SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

THE NATURE OF ALLITERATIVE POETRY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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I RECALL two problems which have troubled me in reading two alliterative poems written in the fourteenth century: familiar problems which have troubled other readers beside myself. The first is the so-called Pardon scene in *Piers Plowman* (in the second vision of the poem, as recounted in Passus VIII of the A-Text), where Truth has sent a pardon extending to all estates.[1] A priest asks to see the pardon which Piers holds. The dreamer looks on,

> And I bi-hynden hem bothe · bi-heold al the bulle.
> (A VIII, 93)

The priest reads the clauses of the Athanasian creed and pronounces that here is no pardon at all. In the A-Text, and in the B-Text, Piers in pure anger tears up the document. According to all three texts, a quarrel ensues between Piers and the priest, and the dreamer awakes and tells how he went on his way, wondering what the sight meant. He reminds himself that dreams are often not to be trusted, but also that some dreams in the Bible when properly understood conveyed truth:

> Al this maketh me · on metels to thenken
> Mony tyme at midniht · whon men schulde slepe,
> On Pers the plouh-mon · and whuch a pardoun he hedde,
> And hou the preost inpugnede hit · al bi pure resoun.
> (A VIII, 152–5)

Wise and ingenious men have written about this scene and given learned and ingenious interpretations. What remains surprising is that the scene should require so much ingenuity to give it meaning. All readers realize, with some dumb literary instinct perhaps, that they have reached a climax at this point

[1] *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (1886), vol. 1, A-Text, Passus VIII, pp. 226 ff.

of the poem. It is not satisfying to take the dreamer as a 'naïve narrator', or the tearing of the pardon as an arbitrary device to break the dream. The reader is surely right in feeling that the scene is relevant to the meaning of the poem. And yet the relevance is never made explicit. How could this poet, who is, as we come to know him, often powerful in utterance, and clear in exposition, sometimes resolutely tedious when he is determined to have his local meaning plain, offer in the A-Text, continue to offer in the B-Text, and still offer even in the C-Text —where he seems aware of some of the difficulties—a climax which remains scarcely intelligible? Did not the poet know the meaning of what he had himself composed? The answer given by the texts is surely, No.

The second problem is as familiar and much simpler. Most readers nowadays will agree that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a shapely and carefully constructed romance, lightly and deliberately moralized. The Lady's temptings of Gawain in the bedroom are seen to relate to the morality of the work. Each bedroom scene, we recall, is associated with a hunting piece. Yet to read the meaning of the poem into and through these hunting scenes has perplexed most interpreters. It is an excellent principle to insist that an impalpable allegory is no allegory at all. Many readers will have welcomed Professor Norman Davis's note on the first hunt: 'The noise, confusion and slaughter of this scene and the terror of the mass of hunted animals make unacceptable any suggestion of a symbolic parallel between it and the simultaneous quiet pursuit in the castle bedroom.'[1] What then are these hunting scenes doing in the poem? No doubt explanations can be sought and given in terms of a metonymic structure in the poem, or of social flattery of the audience. Part of the answer lies elsewhere.

In a society instructed by word of mouth, and by ear, any information or moralization is taken directly as it comes, in memorable and discrete parcels: the attention is directed simply to a succession of points; and if the points are sharp enough they will stick in the mind. Information is accepted within the frame of a story and extracted from it without discomfiture. The end of the first hunting scene in *Sir Gawain*, which deals with the breaking up of the carcass of the slain deer, may be taken as illustration. This is a full and detailed account in technical language of an elaborate ritual. We can assume a general

[1] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edition revised by Norman Davis (1967), p. 107, note on 1158 ff.

interest in hunting on the part of the audience: we cannot assume that more than a few members of the audience would have a detailed and expert knowledge of the advanced technique and its terminology. The direct and natural way for an audience to have taken this passage was in the first place as memorable instruction. While this part of the narrative was proceeding, they will have switched their attention from the story to the instruction.

There are other passages of *Sir Gawain* which could be considered as similarly, if less ostentatiously, mnemonic: the arming for instance, or the schematizing of the pentangle. We need not ignore simple if secondary intentions in writing poems, and simpler ways of responding to them. Metrical forms were in common use through the Middle Ages and beyond, for teaching and reinforcing moral, political, religious, sanitary, and behavioural commonplaces, and for fixing grammatical, logical, arithmetical, and legal formulas in the memory. Many passages in Middle English verse, at all levels of accomplishment, become more intelligible when they are admitted to be, if not primarily and detachedly mnemonic, at least vestigially mnemonic in form and content. Particularly is this true, in the later medieval period, of alliterative writing.

Alliteration as a formal device superimposed upon the verbalizations of a culture is itself a mnemotechnique. From the beginnings of the settlement of England by the Anglo-Saxons, alliterative composition had been a preservative of power, patrimony, and communal wisdom. The acquisition of a script, which also springs from a desire to make memorials, did not for centuries render alliteration superfluous; for alliterative usages had become as they have remained, part of the public language when it operates in a traditional and slightly formal register. In the curiously and deliberately archaising verse of the alliterative poets of the last medieval centuries, though these were now no spokesmen for an oral culture, the mnemonic use of verse is less submerged than it was in contemporary verse of a more bookish kind. Bookish verse tended to convert this inheritance into encyclopedism, as we see in Lydgate; but alliterative verse continued to appeal to the active memory more directly. Passages of *Piers Plowman* that may seem digressive—for example, the points of Patience (B XIV, 274–319), and much of the Samaritan's instruction (B XVII, 90–348), may well be signs of the persistence of the mnemonic habit. Much more obvious is the long register of tradesmen in the *Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*: or the

list of Arthur's domains at the beginning of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* or the naming of the apostles in the *Siege of Jerusalem*; or the catalogue descriptions in *Susannah*, and in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages*, where the poet offers an account of the Nine Worthies:

> And I shall neuen you the names of nine of the beste

and having dealt with them one by one concludes:

> Now have I neuened you the names of nine of the best:

and similarly at the end of the *Wars of Alexander* with an attention mark added:

> Now sall I neuyn ȝow þe names · note ȝe þe wordis,

introducing a twenty-line catalogue of Alexander's conquests:

> þe pepill out of Panthi · is plant in first,
> Pruto, Picard, & Pers · & Pamphalie bathe,
> Portingale & Paiters · it paies me trouage,
> Arrabe & Artoyes · and Assie þe mare,
> Abbeon & Aufrike · & Acres anothire,
> Effosym & Ethiops · þire ebrues folke;
> All Ermony & Ewrope · enterely me serues,
> Ingland, Itaile, & Yndee · & Ireland costis,
> Meede & Mesopotayme · & Massedoyne eke.[1] *etc.*

Such lists even through print, manage to suggest that they were well-remembered by the poet and worth remembering by his audience.

The memorable catalogue could also be used as an unpretentious device in construction; for example in the assembly of banners in *Winner and Waster* or in the second part of *Mum and the Sothsegger* with its long list of libels.[2] And many familiar features of alliterative poetry seem to originate in the habit of composing detachable and memorable passages—what are

[1] *The Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*, ed. G. A. Panton and D. Donaldson, EETS 39 and 56 (1869, 1874), ll. 1580–1600; *Morte Arthure*, re-ed. E. Brock, EETS 8 (1871), ll. 26–47; *The Siege of Jerusalem*, ed. E. Kölbing and Mabel Day, EETS 188 (1931), ll. 140–52; *Susannah*, ed. Alice Miskimin, New Haven and London (1969), ll. 66–117; *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ed. (Sir) Israel Gollancz, SEEP ii (1915), ll. 297, 580; *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS, ES 47 (1886), (Ashmole 44) ll. 5655 ff.

[2] *Winner and Waster*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, SEEP iii (1920), ll. 143–92; *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. Mabel Day and R. Steele, EETS 199 (1936) ll. 1343–1751 (end).

called the set-pieces—descriptions of storm or weather, sea-voyages, battles, buildings, feasts, ordered pageantry. Such set-pieces are of course oral formulas writ long and large and had a special hold on memory as is shown by the subtle and pervasive correspondences in set-pieces in different alliterative poems. Many of these correspondences are not known to belong to an ancient traditional repertoire of phrase, but are apparently new transferable property among the later poets.

Most readers identify alliterative verse at sight; and certainly most alliterative poets left no doubt that they intended their compositions to be written down and read from the written page. Yet it is still true that their kind of poetry should be recognized by its sound, at least by its sound on the inner ear. It is the sound that distinguished alliterative verse from other verse of the late Middle English period. English prosody is notoriously obscure, so haunted by ancestral demons, that no sensible person would venture on this ground light-heartedly. It can be observed, however, that the alliterative poets themselves claimed to write in metre. Their metre is not to be called rhyme, in any of the historical senses of the word; plainly also it is not a syllabic or quantitative measure and it is not provided with regular feet. The audible basis of regular recurrence is the beat attached to the alliterating syllables (normally three) in a normally end-stopped line. The accentuation will be imposed upon and often distort the ordinary rhythm of utterance and the metre itself may well be more susceptible to analysis, in terms of music, than of prosody.

The recognizable, memorable if unanalysed sound of alliterative verse is reinforced by the peculiar syntax, grammar, and diction, co-operating to give weight and distinction to this type of composition. The paratactic, itemizing constructions, sometimes dependent for cohesion only upon the phonemic signal; the selection of words with a view to 'alliterative rank'; the use of variation and of epithets with a high level of predictability—such devices feed upon and strengthen the memorability of alliterative verse. From ancient times it had been understood that in devising mnemonics, what was to be committed to the memory should be made striking, and precise, simplified, slightly transfigured—that is made somewhat exaggerated or somewhat grotesque—and set within a homogeneous and familiar matrix. The alliterative style can be described in these terms. It simplifies as well as intensifies, it produces the effect of idealization under the appearance of realism, the sense of a high style hoisted

up out of colloquialism. It also betrays its susceptibility to parody, its tendency to collapse into patterned noise, into rant.

The mnemonic cast of alliterative verse is for my purpose only an outward expression of a more intimate dependence of late medieval alliterative poetry upon memory. Much of this poetry commemorates the past as *testis temporum*, *memoria vitae*, *nuncia vetustas*. The poet is often a memorialist. He tells the great *gestes* of antiquity. But the dependence on memory can be taken still further. The actual poetry-making is to be understood as a function of memory. Comprehensively, the poetics of alliterative poetry—in relation to form, matter and art—can be regarded as a poetics of memory.

The whole notion of the human memory is elusive and difficult to hold in mind. Of all the faculties there is none harder to account for or has perplexed the philosophers more. It would be advisable perhaps to follow Sir William Hamilton's advice and 'truncate a problem I cannot solve'. Fortunately, Dr. Frances Yates[1] has laid a delicate firm hand upon the Protean mystery and has fairly stabilized the role of memory in Western European thought, and demonstrated the continuity of the ancient arts of memory from classical to renaissance times. In all human affairs that depended upon transmitted learning these arts of memory were of supreme practical importance. Some acquaintance with them is usually implicit in the treatment given to memory under the fourth head of the art of rhetoric. No writer could escape their influence. Their drills often shape composition: thus the description of halls or pictorial panels in medieval allegory exploit the doctrine of places as taught in artificial memory.

Increasing literacy in the later middle ages, like the introduction of writing among the Egyptians of old, as Socrates said, was a recipe for forgetfulness; but it was only at the end of the middle ages, in the sixteenth century, that Englishmen emerged with astonishing acceleration from an intellectual world controlled by the spoken word, and began to dispense with their old props to intellect. Earlier the whole medieval system of education had depended upon memory. Just as scraps and terms of rhetorical theory turn up in all branches of medieval learning, so, as Miss Yates has shown, this associated art of memory was everywhere at work. It influenced the teaching of ethics and the practice of

[1] Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (1966).

the spiritual life. Thus, memory working within the imaginative faculty was treated as part of prudence: so *Imaginatif* in *Piers Plowman*, not unexpectedly, contributes to the understanding of the life of Dowel.

The psychology of memory remained Aristotelian—modified somewhat by the Arab commentators, and generally little disturbed by the schoolmen. But St. Augustine—particularly in *De Trinitate* and in the tenth book of the *Confessions*—had already inextricably entangled the theory with Christian experience of the inner life, and in the development of the new devotional movements from the eleventh century, Augustine's influence was strong. Thenceforward the *memoria Christi* is carefully promoted. *Agere memoriam* is the key to early Franciscan piety. In all the devotions of the Mind of the Passion there is conscious recall of the images of the crucifixion as a means of making real the presence of Christ. The memory stirs sentiment and motivates the will. Memory still has primacy in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, and indeed in some of the English poetry of meditation of the seventeenth century which in this respect as in other aspects of thought and language prolonged a rich medieval inheritance.[1]

Memory, in poetry as in rhetoric, was not only concerned with guaranteeing delivery: it also had to do with invention. The poet's wit, in Dryden's phrase, 'like a nimble spaniel, beats over and ranges through the field of memory, till it springs the quarry it hunted after'. Traditionally, invention was defined as the excogitation of true or verisimilar material selected with a view to making a convincing argument. Late medieval handbooks on school-poetry or preaching or dictamen are much less concerned with invention than with arrangement and style; and the vernacular poets of medieval England were in similar case. Their material was usually at hand: their work most often translation or adaptation. Usually whatever remained of inventive activity was absorbed into the internal organization. In a debate, such as *The Owl and the Nightingale*, or in any composition according to a strict formal pattern, the choice of material was determined less by the need to promote a line of argument and more by its general convenience to the prescribed shape. The actual finding of arguments was restricted to amplification within a frame. Even Chaucer accepts this situation. Indeed in the *House of Fame* he encounters, debates, and politely turns down several

[1] See L. Martz, *The Paradise Within*, New Haven, Conn. (1964).

positive suggestions that might have enabled him to become a poet of freer invention.

Alliterative poetry in general is different, not necessarily superior of course, for there are many other things to poetry beside invention. It is known that many alliterative pieces prove difficult to classify: the difficulty always obtrudes in discussion of *Piers Plowman* and its associated pieces: satire, complaint, preachment, dream allegory, meditation, apocalypse, debate, moral tract, epic—no label is adequate. There are other difficulties with *Patience* and *Purity*. There has been debate enough about *Pearl*. *St. Erkenwald* is not an ordinary Saint's life. There is difficulty even with *Auntyrs of Arthur*, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, and *Morte Arthure*. None of these pieces is quite what a medieval English poem is expected to be like. They all transcend expectation and strain the limits of genres. The difficulties may suggest that we are dealing with compositions of individual invention.

At the same time, the alliterative poems present a remarkably steady view of the poet and his activities. The poet of courtly verse must show himself as the fresh young lover even if he allows chronology to belie him: the voice of the narrator in the alliterative poems is always that of a man full of years. The author of *Winner and Waster* has nothing but contempt for these modern beardless boys who jangle as jays and tell their trashy tales (24–6). The young can neither give nor take counsel. Truth is declared in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages* by Elde whose 'berde and browes were blanchede full whitte' (156): In *Mum and the Sothsegger* by 'An olde auncyen man of a huntrid wintre' (956). In the same poem true Wit, taken as an image of the poet, and surely close cousin to Long Will, is presented as

> Well homelich yhelid in an holsum gyse,
> Not ouerelonge, but ordeyned in þe olde schappe,
> With grette browis y-bente and a berde eke,
> And y-wounde in his wedis as þe wedir axith.
> (212–15: cf. Introduction, p. xv)

Our alliterative poet is necessarily old in as much as wisdom is to be acquired through long experience. He remains a practical man, who knows about the world of affairs, who is eager to present memorable instruction on public occasions about war and peace, and on current topics of civil and religious debate. He is clerkly but his concern is not primarily ecclesiastical. What he has to say is grounded on a knowledge of common life. He has an excellent memory for detail, and he is very ready to display it. He has read books, old good books, whose antiquity is

some guarantee of their value. Some of them are hard and misty, but none the less truthful for that. He himself may have to use the hard and obscure words, for what he has to say is often rather special. He is outspokenly contemptuous of mere entertainers, though, to the foolish, he himself may at times appear something of a fool. He is familiar with all sorts of people and yet he stands over against all society with understanding and detachment. He often withdraws; he walks alone to seek a retreat and focuses society through his glass of vision. And to the society he returns to tell the truth and to seek a reward.

We need not believe that many an alliterative poet deserves to be microcosmogrified thus. It gives him too antiquarian a gloss, anticipating even in detail that Minstrel of Sir Walter Scott's who sang the Last Lay. But a certain bookishness in an account of the alliterative poet would be significant. He no longer caters for an oral culture. In his conceit of himself as a sage and gifted littérateur, he is surprisingly like that ideal poet—aloof, high-souled, scornful of scurrility, a devoted amateur in theology, replete with counsel for princes—who was beginning to emerge from Boccaccio's Life of Dante and *De Genealogia Deorum*. All that the alliterative poet lacks is a good classical education. In his homely and wholesome English guise he remains on the side of the Trojans.

The alliterative poet protests that he is to be counted, above all else, a truth-teller. The prologue of the *Gest Hystoriale* treats the theme at length (5–98), lamenting first that many true stories have slipped from mind which could well bring comfort to men's hearts if they were faithfully rehearsed by poets who knew the facts and had studied what happened. This poet then devotes some seventy lines to a justification of his narrative and sources. Nor were such claims entirely specious. The poet of the *Siege of Jerusalem*, though recognizing that he is 'tied to the laws of poesy and not of history', organizes his learned sources with skill and ingenuity. There is a deliberate sobriety of tone and a matter-of-factness about this poem, about the *Gest Hystoriale*, and the Alexander poems which suggest that all of them could have been intended and received as morally authentic histories.

The poets display a similar confidence in their own veracity in *St. John*, *Joseph of Arimathie*, and in other treatments of faith and scripture. Even in *Sir Gawain* the poet sets his story in a recognized historical frame and vouches for its authenticity.

It would be superfluous to demonstrate the claim to truth-telling in *Piers Plowman*. Truth is the first of the abstractions

named, and Conscience, still valiant for truth, accompanies the dreamer out of the poem at the end. With a narrower scope, an anxious search for doctrinal truth is pursued by the poet of *Piers Plowman's Creed* amid the conflicting testimony of human works:

> But all þat euer I haue seyd · soþ it me semeþ,
> And all that euer I haue writen · is soþ, as I trowe.
> (841–2)[1]

Mum and the Sothsegger may not be a shiningly eloquent composition but it fumbles to formulate the issue which was to dominate renaissance poetics: how to discern and communicate the realities of political action.[2] The poet confesses that he has looked through old books and consulted living authorities with little success, for they offer principles, and no guides to action. Now, in his sleep of despair he encounters the old Genius of the fruitful garden who gives him exemplary Senecan instruction, urges him to uphold the sacred cause of truth rejecting those 'who fikeely fable & fals ben within', and to look for truth where truth resides:

> Yn man-is herte his hovsing is, as hooly writte techet,
> And mynde is his mansion. . . .
> (1224–5)

It is God who breathed the spirit into man,

> For trouthe and þe trinite been two nygh frendes.
> (1248)

Langland also had announced this union of truth and the Trinity in the heart of man. In this claim, invention is liberated. Not for these alliterative poets the novelty of the Chaucerian invocation to the Muses for aid. They are much more ready to call upon God in Trinity:

> Maistur in mageste, maker of Alle,
> Endles and on, euer to last,
> Now God of þi grace, graunt me þi helpe,
> And wysshe me with wyt þis werke for to end.

And again,

> Now grette glorious Godd, thurgh grace of hym selvene
> And the precyous prayere of hys prys modyr,
> Schelde us ffro schamesdede and synfulle werkes . . .

[1] *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS 30 (1867).

[2] See A. B. Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*, Durham, N.C. (1965), pp. 75–87.

And wysse me to werpe owte some worde at this tyme,
That nothyre voyde be ne vayne, bot wyrchip tille hyme selvyne;
Plesande and profitabille to the pople þat theme heres.[1]

A Biblical and an Horatian intention are here consciously brought together.

Frequently the emphasis in presentation reveals the high view of poetry. Some of the poets are interested in expounding the theology of the trinity: in *Piers Plowman* of course; more unexpectedly perhaps in the *Siege of Jerusalem* and in *Joseph of Arimathie*.[2] There is lengthy treatment of the worship of idols in the *Gest Hystoriale*, *Joseph*, the *Siege of Jerusalem*. *Patience* and *Purity* and *St. Erkenwald* take up the same theme.[3] Many of the poems that grow out of canonical or apocryphal scripture developed or emphasized prophetic episodes: the story of Jonah, Belshazzar's feast, the vision of the New Jerusalem, the special insights of the young Daniel in *Susannah*, the oracles delivered before the birth of Alexander, the predictive visions in *Morte Arthure*, *Auntyrs of Arthur*, *Joseph*, and *St. Erkenwald*. To tell of Tobit and truth was ever a proper theme.

The special knowledge spoken of is regarded as being locked up within a man and released by divine command. Speech is the 'spyre of grace' (PPI B IX, 100). It is the gift possessed by the prophets of old, a Jonah, a Daniel

> þat hatȝ þe gost of God þat gyes alle soþes.
> His sawle is ful of syence, saȝes to schawe,
> To open vch a hide þyng of aunteres vn-cowþe.[4]

Joseph is commanded by God to loose his lips and let the spirit work: and later receives direct instruction from Christ. Passages in *Piers Plowman*, *Winner and Waster*, *Mum and the Sothsegger*, and specifically the collections known as the *Scottish Prophecies* incorporate quasi-prophetic material of a kind first associated in England with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Merlin—allusive allegorical

[1] *Gest Hystoriale*, ll. 1–4, p. 1; *Morte Arthure*, ll. 1–3, 9–11; cf. *Death and Liffe*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, SEEP v (1930), ll. 17–19; *Chevelere Assigne*, ed. H. H. Gibbs, EETS, ES 6 (1868), ll. 1–4; *Pierce the Ploughmans Crede*, ll. 1–4.

[2] *Piers Plowman*, especially C-Text, XIX–XX; *Siege of Jerusalem*, ll. 97–120; *Joseph of Arimathie*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, EETS 44 (1871), ll. 121–211, 336–44.

[3] *Gest Hystoriale*, ll. 4264–461; *Joseph of Arimathie*, ll. 99–104, 371–402; *Siege of Jerusalem*, ll. 233–6; *Patience*, ed. (Sir) Israel Gollancz, SEEP i (1913), ll. 164–8; (*Purity*) *Cleanness*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, SEEP vii (1921), ll. 1341–48; 1719–20; *St. Erkenwald*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, SEEP iv (1922), ll. 15–32.

[4] *Cleanness*, ll. 1598–1600.

utterance which continued to exert a real and disturbing influence on politics, often at the fringes of literacy, well beyond the Middle Ages. The alliterative line with its impressive sonority and uncertain syntax was an apt medium for oracular utterance.

The assumptions about poetry shared by the alliterative poets are, as will be admitted, very ancient. These backward-gazing poets were drawing upon the oldest traditions of European poetry. Yet, unconsciously of course within the context of their own times and with no perspective of what was to come, they begin to anticipate renaissance poetics. The broad and recognizable channel by which the old ideas were being carried down the stream to later times is Augustinianism, which even in the flush of scholasticism had remained a strong secondary current of thought. It was Augustine, who had provided the English after the conversion with a theory of inspiration of the Scriptures; and this theory, as modified by Gregory, had given them their guiding principles of literary composition, that *Bibelpoetik* which has been a recurrent feature in English poetry. And it was Augustine above all other fathers of the church who, when studied afresh, restored and then maintained a powerful Christian imprint on the new poetics of Europe from Petrarch's time into the seventeenth century. A full evaluation of the literary implications of the neo-Augustinianism of the late fourteenth century in its relation to ultra-realist thought could well have important consequences for the understanding of the development of late medieval poetry in England.

Augustine had sought and found the Trinity in the heart of man. An understanding of memory overflows psychology and invades metaphysic. In his great trinitarian analogy of the soul Augustine had distinguished memory, intelligence, and will, mutually related faculties, each enveloping the others. A man's memory stores images abstracted by the intellect out of the flux and buzz of experience and recalls them for the intellect's use whenever he has made up his mind to think or speak. In a sense then—but not in a Platonic sense, though using the Platonic formulation—we remember, rather than start to learn, in all acts of knowledge. In *De magistro* Augustine examined this process of thought from a consideration of what happens when we read scripture or pray to God. We can have a knowledge of God in doing these things because God is, already and always, there in the memory. This presence of God within the mind is likened to the presence of an inner teacher or master and it is this inner

master that illuminates the mind in acts of understanding. In reading to understand, or in prayer, the illumination operates on and activates a whole throng of familiar words in store. In telling the truth, that is in embodying the illumination in words, the reciprocally engaged and reciprocally modifying faculties of the mind working through words afford not only a human model of the Divine Trinity, but their activity is also directly linked with, and powered by, the Trinity in virtue of the illumination. The memory is thus 'a psychological focus through which conversion and reformation are gained out of time, multiplicity, and history'.[1]

None of the alliterative poets turns a steady inquisitive gaze upon his own composing. These poets recognize a gift of grace in themselves, they acknowledge it in scripture. As a group, whatever may have been their social status, they take themselves rather seriously. They also take the use of words seriously. They choose grave themes and believe utterance is powerful. But they have neither the occasion, the interest, nor the vocabulary to examine closely how they write. Their word for memory is still mind: the general agency and treasury of knowledge: *mens pro memoria accipitur*. And mind is much too comprehensive a term for them, or for us, to use in analysis of the mental processes involved in composition.

But the role of illumination in invention can be explored further. There were of course other vernacular writers who followed the workings of the mind and had a specialized interest in illumination, and within the context of their concern were careful and scrupulous in introspection. We are not interested here in the systematic psychology of the devotional and mystical writers such as is given in Chapters 63 and following in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, but with expressive accounts of what actually goes on within a mind engaged in discovering and shaping material which comes eventually to verbal formulation.

The Revelations of Juliana of Norwich describe the evolution of some mental processes which begin in perceptions and end in verbal dictation. On 8 May 1373 this woman, who is called simple and unlettered, experienced in sickness a series of 'shewings'. Some of these shewings seem to have been received as bodily sights, some she calls spiritual: sometimes she is not quite sure which. Some were associated at some stage with verbal

[1] G.-B. Ladner, 'St. Augustine's Conception of the Reformation of Man to the Image of God', in *Augustinus Magister* (Communications: Congrès international augustinien, Paris (1954)) ii, 875.

messages. At the moment of perception the shewings were not self-explanatory; but they were intensely memorable and Juliana considered them to be completely authentic. The Special Shewing, given in the longer version of the Revelations, suggests how understanding of an experience developed. She distinguished three stages: first there was a simple recognition of what the shewing is about; then a conceptual formulation developed; finally emerged a fuller understanding of a total meaning. Juliana regarded this further teaching as coming from Christ as the inner master. Each shewing was found to conceal mysteries which were made clear later by the exercise of the imagination, reminiscence, the association of ideas, and introspection. Even fresh detail was recalled in the original experience as a fuller cumulative meaning was acquired. Doctrine, allegory, scriptural exegesis were incorporated. She only knew what the initial shewing was, when she had fully learned what it meant. The whole process which extended over twenty years had a general educative effect and developed a compulsion to utterance.

The Revelations is the outcome: a precious and affecting document, written in a prose no doubt close to colloquial utterance, but cooled and superficially tidied by Juliana's amanuensis. But as a narration the book is disorderly and can scarcely be regarded as a model of the complete literary act, from conception to organized expression in a controlled medium. For a limited purpose, it serves admirably as an enlarged diagram of the originating phase of composition—a highly informative writing-up as of some laboratory experiments of the way in which invention worked with some medieval writers.

Complementary information about other aspects of the process can, with some difficulty it must be confessed, be extracted from Richard Rolle: in particular from Rolle's *Melos Amoris*, which is perhaps the most adventurous treatise on art by any medieval Englishman. Essentially it is an apologia for poetry, for Rolle's extraordinary gift of song. In this work, the form itself is part of the justification—so dominatingly that as a record of Rolle's experiences and of the stages of inventive activity it is heavily obfuscated by the manner of expression. *Melos Amoris* is organized as a linked series of expansions of scriptural texts and accumulates further verbal material from the scriptures, from service books, and from theological and devotional writings; and it is composed in a sustained alliterative Latin prose, rumbling and incantatory, dispersing meaning to the frontiers of unmeaning. Rolle with a vast, still unplumbed

reservoir of phrases to draw upon, is very like an oral poet. He was extraordinarily assimilative, quick, and loquacious.

The process which results in composition begins with the activation of this material, assembled, assimilated, and revolving in the mind. Motion is induced on an act of will by concentrated reading, or by recitation, by psalm-singing, or simply by repeating verbal material. The old materials kindle, melt, and reform.

For page upon paragraph Rolle pursues, captures, and struggles to explain his new and wonderful *melos*. He rejoices in Jesu, in gests of joyful jubilation.[1] The *melos* is the musical vocalization of a truth discerned by the enlightened eye through the window made in the firmament itself where eternal truth is celebrated in angelic song. What Rolle brings thence and endeavours to reproduce in his book is the product of the *musica musa*: not only the unheard melody and jubilation, but a verbal and sonorous expression.

'The Eternal Light purges the mind, really, not imaginatively', Rolle writes in an Augustinian phrase.[2] In this condition when illumination shapes truth inside the mind, the old material in a new order acquires the flow and rhythm and structure of music. Thought has been turned into song.

Rolle's literary position is still very indistinct. Little is known about his sources or about direct influences at work within his intellectual milieu; or about his models in writing and his assumptions about composition. He is the first author within the Middle English period, practising in English as well as in Latin, in verse as well as in prose, to display a cultivated interest in form, style, and the complex art of literate composition. Plainly he attached importance to inherent rhythm and proportion in written composition, no longer completely dependent upon the speaking voice. Alliteration in his own prose and poetry, in Latin and in English, points these musical effects. Most of Rolle's so-called lyrics and other verse pieces are embedded in his didactic prose and then, as if the rising heart has suddenly quickened to the unheard *melos*, utterance becomes metrical. There can be little doubt that he is consciously exploiting an effective device.

What is paradoxical at first sight is that Rolle's English poems appear rough and irregular, so that Miss Hope Emily Allen could write that Rolle had 'no more sense of poetic form than

[1] *The 'Melos Amoris' of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. E. J. F. Arnould, Oxford (1957), p. 42, l. 13.

[2] Ibid., p. 6, ll. 17–18.

a child'.[1] But in discourse designed with a real as distinct from a metaphorical likeness to music, roughness and irregularity are the dynamics of vibrant utterance.[2] Such prosodic accidents of speech will inhere almost automatically in the composition of the oral poet. In literate poetry, these musical features have to be contrived by the poet and introduced by design. We must not repeat simply what Horstman said flatly about Rolle: *He revived the alliterative verse.*[3] The least that can be said, however, is that at the time when a new metrical form of vernacular poetry is developing in England, Rolle had realized the importance of the inner tune in written composition, believed he had caught the tune of a new song, and that his own composition is marked by a number of formal devices, chief among which is alliterative accentuation.

In their different ways Rolle and Juliana contribute to an understanding of the poetic and the practice of poetry that are developed in England and were most characteristically but not exclusively appropriated by the alliterative poets. These poets were making *melos* out of memory. They were transforming the recitative of oral poetry into a literate equivalent where the musical element subsumed in speech was reproduced as a formal feature of written style.

Alliterative poetry is not all of a piece. There is a variety in the composition of alliterative verse, so is there a range of treatment and theme. Nevertheless, as it is more than mere convenience that permits us to speak of alliterative writing in all its variations as one style, so alliterative poems in theme and treatment of theme stand in a continuum: the terms in this continuum are moral insight and historical truth.

On one side of this continuum will stand *Piers Plowman*, in our assessment dominating the whole alliterative achievement. It is this poem above all others that demonstrates how the active memory works in late medieval English poetry.

Modern editors have made the poem increasingly accessible, but we must believe that behind the necessary distinctions of the three texts, there was a sustained attempt by the poet to write one poem. Both the medium, still dependent upon the fluidity of

[1] Hope Emily Allen, *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle* (Modern Language Association of America Monograph Series iii), New York and London (1927), p. 288.

[2] Cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton (1957), pp. 255–8.

[3] C. Horstman, *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and his followers*, London and New York (1896), ii, *Introduction*, p. xviii.

oral composition, and the method of invention—the elicitation of memory—work to keep the composition continuously exploratory and its language experimental. If we look at Langland's language and his modifications in composition in the light of Juliana's account of her experience and both in relation to the workings of memory, Langland's so-called realism may be regarded as an index of his method. For example, the description of the Tree of Charity—in a passage highly characteristic of the method—is presented with extraordinarily vivid and such extraordinarily inconsistent detail that it cannot be visualized. Such presentations are very much of a kind with the *picturae* which Dr. Beryl Smalley has examined in her accounts of Robert Holcot and John Ridevall.[1] As presented, *picturae* are not description or impressions of things seen, but verbal schemes for conceptualization. In Langland the detail is chosen, rejected, and replaced not with a view to its striking force on the sensuous imagination, but, according to its estimated usefulness, that, when fixed in the memory, it can generate concepts in the mind. The detail is not a penetrating point, but the barb which holds the *imago agens* in position. Invention operates to make abstraction memorable.

But originally, and fundamentally, Juliana's narrative depends upon a series of shewings, physical, imaginary, or conceptual. If we exercise our judgement upon the whole structure of *Piers Plowman* it is possible to detect behind the narrative also a series of illuminations, arbitrary in their initial occurrence, inexplicable in their succession, but accepted by the poet as compelling and authoritative. There is the scene of the field crowded with people, full of noise where a marriage is being arranged; a sight of the crowded court at Westminster; the sight of a man with a cross preaching in a field; a sudden meeting of a queer-looking palmer with a plowman who puts forth his head. There is of course the pardon scene: all these in the *Visio*. Later we may think to identify the dinner at high-table; the sight of a man in a dirty coat selling wafers; of a propped-up tree in an orchard; a scene of tournament and a sight of a man covered with blood; perhaps some ugly civil disturbance in the Antichrist passus. Some of these critical illuminations may have sprung from Langland's private experience, some from meditative reading. Langland's use of scriptural quotation may indicate that he regarded some as locutions. Identification of some

[1] Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the early Fourteenth Century*, Oxford (1960), pp. 118, 165–83.

of these critical sights and scenes is surely debatable. There will be others. There can be no doubt that some scenes of this kind or the fragmentation of such scenes lie underneath the movement and development of the poem and give to the poem its vertebrate structure. Around these vertebrates are the accretions of associative memory, the tissue and embodiment of long experience and further thought and reading. In the A-Text the sharp signs are still apprehensible by the reader, but even there they exist behind the exposition and not as presentations of the original sight.

For Langland it can be assumed that they were important, but not in such a way that they had to be retained in their original clarity. They were *ferlies*, marvels, for which he had to work to find the meaning. Indeed as shiny and elusive warrants of truth, their significance becomes much plainer when their immediacy and sensationalism is sloughed off and they can be apprehended as approximations to a universal. This slow and uneven abstraction from sense image to species to universal marks the change that, usually with disfavour, critics have observed in the progress from the A- to the C-Text.

From our first reading of the poem we knew that the tearing of the pardon was a climax. It ends the *Visio*. It can be accepted now with less puzzlement, that when Langland had finished his early draft of the poem, he could not explain what the scene meant. He had to submit it to thought and to the other inner faculties of the mind to find out. He tried to give some sort of interpretation in the last four passus of the A-Text. He knew it had something to do with the life of Dowel. But exactly what, he has not been able to set out to his satisfaction in the last four passus of the A-text. In the later revisions he struggles to make it plainer. The additions in the B- and C-Texts over a period of many years are, as has often been observed, elaborations of these concluding passus in A. There is also a short version and a long version of Juliana's Revelations. She had turned her illuminations over and over in her mind for twenty years; and much of her final exposition can scarcely be linked directly with any particular feature of a shewing as she recorded it. All sorts of things are drawn in. But she never transcends her purpose of recording her initial experiences. Langland of course goes much further; and draws out of the experiences the true and verisimilar material from which he makes convincing his argument, exploring and recommending the life of perfection. This is rare and fresh invention as medieval writers understood it.

The poetics of the illuminated memory have never been clearly delineated in late medieval England, but they belong to a European tradition of thought which within an Augustinian context and with developed emphases is represented within the work of Dante, Bonaventure, the Franciscan poets, the poets of Chartres, the Latin poets of Anglo-Saxon England and of the Carolingian court.[1] It is a tradition that revives in the sixteenth century, in Puritan poetics, and in some writers of the Counter-Reformation. It is important in the development of European conceptism. It is most familiar to English readers in the works of Vaughan, Traherne, and Milton.

The spangle of illustrious names across centuries serves to emphasize that the English alliterative poets are not the waifs of time, thinly lining the route of English poesy with no standing in its triumph. Late medieval poetry even in England speaks with more than one voice. It should not all be deverbalized into allegories of charity and into iconography. It is well to remember Eugenio Garin's observation that there were two opposed understandings of poetry among medieval Latin poets: one as pure rhetorical adornment and the other as a moment of supreme insight, vision, an intuition of an idea.[2]

In the English vernacular the alliterative poets offer a characteristic adaptation of this second understanding: none so impressively as Langland. But once the poetics are recognized they can be seen as informing and controlling many other pieces: *Winner and Waster*, *Mum and the Sothsegger*, *St. Erkenwald*, *Death and Life*, *The Three Living and the Three Dead*. They illuminate others; they are peculiarly applicable to *Pearl* with its two great moments of vision.

But the poetics of memory could also be studied in the historical pieces. In them a narrower horizontal window is opened up on the known history of man. For not only do the poets repeat and elaborate their memorial lists of the Nine Worthies. They see unfolded, and assess the common inheritance of fourteenth-century Englishmen: the legacy of Israel; Alexander and the wonders of the East; Troy and the origins of Britain; Arthur and his empire. They trace and join the lines of destiny into sombre patterns of glory and ambition. They offer a fourteenth-century English version of Augustine's vision in the *City of God*, wherein retrospective memory and a prospective intention must

[1] References can be found from Rosario Assunto, *La critica d'arte nel pensiero medioevale*, Genoa–Milan (1961), Index, *s. pittura.*

[2] Eugenio Garin, *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Bari (1954), p. 52.

of force go together. The apocalyptic mood of the time which Professor Bloomfield has stressed[1] certainly looked towards the coming of the Kingdom of God, but it also anticipated the coming of the Kingdom of God's Englishman.

Time overtook our poets. Even in the fourteenth century they affected an antique fashion. By the late sixteenth century they were superannuated. English people had different ambitions, they were firmly committed to print and heard new tunes of speech in their ears. Most of those who knew anything about the old poetry remarked its provincialism in time and place and speech. The old gests had become dull matter for jesting. Yet something remained and some things were remembered. Let another teacher from the provinces speak. Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost* had a revealingly old-fashioned taste. He too composed a poem about hunting wherein he affects the letter. He also celebrated the Nine Worthies, the deeds of the sweet warmen of old. He was in no doubt that he himself had a gift and what he says about it can be applied directly and descriptively to these earlier poets of memory. They, in their time, exhibited 'a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions: these are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater* and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion'. Let me make Holofernes' complacent conclusion my own: '. . . the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it.'

[1] M. W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse*, New Brunswick (1963).