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That this Silent Tomb Might Speak: History as Poetic Experience in Three Medieval English Poems

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by

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Dedication

To my Mother and my Father

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Introduction

In a class on Modern American Literature, I came across a poem by Marianne Moore called “A Grave.” In Moore's poem, what is, apparently, the speaker's encounter with the sea is transformed into a vision of experience. Rather than presenting a series of dry facts about the ocean, Moore gave us what it felt like to be there, by the sea, to be “[m]an looking into the sea.”[1] Moore presented a vision of experience as grounded in "perception," specifically, experience grounded in the act of looking. Reading this raised a concern about what poetry does with experience–of objects, places, or events. For, in Moore’s transformation of this sea into a grave by way of perception, what happened to the world? What does that poetic act by which the world is transformed by experience–through experience–do to our perceptions of the poet and the poem? I also wondered, Moore, being a modernist, if this was a particularly modernist innovation. How did the poetic act–how did poets–leave the world transmuted through experience? What did the world look like in pre-modernist poetry after the poetic act? In looking for an answer, I turned to Bede.

My introduction to medieval literature at Bard began with Bede, in a way. Though he wasn’t the first medieval writer I read, he was the one who had the most effect on me. In reading his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* I was struck by that quality of poetic transformation of reality I’d seen in Moore and other modernists. I was struck by what I then called Bede’s “moderness.” After reading more medieval literature, I am not confident enough to call that quality “modern.” Still, I was merely introduced to it by modernist literature and associated it with modernity. In any case, Bede struck me like a sudden slant of light on my way

[1] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51566/a-graveyard, l-1

down the road of poetry. I saw something in his *History, something* particular. In his handling of the miraculous–specifically, how he envisioned England as a landscape studded with the miraculous. In the way that he presented the English landscape, I was struck by the way that the land became an actor in the island's history. Rather than being a thing on which more important things happened, the land took in the miraculous quality of events and participated in history. A miraculous river that was called up by a saint at his death remained. That river, remaining, testified continuously to what happened there–to history. That river told all who passed by it that a miracle had occurred here. In doing so, that river participated in telling history and telling poetry. I mean that the river, part of the landscape, is usually expected to be mute and passive. Rather than being passive, it directly affected how history was understood. That active role of the environment, the expectedly passive landscape, surprised me. It struck me and caused me to ask questions about historiography and poetry. What is the link between historiography and poetry? What is the relationship between *how* we remember events, places, and people in historical records and the presentation of that experience in literature? How is experience transformed by being linked to history? How is history changed by being connected to poetry and vice-versa? What are the connecting threads between the two modes of remembering? What is poetry doing, and what is history doing? In thinking about these connections between poetry and history, I also thought about the role of silence.

In *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, Rowan Williams presents a view of language as the defining quality of existence. "[A]ctive communication and relation are the fundamental agency of things.."[2] That is, speech is a kind of casting out something of the self

[2] Rowan Williams. *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

into the world. In casting speech out, we are engaged in a "continuing pattern"[3] where another is prompted to continue adding to what was said. As Williams understands it, this "continuing pattern" is necessary because what one says and means is never really carried over outside the self. Rather, what one says is carried outside of the self, and meaning is that interplay between what was heard and what was meant. "[W]e cannot ever simply say the same words twice with absolutely precisely the same meaning."[4] This view of reality is, essentially, communicative struck me as pertinent to these questions of poetry and history. If poetry is a description of the poet's/speaker's experience of something in the world, and if history is a description or presentation of one's experience of the past, how does the experience of language mediate those two concepts? How do poetry and history interact within the boundaries of language? How does language alter, in some way, poetry and history? The two forms need language. How does the form of language used in a poem or used in history affect our experience of these objects? How is language used to present history through poetry? How might a poet present history to us differently than a historian? How might this occur, specifically in the Middle Ages, where the lines between history and poetry are not as clear-cut as they are presented today? What is the role of history, and what is the role of poetry?

In asking these questions, I focused my current project on three medieval poems–all from different points in the Middle Ages–that deal with how to think about Anglo-Saxon England. One poem written in the late Middle Ages is set shortly after the movement of Anglo-Saxon people to the island; another poem is set in Anglo-Saxon England with the poet meditating on the Roman ruins of the island; and another is set in Anglo-Saxon England wherein the poet recounts

[3] *Ibid.,* 68
[4] *Ibid.,* 67

a dream vision where he recalls the crucifixion through the eyes of the wood on which Christ was said to be crucified. These three poems look back at the past through the medium of an object: a corpse, a tomb, a ruin, and a rood. These three poems seem to use these objects to mediate the experience of the past. In doing so, the poems transform that experience of mediation into history. History becomes not a place or location but an experience. History is what happens when the past meets the present.

In presenting history as an experience, these poems can give us a more detailed view of the Middle Ages. The Medieval period is one in which assumptions abound. People usually think of the Middle Ages in Europe as a "Dark Ages," when people asked no questions and thought no thoughts, and religion, in its most regressive form, contained all possible expressions of creativity. The portrait that these poems present, however, complicates this picture. In these poems, we can find a Middle Ages concerned not just with the past but with how to think about the past. In the various ways that each poem attempts to negotiate the past, to create history through the objects left behind, we can see something of our present situation. We, too, are concerned with the past. We navigate how to think about and consider the past–how to create history. We, too, deal with complicated questions of legacy and how to incorporate these past events, places, objects, and people into our understanding of ourselves. Whether we are talking about monuments of Confederate war heroes or whether we are talking about the living bodies of the people descended from the enslaved brought to the United States, we are constantly surrounded by and forced to reckon with how we construct history through these objects and people brought in from the past. Medieval people were no less complicated in their concerns. They, too, struggled with history as an experience.

The first poem I will discuss is *St. Erkenwald*. Set in the 7th century, during the life of the historical St. Erkenwald, bishop of London,[5] the poem tells the story of what follows the exhumation of a tomb during reconstructive work on St. Paul's Cathedral in London. When the tomb is discovered, it bears strange markings which no one gathered around it can read. People come from outlying towns and cities, but no one can read it. Thus, the tomb is opened. However, upon opening the tomb, another mystery is introduced. The body inside is unknown. After a section where the people of London attempt to discover the body's identity through consulting various records, Erkenwald hears about the discovery and proceeds to the cathedral. There, he performs a miracle to wake up the corpse, then begins speaking to the corpse. He discovers that the body belongs to a judge from pre-Christian England. The judge recounts his life, detailing his high moral character and frustration with his people's lack of moral character. He tells Erkenwald, and everyone gathered that because he lived and died before Christ's death and resurrection, he is in Hell. This evokes an emotional response from Erkenwald, who conceives to baptize the judge immediately, securing his place in heaven. Before Erkenwald can perform a proper baptism, his tears fall on the judge, performing the same function as a baptism. The judge's body rots, and his soul is taken to heaven. Church bells ring, and the poem ends. That is the main thrust of the poem's plot.

Erkenwald is an alliterative Middle English poem[6] composed, roughly, in the 1390s or early 1400s century,[7] though the only extant copy lies in the British Library's MS Harley 2250

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[5] Patrick Womald. "Earconwald [St Earconwald, Erkenwald] (d. 693), abbot of Chertsey and bishop of the East Saxons." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 23. Oxford University Press. Date of access 26 Apr. 2023, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8836>

[6] "Middle English is commonly held to begin about 1100-50 and end about 1450…[however,] linguistic periods can be defined only loosely." J. A. Burrow, and Thorlac Turville-Petre. A Book of Middle English. Second ed., Blackwell Publishers, 1996., 3

[7] *Ibid.,* Page 201

from 1477.[8] Thus, the author of the poem is unknown. However, supposed similarities in style, such as it being written in a northern dialect of the island and using alliterative verse, between the poem and other medieval English poems leads some scholars to suggest possible identities for the unknown author, most notably, the poet *The Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[9]. Now, *Erkenwald* is, generally, considered to be part of the Alliterative Revival. The Alliterative Revival is the view that "the tradition of 'classical' Old English poetry died out soon after the [Norman] Conquest, and that for over one hundred years it was succeeded by a looser form of alliterative verse, which in its turn died out…"[10] After it died out, these loose strands were a product "of about two centuries…[of] literary composition in English [that] was…exceptional: individual works came into being as exceptions to the cultural forces that tended to channel literary activity into French and Latin."[11] The argument begins with the claim that English poetry using alliterative verse ceased at the Norman Conquest. In the vacuum, poetic experimentation riding the continental current became the norm. Out of this continental current, alliterative poetry was revived as a somewhat unexpected result of the many poetic experiments of the time. This view of England's poetic history produces the idea that *Erkenwald* and other alliterative poems appeared not as continuing the poetics of Old English, but that they were formed as products of the experimental norms inspired by French and Latin influences brought by the Norman conquerors. This view of Medieval English poetics has been contested by scholars such as Eric

[8] *Ibid*.
[9] Larry D. Benson. "The Authorship of 'St. Erkenwald.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1965, pp. 393–405. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27714679. Accessed 3 May 2023., page 395
[10] Turville-Petre, Thorlac. *The Alliterative Revival*. D. S. Brewer, 1977., 17
[11] Ian Cornelius. "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival." *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017. 67-103. Print. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature.

Weiskott[12] and Ian Cornelius,[13] among others, who see the view of poetic history evinced by scholars who support the idea of the revival as "[confused]regarding questions of continuity and innovation in poetic practice; relations between linguistic, social, and literary history; and interpretation of the surviving documentary record."[14]

All that said, my discussion of *Erkenwald* will not attempt to wade into the murky waters of scholarship around the revival. However, it is important to note that even without planting your flag for or against the Alliterative Revival, *Erkenwald* is a poem concerned with looking back. The figure of St. Erkenwald had been dead at least seven centuries before the poem's composition. The world the poem is describing is one securely placed in the past. Thus, we are dealing with a poem that looks back from the late middle ages, from a middle ages post-Norman Conquest to one in which the Anglo-Saxons were still acclimating to English soil. In that recent acclimation lies my interest. For, when the poem introduces the tomb, it operates as an unknown object. No one can figure out the inscription on it. Similarly, the corpse's identity cannot be known until Erkenwald wakes up and speaks to it. Thus, in both instances of an unknown object, the past as embodied in these objects becomes unknown and inaccessible. Nevertheless, the poem is concerned with looking back at these objects even if their origin and meaning are initially unknown. For, in the poem's looking back, it shares the same concern as the other two poems I'll be discussing.

The Ruin and *The Dream of the Rood* are the other poems I discuss. They lie in separate manuscripts. Both are in Old English. What we call Old English is "based on the language of the

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[12] Weiskott, Eric. "Introduction: The Durable Alliterative Tradition." *English Alliterative Verse: Poetic Tradition and Literary History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. 1-22. Print. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature.
[13] Cornelius.
[14] Weiskott.

West-Saxon kingdom as it was written in the days of King Alfred of Wessex (d.899."[15] This form of English predominated before the Norman conquest and decentralization of the West-Saxon dialect. *The Ruin* is in the Exeter Book, a collection of poems in the Library of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral in Exeter, England. According to Bernard Muir in his *Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, the manuscript was "designed and copied out *circa* 965-75" (qtd in Williamson, Craig, 299-300).[16] Its date of composition is uncertain. The *Dream of the Rood* lies in the Vercelli Book, so named because of its location in a cathedral in Vercelli, Italy. Its date of copy is similar to the Exeter book–its poems having also been written down some time in the mid-900s.[17] However, in a manner very different from *The Ruin*, fragments of the poem are attested as early as 701 because part of the poem had been carved on the Ruthwell Cross, Dumfriesshire, in England. The only complete text is in the Vercelli book.[18]

The poems are also very different in their subject matter. *The Ruin* is, ostensibly, a description of the Roman ruin, assumed to be the ruins of the city of Bath.[19] The poet is unknown. *The Dream of the Rood*, however, is a poem that begins with the poet having a dream vision of some heavenly realm. In that realm, the poet encounters a tree. That tree, then, speaks, describing its "life" as a tree that was cut down to become the cross on which Christ is said to have been crucified. The *rood* tells the poet about the experience of being the site of Christ's crucifixion. After it describes the crucifixion, the *rood* launches into a theological description of its role in salvific history. The poem culminates in the poet's desire to return to the heavenly realm at death.

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[15] Burrow., and Thorlac., 3
[16] Craig Williamson, et al. *The Complete Old English Poems*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
[17] *Ibid*, pg. 185
[18] Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 2;
[19] *Ibid*., 1

Much like *St. Erkenwald*, both poems meditate on objects. The objects of *The Ruin* and *The Dream of the Rood* are different but, nevertheless, act as mediators of the past. Where the poet of *The Ruin* is looking back on Roman Britain, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* is looking back at the time of the crucifixion. Both poets are concerned with how those periods speak to their current moments. My interest in both poems lies in the way that experience of an object serves as the central thrust of each poem. Whether we are talking about a collection of Roman ruins or a piece of the crucifixion cross, both poets are interested in how these objects act as things by which they may access the past and have it speak to them. What are the implications of that kind of experience? Where does it lead each poet? How do their experiences connect to the experience of the past offered by the *Erkenwald* poet? I am not sure, but my interest lies in exploring how these poems might speak to each other across time, much as the poets of these poems use objects to communicate across time to their moment.

Chapter 1: "And I Might Speak in Vain to your Silent Ashes"*: St. Erkenwald* and History as Language

St. Erkenwald is an alliterative Middle English poem composed, roughly, in the 1390s or early 1400s century,[20] though the only extant copy lies in the London, British Library's MS Harley 2250 from 1477.[21] The poem's author is unknown, though supposed similarities in style between the poem and other medieval English verse, such as it being written in a northern English dialect, between the poem and other medieval English verse leads some scholars to suggest possible identities for the unknown author.[22] The poem catalogs the exhumation of a tomb during reparative construction on St. Paul's Cathedral in London, thus locating the poem some time in the seventh century when repairs on the actual St. Paul's were said to have been done.[23] The action of the poem begins when the tomb is exhumed, investigated, and then opened. On opening it, onlookers discover a corpse fully preserved yet unknown to the community. Word travels. St. Erkenwald, the bishop of London and titular character, hears of the tomb. He travels to St. Paul's where, after a brief detour to perform Mass and lecture those gathered in the cathedral, he enacts a miracle. In the poem's words, "he turnes to the toumbe and talkes to the corce."[24]. In talking to the corpse, Erkenwald initiates a dialogue whereby the corpse reveals himself to have been a judge in pagan Britain. The corpse reveals that, while living, he was "ry3twis and reken and redy of the laghe."[25]. Because of his moral exemplariness

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[20] J. A. Burrow, and Thorlac Turville-Petre,. *A Book of Middle English*,. Second ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 201
[21] Israel Gollancz. *St. Erkenwald (Bishop of London 675-693): An Alliterative Poem*. Oxford University Press, 1922., V and *Ibid*. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *St. Erkenwald* come from Burrow and Turville-Petre.
[22] Benson
[23] J. A. Burrow, and Thorlac Turville-Petre*,* 204
[24] *Ibid,* l. -177
[25] *Ibid,* l. -245

while alive, he was destined for purgatory. In an incredibly moving scene, Erkenwald asks him, after hearing of his time as a judge and of the people's mourning of him at his death, "'3ea, bot sayes thou thi saule…/ Quere is ho stablid and stadde, if thou so stre3t wroghtes?"[26]. The judge's entire demeanor shifts. His "hedde waggyd" and he "gefe a gronyng ful grete"[27]. He says that he is in purgatory, that, on the Harrowing of Hell, he remained there. Erkenwald, upon hearing this, weeps. His tears serve as an overdue baptism for the judge-corpse. The judge-corpse rots, turning to dust, church bells ring, and the poem ends. This is, in brief, the plot of *St. Erkenwald*.

According to Patrick Wormald in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, he was an "abbot of Chertsey and bishop of the East Saxons" who "was made bishop in London…."[28] He was tied to the aristocracy, being described as a "clerical counterpart of the very highly born aristocrats," while, by the time, the poem was composed, he'd become, in Womald's words, the capital's [London] nearest to a native patron saint." In considering this, the historical Erkenwald is distinct from Erkenwald as the figure became characterized by the poet of *St. Erkenwald*. There is little characterization of Erkenwald in the poem–no mention of his life outside of when he responds to the tomb. This is curious because it allows the poet to use Erkenwald as another character in the poem without, it seems, depending too heavily on historicizing him. He can transform him into a kind of exemplar, a kind of type, by making the character of Erkenwald not a proper "person" but a figure that will perform a similar function to a poet. As we will see, the people of the London of the poem become frustrated by their attempts to make history out of the

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[26] *Ibid,* l. -273-4.
[27] *Ibid*, l. -281-,282.
[28] Patrick Wormald, "Earconwald [St Earconwald, Erkenwald] (d. 693), abbot of Chertsey and bishop of the East Saxons." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 23. Oxford University Press. Date of access 26 Apr. 2023, <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8836>

past, to make it speak. Erkenwald, however, circumventing their established methods of history-making, of experience of words, of the marvelous, the wonderous, proves that past, even in its silence can be languaged and, thus, related to the present, performing an, ironically, similar function to what the poet does with him as a character.

The poet of Erkenwald is able to make the past an experience, and, in the following pages, I would like to chart out how exactly that happens–to explore the implications of that and how that process unfolds throughout the poem up until the waking of the corpse that occurs at the midway point of the poem. In *St. Erkenwald*, the past appears as silent and is given speech–or is interpreted as speaking, and the author of that speech is simultaneously the character of Erkenwald and God. What do I mean by this? That will become apparent later, but of note now is that this process of giving speech to the past, of giving interpretive capability to the past, places Erkenwald in an interesting position. In a sense, he acts as somewhat of a poet because he can make a seemingly, distant and unapproachable past experienceable. Because of my focus, I will not address the poem's second half, where the corpse addresses Erkenwald and the gathered audience. Rather, my focus will be on how the Erkenwald poet sets up an expectation of history, complicates it, then reconfigures that complication into a subtle continuation of their original view of history. I will explore how this is done through language and the figure of Erkenwald as a quasi-poet, a kind of rough stand-in for the figure of the poet. In doing so, I hope to show some of my surprise and curiosity at what the poem does and shows to me. I would also like to give a little caveat. *St. Erkenwald* is a difficult poem. It encompasses a variety of genres and moves between them in ways unique to it as a poem. Very few scholars

have talked about it, let alone written books about it. This discussion of the poem, then, is an attempt at getting at a particular point of interest for me in the poem.

What is at stake in a poem about a physically-preserved, talking corpse and a bishop whose miracle is that he causes the speech of said corpse? What is at stake here where the central event, the "miracle," facilitates communication with the past, where the miraculous is language's ability to explicate the past? Issues of interpretation and knowability of the past will figure into this investigation of the connection between the linguistic and the miraculous because of the way that the corpse-judge speaks about the past; the way that the people attempt to understand (or, explain) the appearance of the corpse; and the way that the poet himself talks about the past. Thus, these are three vantage points for thinking about the role of language in the poem as a vehicle of access to the past. We are considering who speaks, who speaks to whom, and how we might understand, through the miracle of St. Erkenwald, and the brief timeline given by the poet at the beginning of the poem, the way that not only "people," or perhaps, more particularly, people within the poem, speak, but the way that the expectedly inanimate, such as the dead or buildings or books, etc., speak. In considering these different ways that language comes "alive" in this medieval poem, it is necessary to focus on the one object in the poem that does not speak, or, perhaps, more complicatedly, does not speak explicitly: the tomb itself.

The inscription on the tomb is never decoded. It remains unknown. In a poem full of "speaking" things, the tomb is silent. Scholarship has often conflated the tomb and judge[29] as if

[29] Cynthia Turner Camp. "Spatial Memory, Historiographic Fantasy, and the Touch of the Past in 'St. Erkenwald.'" *New Literary History*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2013, pp. 471–91. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542570. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023., 51-52 and Eric Weiskott, and Philip Schwyzer."Exhumation and Ethnic Conflict: From *St. Erkenwald* to Spenser in Ireland." *Representations*, vol. 95, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1–26. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2006.95.1.1. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022., 5

they were both simultaneously asked to speak and, so, spoke. The conflation of the two ignores *St. Erkenwald's* distinct presentation of language. By conflating the two objects, scholarship ignores that this poem is about speaking things. In having an unreadable inscription, the tomb interrupts the poem. It interrupts a poem whose central event, whose central miracle, is the causing of speech. The interruption of the tomb deserves more attention for its "anti-" quality and how, in assuming the position of an "unspeaking" object in the poem, it says something about how the lack of language can access the past.

Reading *St. Erkenwald* for the first time, I became drawn to how the poem opens with a presentation of history in a serialized format. In the poem's opening lines, history is presented as a line going down from the time of Christ to the time of Erkenwald, where the poem's action occurs. History is presented in a linear, if not chronological, fashion. In presenting history in this serialized format, the poet achieves a strange effect whereby the reader is primed for a similar linear history throughout the poem. Yet, the poet does not satisfy this expectation; outside of the opening, the poet does not follow through with a linear, clear-of-potholes history. The history that follows the opening of the poem is complicated. The introduction of a tomb with an unknown inscription and, then, a body whose identity is unknown complicates the poem. In presenting these problems, or as I call them later, *interruptions*, the poet does something more interesting.

These interruptions are disorienting. They both upset history, as presented in the poem's opening lines. At the same time, they reconfigure how that history might progress when the way it was presented before the interruption no longer moves unimpeded. How might history

continue as history–as part of the present–when its way of being is upset? How does the poet reconfigure and reconstruct history in the wake of interruptions?

These interruptions for the *Erkenwald* poet introduce alternative modes of conceptualizing history in the face of historical lacunae. As if the poet were experiencing the past as a manuscript whose parts had somewhat been effaced by worms or eaten by the airs of age, the poet finds ways of reading those lacunae as somehow constitutive not of an interruption or accident, but as purposeful placements on the road to creating history. For the *Erkenwald* poet, objects or persons from the past who prove difficult to incorporate into a linear view of history necessitate a more complicated conception of history. That choice to view these interruptions in history as opportunities to create a more complicated presentation of history is curious because the vision of history it evinces is so antithetical to my expectation of how people of the medieval period experienced the past. I assumed that they would be used to lacunae. I assumed they would have just left those spaces blank and moved on. The *Erkenwald* poet does not do this. What effect does this have? What happens when a seemingly, blank space in history is not just filled in but reconstituted? What does it mean to say there are no holes in history–at least no holes as the *Erkenwald* poet sees it? What effect does that have on a reader who, primed by the expectation of the poem's opening lines, is looking for a serialized history–who, because of assumptions about how people of the past handled the past, is surprised?

The introduction of the tomb becomes a way that the poem seems to support the experience of history as something created through the present's experience of the past. When the tomb is introduced in the poem, it is introduced as a historical object: it is of the past. In not having a legible inscription, in being unremembered in any record, it locates itself as an object

that cannot be experienced in the present because of its inaccessibility. In being inaccessible, it sets the stage for an interruption: a moment where the possibility of experiencing the past is severed. This interruption occurs because the form of history described in the poem's opening lines precludes any such interruption. The history in the opening lines of the poem is a serialized one.

In the opening lines of *Erkenwald,* the poet emphasizes the chronological and, thus, thematic nearness of the Crucifixion to the events of the poem. The poet tells us that "no3t full long sythen… / Crist suffrid on crosse and Cristendome stablyd / Ther was a byschop in þat burghe."[30] In telling us that the poem's events are "no3t…long sythen " Erkenwald was in London,[31] the poet suggests that the events of the crucifixion and the story of the poem are related. In placing the life and death of Christ and the establishment of Christianity chronologically near the life of Erkenwald, the poet suggests that the poem's events must be read in relation to that past. The past and the later events of the poem are connected in time and theme. Thus, the past becomes a way of reading the present. It is not separate from the contemporary moment of the poem but interwoven with it. Indeed, as the poem's opening section continues, the poet furthers that view of the past as directly related to the present.

From "his [Erkenwald's] tyme" to "Hengyst dawes" down "[t]ill Saynt Austyn" and "Saxones tyme," the poet cables a series of names, of "tyme[s]" and "dawes," as ways of connecting the past to the present moment. History, for the poet, is presented as a series of events culminating, in the realm of the poem, with "his tyme." The poet, by presenting historical persons and their "dawes" and "tyme[s]" in a series, creates a history of "Englond." That history

[30] *Ibid,* l.1-2.
[31] *Ibid,* l. 1.

is created by linking persons and their eras, continuing what the poem's opening establishes with its beginning in the era of Christ's crucifixion. Thus, the poet connects each era and person by spatially drawing them near one another. In drawing these eras and persons spatially near each other, they are related thematically as Christ's time was related to Erkenwald's time. Though the persons and eras are somewhat jumbled chronologically, the poem speaks history as a series of linkages, connecting all these "Englond[s]" to each other, to the "dawes" of "Crist," establishing an "Englond" borne out of linkages. Therefore, implicit in this opening section of the poem is a view of history as connections between the past and present through the linguistic act of a poem. When the tomb appears, then, with its lack of connection, it is at odds with this poetic project.

The tomb is isolated from other eras and persons, yet it is introduced in a process of excavation that renders corporeal the series established in the opening lines of the poem. The introduction of the tomb lies on the other page of my edition–a full 25 lines from the end of the series at "Saxon tyme." Spatially, then, it is distant. Temporally, too, its origins are obscure even if its finding happens in Erkenwald's "tyme." The tomb's disconnection from the preceding series interrupts the poet's presentation of history as an unbroken chain to the present while extending the poet's view of the past as something related to the present. The tomb is introduced as unreadable and unrecognizable through language and, thus, unable to be incorporated into the present. If this tomb is unrecognizable, unreadable, and, thus, incorporable into the present, what does that say about history as the poet presents it? What is the role and efficacy of language concerning the past? How does the poet "resolve" that impasse? In Erkenwald's "miracle," we might imagine a kind of resolution–a way that language maintains its efficacy as a linker of the past to the present.

While it frustrates attempts to incorporate it into the present experience of Erkenwald's "tyme," the tomb also continues the poet's presentation of history as a series of linkages. While digging "depe into the erthe, / Thai [English workers] fountain fourmyt on a flore a ferly faire toumbe,"[32] workers digging toward the 'fundement,' towards the foundation of St. Paul's, discover the tomb. The digging occurs as part of a construction project on the cathedral, following references to the cathedral's pagan origins. "New Troie" became "London;"[33] the capital of pagan Britain became the capital of Christian Britain, just as the "temmple alder-grattyst," the "thrid temple…of Triapolitane"[34] became "Saynt Paule."[35] In presenting the digging as occurring after these references to the cathedral's pagan origins, the poet establishes spatial and thematic connections between the past and present. Thus, the project of linking the past to the present, as the poet performed in the opening series of the poem, continues. "Englond," particularized in "London," is further particularized in "Saynt Paule." The poet then establishes an expectation of that series announced in the earlier half of the poem. Stone and steeple speak through changing names the continuity of their subsisting frames. Thus, when we come to the tomb, the poet's establishment of an expectation of continuity with the present causes the tomb's unreadability to interrupt that series.

The initial collective response to the tomb is a reaction to the indecipherability of the embedded letters. The poet tells us that "...þe bordure [of the tomb was] enbelicit wyt bryȝt golde lettres, / Bot roynyshe were þe resones þat þer on row stoden. /Fulle verray were þe vigures þer auisyde hom mony, /Bot alle muset hit to mouthe and quat hit mene shulde."[36] After a florid

[32] *Ibid,* l. 45-6.
[33] *Ibid,* l. *25*.
[34] *Ibid,* l. 31.
[35] *Ibid,* l. 5.
[36] *Ibid,* l. 51-4.

description of the “ferly faire toumbe,” the poet’s attention turns to the tomb’s indecipherability, using the word “[b]ot” (“but”) to mark a turn, an interruption, to that florid description. The “[b]ot” acts as an interruption, a pivot from the object as an object to its readability. The poet announces through that “[b]ot,” the tomb’s interruption to the hitherto presentation of history as a series of connections. Thus, the movement of “mony clerkes” to articulate the letters on the tomb, to “brynge hom in wordes,” in the next two lines of the poem introduces what becomes the primary concern of the poem up until the introduction of the corpse: the articulation of the letters on that tomb.

In prioritizing articulating those letters, the poem continues its concern with a serialized presentation of history. The people of the poem do not pass by the unknown letters unconcerned. They want to know what they say. A mass exodus ensues to the tomb's location for the specific purpose of decoding those letters. The people do not react, “mony clerkes” do not “Þer besiet hom a-boute ” and “Mony hundrid hende men highide þider,” because of the tomb’s design. Rather, they go to “bryng hom in wordes.” They go to decode the tomb’s inscription because the tomb should be something the people of the poem can access. If they can access the past by decoding the tomb’s inscription, they can experience the past as something relevant to the present, as history. They expect, even if not initially, to access the past and, thus, continue the creation of history. When the poem introduces the corpse, it introduces another interruption to the presentation of a serialized history. Yet, it is one that the poem navigates curiously with Erkenwald’s miracle.

The initial encounter with the corpse is florid. The inside of the tomb is described as "gay, al with golde payntyd."[37] The corpse itself is "[a]raide on a riche wise in riall wedes."[38] The description takes up much of the encounter, giving way to a general reaction, a general murmur of the people. The poem tells us that they "spyr uschon othir / Quat body hit my3t be that buried wos ther, / How long had he ther layne, his lere so unchaungit, / And al his wede unwemmyd?"[39] While the description of the corpse, his "lere," his "wede," are the main things the gathered folk wonder at, their questioning is the center of this scene. As with the introduction of the tomb, the brief, ornate description gives way to concern, not with the object itself but a collective concern about where it fits within the collectively known serialized history. The people do not mutely stand there stunned at the corpse. They do not cease to speak. They ask questions about the corpse. Who is he? How long has he been there with his face and clothes seemingly, unaltered by time? When they meet this relic of the past, they attempt to ask themselves, their collective memory, not rhetorical questions but investigative questions that connect the object to the present. Again, much like the tomb itself, their concern with the corpse is not solely with it as an object but with how it fits into their understanding of the past as it relates to the present. By asking questions about the corpse, they show they are concerned with history's form and unsure of what to do with newly recovered parts of the past that interrupt that serial form.

When the "ylka weghe," or "everyman" speaks directly, he is not speaking about the beauty of the corpse's clothes, the ornateness of the interior of the tomb, or even the appearance of the corpse's flesh, he is speaking about a collective ability to link the past to the present. It is worth quoting the "ylka weghe" and the poet's response to him at some length:

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[37] *Ibid,* l. 75.
[38] *Ibid,* l. 77.
[39] *Ibid,* l. 92-5.

"Hit myȝt not be bot suche a mon in mynde stode longe;
He has ben kynge of þis kithe as couthely hit semes.
He lyes doluen þus depe hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say þat he hym sene hade."
Bot þat ilke note wos noght for nourne none couthe,
Noþir by title ne token ne by tale noþir
Þat euer wos breuyt in burghe ne in boke notyde,
Þat ever mynnyd suche a mon, more ne lasse.[40]

The "ylka weghe" begins with a concern with "mynde," that the corpse "myȝt" have been contained in collective memory. The words come out as if in some anxiety, as if after the interruption of the indecipherable letters of the tomb, this corpse must be remembered. How could someone so richly attired, recently deceased, not be remembered? He must have been a king, the everyman says. He must have been someone remembered. He must have been someone who, some sage, some wise person, remembers or learned about. If not, the wonder lies not in his dress, where he was found, and how he was found but in that lack of memory or record. The poet tells us that there is no record, not in any books, tales, or titles in any city. There is no connection between the corpse and the present. What is a "wonder" for the "ylka weghe" is that lack of connection to the present. The possibility that the past ceases to be serialized through a lack of memory and records serves as the poem's central concern regarding the corpse. As this concern is articulated in the voice of everyman and the poet, it highlights anxiety not with objects or places proper but with a connection through these objects to a sense of what the past and present

[40] *Ibid,* l. 96-106.

are. The word “wonder” here operates as an articulation of that anxiety. In a slightly different way, the word “wonder” describes what reached Erkenwald of the corpse.

The Middle English word “bodeworde” describes the news of the corpse that reaches Erkenwald. “Bodeworde" can be translated as a sense of “wonder.” The poet tells us that “Þe bodeworde to þe byschop was broght on a quile /Of þat buriede body, al þe bolde wonder”[41]. One of the definitions of the word *bodeworde*, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, is a “message, report; news.” This definition would seem to fit the sense of the passage. The news of the buried body in all its wonder came to the bishop after a while. However, the word has another relevant meaning: The *MED* lists one of the definitions of *boderworde* as “[a] message or annunciation (of God, an angel).” While the word has the sense of news or a report, it also carries the connotation of a kind of divine announcement, a divine message. If we read the word with this definition in mind, considering that the word “wonder” has, as one of its definitions, “a manifestation of divine greatness or benevolence,” then Erkenwald’s hearing about the corpse takes on a different kind of significance. When Erkenwald hears about the corpse, the poet embeds a word that carries connotations of the miraculous in that report. That this connotation is not present either in the introduction of the tomb (at least outside of what is implicit in its being found underneath a cathedral), in the discovery of the corpse, or the lack of record or memory of the corpse, characterizes the experience of Erkenwald as distinct. Erkenwald is the first character in a poem that begins with mentioning Christ to experience the past as something miraculous. Thus, while anxiety characterizes the word as the “ylka weghe,” uses it in his speech about being

[41] *Ibid,* l. 105.

unable to identify the corpse, a kind of God-consciousness permeates the word when it is used to describe Erkenwald's hearing about the corpse.

The two previous examples illustrate the way that experience of the past figured in the body of the corpse occurs through the language of wonder. The language of wonder is slightly modulated to suggest different experiences for Erkenwald and the "ylka weghe.". Both Erkenwald and the "ylka weghe" are considering the same object. The poet, or narrator, uses the word "wonder" in the speech of the "ylka weghe," which is directly followed by Erkenwald's introduction. Using the same word in both instances, the poet establishes a continuity between what the two are experiencing through the shared language used to describe that experience. However, the poet distinguishes between the two experiences by slightly modulating the language as it relates to the two figures. Thus, the silence of the tomb that seemed to interrupt the serialized view of history presented in the opening of the poem gives way to a continuity that is established through the word "wonder." "[W]onder" catalyzes relating the past to the present, by relating experience to experience.

Erkenwald is presented as a character who appears reluctant to relate his experience of the corpse to the talk he hears about it. However, the poet's presentation of him complicates Erkenwald's seeming orneriness. In the section before Erkenwald begins speaking to the corpse, he chastises the people gathered, but, more immediately, his behavior when he arrives in London is telling. Indeed, though hearing about the corpse through *boderworde*, he appears frustrated with the "many people who, with a mighty clamor, told him of the marvel" on his arrival in London.[42] He seems to storm into "his palais" after commanding "silence."[43] Thus, in his initial

[42] Christopher Cameron, *A Translation of the Middle English "St. Erkenwald,"*1993, unpublished MA thesis, Emporia State University, 71.
[43] Cameron, l. 115; and l. 71

response to meeting the people of London through whose talk he heard about the tomb, he is annoyed and hesitant to connect their experience of the corpse to his. The only one he speaks to is God to whom he asks to help him understand "'Þe mysterie of þis meruaile þat men opon wondres'."[44] While seeming to avoid or be frustrated by the people's reaction to the corpse, Erkenwald desires what the people's "clamor" indicates they desire too: to understand how this object from the past relates to the present.

When Erkenwald emerges from his palace, he explains the experience of the "wonder" and "marvel" of the corpse as something miraculous. The miraculous becomes a way that interruptions in the serialized presentation of time, as established in the poem's opening, can be understood. Thus, the interruption of the silence of the corpse, like the silence of the tomb, is not seen as something that frustrates a serialized experience of history but redefines those interruptions as something similar to bridges. Much as the word wonder is used to describe both Erkenwald and the "ylka weghe's" experience of the corpse and its lack of record, the definition of the same word is altered in both its uses. Likewise, the interruption of the "wonder[s]," the tomb's illegible inscription, and the unknown corpse remain interruptions to the presentation of history as outlined in the poem's opening. However, at the same time that they remain interruptions, they are also miracles.

Erkenwald is not using the word miraculous. Rather, Erkenwald is, more so, changing the definition of what I have been calling interruptions. Instead of viewing them as roadblocks in history marching forward from Christ on down, Erkenwald sees interruptions as moments wherein God has to intervene. They are not interruptions in the sense of places where we simply

[44] Burrow and Turville-Petre, l. 125.

cannot go forward but places for God to enter history. Thus, when Erkenwald chastises those gathered, he criticizes them not necessarily for their frustration with the interruption of the corpse's unknowability to their understanding of themselves but for their inability to read the interruption as an opportunity. Again, a "wonder" is an interruption. The serialized history the poet presents, in the beginning is stopped. In stopping, the poet necessitates the introduction of a miracle. So, when Erkenwald talks to the corpse, he is still looking at the corpse's unknowability as an interruption to the past as something experienced in a clean arc from Christ days on down, but, for him, as opposed to the rest of the people of London, it is, also, an opportunity for God to enter into history through the miraculous. I am unsure whether the miraculous is an act of God entering history or if the interruption invites God to intervene in history. However, a third possibility is worth exploring through Erkenwald's response to the dean of the cathedral's description of the corpse and tomb and their lack of record of either. It is worth quoting what Erkenwald says at length. He tells them:

> 'Þou says soþe,' quod þe segge þat sacrid was byschop,
> 'Hit is mervaile to men, þat mounties to litell
> Toward þe providens of þe prince þat paradis weldes,
> Quen hym luste to unlouke þe leste of his myȝtes.
> Bot quen matyd is monnes myȝt and his mynde passyd,
> And al his resons are torent and redeles he stondes,
> Þen lettes hit hym ful litell to louse wyt a fynger
> Þat all þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never.
> Þereas creatures crafte of counsell oute swarves,

Þe comforth of þe creatore byhoves þe cure take.

And so do we now oure dede, devyne we no fyrre;

To seche þe soth at ourselfe ȝee se þer no bote;

Bot glow we all opon Godde and his grace aske,

Þat careles is of counsell and comforthe to sende,

And þat in fastynge of ȝour faith and of fyne bileve.

I shal avay ȝow so verrayly of vertues his

Þat ȝe may leve upon long þat he is lord myȝty

And fayne ȝour talent to fulfille if ȝe hym frende leves.'[45]

Erkenwald acknowledges the occurrence as a "mervaile," or, at least, he recognizes that the word used by the "dene" is "mervaile." However, Erkenwald evacuates the word of any meaning because he views it as limited. It amounts to little, he says, when compared to what God, the prince of paradise, wields. In saying this, Erkenwald fills what he had evacuated. In evacuating the marvelous of its marvelousness, by saying that it amounts to little compared to what God wields, Erkenwald is filling the marvelous with something else. He is filling the marvelous with God. For, when he says that "Þereas creatures crafte of counsell oute swarves, / Þe comforth of þe creatore byhoves þe cure take," he is saying that where the people of London have been limited in their "crafte," in their ability to connect the past as embodied in the corpse and the tomb to the present, "þe creatore byhoves þe cure take," and the "cure," as Erkenwald presents it, is to "leve" ("believe") in that figure who wakes up corpses that historical records and chronicles had been unable to access.

[45] *Ibid,* l. 159-76.

The theological and historical are linked together in Erkenwald's reconfiguration of the meaning of the tomb and, when the tomb is opened, the corpse's silence and lack of historical record. Erkenwald utilizes the theological as a bridge between the past and present. He does so through the implications of the words "wonder" and "mervaile." In doing so, he connects the past to the present as the poet did in the poem's opening lines. Thus, when the people within the poem open the tomb, they find not a new history but history primed for creation, a past that awaits Erkenwald's reconfiguration. Erkenwald's appearance and the finding of a corpse in a holy place has precedents in medieval literature, though the end is usually different than in Erkenwald.

Medieval readers were primed for the miraculous discovery of corpses through the *inventiones* genre. As Philip Schwyzer describes, the *inventiones* were hagiographical literature about discovering a saint's miraculously preserved remains.[46] Just as the corpse's sudden appearance has some precedents in medieval literature, the inscription, too, can be identified with an element of medieval English life: runes. As Erik Weiskott writes, "The inscription [on the tomb] is 'all runes' to the seventh-century Londoners [within the poem], just as Anglo-Saxon runes would be inscrutable to late medieval Englishmen."[47] What Schywzer and Weiskott acknowledge the existence of language and expectation around these historical artifacts in medieval England. The *inventiones*, in addition to literally applying to the invention of a saint through the recovery of their remains, also constituted a kind of medieval grammar for understanding the who and why of what they dug up. What this means, then, is that there was precedent for what happened in *Erkenwald*. History as interrupted, too, has precedents in

[46] *Ibid.*, 12
[47] Weiskott.

medieval literature. This point is particularly notable when considering that Erkenwald is supposed to occur during the 600s. The poem takes place shortly after the Saxon invasion,[48,,] thus being set in a time in which the island's people would already be primed for understanding the island as something mysterious, something containing aspects they would not have been familiar with, having arrived, relatively, recently.

So, when scholars such as Schwyzer argue that "the relationship between the Britons and Saxons has been far from clarified [at the end of the opening of the poem, that t]his will be a poem about making repairs, and also about making reparations," [49] it rings false. The relationship is clarified in the poem's opening lines by both the serialized description mentioned previously and the precedents in the *inventiones* genre of the island as a place rife with undiscovered aspects of the past set to be turned into the experience of history. The relationship is clear. For, when the Saxons are mentioned, theirs is a "tyme" among "tyme[s]." They are not *not* listed. They are not denied as taking part in the history of England. They are mentioned in the same stanza and opening page as "Saynt Austyn" and "Crist," linking the Saxons to a pre-England and an England happening, an England in transition.

Schyzer's contention that "very recent, very local conflicts'" bubble beneath the fluid surface of the poem's opening misunderstands what the opening of the poem is doing. It is not merely listing a series of events for the sake of listing them. It does not list a series of military victories, conquests, or losses. The opening of the poem is weaving history. The poem's opening

[48] The term "invasion" is acknowledged as, perhaps, not exactly accurate. As Schywzer puts it, "what seems likeliest [in regard to Anglo-Saxon movement to England] is that some limited immigration from overseas coincided with or triggered the more widespread adoption of Germanic customs by local peoples. The 'invaders' may have consisted of no more than a handful of culturally charismatic war-leaders. Anglicization may have been a largely voluntary and opportunistic response to the perceived success of Germanic societies in the North Atlantic world." (3)
[49] Schwyzer., 4.

conceives history as the experience of the past by those in the present. The poet is connecting these past events in such a way as to give them temporal and thematic nearness. That is the opposite of conflict. The poet orders events and persons through language, espousing a connected vision of seemingly disparate parts as an experience of the past. For the poet, history is an active, engaged joining of persons and events through claiming temporal, spatial, and thematic connection. That is the poet's England. Schywzer is somewhat correct that the poem "undermines progressive history, moving from paganism to Christianity, from the Britons to the English…." Yet, it does this later in the introduction of the tomb and, as I argued, more as a rhetorical device than as an absolute. The poem's history is very much progressive in the sense that it is conceived as connected. Yet, history has its interruptions. In that sense, it is not progressive. It alternates. That holds even if we only focus on the opening lines and the dialogue with the corpse. History is presented as a linguistic expression of the past by the present, speaking back and forward into time, undermining and, yet, confirming a sense of progressive history. In the poet's complication of progress, in his prioritizing history as a linguistic experience, the poet is getting at a more complicated view of history than either solely progressive or regressive. History is what the present hears of the past. And the present always hears something, even the dead's speech. Silence, then, is surprising. Silence is surprising because the poem, in composing history, can always opt to speak. Why choose silence? What is to be done with the presence of the silent object, the silent figure? What is to be done with a tomb that does not talk? Can it be made to speak after it is written without a voice? Or does it already have a voice–low, murmuring, but a voice? What does silence in a poem where even corpses speak say? What does it say that even the dead can't articulate? In that interruption to

history's articulation, the poet, through the figure of Erkenwald, reconfigures what it means for the past to speak. The "wonder" of silence becomes a moment of speech rather than silence as an absence.

God, for Erkenwald, becomes a way of filling the silence of a past that does not speak.

What the dean of the cathedral and the everyman before him refer to as marvels are, in Erkenwald's words, moments where "..lettes hit hym ful litell to louse wyt a fynger / Þat all þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never." Erkenwald sees these moments as places where God lets "louse wyt a fynger" what " all þe hondes under heven halde myȝt never" and what left the people of the "ylka weghe" in a condition where "al his resons are torent and redeles he stondes." In those moments, Erkenwalds sees God as that joint by which silent objects of the past are connected to the present, thus allowing for the creation of history. Where a silent tomb had stood, where an indecipherable corpse had lain, where the past proved out of linear order to the present–where a void lay as the experience of Erkenwald and his fellows with those objects of the past, God fills that void much as the series itself fills history. Where history is the connection of the past to the present through an experience of past "things," Erkenwald reimagines the silence of objects in the past that refuse connection through a religious lens. This echoes the poem's opening section, where the past is serialized. It echoes the opening section and moves it in a different direction. Again, the "crafte" of people is what Erkenwald is calling limited–that "crafte" can be identified as people's ability to figure out, as the notes to the poem put it, "solution[s]" to the problems of the world. In the limit of people's "crafte," is that silence. That silence demands, according to Erkenwald, that people not use their "crafte" any further but fill the silence with God through "grace."

Through Erkenwald's reorientation of how to experience the past, Erkenwald, in a sense, continues the view of history as a serialized thing established in the early half of the poem while simultaneously reorienting what that serializing looks like. History is not a clean series. Its continuities have interruptions. Those interruptions are, thus, designated as "mervailes," yes, or "wonders," but these terms are, by Erkenwald, evacuated of their significance. They are not necessarily, interruptions to history as a series. Instead, what they are, are moments to acknowledge God. Erkenwald establishes a view of history that requires one to read God into the past's interruptions.

In reading God into these interruptions, history is created, and the past is connected to the present. In *Erkenwald*, even with interruptions, the past is connected to the present by redefining the word "mervaile" and making the corpse speak through prayer. History, then, becomes a way that the writer of Erkenwald establishes history as a series and its silences not as silences, not as interruptions to the historical project, but as moments to fill the void with God.

In the people's collective inability to incorporate their experience of the corpse and the tomb into the linear history established in the poem's initial lines, the poem itself offers a view of history prone to frustration. The introduction of Erkenwald and his reorientation of history away from the books and records that the people of the poem use to experience history, to make history speak, proves the central shift of the poem. While Erkenwald's miracle is getting a corpse to talk, the most significant thing he does in the poem is to create a new way of considering the definition of the marvelous. He thus performs an incredible feat of destabilizing the meaning of the marvelous as something that interrupts history and, instead, signifying it as something that

creates a continuity between the past and the present by describing that experience of the interruption as filled with God's handiwork.

By the midway point of the poem, both the corpse and tomb have been incorporated into history. Both objects have become primed for "negotiating…competing…temporal jurisdictions i.e., the ways in which different histories demand to be understood."[50] While for Hartmann and Johnston history is maybe better understood as "the pasts our texts look back to and the temporalities they construct,"[51] I am using history here to mean the past as it is experienced in the contemporary moment rather than, if I understand their definition correctly, as some sort of disjunction between the two. The history the poet gives us is one of an experience of the past rather than a presentation of the past it was, or, as Philip Schwyzer argues, "the poet imagines seventh-century Saxons might [imagine the past.]"[52] Both the corpse and tomb have become ways not of halting history but of "negotiating" through the "temporal jurisdictions" between the past and present. As the Erkenwald poet shows us, these become points where the past must be given a new frame for experience and history.

For the poet of *Erkenwald*, history becomes a way of describing an experience of the past. In presenting history as such, the poet can introduce the figure of Erkenwald as someone who, like a poet, creates an experience of the past. That Erkenwald does this through language is mainly what ties him to the figure of the poet proper. Because of the poem's plot and narrative, we see the poet's presence less, and we experience the poet as a maker less. The poet has a more significant presence in the opening section and in the choice of language to detail Erkenwald's

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[50] Jan-Peer Hartmann and Andrew James Johnston, ed. *Material Remains: Reading the Past in Medieval and Early Modern British Literature*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2021), 9.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] Schwyzer, 6

encounter with and reconfiguration of the wondrous. However, this leads me to ask, what would that experience of history look like if the poet had more of a presence? What would history look like if the poet was a character rather than a narrator or figure setting the pieces on a proverbial board? What would the poet look like as someone more actively entwined with and integrated with the poem's narrative? While the poet's presence is more apparent in the poem's opening lines, that presence dissipates as other characters begin to enter the poem. In the following section, however, we will look at Old English poems that will more directly place the poet as the one mediating the experience of the poet's past by the poet's presence. In *The Ruin*, there are no other characters. There are characters in *The Dream of the Rood*, but something more interesting happens with the characters presented in *The Dream of the Rood*. In how the poet handles these characters and the poem's situation, generally, the poet's view of himself takes a fascinating turn. Of particular note will be how the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* handles this situation because of that poem's analogs with the theme of the miraculous and God's imposition on history.

Chapter 2: *Reading Ruins and Roods*: The Poets of *The Dream of the Rood* and *Ruin* as Historians

The second section of this project considers two Old English poems, known by their modern titles, The Ruin and The Dream of the Rood. Each poem survives in a single copy. The Ruin survives in the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Chapter Library, MS 3501), dated to the tenth century, and The Dream of the Rood survives in the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare di Vercelli, MS CXVII), also dated to the tenth century. *The Ruin* is a description of the Roman ruin, assumed to be the ruins of the city of Bath.[53] The poet is unknown. The single copy of the poem contains lacunae, places where the manuscript is illegible. In *The Dream of the Rood,* the poem begins with the poet having a dream vision of some heavenly realm. In that realm, the poet encounters a tree. That tree, then, speaks, describing its "life" as a tree that was cut down to become the cross on which Christ is said to have been crucified. The *rood* tells the poet about the experience of being the site of Christ's crucifixion. After it describes the crucifixion, the *rood* launches into a theological description of its role in salvific history. The poem culminates in the poet's desire to return to the heavenly realm at death.

The Ruin centers on the relationship of the ruin described to its former inhabitants. The ruin is described in its significance to its former inhabitants–that is, the poem seems to explore the ruin as a site of one-time human activity. Why is this of interest? Because objects such as the stones used to build the ruin carry an expectation of inertness, at least insofar as I imagine them. Instead, the structure that we expect to be inert is described as charged with human activity–charged in the sense of holding some kind of memory of the activity that the poet's

[53] *Alexander, 83*

seeing unlocks. In doing so, in presenting the ruin as charged with human activity, the poem performs a vision of the past predicated on what I will call "haunting."While ghosts do not show up in this poem, milling about the structure of the ruin, a shadow of past activity, of a past life, is drawn out of the structure by the poet and presented in the way the poem links the ruin to its former inhabitants, as though they were present.

The poet does not sharply distinguish the description of the ruin, described as physically present before the poet, and the shadows borne of his imagination that haunt the ruin. Instead, the poet presents the structure and activity of its former inhabitants as existing within the same space–in the poem itself. The poem does not merely enact a scene of remembering but enacts an experience of reality as simultaneously informed by the past through/with the objects of the present. That experience which the poet presents is performed in the space of a poem. What are the implications of the experience of the past which the poet performs and that the poet's experience is done within the frame of a poem? What is being called to by the poet of *The Ruin* is poetry's specific capacity to present to us the world's hauntedness. *The Ruin* gives us a world haunted by human activity, leaving no thing "just itself." The poet imbues the stones of the ruin with the activities of those who formerly inhabited it–so, while the stone itself does not speak, it becomes a location for considering our relationship to human activity in the world.

In *The Dream of the Rood*, something similar happens to what occurs in *The Ruin* but is altered by the direct speech of an object–that is, the object of the "Rood," or the cross on which Christ was crucified. If, in *The Ruin*, we are given a world whose objects are "haunted" in the subtlest sense of that word, in *The Dream of the Rood*, we are given a world no less haunted but, in fact, considerably affected by that haunting. While the poet of *The Ruin* draws our attention to

the human activity embedded in the building blocks (pun intended) of the world, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* is almost overwhelmed by that implication of activity in the world. Alternatively, rather, it is the other way around. The poet of *The Dream of the Rood* may be overwhelming the world with that activity in presenting objects as directly capable of speech and, by extension, capable of experience. Whether the poet is overwhelmed or overwhelming, the result is the same: an object capable of human activity and experience.

Both the ruin and the Rood are presented as, in some way, being capable of explicating the experience of human activity in the world because they are affected by the experience of human activity in the world (that is, a ruin built to house humans, a rood used to carry Christ). The difference between the two poems is not just in the directness of how that hauntedness is presented to us but in what both poems seem to say about the poet's function and poetry proper in explaining the world's hauntedness. In *The Ruin,* in its fragmented meditation on the bones of a structure, in its recalling the former lives lived in the body of that structure, and in the poet's subtle weaving of his experience of the ruin into the experience of its past inhabitants, the poet implies his own presence. That the world of the poem, the Roman ruin long-abandoned and dilapidated, carries it with the activity of others suggests that the poem, like the ruin, becomes a site charged with human activity,--that is, the activity of a poet. The poet's presence is implied in the place of the ruin. The poet speaks from the space of the poem; his presence, in a sense, is implied in the space of the poem by the implication of human activity in the ruin. The poem itself, then, does what it is describing to us in charging itself with human activity, with the activity of the poem. *The Dream of the Rood*, on the other hand, gives us not a performance of implication but the performance of the world's hauntedness. The poet in *The Dream of the Rood*

is present from the beginning of the poem, speaking directly to the reader and, seemingly, with us being spoken to by the object. For the poet of *The Dream of the Rood*, there is no implication of the world's, and thus the poem's, hauntedness, but a direct presentation of the presence of the poet–a presentation that caused me to use the word "overwhelming" earlier because the poet's experience of the ruin affects the form of the poem itself. Thus, both poets are concerned with how the past haunts the world.

The two poets take different approaches to presenting that hauntedness. What are the effects of the two ways these poets present the experience of the world as charged by human activity? What is the significance of those presentations as performed in a poetic space? What is the significance of a poem as a site for this experience? Is there any sense in the poems of what this experience looks like outside of poetry? What might the poetics of a haunted world mean outside of poetry? In *The Ruin*, the first word used to describe the structure, specifically its *weall-stán*, the stones which make up its "walls" or "ramparts," is *wrætlic*, translated, variously, as "well-wrought" or "splendid."[54] The word means "wondrous, curious, elegant, beautiful."[55] The ruin is initially introduced to us as tied to human activity. The first word used directs us to a perception–it is wondrous, curious, or elegant. It is something that, from the opening, we are directed to view the titular ruin as something experienced. Throughout the poem's beginning, various ruined structures are described, in varying states of disrepair, as created objects. Roofs are "ruined" or "fallen," towers are "fallen" or "tumbled," and a "barred gate" is "broken." All of these objects—roofs, towers, and gates—function in relation to human activities. Indeed, they

[54] Alexander, 2; and Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse: Selected with an Introduction and a Parallel Verse Translation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 26.
[55] "wræt-líc": *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller et al., Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014, https://bosworthtoller.com/36593

are products of human activity. The roof was a shelter, the tower's defensive posts, and gates entrances into the *burgstede*, into the city. The poem presents the ruin as a site of human activity by cataloging the states of the objects of the ruin. Even in its disrepair, human activity suggests itself in the edifice of these made things.

Indeed, the presence of the human is given explicitly when the poem tells us that "[e]arthgrip holds" the "master-builders,"[56] *waldend wyrhtan*, setting up a contrast: while "[w]all stood /…kings fell often…."[57] The structure has remained while people have not, "gone, long gone, / [held] fast in gravesgrasp."[58] Or: This contrast sets up two slightly different points. One is that this description of the fate of the "master-builders" separates human activity from the poem's subject. Though that past activity has been implicit until now, this introduction of the human authors of the ruin, of their demise and, thus, lack of presence in the ruin, separates the object of the ruin from its human builders. The poem's separation of humans by death and, thus, their activity from the ruin differs from the contrasts between the longevity of structures, of stone, and the relatively brief lives of humans. The structures still hold, though, "[t]orn and collapsed, and eaten up by age."[59] Humans have not remained. The human beings lie in the graves, therefore having ceased activity within the ruin.

Paradoxically, though, the result of their activity, however, has not ceased, and, by extension, their activity has, in a sense, not ceased. A tension arises between that activity, that humans built and lived in these structures, and its results–that is, the buildings themselves remain as the consequence of humans having built them to live in. Thus, while, on the one hand, the

[56] Alexander, 2; and Hamer, 27
[57] Alexander, 2.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] Hamer, 27.

poem seems to move toward a contrast between the ruin and its human builders, the human builders haunt the whole structure. The poem pulses with that activity in the names of the parts of the ruin and in that opening word that announces to the reader that, though these people have long since passed away, their work still elicits wonder and still is experienced. That experience of wonder becomes important later in the poem, but briefly, it is worthwhile to read the poem's implications as *just* about the end of human life and the remains of ruins.

If the poem is read as a kind of juxtaposition of humans and stone, then it becomes a site of consideration for the fleetingness of human life and the steadfastness of things. Human activity, then, functions similarly to the stones themselves. We are called to consider how this structure as a thing made by humans, by human activity, calls to mind the fleetingness of human activity–that is, while the structures remain, the activity that these sites were created to house has ceased. Death and silence pace the open halls of the ruin. The ruin, then, is a kind of memorial-site wherein human activity can be remembered. It is not experienced. It is remembered, in the sense that the viewer of the ruin, such as the poet, is not able to access anything of the past. They can merely think about how the ruin was a home and hall and is now no longer, therefore calling to mind life's fleetingness. The ruin, in this configuration, is something separate from the activity that engendered it because the presence of human beings is only implied through the presence of the objects they left behind. One walks through the halls of the ruin and can only consider the dead, unable to consider the past except as an implication of what were once towers and roofs. If the poem had ended there, that sharp distinction would have remained, though tense. However, something more interesting occurs in the second half of the

poem when the poet does not merely tell us that human beings inhabited the ruins and died, but tells us how that time was experienced.

After a lacunae, the creation of the structures that became the ruin is described. “The heart inspired,” or “mood quickened mind,”[60] of someone “*gebond / weallwalan wirum wundrum togædre,*”[61] “[w]ondrously linked the framework [of the building] with iron bonds.”[62] Though the words *wundrum* and *wrætlic* are different, their meanings echo each other, announcing a further complication of the tension between the brief lives of the humans who built the structures and the longevity of the structures. By focusing directly on the act of the structure's creation, designating that creation as “wondrous,” the poem announces a return to the structure as an experienced thing that the poem opened with. The createdness of the structure as made implicit in the names of its parts, its roofs, its towers, is, here, turned towards not the memorialization of the dead, not a defaulting , even, toward the ruin’s decay as the only means of approaching the past, but to the experience of the ruin as a site of human activity.

“Wonder” imbues the ruin of the poem with activity. While human activity is implicit in a structure composed of “roofs” and “towers,” of created, purposeful things, the poet places themselves into that activity, directly, through the use of the word “wonder” to describe a past event he couldn’t have witnessed. By placing themselves within that past event, he links the past with its “wondrous” creation to the present where the poet is looking on the “wondrous” walls, drawing together the experience of the activity of the creation of the ruin as a structure and the experience of the ruin as a ruin. By designating the ruin and its creation as “wondrous,” the human activity implied in “roofs” and “towers” is brought to the present within the space of the

[60] Alexander, 2.
[61] Hamer, 26.
[62] *Ibid*, 27.

poem. From first seeing its stones as "wondrous, to considering its parts, to considering its creation, to the designation of its creation as "wondrous," by saying that it was caused by a *mod monade*,[63] a mind "inspired," much as a poet is "inspired," the poem moves from description to expression. The poem moves to the ruin as a thing experienced. The poem is no longer dealing with the implication of human activity in things but the experience of human activity in things. In doing so, human activity and the ruin are joined together and experienced as bound together, much like the "iron bonds" of the building with the word "wondrous."

In making the ruin into a thing experienced rather than merely, a collection of memorial sites, the poem places the human activity of the ruin's creation, of the lives lived within the ruin, within the ruin as the poet is seeing it. The poet, thus, through experience draws human activity out of the past and places it as present in the ruin, as haunting the ruin, rather than, merely, recalled by the structure–as if human activity were outside of the ruin and then imposed on it. Hauntedness, in this sense, means that the activity of people is not just suggested by the ruin, but experienced in seeing the ruin, is experienced with the ruin. In human activity being experienced in the ruin, that activity is not imposed upon the ruin but bound up with the experience of the ruin as a ruin. Implied in the word "ruin" is a site of human activity, which already charges one's experience of the structure. Further, with the poet's use of "wondrous," the poem itself connects the experience of human activity of viewing the ruin, of looking at it, to the creation of the ruin, to the human activity by which the ruin was made. Thus, embedded in the ruin is the experience of human activity whether or not it is called up directly by the poet.

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[63] *Ibid*, 26. *Monade*, however, is Hamer's reconstruction of a lacunae at *mod mo…* Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to pursue the implications of his reconstruction.

The ruin is not an inert object with a memory or past planted onto it, but a participator in the calling up that human activity, because, as the poet's turn tells us, explicit in its being built is its being created at some point, in its being a thing made and, thus, in a sense, a continual testimony to that activity. The ruin, then, ceases to be, merely, a memorial for past human activity but becomes a site that calls up its own creation, thus bringing that activity to the present. What are the implications of this, of the ruin as a site of past and present human experience? What are the implications of having a poem explicate this relationship for us? The importance of this may lie in the presence of the poet, in the activity of the poem as poem, and in the space of the poem.

We do not have a named poet. We have a poet who has, assumedly, stumbled upon what are generally assumed to be the Roman ruins of the city of Bath[64]. We do not, necessarily, know where the poetic voice is coming from. Nevertheless, the poem does something interesting that connects it in its very structure to these same ruins that it's describing. The poet does not directly enter into the poem. There is no "I," either ventriloquized or actual. There is no movement around or through the structure of the ruin. In fact, the poetic voice may be imagined to be standing still, this whole enterprise one of the mind. Nevertheless, the poem moves. The voice of the poem moves. It moves first from the experience of the ruin. It describes the ruin as "wondrous" and, in doing so, tells us, the readers, the experience of one viewing the ruin. There is no "I" telling us how he might feel, but the description operates to describe the experience of a general viewer, a general "I" implicit in the poem. Thus, the adjectives and descriptions used in the poem are no more absolute than if the poet had described an action he took in the poem.

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[64] Alexander, 1.

The ruin's descriptions operate as experiential pathways by which the reader simultaneously accesses the ruin and the past. This occurs not just through the use of the word "wondrous" that I highlighted earlier but through the description of the ruin before it was a ruin as "[b]right," of a former inhabitant as "mood-glad," and of formerly peopled halls as filled with "loud cheerfulness." On a somewhat obvious level, these descriptions serve to bring to mind the experience of the ruin not as a ruin but a place where humans lived. At the same time, these descriptions perform a similar function to "wondrous." They tell us about the experience of the ruin. By using these descriptions of people who no longer inhabit the ruin, people who would not have been skipping through the overgrown stone streets of the ruin, we are being guided toward an experience of the past.

The description of the past that the poem outlines is one that comes most clearly in the poet's use of the two words translated as "wondrous," but they all are embedded in these other descriptions of the past. They are embedded in the descriptions of the present that lead us to the descriptions of the present. This poem moves not in space, necessarily, but in time. In moving in time, the poem collapses the experience of the past and present into a single expression as depicted in the object of a poem. The experiences of those past and present are presented to the reader in a single object–in the poem. In the same way, the ruin is an "object," for lack of a better word, that presents all of the aforementioned experiences. Both the poem and the ruin, then, are sites of human activity which, also, serve as points of experience for that activity. We are, like the poet, primed to experience the past and present simultaneously.

Whether we are talking about defensive towers or the intricacies of a hot water system, the function of the objects in the poem are not in what they tell us about Roman-era Bath, but in

the experience that they draw out. Experience takes precedence in the poem. In the ruin as a site of experience, the poet uses the ruin as a way to draw the past out of the past into the present, much as the poet's Old English vocabulary does not "accurately" describe" Roman Britain anymore than Shakespeare's Rome is Rome. The past described is very much a past that is present.

Whether we are talking about the "wrights," the "master-builders" who constructed the things that made the ruin, or those men who would feast in the ruins "many mead-halls… // flushed with wine-pride,"[65] the main concern of the poem is how this past experience can be articulated to the poet's contemporaries. In its function it is telling us something about its human inhabitants, yes, but it is telling us something more pivotal: the poem is asking how do we talk to/with the past? How does poetry take up this task? How does poetry use experience to perform this task? Is the poem successful? These are open questions that the poem calls up much as the ruins calls up its own creation. As the ruin is haunted by presences, by activity, so, too, is the poem haunted by its createdness, by the activity of being a poem attempting to reconstruct the experience of the past.

In *The Dream of the Rood,* the subtlety of *The Ruin* is gone and both the poet and the object speak directly. The poem opens with the word *Hwæt,* variously translated as "listen," "lo," or "behold,"[66] which calls attention to the presence of a poet. Rather than beginning with a description as *The Ruin* begins, implying through an adjective the presence of a poet, the presence of a voice articulating an experience, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* begins by announcing his presence.

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[65] Alexander, 2.

[66] "hwæt": *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller et al., Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014, https://bosworthtoller.com/20051

In beginning the poem with an interjection that both calls attention to the poet and commands the reader, we are, thus, primed for when the poet introduces themselves fully as an "I." "Hwæt, iċ swefna cyst secgan wylle, / hwæt mē ġemǣtte..,"[67] the poet says, "Hear while I tell about the best of dreams / Which came to me…,"[68] telling us that what we are about to be told is a dream–specifically, the dream of the poem's "I." This opening sets the poet as both an explicator and an experiencer. He tells us to "listen," In telling us to listen, he is marking off the tale he is about to tell as a tale while simultaneously inviting us into that experience by telling us to "listen." Thus, in these opening lines of the poem, the poet simultaneously announces the presence of both a reader and a poet through the interjection *Hwæt* and the announcement that we are about to be told a dream that "came" to the poet. Using that interjection and telling the reader of the poem's origin in the poet's dream, the reader is invited to experience another individual's experience. The poem positions the reader as two individuals, two persons, creating a dynamic that is very different from the dynamic the poet establishes in *The Ruin*.

The opening word *Hwæt* functions in a distinct way from the word *wrætlic* from *The Ruin*. It allows the poet to establish an "I" in a much sharper way than the poet of *The Ruin* while, at the same time, announcing that what we are dealing with is an experience. We learn that what we are hearing is coming from one voice, from an "I," so that, as the poem proceeds with a heavenly description of the dream world of the poet, we are not necessarily, surprised but primed by the "I" to see these descriptions as unified by the poet's "I." This is distinct from *The Ruin's* relatively impersonal description that is unified by the focus on a single structure. Thus, when

[67] Hamer, 160.
[68] *Ibid*, 161.

the poet reaches the image of the "[h]ǣlendes trēow,"[69] the "saviour's tree,"[70] which speaks, introducing the second half of the poem, we view its speech not as an interruption but a continuation of that poetic "I." The *rood* speaking is not the "I," but because of the force of the poet's personality, the *rood* speaks more directly, an extension of the poetic voice. Indeed, that it is that "I" "[g]rieving in spirit for a long, long while"[71] that immediately precedes the *rood's* speech furthers this point. It is as though "grieving," that emotional experience at the "saviour's tree," draws out of the poet the *rood's* speech. Compared to the stones that do not say anything directly, speaking by implication, by what they draw out of the poet of *The Ruin* rather than the other way around, we are brought into a radically different relation to experience.

In the *rood*'s description of its experience of the crucifixion, in the particular language used to highlight the emotional experience of the crucifixion, the *rood* is imbued with an emotional capacity hinting at its connection to its origin in the poetic poet's voice. In its opening speech, the *rood* declares that "iċ þæt ġȳta ġeman,"[72] telling us that "I remember it still."[73] The word *ġeman*, translated as "remember," also carries with it the connotation of "to think of,"[74] hinting at not just a recollection of a past event but the ability to dwell on and consider the said event. Thus, in this opening line of the poem, the *rood* establishes itself not as an unconscious object upon which an experience, namely the crucifixion, happens, merely recalling that other's experience, but an actor who, in retelling the tale, also hints at the emotional experience of that event because it experienced the event. The *rood* is telling us not just what happened in the

[69] *Ibid*, 162.
[70] *Ibid,* 161.
[71] *Ibid,* 163.
[72] *Ibid*, 162.
[73] *Ibid,* 163.
[74] "ge-man": *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, edited by Thomas Northcote Toller et al., Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2014, https://bosworthtoller.com/15155

crucifixion of Christ but how it experienced the event of the crucifixion. In that distinction, the *rood*'s opening lines echo the poem's opening lines. As the poet invites us to "listen," to tune our ears to an experience, to "the best of dreams," the *rood* tells us to tune our ears not just to a recollection but to the experience of an emotional event. Both the poet of the poem and the *rood* announce to us that we are not just hearing a description of an event or an object. We are invited into an experience.

Indeed, when the *rood* tells us that it "trembled" at the "embrace" of Christ," that they, the ones who crucified Christ, "reviled us both together,"[75] and that, after Christ had been taken off the *rood,* that the *rood* "remained there, weeping"[76] with the *we* who "made a sepulcher for him,"[77] what these descriptions tell us is that the *rood* was not a passive viewer of the crucifixion but a participant in the experience of the crucifixion. What the *rood* hinted at in describing the tale of the crucifixion as something *ġeman,* something "remembered," something "thought about," is expressed in the naked language of a body trembling at another body's embrace, of a body mocked with another body, and of a body "weeping. The *rood* directly links its experience of the crucifixion to the emotional experience of a person in the event of the crucifixion.

As hinted above, the *rood* is not even a contemporary spectator of the event, but one as intimate as could be imagined–the *rood* is the cross on which Christ was crucified, directly placing itself as an emotional intimate in the moment of the crucifixion. Through the voice of the rood, this intimacy enables the poet to do something extraordinary: the poet links his contemporary experience to a past experience through the use of an object. The poet links himself to the voice of the *rood* by creating a unified sense of a poetic voice by establishing a

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[75] Hammer, 163.
[76] *Ibid*, 167.
[77] *Ibid*, 167.

strong poetic "I" early in the poem. Thus, when the poet moves to the voice of the *rood*, we know that we are, in a sense, also dealing with the poet's voice. So, when the *rood* identifies itself so intimately with the crucifixion, with the experience of Christ on the cross, we know that the poet, too, is also identifying with that experience. In doing so, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* moves much further than the poet of *The Ruin*. Experience of the past, for the former, becomes something directly apprehended. There is no sense of implication here. The poet directly experiences the past.

The poet presents his experience of the past through the object of the *rood* to further that experience of the past. The poet could have presented himself as someone thrown back into the past. As if a time machine had thrown him out of his own time and left them in the past. The poet could have stood by the cross, becoming another witness to the crucifixion. The poet does not do this. Rather, extraordinarily, the poet locates himself within the most intimate place of that event–they become the cross on which the event took place. In doing so, the poet can achieve an experience of the past that, otherwise, he could not have achieved as a spectator. However, even in the *rood*'s identification with bodies other than the body of Christ, he draws themselves deeper into the experience of the moment.

Indeed, the *rood* "remained," *stōdon,* as though identifying directly with the others who stood in that place. That the *rood* directly identified with the persons who stood is expressed in the fact that the *rood* uses the word for "we," *wē,* to tell us that it stood with others not by or against or near, but, rather, in the construction of the sentence directly places itself with the others standing. The *rood* makes no distinction between itself as a body there and the bodies of others who witnessed the crucifixion. Thus, the poet of the poem in moving into the body and

voice of the *rood*, locating the *rood* as the closest intimate in the experience of the crucifixion and, simultaneously, associating the *rood*'s experience with the experience of figures other than Christ's contemporary to the crucifixion, the poet can present a way of experiencing the past that is startling, particularly for how it differs and furthers the experience of the past articulated in *The Ruin*.

If the poem had ended with the description of the crucifixion, it would remain interesting, yet, in the poem's final section, the *rood* does something particularly curious. The *rood* explicitly calls the reader to experience what it experienced.

In a section worth quoting at length, because each line is important for explaining what the rood does with the crucifixion, the *rood* tells us the result of its experience,

> Now the time has come
> That far and wide on earth men honour me,
> And all this great and glorious creation,
> And to this beacon offer prayers. On me
> The Son of God once suffered; therefore now
> I tower mighty underneath the heavens,
> And I may heal all those in awe of me.
> Once I became the cruellest of tortures,
> Most hateful to all nations, till the time
> I opened the right way of life for men…[78]

[78] *Ibid*, 167.

The *rood* has turned from the "time" of the crucifixion, from the emotional experience of the crucifixion moment to a kind of transhistorical moment. Like, the poetic speaker who, earlier in the poem, moves from the act of dreaming to the speech of the *rood*, who weaves the poetic "I" across the twin voices of poet and *rood*, the *rood* itself moves from the distinct but unified experience leading up to and culminating in the crucifixion into a time that is temporally distant from the crucifixion yet not experientially.

"Now the time has come / That far and wide on earth men honour me," the *rood* says, telling us that the "[n]ow" it is locating itself within is one in which this object that was once "[m]ost hateful to all nations" is one on which men must now "offer prayers." The *rood* is announcing that though it no longer occupies the same space, the ground of Christ's crucifixion, and that, while it keeps its experiential significance, it does not occupy the same experiential significance as in the part of the poem that discussed the crucifixion. What I mean is that if, in the time that "[o]n [it] /The Son of God once suffered," making it "hateful," then "now /…[it] may heal all those in awe of [it]," the *rood* is, thus, still an experientially significant object. Still, it is not experientially significant in the same way. What happens, then, is that the *rood* reorients its experiential significance. It turns "hate" to "awe" and locates that significance not within the figure of Christ himself, but within itself, within the figure of the *rood*. The experience of the crucifixion, as expressed in the poetic identification of the *rood* with the experience of Christ through words such as "tremble," "embrace," and "weeped," leads to an identification of the *rood* with Christ.

Rather than merely being an object on which Christ suffered, the *rood* itself suffers with Christ. Indeed, one could argue that it suffers as Christ suffered because it is through the figure

of the *rood,* as it is presented in the poem, that the experience of crucifixion is presented and articulated. Thus, when the *rood* tells us in the last line of this quote that it "open[s] the right way of life for men" it is, in a sense, punning on the nature of both the crucifixion as theologically understood and the crucifixion as it has been described in the poem thus far. The death of Christ on the cross is seen as God placing Himself within human experience through the figure of Christ as a bridge between the divine and the human. At the same time, the *rood*, a non-human, non-divine thing, an object, directly identifies itself with the suffering of Christ on the cross, blurring the lines between the two, between object and human. Thus, as Christ "opens" a way to salvation, to entrance to God's kingdom, the *rood*, in its description of the emotional experience of suffering with Christ on the cross, opens the reader both to the experience of the crucifixion of Christ and, thus, entrance into salvation.

The poet, then, explicitly calls the reader to partake in the experience of the *rood* by locating it outside of time by likening it to the experience of Christ. When the *rood* "order[s] you [the poet] / That you reveal this vision to mankind,"[79] that "[t]hrough the cross each soul / May journey to the heavens from this earth / Who with the Ruler thinks to go and dwell,"[80] the *rood* is placing itself as a kind of intermediary between the crucifixion as a temporally bound moment and the experience of the crucifixion as outside of time. The *rood* tells the poet to "reveal this vision," to, in a sense, proclaim this poem, to tell the experience of the *rood* in identifying with Christ's crucifixion, because it is through that experience of the *rood*, through its emotional intimacy with Christ's suffering, that "each soul / May journey to the heavens…." Then, it is in the figure of the *rood* that the emotional intimacy with the experience of Christ is known. Thus,

[79] *Ibid*, 167.
[80] *Ibid*, 169.

when the poet tells us that "I wait each day / For when the cross of God, which here on earth / I formerly beheld, may fetch me from / This transitory life,"[81] it is as though the poet is awaiting the vision that initiated the poem, the movement from the poet's voice to the voice of the *rood* to, in a sense, the voice of God.

For the poets of *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Ruin*, the experience of the past as embodied in objects play a crucial role in determining the effect of the past on the present. When the poet of *The Ruin* eyes the Roman ruins, describes them, tells us what they look like in his now, what they must have looked like in the past, and, in doing so, tells us through the implicit use of adjectives, how these objects are experienced now, the poet is doing something interesting. The poet of *The Ruin* does not move. He does not travel through visions but remains, as a voice, fixed on a particular object in a specific place, describing its intricacies. What seems to "move" for the poet is not his location but his experience. Using adjectives allows the poetic voice to "move" where the location does not. The ruin does not lift itself from where it stood and go elsewhere. Instead, it remains where the poet found it, but in looking at it, thinking about it, and experiencing it, the poet seems to move it.

At the same time, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* moves. The poet describes to us a dream vision wherein the poet witnesses a kind of heavenly kingdom revealed before his eyes and, subsequently, enters into the voice of the *rood*, the piece of wood that became the cross on which Christ was crucified, moving, with that voice, from when it was torn from a stump to when it carried the body of Christ and, then, to a moment future to the crucifixion where it tells the poet of its transhistorical significance. In describing the significance of the *rood*, in

[81] *Ibid*, 171.

identifying the *rood*'s experience with the experience of Christ on the cross, the poet can outline a way that experience is not temporally bounded. In doing so, the poet offers a vision different from the poet of *The Ruin* that is, nevertheless, similar. Both poems offer ways that experience operates as a transhistorical phenomenon. In both poems, objects of the past serve as ways that both poets can experience the past as something present, either through the implicit emotions the objects evoke in the contemporary poet or in the startling movement and speech of those objects outside the boundaries of time. What do these poems tell us about poetry? How are we to understand the poetic voice in relation to the past and past experiences?

In thinking about these two poems, I am struck by how the past "moves." I am overwhelmed by how the past does not take on legs and walk across the pages of the poem. The past is never explicitly a character. Neither are human beings necessarily, identified with the past in these poems. Humans haunt the past, but they are not the central ways the past is experienced in either poem. Instead, objects serve as ways through which the past is navigated. The past is not necessarily, entered as though it were a fixed thing. Neither poem seems to approach that in the (assumedly) anachronistic description of "mead-halls" and "thanes" of Roman ruins, or the "heroic" Christ that "mounts" the cross. Instead, both poems seem more concerned with articulating a notion of the past as an experience. What is before "us"? How does what is before "us" inform what we are now? Both poets seem to ask similar questions when they approach objects that have significance in their current moment and, in interacting with those objects, in meditating on those objects, tell us something about the experience of poetry and history. What exactly they are telling us about these two things, I am not sure. Still, I think the manuscript of *The Ruin* ending with its lacunae, and the text of *The Dream of the Rood* beginning with its

asking us to *Listen*, meet each other at a halfway-point by which we may start to consider our experience of past.

Conclusion

In these three poems, I have attempted to explore how the poems present history as an experience of the past. In exploring how the poems conceive of history, I have also tried to get at some of the complexity in Medieval English poetry. *St. Erkenwald* is a difficult poem. I struggled immensely to make a compelling argument or even talk about it intelligently. As I said before, the poem is doing much with the literary history it has inherited. In my discussion of it, I have attempted to lay out how *St. Erkenwald* reconfigures how interruptions to a specific mode of history should be viewed. In the poem, these moments of interruption do not wholly stop history. Instead, they create moments whereby history must be made with different tools and forms of understanding. The poet of *Erkenwald* does this by bringing in a conception of the miraculous. This conception of the miraculous serves to push the poem and, thus, history forward. The poet tells us that the past sometimes needs to be read differently.

The poets of *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Ruin* say something different. Rather than focusing on interruptions, they focused on how the seemingly inanimate speaks. The walls of Roman ruins teem with the voices of the long-dead. A piece of wood in a dream brings a religious vision. Nothing is really dead for these poets. Objects are just as voluble as people if one has ears to hear.

Working with these poems, my surprise has come from their complexity. Writing shorter essays does not give a sense of the breadth of these poems. In doing this work, this longer work has made me more curious about where to go with these questions about history and poetry, particularly how these questions might be taken to medieval Arabic literature.

In considering my next steps in working on medieval literature, I want to turn to medieval Arabic poetry. I did not work on any medieval Arabic poetry for my senior project because my lack of proficiency in classical Arabic made me hesitate to approach the poems and also due to the lack of English-language editions of much of the medieval Arabic literary canon. However, in writing my senior project, I have already been considering where to go next.

In *An Introduction to Arab Poetics,* Adonīs, the Syrian poet, discusses, in brief, the development of Arabic literature. How he envisions the origin of Arabic poetic convention in his discussion is interesting. "It is important to note," he writes, "that the Arabs codified poetic orality, giving its conventions and practice systematic formulations, in the early years of the interaction between Arab-Islamic and other cultures, in particular Greek, Persian, and Indian."[82] In Adonīs's view, Arabic the systems of Arabic literature come out of anxiety against literature as an "other." For Adonīs, Arabic literature is not a native tradition but something constructed against to stand against another's literature. I bring this up because this view of history and literature comes across as reductive to me. It seems to say to me that the literary effort of people of the past is, rather than a complicated process of self-understanding and reckoning, is a reaction. A view of literature as a reaction against has echoes for me in the scholarship discussed in the introduction that envinced the idea of an alliterative revival. Rather than seeing a more complicated process of self-conception and creation through the development of a literary tradition, a "break" or "reaction" is used to smooth over that complicated process. I think that assumptions about the Middle Ages often revolve around ideas that people from the past were less sophisticated in the creation of their literature. That, somehow, in the modern world, we

[82] Adonīs, and Catherine Cobham. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. Saqi Books, 2003., 19-20

have come to understand literature as a construction while they, lacking that level of introspection, did not. My hope is that in writing this project I have been able to do something to frustrate that idea. I hope that I have been able to present the literature of Middle and Old English as exampled in these three poets as complex negotiations with the self and more complicated ways of attempting to understand the self within tradition. At the same time that I hope I have accomplished this, I hope to continue doing this work in other world literature. I brought up Adonīs because I hope that, in my example, I have been able to show one of the possible ways that what I have been talking about in this paper is not just pertinent to Medieval England.Views abound that reduce works of literature of the past with words like "regressive" or "imitative," but I do not see that. I see something much more complex and fascinating going on in the lines of these poems. I see the same thing that goes on in the poems of modernity. Thus, I would like to delve deeper into medieval Arabic literature in my next steps. I would like to improve my classical arabic enough to handle these poems in the original. I have already begun thinking of possible avenues for future research, such as in the popular literature of the medieval Arabic world.

One of my initial ideas for my senior project revolved around the medieval Arabic poem *Sirat Antarah*. I was interested in exploring how this poem took the historical character of '"Antar ibn Mu'āwiya ibn Shaddād…[and] evolved [him] into the legendary black warrior of popular story-telling, and [how] the two became inextricably merged in popular imagination."[83] Much like the historical figure of Erkenwald was transformed by the poet of *St.Erkenwald*, I'm interested in discussing the legendary life of a figure as presented in the poems about him. In my

[83] Remke Kruk. "Sīrat' Antar Ibn Shaddād." *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, edited by Roger Allen and D. S. Richards, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 292–306. The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature.

interest in a figure's legendary existence, I am also concerned with how such a figure is experienced in "popular imagination."

In my first semester at Bard, I took a class on the historiography of the Middle East. In that class, I learned about how history is not just what was presented to me in high school but operates under varying lenses. In viewing history in that way, I was able to think about it similarly to literature–that is, as a thing with differing viewpoints regarding how to write and think about it. I wrote about three biographies of three Islamic heroes. In writing that piece, my concern was not with these figures as historical personages but with how they lived as literary figures. The transformation of a historical figure into a legendary/literary figure has remained a primary concern of mine, but after this project, it has been somewhat complicated. Rather than viewing my interests solely with the legendary aspect–with the literary aspect, I have come to appreciate the historical lives of figures. In having to research the historical Erkenwald and the manuscripts where the poems were found and not only talk about the poems, I learned to value the more physical qualities of history. I came into literature as less concerned with historical details and factual accounts than with the experience literature provides. However, I've learned through this project to appreciate that. I don't think I would have gained that same appreciation if I hadn't been working with poems much older than our contemporary moment. I think that having to think of these pieces as historical objects and as poetic pieces forced me to reckon with my bias. While my interest in medieval literature and literature generally remains one of fascination with the beauty of a line and the experiences that I can partake in, I am not without an appreciation of the harder facts of history.

I would like to bring that concern together with a more considerable concern around connecting literatures. As a teenager, my central experience with literature was as something that connected my experience of the world to other experiences. I remember reading Hamlet in high school shortly after the death of a loved one and having the experience that this character, who I could not touch or talk to, understand me. I felt that my experience as someone very far removed from medieval Denmark was the same as his. That was a pivotal moment for me. That moment gave me the ability to think of literature not just as something fun that I'd do to pass the time or escape the world but as something that complemented experience. In the experience of other lives, other characters, and events, something of my experience was shared. I, as a person, begin to understand the world's connectedness through literature. My ultimate goal in reading literature and writing about it is to emphasize that connected quality–that there is a presence behind the written piece, which shares something of humanity with other lives.

I don't mean that I am concerned with authors. Literature, in my understanding, functions similarly to a studied recognition. The recognition is that you are conscious among other consciousnesses. When I was drawn to the poems I discussed here, I was drawn to their ability to render experience as a primary concern. In the way these poets have presented their worlds, they have also presented other worlds–they have presented other experiences. In the poets' concern with the past, I considered my own concern with the past.

As a Black American, I live very much in recognition of the past. From the reality that most of America's black population is descended from enslaved people to systemic racism's entrenchment of that fact, history is very much on my mind. In seeking alternatives to history as weight bearing down on my conscience, literature offers not an escape from that experience but a

different understanding of my relationship to history. When the poet of *The Ruin* describes Roman ruins in language that fuses them with his own world of Anglo-Saxon England, I begin to see the possibility of history not as some inescapable brick bearing down on it me but as an experience. The poet, whoever he is, brings not himself–but the identity of his historical moment to any understanding of the past. The past does not weigh him down; in experiencing it and writing about it, he is creating history. The creation of history is a negotiation between the immutability of an object, event, or person embodying the past and the contemporary self as constituted by all that makes that self contemporary.

So, too, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* does not escape from the past but reimagines it as an experience of divinity. The *Erkenwald* poet, too, in their introduction of the presence of God in the silences of history, in the indecipherability of a tomb, and in the silence of a corpse. For these poets, the past is not a terror to be avoided or escaped from. Instead, the past is a moment to experience and understand the present. One cannot truly exist in the present without meeting those objects, those events, that were before. These three poets do not just offer examples of what medieval poets were doing and how complex they were thinking about their history, but they also provide a way for people now to think about the present. In doing their work in the middle ages, they were doing the work that literature, at its best, does. They were sharing an experience and, more importantly, a way to conceive of experience not as a thing that just happens but as a studied activity.

In conclusion, I hope to continue working on medieval literature, moving to Arabic literature and, possibly, medieval Ethiopic literature. I would like to bring more of the medieval world's literary traditions into contact with each other. That is my ultimate project. Connection

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