paradoxical combination of

<sup>40</sup> On repetition and variation, see F. Robinson, 'Two Aspects of Variation in Old English Poetry', in his *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 71–86.

<sup>41</sup> Turner, *History*, IV, 378–9. This observation parallels that of Jones, that passages chosen to illustrate Old English poetics shifted to increasingly using *Beowulf* over the course of the nineteenth century, whereas they were previously drawn from the Caedmonian poems. Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, p. 162.

<sup>42</sup> F. Gummere, *A Handbook of Poetics for Students of English Verse* (Boston, MA, 1885), pp. 87–88. Gummere does not cite any passage in relation to this assertion, but he appears to be referring to *Beowulf* 1522–8.

<sup>43</sup> Gummere, *Handbook*, pp. 174–6; W. Scherer, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (Amsterdam, PA, 1868), p. 159. Stanley offers brief discussion of the two in 'Aesthetic Evaluations', pp. 460–1. A full survey of the use of the iron metaphor in nineteenth-century German scholarship is beyond the scope of this current article. However, Stanley's 'Aesthetic Evaluations' captures the porousness between nineteenth-century English and German scholarship on Old English style, and Gummere's borrowing of Scherer's image here suggests that the iron metaphor was not wholly isolated to Anglophone writing.

<sup>44</sup> Gummere, *Handbook*, p. 176.

terseness and repetition, of abrupt leaps but also slow circling, was frequently highlighted and to some seemed barbarity in itself. So the French historian Hippolyte Taine, who characterised Saxon poetry, like the Saxon people, as unbridled force and emotion:

The poets cannot satisfy the inner emotion by a single word. Time after time they return to and repeat their idea. ... His phrases recur and change; he emits the word that comes to his lips without hesitation; he leaps over wide intervals from idea to idea. ... It is impossible to translate these incongruous ideas, which quite disconcert our modern style. At times they are unintelligible. Articles, particles, everything capable of illuminating thought ... are neglected. Passion bellows forth like a great shapeless beast; and that is all.<sup>45</sup>

In these shared tropes of scholarship, the poetry's emphatic hammer blows conflated metre with syntax, and both in turn with the perceived strain of inarticulate expression.<sup>46</sup>

Alongside the rise of the iron metaphor, the heroic image itself was newly central to nineteenth-century publications of Old English poetry. At the turn of the century, the 'national epic' that is *Beowulf* was rediscovered, and newly available via the transcription of the Icelandic scholar Grímur Thorkelin, and subsequently, the translations of Turner, Conybeare, and John Kemble.<sup>47</sup> While in 1774, the Poet Laureate Thomas Warton could sum up the Old English corpus as 'little more than religious rhapsodies',<sup>48</sup> a century later, readers would be told that 'war is the leading subject of A.S. poetry; and [its] vigorous style is peculiarly adapted to that theme'.<sup>49</sup> Further, as Jones has shown, what was particularly influential in shaping the wider imagination of *Beowulf* was not, initially, these scholarly editions, but rather Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Jones persuasively reads Scott's fashioning of ur-English poetry to embody the very linguistic distortions that scholars had taught readers to expect: amidst echoing battlefield calls to 'Whet the bright steel',

<sup>45</sup> H. Taine, *History of English Literature*, trans. H. Van Laun, 2 vols. (New York, 1871), I, 43.

<sup>46</sup> This perceived struggle is stated even more explicitly by Scherer, who writes of the Old English poet: 'Er bezeichnet nichts als die Sache selbst, aber nicht durch das eine angemessenste Wort, sondern durch eine Zahl von Synonymen. Er scheint sich nie genug zu thun und vergeblich nach völligem Ausdruck seines innern Bildes zu ringen', Scherer, *Zur Geschichte*, p. 159. ('He depicts nothing other than the subject itself, but not so much by means of the most appropriate word but rather by means of a number of synonyms. He never seems satisfied and he struggles in vain to achieve total expression of his inmost representation', translation from Stanley, 'Aesthetic Evaluations', p. 461).

<sup>47</sup> For a brief account of the rediscovery and early translation history of *Beowulf*, see, K. Kiernan, 'Part One: Thorkelin's Discovery of *Beowulf*', *The Thorkelin Transcripts of 'Beowulf'*, *Anglistica* 25 (Copenhagen, 1986), pp. 1–41; Liuzza, 'Lost in Translation', pp. 281–95.

<sup>48</sup> Warton, *History*, p. vi.

<sup>49</sup> A. Tolman, 'The Style of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Trans. and Proc. of the Mod. Lang. Assoc. of Amer.* 3 (1887), 17–47, at 23. On the arc of this development, see Payne, 'The Rediscovery of Old English Poetry', pp. 154–5.

Ulrica's Hymn in *Ivanhoe* performs all the inversions, violent transitions, metrical noise and metaphoric periphrasis that had been made by Turner and others into hallmarks of Saxon poetic difficulty.<sup>50</sup> 'Whet the bright steel' thus vividly and influentially presented a poetry of warriors and weaponry that was enmeshed in a specific way of hearing and understanding the earliest English poetic style.<sup>51</sup>

As we can begin to see, it is in the multiple corroborations of old and new that the iron metaphor gained its grip on the century. And even as it served to look nostalgically into the past, iron also spoke with new potency to contemporary expressions of national power. The military decoration of the Iron Cross, for example, later adopted by Nazi Germany and which lives on today as a White Supremacist symbol, has its origins in the 1813 campaigns of the Germanic states against Napoleon. In 1839, the East India Company commissioned the iron steamship *Nemesis*, which went on to defeat Chinese war junks in the First Opium War – an iconic triumph of British imperial power in the East. In 1862, it was with 'Blut und Eisen' that Bismarck called for the unification of Germanic territories. Associations between iron and power – industrial and particularly national power – would be affirmed again and again throughout the century.<sup>52</sup>

It is interesting to imagine how lexicographical sensitivity to the meaning of iron expanded in the course of the century, as its association with military power gained new significance. By 1898, the Bosworth-Toller *Dictionary* would note that *isen/iren* meant a 'sword, blade' in poetic usage – a meaning not explicitly available in Bosworth's original 1838 *Dictionary* earlier in the century.<sup>53</sup> The intimate link between an iron-clad nationalism and the study of Old

<sup>50</sup> Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 49–52; 68–75.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 52, 74, and 86.

<sup>52</sup> The same association, with an interesting twist, is used by American poet Sidney Lanier (1842–1881), who turned the 'iron' of Old English to critiquing the 'anemia' of literature in his own day: 'Our literature needs Anglo-Saxon iron; there is no ruddiness in its cheeks, and everywhere a clear lack of the red corpuscles.' S. Lanier, in the posthumously published essay 'The Proper Basis of English Culture', *Atlantic Monthly* 82 (1898), 165–74. See also Niles' discussion of Lanier in *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 291–2.

<sup>53</sup> J. Bosworth, *A Dictionary of the Anglo-Saxon Language* (London, 1838), *s.v.* 'isen, isern, iren': 'iron; ferrum'; T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford, 1898), *s.v.* 'iren, es': 'n. iron, an iron weapon, a sword, blade'. Interestingly, Lye's 1772 dictionary, on which Bosworth's dictionary was based, gives 'ferrum, chalybs', wherein the extension to weaponry is potentially already present within the semantic range of 'chalybs'. Indeed, both Latin glosses reflect the polyseme and inherent fuzziness of the word, both extendable from 'iron' to 'items made of iron' and particularly weaponry. See E. Lye, *Dictionarium Saxonicum et Gothico-Latinum*, ed. O. Manning (London, 1772), *s.v.* 'isen'. Cf. the further specificity of the DOE, *s.v.* 'isen, isern, iren' (n.), listing 2.b.i. 'a sword' among other sub-categories of iron implements.

English is especially visible in Benjamin Thorpe's well-known image of iron as the co-expression of Anglo-Saxon literary, linguistic, and military prowess. Framing his 1846 *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica*, Thorpe absorbs the linguistic nativism of an earlier reviewer and calls for the return to a simple, pure, and unadorned English:

About the Anglo-Saxon tongue there was the strength of iron, with the sparkling and the beauty of burnished steel, which made it withstand with success the attacks that the Norman William and his fawning courtiers directed against it, as they tried in vain to thrust their French into the mouths of the English people. If the sword of the Normans vanquished the Anglo-Saxons, the Anglo-Saxons' tongue in its turn overthrew the French of the Normans.<sup>54</sup>

In 1833, John Mitchell Kemble was already introducing into English studies New Philology's 'sound iron-bound system' of Germanic comparative etymology.<sup>55</sup> As such, iron dovetailed with New Philology's other iconic metaphor – the stemma of trees – for conceptualising the Teutonic heritage. Yet while trees could lend themselves to a positive language of grafts and growth,<sup>56</sup> the rhetoric of iron handled otherness through a persistent dichotomy between purity and corruption.<sup>57</sup>

Looking back to Gummere and Taine above, it is instructive that neither of their discussions cite, or even acknowledge, which passage of Old English they

<sup>54</sup> The language is that of a *Dolman's Magazine* reviewer of Thorpe's 1844 *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, signed one C. P. S., which Thorpe quotes at length in the second edition of his *Analecta*; the first edition was published in 1834. B. Thorpe, *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica* (London, 1846), p. v. For a partial text of the anonymous review and Thorpe's use of it, see Stanley, 'Aesthetic Evaluations', p. 468.

<sup>55</sup> C. Simmons, "'Iron-worded Proof': Victorian Identity and the Old English Language", *Medievalism in England*, ed. L. J. Workman (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 202–14. The phrase appears to have originated in a sonnet gifted from Tennyson to Kemble, which Kemble then used in the preface to his edition of *Beowulf*. See Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 238–9.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., J. Grimm, who saw the Anglo-Saxons 'grafting' Christianity to earlier pagan roots, and compared the surviving corpus to a flourishing of autumnal colours before winter's arrival; also Walt Whitman, who called for an American poetics that viewed the English language as strengthened by foreign grafts on to Saxon stock. Grimm, *Andreas und Elene* (Kassel, 1840), p. lviii. On Grimm's view of Christianity's influence, see Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past*, pp. 14–23. On Whitman, see J. E. Bernbrock, 'Walt Whitman and "Anglo-Saxonism"' (unpubl. doctoral thesis, Univ. of North Carolina, 1961); and Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 170–82.

<sup>57</sup> In contrast, the virtue of alloying, as far as I can tell, was never celebrated. As a metaphor for linguistic purity, iron paired with 'corruption' as its prevalent trope. See, for instance, William Barnes, who thus celebrates Bosworth's *Grammar*: 'A more common cultivation of the Gothic tongues would tend, I think, to check the growing corruptions of our own; by showing how it may be enriched from itself, and therefore how little need we have of borrowing from Greek and Latin'. Barnes, 'Compounds in the English Language', *The Gentleman's Mag.* 102 (1832), 590.

are describing. So vivid was the metaphor, it seems, that it could usurp the work of reading. While it seems clear that the neoclassicism of scholars was responsible for much of the prejudice against Old English verse, the precise ways in which the poetry failed to be artful, to be graceful as well as strong, was seldom specified.<sup>58</sup> What is the opposite of iron, one might ask? Is it gold, or perhaps marble? Following a lengthy comparison of accent against quantity, Gummere evoked the swift Olympian runner as the foil to clunky Saxon poetry:

Compared with Greek and Latin metres, our verse gains in intensity and force, loses in grace and flexibility. This is especially true of our earliest verse, before the influence of the classics had added so much grace and freedom, and, at the same time, regularity to our rhythm. The Greek verse sped swiftly and lightly, like an Olympian athlete; the early Germanic verse had the clanging tread of a warrior in mail.<sup>59</sup>

We see here the metaphor's sleight of hand, how it embodies description and aesthetic judgement in one, using tokens of a culture to reify its claims. We might also consider the way Taine evoked the sword as the symbolic, brute-force antithesis to a philosophical intellect. Thus the refined and allusive poetry of Boethius' *Consolatio* had to be blunted to didactic explicitness for 'an audience of thanes', becoming in the process 'an artless, long drawn out and yet abrupt prose'.<sup>60</sup> It is an ironic juxtaposition, not least because one of the distinctive features of the Old English translation of the *Consolatio* is the way it dramatically heightens, rather than subdues, the *agon* of wisdom as a dialectical art.<sup>61</sup>

These examples are selective, but they serve to suggest how the imagery of iron situated Old English poetry amidst the values, tensions, and discoveries of nineteenth-century thought. Importantly, they demonstrate that it was a *specific* kind of idea about iron that came to define the Old English language and corpus — the iron poetics they saw in the early English past was less the skilled ironwork

<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to compare how the Romantics who praised Homer's heroic verse often emphasised the same qualities of vigour and primitiveness, but did so through quite different metaphors, often with light and smooth rather than pounding qualities, e.g., 'strong as a river', 'unpremeditated songs ... borne of the breezlike tunings of a lyre', 'the root just sprung from the ground, rather than the full blown flower'. See D. Foerster, 'Critical Approval of Epic Poetry in the Age of Wordsworth', *PMLA* 70 (1995), 682–705, esp. 695–8.

<sup>59</sup> Gummere, *Handbook*, pp. 144–5.

<sup>60</sup> Taine, *History*, p. 51–2.

<sup>61</sup> On the dramatic heightening, see *The Old English Boethius: an Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. M. Godden and S. Irvine, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2009), I, 54. On the dialectical craft as the striking together of something akin to weaponry, see, e.g., *The Old English Boethius* B.35: 'Ic wene þeah gif wit get uncre word tosome sleað, þæt ðær asprunge sum spearca up soðfæstnesse para þe wit ær ne gesawan' ('I think however that if we strike our words together still further there will spring out some spark of truth which we have not seen before'). Text and translation from Godden and Irvine, *The Old English Boethius*, I, 334 and II, 64; cf. *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 3.P12.

of ornamented swords an Old English poet might lovingly describe, and more the iron of the Industrial Revolution: working-class mettle, with power rather than preciousness or artistry as its core value. It is worth pausing here to compare how Old English poets themselves described iron structures, tellingly in ways that do not share this diametrical tension between refinement and power. We might consider, for example, the way the *Beowulf* poet marvels at how the great hall Heorot did not collapse in the violent struggle between hero and monster, the way he explains its endurance as testimony to the ‘skillful thought’ (‘searoþoncum’, *Beowulf* 775) of the smiths who forged its structural bands.<sup>62</sup> Or Beowulf’s helmet, which later protects him in his underwater battle against Grendel’s mother, and which the poet describes as strong because of its careful, wondrous artistry:

ac se hwita helm hafelan werede,  
se þe meregrundas mengan scolde,  
secan sundgebland since geweorðad,  
befongen freawrasnum, swa hine fyrndagum  
worhte wæpna smið, wundrum teode,  
besette swinlicum, þæt hine syðþan no  
brond ne beadomecas bitan ne meahton. (*Beowulf* 1448–54)<sup>63</sup>

In this passage’s artful envelope structure, the helmet’s protective power frames the passage, but its middle parts are entirely devoted to the helmet’s intricate making: that it is adorned with treasure (‘since geweorðad’) and intricately put together (‘wundrum teode’); it is encircled with a chain that is splendid (‘frea’), and boasts a boar figure, elsewhere specified as made of gold. Though already old (made in ‘fyrndagum’, ‘days of yore’), the helmet shines (‘hwita’). Here, the poetic design mirrors the smith’s handiwork, presenting strength as it operates through ornament and precision. In such descriptions, beauty and the pleasure of refinement are not antitheses to the strength of iron, but part of its power.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> ‘Ac he þæs fæste was | innan ond utan irenbendum | searoþoncum besmiþod’ (*Beowulf* 773–5).

<sup>63</sup> ‘But the shining helmet protected his head, which sought to disturb the sea’s depths, to seek the troubled currents, decorated with treasure, encircled with a splendid band, as a weapon-smith made it, wondrously assembled it in the days of old, set upon it boar images, so that afterwards no blade or battle-sword could bite it’. Translations from the Old English are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>64</sup> E. Thornbury’s ongoing work argues that the early English conceived of ornament differently from its place in classical aesthetics: that is, ornament is not separate from and external to function, but as transformative and constitutive of function. See Thornbury, ‘Light Verse in Anglo-Saxon England’, *The Shapes of Early English Poetry: Style, Form, History*, ed. E. Weiskott and I. Dumitrescu (Kalamazoo, MI, 2019), pp. 85–106, esp. 95; also, Thornbury’s forthcoming book-length study titled *The Virtue of Ornament*.

In contrast, nineteenth-century writers clearly had more difficulty squaring their idea of a Saxon poetry of iron with notions of refined beauty. Longfellow's aforementioned review, which had influentially put forth a landscape of iron weaponry, curiously begins by highlighting but also circumscribing the place of beauty for Old English literature:

We read in history, that it was the beauty of an ancient manuscript, which tempted King Alfred, when a boy at his mother's knee, to learn the letters of the Saxon tongue. A volume, which that monarch minstrel wrote in after years, now lies before us, so beautifully printed, that it might tempt any one to learn not only the letters of the Saxon language, but the language also. ... We would fain hope, that the beauty of this and other Anglo-Saxon books may lead many to the study of that excellent language. Through such gate-ways will they pass, it is true, into no gay palace of song; but among the dark chambers and mouldering walls of an old national literature, all weather-stained and in ruins.<sup>65</sup>

This opening passage enacts the very process of temptation it describes: Longfellow repeatedly offers the reader the promise of 'beauty' – but that beauty is located only in the material medium, as a 'gateway'. The word itself is never directly applied to the language and the literature. In 1823, Joseph Bosworth – whom Longfellow credited among his main sources and with whom he had a scholarly friendship – had declared, following Turner:<sup>66</sup>

In thus considering our ancient poetry, as an artificial and mechanical thing, cultivated by men chiefly as a trade, we must not be considered as confounding it with those delightful beauties which we call poetry. These have arisen from a different source; probably more from the Norman than the Saxon muse, and are of much later date. They are the creations of subsequent genius: they have sprung up, not in its dark and ancient days.<sup>67</sup>

The 'iron poetics' of nineteenth-century readers drew forth from Old English primitive vigour, purity, masculinity – a kind of defining strength that stood always in difficult relationship to conventional beauty. As we see in Thorpe, iron served to hold together that alternate standard.

As we critique an outdated perception, I have sought also to trace some of the habits of thought it makes visible, some of the key questions with which early readers were grappling, and salient ways in which the metaphor of iron operated in the midst of these desires and unknowns. The success of the metaphor must be seen through the way it could be variously remoulded to, yet still hold together, multiple kinds of identification and projection; it speaks to the ways in which the

<sup>65</sup> Longfellow, 'Anglo-Saxon Literature', p. 91.

<sup>66</sup> M. J. Toswell, 'Joseph Bosworth and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Fellow Anglo-Saxonists?', *N&Q* 65 (2018), 292–5.

<sup>67</sup> J. Bosworth, *The Elements of Anglo-Saxon Grammar* (London, 1823), p. 212. Bosworth here is quoting Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 3rd edn, 3 vols. (London, 1820) III, 312, with small changes.

distinctive style of Old English verse was heard through these amalgamations of old and new. Amidst the malleability, perhaps paradoxically, key virtues were emphatically consistent: iron drew forth from Old English the qualities of strength and purity. It was a medium whose difficult relationship to conventional standards of grace and harmony was taken to be a *meaningful* difficulty, which could be turned to a range of aesthetic and ideological allegiances. Old English poets themselves seemed to speak and think about the medium and its value in very different ways.

II: A HAMMER FOR THE SCHOLAR'S TOOLBOX: THE EARLY DECADES OF  
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Framing an antithesis between 'iron' and 'irony' as a difference in readerly sensitivity, Liuzza succinctly captures what the metaphor of iron is generally felt to mean to us now, as students of the literature in the twenty-first century. It has come to represent, Liuzza writes,

...the belief that *Beowulf* is an artless, straightforward heroic tale, a kind of poetry without poetics: sturdy and solid or drafty and riddled with nonsense, full of the manly vigor and honesty or of the crudeness and brutality (depending on one's sympathies) of the northern world, either the bright iron of an ancient sword, emblem of glory and heroic duty, or the rusted iron of the buried treasure of a vanished race, as useless to men as it was before.<sup>68</sup>

'Irony', in contrast, draws out the alternate richness of Old English artistry, its tonal complexity and expressive tact, displaying a negotiation of skill and subtlety in poet as well as audience. The metaphor of iron, in this tradition, has served to present the poetry in a way that discourages *poetic* appreciation.

In the pages that remain, I will draw out a counter-dynamic, spotlighting moments in which the metaphor of iron is not merely a primitivizing reflex, but rather serves to grapple in more concrete ways with the structure and mechanism of Old English poetic form. In these moments, we see how the iron metaphor offered certain nineteenth-century readers new ways to formulate old problems – showing, that is, the iron imagery operating as a problem-solving device. Even as the clang of clashing metal came impressionistically to mark, for many, the perceived harshness and disorderliness of Old English verse, it also served as a conceptual metaphor for an emergent sense of the poetry's metrical coherence.

As we have seen, the early nineteenth century was a turning-point in the history of English metrics. The quantitative scansion that Hickes had proposed in 1705 had, by the latter half of that century, lost its sway. By the 1810s and 1820s, a new paradigm for Old English verse was emerging: as a poetry governed not by quantity, but stress. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, this new perception would gradually be formalized into what Ian Cornelius has termed the 'accentual

<sup>68</sup> Liuzza, 'Iron and Irony', p. 51.



paradigm' that undergirds the dominant theory of Old English metrics into the present day.<sup>69</sup> Landmarks in this development include Walter Skeat's 1868 'An Essay on Alliterative Poetry', which crystallized the new framework by supplying it with its own 'English' terminology that breaks with classical scansion. In 1885, the German philologist Eduard Sievers would publish his influential Five Types schema that is still the shared reference point for students of Old English metre today.<sup>70</sup> While the accentual paradigm would not solve all the unknowns of Old English metre, it gradually solidified a new principle through which Old English verse could once more be perceived as orderly and rule-bound rather than slovenly and structureless.

Half a century before Sievers, however, Bosworth's 1823 *Elements of Anglo-Saxon Grammar* already sought to describe the newly-emerging paradigm. As readers of the *Grammar* could learn, 'the Anglo-Saxons regulated their verse according to rhythm': 'When smiths are hammering with their sledges a certain regular return in their strokes produces rhythm.'<sup>71</sup> Bosworth's image is especially productive to think with because it is a hinge for two different trajectories of the metaphor's function in the cultural imaginary. On the one hand, Longfellow's influential romanticization – that Old English verse rings 'like blows of hammers on an anvil' – is probably indebted to Bosworth, whose *Grammar* is enthusiastically praised at various points in Longfellow's review essay.<sup>72</sup> This link from Bosworth to Longfellow thus parallels the link Jones has traced between Turner and Scott: it shows

<sup>69</sup> For an insightful and engaging account of this development, from its emergence and consolidation in the nineteenth century to its elaboration in the twentieth, see Cornelius, 'The Accentual Paradigm', pp. 459–81.

<sup>70</sup> Sievers's *Fünftypen* schema proposed that all surviving Old English verse could be understood as the realisation of five basic underlying accentual patterns, labelled A, B, C, D, and E – with type A (/ x / x) being the most common. These five types emerge from Sievers's principle of four positions per verse, which subdivide into two feet each containing one ictus (or stress) and a number of unstressed syllables. A stress can be borne by a syllable that is inherently long, or by a short syllable in combination with any other syllable ('resolution'). Thus while earlier scholars such as Guest and Skeat would write of quantity and accent as opposed systems, quantity is in fact still operative within Sieversian metrics; the difference is the governing role to which word accent is newly accorded. The accentual paradigm may now be giving way to a new way of understanding Old English metrics – as a metre organised not by the alternation of syllabic emphasis but by morphological class. This new paradigm builds on long-standing scholarly consensus on the differential prominence of morphological categories, but dispenses with feet and word boundaries and is non-accentual in the way it formulates allowable verse-types. This morphological paradigm was first proposed by N. Yakovlev, 'The Development of the Alliterative Metre from Old to Middle English' (unpubl. D.Phil. thesis, Oxford Univ., 2008). It has since been reviewed in the work of T. Cable, 'Progress in Middle English Alliterative Metrics', *Yearbook of Langland Stud.* 23 (2009), 243–64; and contextualised in studies such as Cornelius, 'The Accentual Paradigm', pp. 459–63; and Weiskott, 'Alliterative Meter and English Literary History', pp. 259–64.

<sup>71</sup> Bosworth, *Grammar*, pp. 221–2.

<sup>72</sup> Longfellow, 'Anglo-Saxon Literature', pp. 92–3.

the newest scholarship melding with literary imagination, for the particular power of Longfellow's essay is the way in which he seized the romantic potentiality of Bosworth's metaphor and wove it into the archaeological leitmotif of his essay. Longfellow's hammering smith, as Frank has traced, would come to flourish in the same decades alongside Sieversian metrics, popularizing the accentual drum-beat in ways that reinforced the poetry's primitive image.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, focusing on Bosworth's efforts early in the century enables us to see the metaphor participating in a different story, one engaged in a more precise intellectual project seeking to build out the rules of accentual metre. The metaphor responds to an acute sense of insufficiency then felt in seeking to grapple with Old English verse as a non-classical metre. It flourished, that is, not only for its potent associations with warriorhood, with the archaeological past, and with national power, but also because of a concurrent negative space in the existing toolkit for describing and analysing poetic form.

In the early decades of the century, when the principles of what would become the accentual paradigm were yet to be defined, basic but important questions included: What are a line's constituent units and rules of arrangement? What is the relationship between accent, quantity, and alliteration? Among the earliest formulations is Conybeare's 1813 'Observations on the Metre of the Anglo-Saxon Poetry', wherein Conybeare articulated a conceptual break from quantitative scansion to propose that in Saxon poetry 'emphasis ... holds the place of quantity'.<sup>74</sup> Conybeare further theorised that such patterns of emphasis produced units recognisable as trochaic and dactylic feet – a proposal that the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask would reject four years later. Instead, Rask argued that only the stressed syllables mattered in Old English metre, usually two per verse.<sup>75</sup> As the newest grammars sought to integrate the emerging metrical paradigm with accounts of the early English language, even the very concept of 'accent' or 'emphasis' required careful definition.<sup>76</sup> Bosworth's *Grammar*, for example, writes that it is 'necessary to show what is meant by syllabic emphasis, which ... holds the place of the Roman and Greek quantity. This emphasis is the superior energy with which at least one syllable of a word is enunciated.'<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Frank, *Etiquette of Early Northern Verse*, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> J. J. Conybeare, 'Observations on the Metre of the Anglo Saxon Poetry', *Archaeologia* 17 (1813/1814), 257–66, at 260–1.

<sup>75</sup> Conybeare, 'Observations', pp. 262–6; R. Rask, *Angelsaksiske Sproglære tilligemed en kort Læsebog* (Stockholm, 1817); R. Rask, *A Grammar of the Anglo-Saxon Tongue, with a Praxis*, trans. B. Thorpe, 2nd edn (Copenhagen, 1830), pp. 144–6. Citations of Rask in this essay are from Thorpe's edition.

<sup>76</sup> Cornelius, 'Accentual Paradigm', p. 465.

<sup>77</sup> Bosworth, *Grammar*, p. 220.

It is in this context that we find Bosworth's hammering smith. The *Grammar's* section on 'rhythm' begins:

Several emphatic syllables cannot be conveniently enunciated in succession; there must be a syllable or two remiss or feeble after an emphasis. It appears, therefore, that in language emphasis and remission occur at certain intervals. On these depends rhythm, the vital principle both of speech and song. Any action or motion regularly repeated produces rhythm. When smiths are hammering with their sledges a certain regular return in their strokes produces rhythm.<sup>78</sup>

Bosworth's later sections on versification draw liberally from the work of Conybeare and Rask. These debts show Bosworth to be very much working in conversation with the latest debates about how syllables within an Old English line should be arranged – yet the hammering smith is in neither of these sources. Instead, Bosworth's metaphor comes from an alternate philological discourse: it channels an old metaphor illustrating the continuity of language and motion, while drawing on John Grant's latest theorisations about the constraints of spoken language – that is, the necessity of periodic alternation for verbal articulation.<sup>79</sup> What the analogy adds to the discussion of Old English versification is a way to conceptualise the rules of rhythm as bound by, and discoverable through, mechanical principles. Compare the vagueness with which Turner attempted his description of rhythm: simply 'that peculiar rhythm or cadence which is observable', and which 'will be felt by every one' who reads his excerpts of the poetry.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, Bosworth goes a step beyond Conybeare and Rask in demonstrating the concept of 'emphasis' for Old English, to conceptualise the constraints that govern the relationship between stressed and unstressed syllables.

We might even understand the hammering smith as participating in a specific point of debate in the accentual model as it was forming, as the new grammars sought further to determine the behaviour of *unstressed* syllables. How many unstressed syllables can begin a verse? Can two stresses follow each other

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 221.

<sup>79</sup> J. Grant, *A Grammar of the English Language* (London, 1813), pp. 356–90, esp. 358–9, 383–4; the image of the hammering smith is at 384. Bosworth's note for the hammering smith points to the image in Cassius Longinus, cited by James Harris and used by both Longinus and Harris to distinguish rhythm from metre: the former being equally the property of words and motions of the body, the latter a property of language alone. Bosworth's own application of the image places its focus slightly differently, foregrounding the mechanical necessity of alteration that seems to be influenced by Grant's interest in the constraints of speech organs. Bosworth, *Grammar*, p. 221 n.12; J. Harris, *Philological Inquiries: in Three Parts*, 2 vols. (London, 1781), I, 68. For an edition of Longinus see ed. and trans. M. Patillon, *Fragments; Art Rhétorique* (Paris, 2001), pp. 180–81. Cornelius, 'Accentual Paradigm', p. 466, notes Bosworth's debt to Grant in these sections on rhythm.

<sup>80</sup> Turner, *History*, IV, 416.

consecutively? These would continue to be difficult questions in the century of Old English metrics to come – the latter, in particular, would be known to later metricists as the much-debated problem of ‘clashing stress’.<sup>81</sup> Bosworth and his contemporaries did not use this technical term, yet their theorisations make it clear that these questions were very much in the foreground. Just five years earlier, Rask had proposed:

All that here has influence upon the measure, seems, as in Icelandic, to be the long or accented syllables, which have an emphasis in the context, of which there are two in a line, each of which is usually followed by one, two, or even more, syllables, provided the natural intonation in the reading admits of their being pronounced short; but these long and short syllables do not seem, to be arranged according to other rules than those prescribed by the ear, and the cadence of the verse; yet two or more accented syllables seldom occur unaccompanied by some short ones.<sup>82</sup>

He proceeds to scan the line ‘hwyðer seo sawul sceal’ (‘whither the soul shall’) as bearing stress on ‘sa’ and ‘sceal’, with initial unstressed syllables and also an unstressed ‘ul’ serving ‘to facilitate the connexion between the long ones’.<sup>83</sup> This need for a facilitating ‘connection’ between stresses would soon after find stronger articulation in Edwin Guest’s chapter on ‘Accent’, which according to his opening definition ‘*must* be stronger than that of any syllable immediately adjoining’:<sup>84</sup>

When two syllables are separated by a pause, each of them *may* receive the accent, the pause filling the space of a syllable. . . . As no pause can intervene between the syllables of a word, it follows that no two of its adjacent syllables can be accented.<sup>85</sup>

The necessity of separating consecutive stress that Guest articulates here seems to have been the consensus at the time, even as lines that did not easily conform to such alternation would necessitate continued elaboration and qualification of the theory.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup> For the significance and later development of this concept, see Cornelius, ‘Accentual Paradigm’, pp. 472–4.

<sup>82</sup> Rask, *Grammar*, p. 146.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 147.

<sup>84</sup> See second edition of E. Guest, *A History of English Rhythms*, ed. W. W. Skeat (London, 1882), p. 74. Emphasis in original. Citations of Guest are from the second edition; for the first edition, see E. Guest, *A History of English Rhythms*, 2 vols. (London, 1838), I, 76.

<sup>85</sup> Guest, *History*, p. 77. Emphasis in original.

<sup>86</sup> The opening lines of *Beowulf*, for example, immediately offers up several challenges, for ‘Gardena’, ‘geardagum’, and ‘þeodcyninga’ each comprise consecutive stressed syllables. For clashing stress as understood by Guest’s contemporaries, see Cornelius, ‘Accentual Paradigm’, pp. 472–4. See also Guest’s elaboration of secondary stress and what he calls ‘accent of construction’ – that verbal accent can be ‘eclipsed by a stronger accent’ immediately adjoining. Guest, *History*, pp. 76–9.

These studies, which span the decade before and after Bosworth's *Grammar*, offer different rationales and responses to the question of how stressed syllables should be patterned among unstressed ones. Together they help us see Bosworth's use of the hammering smith as participating in a larger pursuit of the precise definition of a poetry organised by rhythm and emphasis – particularly, as organised by the *alternation* of stressed and unstressed syllables. By incorporating an analogy of poetic rhythm to motion, Bosworth presents such alternation in Old English as a logical necessity. As examples for his section on rhythm, his *Grammar* copies Conybeare's excerpt from the Old English *Phoenix*, but trims Conybeare's *Genesis* passage and adds another from *Judith*, so that these examples comprise exactly two falling feet with dips of one or two syllables.<sup>87</sup> Bosworth selected excerpts tailored to showcase the pattern of alternating stress (/ x / x) that his hammering smith embodies, which again shows him elaborating upon his sources to bring the principle into focus.<sup>88</sup> The hammering smith is, in this light, an imaginative supplement to Conybeare's dactylic and trochaic feet – the former is deduced from individual verses, while Bosworth's smith seeks to provide a rationale that transcends individual instantiations.<sup>89</sup> Both are part of an exploratory effort to explain a line's structural units, to capture a yet under-theorised perception of metrical order.

A few decades before Conybeare, Rask, and Bosworth, the esteemed Chaucerian editor Thomas Tyrwhitt had lamented that he was 'unable to discover any material distinction of the Saxon poetry from prose, except a greater pomp of diction, and a more stately kind of march'.<sup>90</sup> Tyrwhitt was writing in reaction to Hickeys's quantitative scansion, yet the way in which he formulates this perceived orderlessness also unwittingly anticipates the language of the accentual paradigm. As Cornelius writes, Tyrwhitt's 'more stately kind of march' would become what was later recognised as the accentual rhythm: 'What had previously appeared as no principle at all was now apprehended as the expression of a different kind of metrical system.'<sup>91</sup> Bosworth in fact would follow up his hammering smith with a

<sup>87</sup> Bosworth, *Grammar*, pp. 223–4; cf. Conybeare, 'Observations', p. 264.

<sup>88</sup> Jones similarly notes how Turner silently stitches together excerpts from three different poems to accentuate a falling rhythm. Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, p. 71.

<sup>89</sup> While Bosworth gives Conybeare's formulation as compatible with his own, we see here also the contrasting approaches of descriptive classification versus transcendent principles that are a site of tension in the later history of English metrics. For reflection on this philosophical issue, see e.g. T. Cable, 'Constraints on Anacrusis in Old English Meter', *MP* 69 (1971), 97–104, esp. 97; and 'Timers, Stressers, and Linguists: Contention and Compromise', *Mod. Lang. Quarterly* 33 (1972), 227–39.

<sup>90</sup> T. Tyrwhitt, *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer: to which are Added, an Essay Upon His Language and Versification, an Introductory Discourse, and Notes*, 5 vols. (London, 1775–78), IV, 48.

<sup>91</sup> Cornelius, 'Accentual Paradigm', pp. 469–70.

similar second analogy, comparing accentual rhythm to alternating steps in walking:

Even in walking there is rhythm. The feet come in contact with the ground at regular intervals. This will illustrate rhythm, as applied to language. ... Each step may be called emphasis, and the time intervening between the steps may be termed remission. Hence rhythm may be defined [as] *periodical emphasis* and *remission*.<sup>92</sup>

Walking, like hammering, is an analogy that uses the rhythm of motion to explain the rhythm of poetry, both built on a principle of alternation. The *topos* is a familiar one, of course, recalling the idea of a ‘foot’ in Greek poetry as the unit of poetic measurement. Yet it is worth pausing over Tyrwhitt’s formulation, because it is particularly well suited to illuminate the latent acuity of metaphor in scholarship. The convergence of perceived structure and structureless-ness in the metaphor of walking helps to draw out the way alternate descriptors stood in for yet under-theorised perception, the way both Tyrwhitt and Bosworth turned to metaphoric description to help solidify observations that, as yet, lacked both a definite framework and terminology.<sup>93</sup> They spotlight the essential operation of the iron metaphor as, analogously, an imaginative component within an intellectual problem. The point is less to draw a causal connection between the metaphor and later scientific ideas about metre, but rather to show that the image of hammers pounding, of swords clashing, served as an expression of, and a conceptual tool for, the growing awareness of the governing role of stress. Before a new paradigm took hold, readers reached for alternate vehicles to grasp Old English verse, at a time when the existing analytical language of Classical metrics was proven insufficient, yet a new scholarly language, tailored to ‘Saxon style’, was not yet in place.<sup>94</sup>

That the problem posed by Old English style was acutely felt as a problem of *language*, and not simply of knowledge, is made explicit by Walter Skeat. Proper terminology, his 1868 essay on alliterative poetry makes clear, is crucial to proper understanding:

Nothing has more tended to obscure the rules and laws of English prosody, than the absurd and mischievously false terminology that has been made use of in discussing it. Whilst it is pretty clear that it is based on quite a different system from the Latin and Greek metres – on an *accentual*, that is, not on a *temporal* system – we have attempted to

<sup>92</sup> Bosworth, *Grammar*, pp. 221–2. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>93</sup> This fundamental analogy to motion is, in fact, the way Guest frames his introduction to English poetry only a few years later. Guest, *History*, p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> On a broader arc, D. O’Neil has suggested that embodied metaphors in the study of Old English metrics served as counterweight to the perceived abstraction of analytical typologies of stress contours. O’Neil, ‘The Ear, the Foot, the Gut: the Metaphoric Body of the Timer Tradition of Old English Metrics’, *Essays in Med. Stud.* 34 (2018), 65–82.

explain its peculiarities by terms borrowed from the Latin and Greek ... The truth is, the whole terminology of English prosody, if it is not to be misleading and fruitful in all kinds of errors, has yet to be invented.<sup>95</sup>

Skeat's primary concern in this essay is fourteenth-century alliterative poetry, but it is through the diachronic continuities and developments between Old and Middle English metre that he lays out its principles. The essay serves, in this light, as an important reminder of the inextricability of scholarship on Old English metrics in the nineteenth century from concurrent developments surrounding Middle English alliterative verse. Many of the scholars noted in this section, such as Tyrwhitt, Guest, and Skeat, worked across that divide.<sup>96</sup> Here in this opening passage, Skeat is pointing out a signal contradiction in this development: that even as scholars broke from the classical paradigm, they still depended on the terminology of quantitative prosody to describe early English's non-quantitative metre. Instead of syllables that are 'long' and 'short', for instance, Skeat would suggest the terms 'loud' and 'soft'.<sup>97</sup> More importantly, he argues that improper terminology was not simply a superficial infelicity, but conceptually pivotal and consequential. So laments Gummere in his 1885 chapter on Old English metre: 'There is no fixed use of terms, no full agreement even on some of the simplest elements of the science.'<sup>98</sup> The sense of linguistic insufficiency they express – and the corresponding desire to supplement it – helps to illuminate the earlier and often only implicit dynamic in which the limits of understanding precipitate a desire for new, and more descriptively encompassing, language.

Skeat's terminology was idiosyncratic and did not, eventually, catch on, but his formulation makes explicit a lacuna that was felt through the preceding decades as the paradigm was emerging.<sup>99</sup> In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the interregnum between two paradigms precipitated an exploratory grasping for new descriptive language – and importantly, the criteria for what that language should be were inflected by multiple intersecting concerns. Skeat's essay goes on to show how that desire for better terminology was

<sup>95</sup> W. Skeat, 'An Essay on Alliterative Poetry', *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript: Ballads and Romances*, ed. J. W. Hales and F. J. Furnivall, 3 vols. (London, 1868), III, xi–xxxix, quotation at xi. Emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> For contextualisation of this fluidity in nineteenth-century Old and Middle English scholarship, see Weiskott, 'Alliterative Meter and English Literary History', pp. 259–85.

<sup>97</sup> Skeat, 'Essay', p. xi.

<sup>98</sup> Gummere, *Handbook*, p. 133. Jones also notes that what limited the usefulness of Conybeare's subsequent work on metre was that 'he was hampered by the lack of an appropriate descriptive terminology'. Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, p. 87.

<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Skeat would go on in this essay to evoke many of the same metaphors for Old English verse, the 'ringing of hammer-blows on an anvil, or the regular tramp of an army on a march'. Skeat, 'Essay', pp. xxxiv–xxxv.

interwoven with ambivalence about foreignness, about the way non-English metrical terms inevitably entailed a disjunction between *signum* and *res* when dealing with English poetry.<sup>100</sup> Bosworth had expressed a similar native preference: his *Grammar* had called for a break not only with an untenable metrical model, but with the whole Latinate presentation of early English language and poetry: ‘to divest the Saxon grammar of the useless Latin encumbrances’ and making ‘Saxon prosody’ appear ‘in an English dress’.<sup>101</sup> These formulations, I think, help us see more clearly the nature of that lacuna, the way it sought a new technical precision that was not wholly separable from an idea of Englishness. As a way of theorising about the poetry, the image of the hammering smith offered a conceptual tool for thinking through the precise mechanisms of metre, but that also – as Longfellow’s review essay draws out – readily responded to an imagination beyond the technical.

### III: STRETCHING THE IMAGINATION: ALBERT TOLMAN AND STRUCTURES OF IRON

We hear again echoes of Bosworth’s rhythmic smith when Albert Tolman, in 1887, explains that poetic compounds are ‘naturally agreeable to the A.-S. metre with its hammer-strokes’.<sup>102</sup> Unlike the major players of the discipline noted above, Tolman was primarily an early modernist, and a figure seldom mentioned in histories of Anglo-Saxon studies.<sup>103</sup> Yet Tolman seems to have been responsible also for some of the medieval curriculum at the University of Chicago,<sup>104</sup> and his article on ‘The Style of Anglo-Saxon Poetry’ shows his familiarity with many of the debates in the scholarship, as well as its common assumptions and

<sup>100</sup> As he writes, ‘It were much to be wished that we had some genuine English terms to supply the place of the *trochee*, the *iambus*, the *dactyl*, and the *anapaest*.’ Instead, Skeat proposed the terms ‘tonic’, ‘return’, ‘dominant’, and ‘arabesque’ or ‘solitaire’ – while still lamenting the lack of proper English words for some of these contours. Skeat, ‘Essay’, p. xii.

<sup>101</sup> Bosworth, *Grammar*, pp. xxxi–xxxii. On the distance between this stated ideal and Bosworth’s actual accomplishment in context of other Anglo-Saxon grammars, see S. Hughes, ‘The Anglo-Saxon Grammars of George Hickes and Elizabeth Elstob’, *Anglo-Saxon Scholarship: the First Three Centuries*, ed. C. T. Berkhout and M. Gatch (Boston, MA, 1982), pp. 119–47.

<sup>102</sup> Tolman, ‘Style’, p. 28.

<sup>103</sup> Tolman received his PhD at the Kaiser-Wilhelms University, Strassburg, with a dissertation on Shakespeare. He also left behind published essays as well as many unpublished notebooks on Shakespeare, Spenser, epic poetry, Old English, and the teaching of English literature. See ‘Guide to the Albert Harris Tolman Notebooks 1892–1925’, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. Of English-language histories of the field, only Calder discusses Tolman at any length. See Calder, ‘Study of Style’, p. 26. Tolman also appears in the bibliographies of a number of works, including, e.g., A. Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (New York, NY, 1935), and is occasionally discussed in topical studies of Old English style.

<sup>104</sup> A. Tolman, ‘English at the University of Chicago’, *The Dial* (16 June 1894), 356–7.



metaphors.<sup>105</sup> Tolman does not, however, merely parrot the iron imagery, for he offers his own twist on these inherited phrases when he extends this iron poetics to explain syntax. Of Old English asyndeton and apposition, he writes,

Here a difficulty arises closely analogous to that which the architect experiences in the use of iron as a building-material. It is easy to get strength, but hard to get volume. The pillar which is abundantly strong for its place, is yet too insignificant in size to be imposing. The Anglo-Saxon poet avoids this difficulty by repeating his ideas in every possible way, but not his words. The remorseless energy of the alliterative metre uses up, devours, the thought so rapidly that repetition becomes a necessity.<sup>106</sup>

Though Daniel Calder has noted that Tolman's article seems to find 'a place for every cliché encountered in the history of stylistic criticism', it is also possible, in this moment, to see Tolman applying an inherited idiom to do different work.<sup>107</sup> In Tolman's formulation of the poetry as striving between strength and volume, we see again the familiar tension between concision and expansiveness – the joint tendencies to terseness and redundancy that Taine had likened to a 'shapeless beast'.<sup>108</sup> Looking further back, Turner had clinched this very tension early in the nineteenth century, writing in subsequent editions of his *History* that 'The [Saxon] imagination exerted itself in framing those abrupt and imperfect hints or fragments of similes which we call metaphors, and the feeling expressed its emotions by that redundant repetition of phrases'.<sup>109</sup> Even well into the twentieth century, students of the literature could still read that the eight different epithets by which God is invoked in *Caedmon's Hymn* 'contribute little but bulk to the poem'.<sup>110</sup> In positing an architectural analogy, Tolman thus participates in the long history of seeking to answer what all the repetition is *for*. In drawing on the practical application of iron in architecture – the advantage of which was precisely abundant strength with minimal volume – he leverages a changing medium to understand the construction choices of an old poetry. His imagery connects to that of Bosworth not merely because he inherits the trope of a hammering metre, but because, by providing a coherent mental image for opposing dynamics, iron afforded Tolman a way to conceptualise what had previously seemed disorderly. Much as Bosworth's hammering smith served to frame rhythmic alternation as a

<sup>105</sup> Tolman's cited sources were mostly newer scholarship, English and German, published within fifteen years of his article. Neither Bosworth nor Longfellow is listed among Tolman's cited sources, which suggests that his use of the 'hammering' metre was probably not a direct allusion, but that it likely had become part of the nebula of ideas in circulation.

<sup>106</sup> Tolman, 'Style', p. 23.

<sup>107</sup> Calder, 'Study of Style', p. 26.

<sup>108</sup> Indeed Tolman cites this formulation from Taine, with criticism. See 'Style', p. 34.

<sup>109</sup> Turner, *History*, 3rd edn (1820), III, 301. Partial iterations of this sentiment can be found in earlier editions. See, e.g., Turner, *History*, 1st edn (1805), IV, 375–7; 2nd edn (1807), II, 278–284.

<sup>110</sup> M. W. Grose and D. McKenna, *Old English Literature* (Totowa, NJ, 1973), p. 59.

mechanical necessity, Tolman's architect turned a perceived stylistic fault of Old English into a material and structural necessity.

Tolman sets his essay up in opposition to that of Richard Heinzel, a German linguist whose study of Old English was situated within his primary interest in the Indo-European heritage.<sup>111</sup> His essay objects to Heinzel's prioritising of the common features of the early Teutonic race, to the effect of presenting later Germanic literatures such as Old English as derivative or deteriorations of a pure proto-Indo-European style. This objection serves directly to propel Tolman's own approach: instead of explaining Old English via external affiliations, Tolman sought to understand the stylistic features of Old English as an interlinked and coherent system from within. He returns repeatedly to the belief that the features of Old English can be understood as a system driven by a 'common cause', and suggests that Old English metre 'often seems to have a compelling force which determines style'.<sup>112</sup> It is thus consistent with his prioritising of internal coherence that Tolman extends an influential metaphor for Old English metre toward explaining also the poetry's striking structure.

Indeed, the mechanics of structure was especially of interest to Tolman. Elsewhere, he argued that the principles of science and physics teach not only the foundations and facts for scientific work, but also what he calls the 'great forms of thought' that are valuable for humanistic understanding:

Literature itself must largely find its raw material, its great metaphors and similes, its vivid pictures and mighty symbols, within the domain of natural science ... Were any writer completely ignorant of these facts and conceptions, he would be unable to make use of some of the most powerful symbols that exist for the expression of ideas.<sup>113</sup>

Tolman rebuked the narrow outlook that he felt plagued literary study and writing, often devolving into 'empty repetition and formalism' as opposed to a literature that 'has kept in touch with actual life' – an ideal of scientific interestedness that he associated with Wordsworth and Tennyson.<sup>114</sup> Importantly, his vision for a science-infused literary education was less about incorporating more scientific themes into the work of literature, and more about a kind of interdisciplinarity that would challenge and enrich literary scholarship's deeper habits of thought. He writes, in the same article arguing passionately for the place of science in a literary education:

<sup>111</sup> Tolman, 'Style', p. 19; responding to R. Heinzel, *Über den Stil der Altgermanischen Poesie* (Strassburg, 1875).

<sup>112</sup> Tolman, 'Style', p. 19.

<sup>113</sup> A. Tolman, 'Natural Science in a Literary Education', *Appleton's Popular Science Monthly* 49 (1896), 98–103.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 98.

Let the man interested in literature study mechanics. When he learns that many forces differing in quantity and direction can all combine in a single resultant motion, he will not be quite so ready in studying literary movements to fix the attention upon one force or circumstance and neglect all the others. Let him study chemistry; let him determine all the elements in a given compound, and how much of each is present; then he will not be quite so apt, when analyzing a piece of literature, to fix the attention upon one quality and ignore everything else.<sup>115</sup>

Tolman's belief that science offered structures of thought for literary studies – that engineering was, among other things, an exercise in thinking about the created work as a system of energies – is palpable in the way he writes about the expressive energy of Old English poetry as an interlinked system. Tolman was certainly not the first to suggest connections between disparate aspects of the poetry. Heinzel, for example, had related the fondness for ABA sequences in Old English narrative structure to the use of crossed alliteration in metre.<sup>116</sup> In a way, the whole history of the iron metaphor is a story of imaginative interpretive links being created between metre and style, between style and character. But what sets Tolman apart is the self-awareness with which he theorised about the making of that connection, and its importance to his vision of literary studies as a discipline. Indeed, his language for describing Old English poetic style seems already to anticipate the ways he would later speak about engineering as teaching the mind to perceive the unified operation of divergent forces. The way iron imagery recurs in different guises in his article, with notable frequency in his textual selection while serving also to illustrate disparate facets of metre and language, is, I suggest, another aspect of his philosophy, which aims to cast the poetry as an interlinked and coherent system.<sup>117</sup>

What makes Tolman's interest in the principles of engineering especially fascinating is the way his description of Old English syntax resonates with some of the key debates then surrounding the building of the Eiffel Tower, which had begun construction in January of the same year. Designed to be the entrance for the 1889 World's Fair, the structure of the Tower was enabled by, and designed to showcase, the material qualities of its wrought-iron structure: that iron could achieve such structural lightness and ingenuity precisely because it had the *strength*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

<sup>116</sup> Heinzel, *Altgermanischen Poesie*, pp. 3–12. Such intertwining would later be termed the 'interlace structure': see Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*', pp. 1–17.

<sup>117</sup> In addition to his description of meter as 'hammer-strokes' (p. 28) and of OE repetition as if an architect building with iron (p. 23), see also the sword and its attendant iron-epithets as one of Tolman's focal points for illustrating 'repetition with variation' (pp. 24–7), and his description of OE syllables and thoughts that come in 'blows' (twice on p. 22). Swords also appear with some frequency in the passages Tolman selects to illustrate sub-sections on structure, 'B: Repetition' and 'C: Disconnectedness' (pp. 31, 33, 35, 37, 41).

of stone, but far less *volume*. The Tower was a symbol of modernity, taken to herald a new 'Age of Iron' at the turn of the twentieth century; at the same time, its wrought-iron structure embodied key tensions between artistic medium and aesthetic merit that may have made it an especially provocative parallel for rethinking the iron poetry of Old English.

Reflecting on the Tower's significance in material history, Roland Barthes writes that the use of iron instead of stone in architecture (and not just in machines) entailed 'a whole shift in imagination. As telluric matter, stone is a symbol of solidity and immutability ... the mythology of iron is completely different ... Its (symbolic) value is not of the order of heavy materials but of energy: iron is at the same time both strong and light.'<sup>118</sup> As Henri Loyrette notes, much of the Tower's immediate, controversial reception was articulated through its relation to stone.<sup>119</sup> Even before the structure was completed, the (in)famous 1887 Artists' Petition, signed by forty-seven artists and published in the newspaper *Le Temps* on 14 February 1887, drew an explicit tension between the Eiffel Tower and the architecture of stone that would stand in its literal and symbolic shadow:

Above its streets, its broad boulevards, and along its admirable docks, in the midst of its magnificent promenades, rise the most noble monuments to which the human genius has given birth. The soul of France, creator of masterpieces, shines amongst this august flowering of stone. ... Are we going to allow all this to be desecrated? Will the city of Paris go on to associate itself with the baroque and mercantile imaginations of a machine builder, to dishonour itself and become irreparably ugly?<sup>120</sup>

On the other hand, as Loyrette notes, there were also countless commentators who 'joined in extolling the grace, lightness, and enduring modernity' of the Tower, comparing it against the 'clumsy' and 'medieval' material of stone.<sup>121</sup> The modernity of iron, whether one liked the Tower or not, was conceptualised through its relation to stone monuments of the past. When late nineteenth- and

<sup>118</sup> R. Barthes, *La Tour Eiffel* (Paris, 1964), trans. from Thomas Weaver reprint in *AA Files* 64 (2012), 112–31, at 128.

<sup>119</sup> H. Loyrette, 'La Tour Eiffel', in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, 3 vols. (Paris, 1984), III, 474–503; citations from 'Eiffel Tower', *Realms of Memory: the Construction of the French Past*, trans. A. Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York, 1998), III, 348–374.

<sup>120</sup> 'Au-dessus de ses rues, de ses boulevards élargis, le long de ses quais admirables, du milieu de ses magnifiques promenades, surgissent les plus nobles monuments que le génie humain ait enfantés. L'âme de la France, créatrice de chefs-d'oeuvre, respendit parmi cette floraison auguste de pierre. ... Allons-nous laisser profaner tout cela? La ville de Paris va-t-elle donc s'associer plus longtemps aux baroques, aux mercantiles imaginations d'un constructeur de machines, pour s'enlaidir irréparablement et se déshonorer?' *Le Temps* (14 February 1887). Translations from the French are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>121</sup> The contrast would be brought into particularly sharp focus just a few years later, with the addition of the stone Tour Montparnasse. Loyrette, 'Eiffel Tower', p. 350.

early twentieth-century painters sought to paint the Tower, it was precisely the iron latticework's striking removal of volume that would provoke and display the newest image-making techniques.<sup>122</sup> The Tower's 'iron-ness', and not simply its size or shape, was central to what it symbolised in the public imagination from the very beginning. As an experimental piece of architecture, it was understood to showcase a kind of transcendent energy that was defined against the heft of stone: its curvatures and latticed piers showed off a union of lightness and strength made possible by technological advances in iron casting and structural engineering. And it is precisely these newly-exciting qualities of iron, generating its design through compact strength, that furnish for Tolman the central terms of how Old English apposition works.

Tolman's essay on Old English came out ten months after the Artists' Petition, in December of the same year, and it is intriguing to imagine how his vision of iron verse structure may have been influenced by the heated debates about iron as a medium for art. That Tolman chose to elaborate his architectural analogy with a second metaphor of a prancing 'spirited horse' further renders the Eiffel Tower, with its aspirations to lightness, a yet more suggestive parallel. In fact, the leaping horse may have been an image Tolman elaborated from Gummere – one of his key sources – who, as we saw above in section I, had also described Old English in terms of crashing metal and a redundant 'eternal leaping back and forth'.<sup>123</sup> Yet while Gummere clearly took such 'back and forth' to be dull and primitive, in Tolman such repetition becomes 'enjoyable', an expression of spirited energy:

Thus A.-S. poetry progresses like a spirited horse, which takes a few long bounds forward, only to follow that by much prancing and tossing without any advance. But this repetition of the main idea is made enjoyable by the constant variation of the language.<sup>124</sup>

He proceeds to offer a catalogue of poetic synonyms and metaphoric compounds for such variation, concluding with the comment that 'The metaphor is a flash of lightning, giving the maximum of light and heat in the minimum of time. It is plain, too, that those figures which can be complete in a single word, are naturally agreeable to the A.-S. metre with its hammer-strokes.'<sup>125</sup> Here, we see again Tolman's interest in drawing individual characteristics of the poetry into one coherent system. The 'flash of lightning' underscores an unweighted rather than

<sup>122</sup> First and most notably in the pointillism of Seurat. See G. Insausti, 'The Making of the Eiffel Tower as a Modern Icon', *Writing and Seeing: Essays on Word and Image*, ed. R. C. Homem and M. Lambert (Amsterdam, 2006), pp. 131–143; B. Bergdoll, *The Eiffel Tower* (New York, NY, 2003), p. 12; and Loyrette, 'Eiffel Tower', p. 367.

<sup>123</sup> Gummere, *Handbook*, p. 176. Gummere is, in turn, building upon the imagery of Scherer. See above, n. 43.

<sup>124</sup> Tolman, 'Style', p. 23.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28.

hefty vision of strength and energy, in ways that pull away from what the ‘iron poetics’ he inherits had traditionally symbolised.<sup>126</sup> It is as if the new possibilities for iron at this turning-point of modernity – newly elevated from military and industrial toil, and raised to architectural and even purely aesthetic application, aspiring to lightness as it transcends the limitations of old stone structures – brought new associations and potentialities to bear on an old weighty poetics without altering its fundamental metaphor.

Though Tolman’s essay on Old English does not directly mention the Eiffel Tower, these vibrant developments occurring in the time of Tolman’s writing – and Tolman’s own active interest in applying engineering to literary study – help to frame his iron architect as a considered rather than superficial analogy. Indeed, the way in which Gustav Eiffel himself had to defend the unconventional, un-Classical beauty of his ‘monstrous’ tower suggests perhaps another facet of the interest the Tower could have held as a companion for reading Old English, a poetry that has likewise conformed with difficulty to classical notions of beauty. For one, the three-hundred metre Tower was gigantic, its proportions seen to shock and defy good taste.<sup>127</sup> Another challenge was the material itself: that iron was felt to be the medium of industrial power was another source of anxiety over its uncertain aesthetic merit. This tension between practicality and art is palpable, for example, when the Artists’ Petition asks why Paris would align itself with ‘the baroque and mercantile imaginations of a machine builder’.<sup>128</sup> In a neoclassical aesthetic in which the medium has an inherent and determining value, iron was felt to be utilitarian and workmanly, its questionable membership as a work of ‘art’ variously charted through its affiliations with industrial production as opposed to handicraft, with the factory as opposed to refined display, with the powerful machines of war and manufacturing as opposed to architecture and art.<sup>129</sup> The tower of iron evoked a shifting array of ways in which power and functionality melded uneasily with ideals of beauty.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>126</sup> In the Tower’s antithesis to the ‘clumsiness’ of stone monuments, we might also recall Gummere’s twin metaphors, as seen in section I of this study, contrasting the swift Olympian runner with the clunky warrior in mail.

<sup>127</sup> W. Thompson, “‘The Symbol of Paris’: Writing the Eiffel Tower”, *The French Rev.* 73 (2000), 1130–40.

<sup>128</sup> See *note* 120. This view was shared by later artists: few painters of Paris – with the notable exception of Seurat – saw the Tower as fit to paint. Loyrette, ‘Eiffel Tower’, p. 367.

<sup>129</sup> Bergdoll, *The Eiffel Tower*, p. 8; Loyrette, ‘Eiffel Tower,’ pp. 356–7.

<sup>130</sup> The reception and afterlife of the Eiffel Tower has indeed a complicated relationship to the idea of utility. Its critics, as its admirers, are of many camps, and some also took aim at the perceived ‘uselessness’ of the Tower itself (as opposed to identifying iron as a medium of function). On the pains Eiffel took against such criticism both before and after the Tower’s completion, and the importance of functionality to the preservation of the Tower in the twentieth century (notably for purposes of radio, military, and astronomy), see Loyrette, ‘Eiffel Tower’, pp. 352–5.

In this tension between art and utility, we might recall Turner and Bosworth's assessment of Old English poetry as an 'artificial and mechanical thing, cultivated by men chiefly as a trade'. In the 1870s, Reinhold Merbot would still associate the stylistic 'harshness' of Old English style with its being a practical poetry – 'erst ein Kunstgewerbe' – handmaiden to the functional needs of society and thus only a craft, not an art.<sup>131</sup> Such tensions also constitute the immediate context for Eiffel's own 1887 apologetics for the Tower, that defends engineering as not antithetical to art, but as an expertise fundamentally linked to the very principles of beauty. He writes in response to the Petition in *Le Temps*:

Are we to believe that, because we are engineers, beauty does not concern us in our constructions, or that we do not strive to create elegant, as well as solid and durable, structures? Do not the true conditions of force always conform to the secret conditions of harmony? The first principle of architectural beauty is that the essential lines of a monument be determined by perfect appropriateness to its purpose.<sup>132</sup>

Eiffel proceeds to elaborate the practical demands that concern his design, chief among them his calculations for wind resistance – crucial to the superiority of latticed wrought iron over solid stone. It is the precise curvatures that result from these *practical* calculations, Eiffel argues, that give the Tower its beauty and boldness of design.<sup>133</sup> As Miriam Levin writes, 'Eiffel wedded skill and imagination in using new technologies, in developing new techniques, and in accepting functionalism and economy as both practical and aesthetic guidelines in the designs of his structures.'<sup>134</sup> In Tolman's brief analogy that invites us to consider a difficult 'iron' poetic style through the practical constraints of iron construction, we are offered, in a glimmer, an alternate

<sup>131</sup> Of *Widsith*, for example: 'Dieses Gedicht ist überhaupt nicht Poesie, es enthält eine Art Literaturgeschichte jener Zeiten', Reinhold Merbot, *Ästhetische Studien zur angelsächsischen Poesie* (Breslau, 1883), pp. 32, 50 ('This poem is not poetry at all, it is a kind of literary history of the age', translation mine).

<sup>132</sup> 'Parce que nous sommes des ingénieurs, croit-on donc que la beauté ne nous préoccupe pas dans nos constructions et qu'en même temps que nous faisons solide et durable nous ne nous efforçons pas de faire élégant? Est-ce que les véritables conditions de la force ne sont pas toujours conformes aux conditions secrètes de l'harmonie? Le premier principe de l'esthétique architecturale est que les lignes essentielles d'un monument soient déterminées par la parfaite appropriation à sa destination.' *Le Temps* (14 February 1887).

<sup>133</sup> 'De quelle condition ai-je eu, avant tout, à tenir compte dans ma tour? De la résistance au vent. Eh bien, je prétend que les courbes des quatre arêtes du monument telles que le calcul me les a fournies donneront une impression de beauté, car elles traduiront aux yeux la hardiesse de ma conception' ('What condition did I have, above all else, to take into consideration in my tower? Wind resistance. Well, I maintain that the curvatures of the four edges of the monument, as furnished by my calculations, grant a sense of beauty because they will communicate to the eyes the boldness of my design.') *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> M. R. Levin, 'The Eiffel Tower Revisited', *The French Rev.* 62 (1989), 1052–1064.

vision of aesthetic harmony for Old English poetry – one in which function is not the antithesis but the guide to reading for beauty, and in which structures of strength and repetition afford an endlessly explorable lightness rather than crushing heft.<sup>135</sup>

Tolman's vision for literary studies garnered little support at the University of Chicago, in a department helmed by John Matthews Manly, the Chaucerian editor and founder of *Modern Philology*, whose 'focus on history and philology was seen as a way of grounding the study of literature in a scientific method'.<sup>136</sup> This formulation of Manly's legacy particularly brings into focus the irony of the opposition between these colleagues: even as both worked at a time when English Departments strove to assert their legitimacy and autonomy among scientific disciplines in the university, Tolman and Manly seem less to disagree on the value of scientific thought for literature than on the specific shape such learning should take.<sup>137</sup> The way in which Tolman's iron architect highlights literature and science's shared interest in structure and effect suggests a different vision for what literature might learn from the sciences – not merely objectivity and rigour, but a training in precision that is simultaneously receptive to imagination.

CODA: HAMORA LAF<sup>138</sup>

The history of the iron metaphor succinctly clinches the sharp point that inheres in an etymological understanding of the word 'style'.<sup>139</sup> Irreducible to content or form, the Saxon poetic style of iron, as conceived in the nineteenth century, embodied the pointed stakes of both, while also framing different ways in which the past and present could be brought into relation. It strings together a story that cuts across some of the ways, as Jones reminds us, in which philological medievalism has often been represented as either starkly progressive or

<sup>135</sup> As can be seen in section I of this study, scholarship has overwhelmingly identified Old English poetry with weightiness rather than lightness. For delightful exceptions, see R. Frank, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Philologist', *JEGP* 96 (1997), 486–513; Thornbury, 'Light Verse', esp. pp. 101–2.

<sup>136</sup> E. Powell, 'A History of the English Department at the University of Chicago'. University of Chicago English Department Website, 2014.

<sup>137</sup> For contextualisation of these tensions amidst broader developments then underway in American English Departments, see G. Graff, *Professing Literature: an Institutional History* (Chicago, IL, 2007), pp. 98–118.

<sup>138</sup> 'What remains after hammers' – also a metaphoric expression Old English poets used for 'sword'; see *Beo* 2829, *Rid* 5.7, *Brun* 6. Modern English does not have an easy equivalent for *laf*: its meanings include 'remnants, that which is left over', 'inheritance', 'what remains after a process is done. For reflections on this phrase, see Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 108–9.

<sup>139</sup> From *stilus*: 'pointed instrument', 'an instrument made of metal, bone, etc., having one end sharp-pointed for incising letters on a wax tablet', 'a weapon for stabbing', 'a manner of writing'. *OED*, *s.v.* 'style'.



regressive.<sup>140</sup> Rather, I have sought to spotlight some of the unknowns and difficulties to which the iron metaphor served as inventive, animated response – a conception of art in tension with strength and functionality, of utilitarian mechanics informing the mechanics of poetry, of a sense of the insufficiency of existing terminology to adequately serve the formation of new knowledge. It traces a story in which acts of analysis are always joint efforts of reason and imagination.

Writing a century before the hammering poetry conjured by Scott, Bosworth, and Longfellow, the eighteenth-century scholar and editor Elizabeth Elstob had also commented on a sense of the language's perceived strength – a strength which she compared to that of bones in the human body.<sup>141</sup> In a witty and eloquent rejoinder to those who would dismiss the Anglo-Saxon language as 'barbarous' and 'harsh', she writes:

The want of knowing the Northern Languages has occasioned an unkind Prejudice towards them ... I never could find my self shocked with the Harshness of those Languages, which grates so much in the Ears of those that never heard them. I never perceived in the consonants any Hardness, but such as was necessary to afford Strength, like the bones in a human body, which yield it firmness and support.<sup>142</sup>

The un-gendered significance of Elstob's metaphor comes sharply into view when we consider the way iron endowed Old English with a kind of hyper-masculinity.<sup>143</sup> Such language as seen in Thorpe's preface, which asserted the strength of the English tongue in strikingly sexualised as well as nationalistic rhetoric, points to the consequences of the iron metaphor. We can note, for example, how Thorpe's conception of a masculine poetics may have authorised his inclination to emend the feminine pronouns in *The Wife's Lament*, influentially imagining them into masculine ones, thus amounting to the erasure of a female voice and perspective.<sup>144</sup> Or how, when scholars write

<sup>140</sup> Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, p. 142.

<sup>141</sup> Elstob's 1715 *Rudiments of Grammar*, the first Anglo-Saxon grammar written in English, had opened with a ringing endorsement from a 'Right Reverend Prelate' (i.e. George Hickes) that women were uniquely suited to 'play the critics' for the 'mother-tongue'. Elstob, *Rudiments of Grammar for the English-Saxon Tongue* (London, 1715), title page.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* pp. x–xi.

<sup>143</sup> On Elstob's work as a woman scholar and author, see S. F. D. Hughes, 'Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756) and the Limits of Women's Agency in Early-Eighteenth-Century England', *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, ed. Jane Chance (Oregon, OR, 2018), pp. 3–24.

<sup>144</sup> See B. Thorpe, *Codex Exoniensis* (London, 1842), p. 441, where Thorpe retains the feminine manuscript readings in main text but suggests the emendation 'minne sylfes?' (misspelled) in a footnote. Thorpe's interpretation of the poem as spoken by a retainer lamenting his lord follows that of William Conybeare as offered in J. Conybeare, *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1826), pp. 244–9; the opposing argument for a female voice extends back to L. Ettmüller, *Engla and Seaxna Scopas and Boceras* (London, 1850), pp. xv, 214. For brief overview and assessment of

about a rough, hardy sort of poetics, their textual selections tend to reinforce a certain kind of heroic canon and way of reading. In parsing the lexicographical history of ‘hwit’, ‘blæc’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’, Haruko Momma has shown the way adjectival descriptions ‘when used as identity markers, are subtle and slippery’ in the way they accrue metaphoric meaning.<sup>145</sup> Iron exhibits similar slipperiness too, as a descriptor of a poetry that served to define national character.

We read by the light of our metaphors. The way we render the speaker’s ‘siþ’, for example, in the *Lament’s* first line, says much about the kind of agency we imagine a female speaker to have. As a word, ‘siþ’ is capacious: it is a journey, an adventure, an expedition, a path or way, any range of fates. When Hygelac says to Beowulf that he ‘siðe ne truwode’ (‘mistrusted his *sið*’, *Beowulf* 1993b), translators generally emphasise the aspect of adventure, though ‘plight’ or ‘fate’ would be equally apt.<sup>146</sup> Yet when the female voice in the *Lament* begins, ‘Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, | minre sylfre sið’ (‘I compose this song about my *sið*, full sorrowfully’, *The Wife’s Lament* 1–2), her ‘sið’ quickly becomes helplessly passive. In the hands of W. S. Mackie, this *sið* is an ‘experience’; in Alexander, it is her ‘wryed existence’.<sup>147</sup> The *Old English Aerobics*, the online learning platform popular in college classrooms, helpfully offers multiple glosses of the word yet also nudges students toward ‘plight’ as the right meaning in context.<sup>148</sup> Even as the field has distanced itself from the explicit

early debates surrounding the gender of the narrator, see, e.g., L. Johnson, ‘The Narrative Structure of The Wife’s Lament’, *ES* 52 (1971), 497–501; and B. Mitchell, ‘The Narrator of The Wife’s Lament: Some Syntactical Problems Reconsidered’, *NM* 73 (1972), 222–34.

<sup>145</sup> H. Momma, ‘The Theater of Race and Its Supporting Actors: a Tale of Two Islands’, *New Lit. Hist.* 52 (2021), 407–29. Momma writes in conversation with recent critiques of the ramifications of nineteenth-century medievalism and its imprints both within and beyond Old English studies in the present day. For some of the work that brought this urgency to the fore, see M. Dockray-Miller, ‘Old English has a Serious Image Problem’ *JSTOR Daily* (3 May 2017), <https://daily.jstor.org/old-english-serious-image-problem>; A. Miyashiro, ‘Decolonizing Anglo-Saxon Studies: a Response to ISAS in Honolulu’, *In the Med. Middle* (29 July 2017), <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2017/07/decolonizing-anglo-saxon-studies.htm>; M. Rambaran-Olm, ‘Anglo-Saxon Studies [Early English Studies], Academia and White Supremacy’, *Medium* (27 June 2018), <https://mrambaranolm.medium.com/anglo-saxon-studies-academia-and-white-supremacy-17c87b360bf3>; and Ellard, *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts, postSaxon Futures*.

<sup>146</sup> ‘I dreaded the outcome | of your expedition’ (Heaney); ‘I dreaded your expedition’s outcome’ (Mitchell); ‘Mistrusted the adventure | of my beloved man’ (Liuzza). S. Heaney, *Beowulf* (London, 1999); S. Mitchell, *Beowulf* (New Haven, CT, 2017); R. Liuzza, *Beowulf: a New Verse Translation* (Peterborough, ON, 2000).

<sup>147</sup> *The Exeter Book, Part II: Poems LX–XXXII*, ed. and trans. W.S. Mackie, EETS, os 194 (London, 1934), 152–3; Alexander, *Earliest English Poems*, p. 108. I am grateful to Geoffrey Russom for this observation.

<sup>148</sup> Consider, in contrast, the greater agency as rendered by Liuzza: ‘I make this song of myself, deeply sorrowing, | my own life’s journey’. Or more loosely, by Hostetter: ‘Oh I can relate a tale

evocation of an iron poetics, to rethink the metaphor of iron is also to examine all the ways in which the image it has fortified, the imagined social and aesthetic world it has held in place, might still inflect the interpretive choices we make.<sup>149</sup>

Yet what I hope also to have shown is that the lifespan of the metaphor is more dynamic than has been recognised. Looking back allows us better to see not only how a metaphor becomes irrevocably tainted, but also how a metaphor gains cachet. Iron cast the poetry in ways that appealed to the antiquarian imagination while also looking to the newest knowledge, and its changing significance in cultural, scientific, and material history give it new potential layers of meaning. A key part of the metaphor's malleable appeal was precisely this ability to look simultaneously forward and backward in time. If, as Jones has eloquently argued, the nineteenth century saw a gradual shift from conceptualising the Saxon world as seamlessly continuous with the English present, to instead a 'fossilized' past entailing distance and recovery, the iron metaphor's success throughout the century may have had something to do with its ability to embody both these evocative frameworks at once.<sup>150</sup> Even more so than the metaphor of a biological organism or Tolkien's tower in ruins, iron could rust *yet endure*, and thus appeal as a symbol of simultaneous loss and triumph. To recall Longfellow's description of *Beowulf*, 'It savors of rust and antiquity. . . . It is like a piece of ancient armour, rusty and battered, and yet strong.' Much like that other influential metaphor of Teutonic studies – that of the tree – iron served to organise a view into the past and relate it to the present; yet the ways in which the 'Iron Age' was also an emergent emblem of modernity made possible new configurations of distancing and identification, of nostalgia and endurance, of old presumptions meeting new technologies.

In particular, what I hope to have spotlighted is a different leveraging of the iron metaphor that thinks with and through its material affordances. The nature of metaphor changes in these instances: they hinge not simply on the medium's inherent, symbolic value (whatever that was thought to be), and instead wield iron as a tool for working out the poetry's constraints and aims. This alternate leveraging of an iron poetics asks, with Bosworth, how rhythms of the body might help determine constraints upon the rhythms of poetry; with Tolman, how

right here, make myself | a map of miseries & trek right across'. R. Liuzza, 'The Wife's Lament', in *Old English Poetry: an Anthology* (Peterborough, ON, 2014), p. 41; A. Hostetter, on the website of the Rutgers *Old English Poetry Project*. For *The Old English Aerobics*, developed by Peter Baker, see <https://www.oldenglishaerobics.net>.

<sup>149</sup> Thornbury has shown an analogous impact on editorial practices operating through the metaphor of the text-as-ruin from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. See 'Admiring the Ruined Text', pp. 230–8.

<sup>150</sup> Jones, *Fossil Poetry*, pp. 1–33.

the practical considerations of engineering can offer an alternative to vaguely-assumed ideals of proportion. It is also in this way that Elstob's metaphor of human bones might help us cast forward, to imagine new material metaphors that can once more be productive for the study of Old English. Elstob serves to remind us, that is, that there is nothing inherently masculine about strength as a virtue, nor iron as a material.<sup>151</sup> As 'bones' help to shed the hypermasculine claim to strength, they also underscore an alternate appraisal of poetic value that is inextricable from function. Like the 'iron bones' of the Eiffel Tower,<sup>152</sup> it challenges us to explore different ways of conceptualising structure and function that can offer new vistas for seeing and understanding the 'un-Classical' artistry of Old English poetry.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>151</sup> The OE word 'iren, -es' is, in fact, a neuter noun. See DOE, *s.v.* īsen, isern, īren' (n).

<sup>152</sup> Guy de Maupassant, for example, had famously called the Eiffel Tower 'a giant, ungainly skeleton' ('squelette disgracieux et géant'). Thompson, "'The Symbol of Paris'", p. 1137.

<sup>153</sup> I would like to thank Emily Thornbury, Eric Weiskott, and the three anonymous readers at *ASE* for invaluable comments that improved this article. I am grateful also to Roberta Frank and the Early English Poetics panel organized by Jennifer Lorden at ICMS 2019 for fruitful conversations at the early stages of this project. Any errors that remain are my own.