

‘One can emend a mutilated text’:
Auden’s *The Orators* and the Old English *Exeter Book*

Few texts can be mutilated and in need of emendation more than the codex of Old English poetry known as *The Exeter Book*. Probably produced in the tenth century, the book was presented to Exeter Cathedral Library in 1072 by Bishop Leofric. Since then, a millennium of deterioration has been accelerated by fire damage and the manuscript’s apparent use as a cutting board and a beer mat. In places the book is barely legible and ‘The Ruin’, a poem towards the end of the anthology, has become, quite literally, a scorch-marked ruin of a text.¹ Many of the poems offer plenty of possibilities for emendation and conjectural reconstruction and editors have been obliged to interfere to a certain extent in order to produce workable texts.² As John Fuller has demonstrated, W. H. Auden uses several poems from this problematic Old English miscellany as sources for sections of his work *The Orators*.³ Fuller treats the relationship as one of straightforward influence from Old English to Auden, and he cites several clear verbal echoes to demonstrate this link. The present article argues that the relationship between the two is more complex than this, and Auden’s work relies in part on an understanding of the precarious state of the ‘source’ text, *The Exeter Book*.

Textual instability, corruption, mutilation, emendation and reconstruction are part of the meaning of

¹ For a detailed description of the manuscript, see *The Exeter Book*, eds. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York: Columbia UP; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936).

² Humphrey Wanley, one of the earliest scholars to examine the manuscript, was even uncertain as to where some of the poems ended and others began. His account is in the second volume of George Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus Grammatico-Criticus et Archæologicus*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1705). The textual difficulties presented by *The Exeter Book* go some way towards explaining why, for a long time, its poems held such a low position in the canon of Old English literature (the poems of *The Junius Manuscript* were most valued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; *Beowulf*, *Judith*, *Maldon* and *Brúnanburh* in the nineteenth: a complete edition of the whole *Exeter* codex was not attempted until the first volume of Israel Gollancz’s edition of 1895, although this remained incomplete until 1934).

The Orators, a poem which (at least on a fictional level) mimics the various scribal and editorial processes of an evolving medieval literary work.⁴

Completed in 1931, *The Orators* is the first work which Auden composed entirely after leaving Oxford (he had published a collection of poems in 1930, but much of this book is based on pieces he was working on while at university). At Oxford Auden studied Old English poetry under J. R. R. Tolkien and C. L. Wrenn and enjoyed the subject, although he only got a disappointing third-class degree overall, and was found in tears after the Old English exam paper.⁵ No doubt Auden's enthusiasm for the poems as literature did not serve him in good stead with his examiners. 'Old English Texts' was paper five of the Public Examination in English, Trinity 1928 (Auden's finals). Although ostensibly a literature paper ('Old English Philology' was examined in paper two), 'Old English Texts' posed questions on dialectal colouring of poems, dating of texts according to orthographic forms, the reconstruction of Old English pronunciation and the relevance of *i*-mutation to Old English grammar.⁶ Auden's retrospective judgement of Wrenn was that he 'was so much a philologist that he couldn't read anything beyond the words'.⁷ One can surmise that a student with such a low opinion of philology would not do well at 'Old English Texts', regardless of his

³ See John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber, 1998), 96. Although wishing to develop his treatment of this topic, I am of course heavily indebted to Fuller. *The Orators* is in W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson, 2nd ed. (London: Faber, 1986), 59-110.

⁴ 'One can emend a mutilated text' is a quote from *The Orators*. See *The English Auden*, 69.

⁵ Although he did not appreciate Wrenn as a teacher, Auden claimed to have been spellbound by Tolkien's recitation of *Beowulf* at a lecture. In old age he claimed Old English poetry to have been one of his most enduring influences. See W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and other essays* (London: Faber, 1963), 41-2. Stephen Spender attributed the post-exam weeping not to disappointment, but to extreme tiredness, although it was not Spender, but Bill McElwee, a mutual friend, who found Auden in this state. See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden, A Biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 80.

⁶ *Oxford university Examination Papers, Trinity Term 1928: Second Public Examination, Honour School of English Language and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928).

⁷ From an unpublished interview with Robert H. Boyer, 11 January 1972, quoted in Carpenter, *W. H. Auden*, 55.

engagement with the poems. Auden's encounter with Old English at Oxford therefore, was somewhat equivocal. His affection for the poetry, coupled with a measure of resentment towards his examiners and dissatisfaction with certain methods of instruction, coloured Auden's use of his source in *The Orators*.⁸

Consisting of three main books, a prologue and an epilogue, *The Orators* mixes prose and poetry and includes mathematical and geometric diagrams, an aviation alphabet and diary entries. It is also notoriously difficult to interpret. Even its own author expressed doubts about it on the eve of publication: 'I feel this book is more obscure than it ought to be'.⁹ Auden intended to criticise fascism, but when he looked over the work again in 1966 he hardly recognised himself as the author, writing 'my name on the title-page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the border of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi'.¹⁰ The conventional interpretation of the work posits a (mostly absent) mysterious leader-figure, who has a powerful but dangerous charismatic attraction for his followers. This key was first suggested, with reservations, by Auden:

⁸ Robert Crawford has written plausibly on *The Orators* as a poem of revenge against his examiners. See Robert Crawford, 'Exam Poem', *Critical Survey*, 6 (1994), 304-11. Crawford also notes that the sub-title of *The Orators*, 'An English Study', may in part be a pun on the discipline of English Studies (the bedrock of which in 1920s Oxford was Old English). The suggestion of possible general antipathy towards Auden's examiners must be qualified by acknowledging that mutual admiration and respect between Tolkien and Auden grew until their deaths in September 1973. Auden celebrated Tolkien's seventieth birthday with 'A Short Ode to a Philologist' and for Auden's sixtieth birthday Tolkien responded with an original composition in Old English dedicated to 'Wystan my friend'. For a fuller account of this friendship, see Paul E. Szarmach, 'Anthem: Auden's *Cædmon's Hymn*' in Richard Utz and Tom Shippey, eds. *Medievalism in the Modern World: Essays in Honour of Leslie J. Workman* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 329-40.

⁹ From a prefatory note which Auden suggested be added to Faber's edition. Eliot decided not to use the note, feeling it was too apologetic. Cited in Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981), 96.

¹⁰ From the preface to a new edition. Also cited in Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 96.

The central theme is a revolutionary hero. The first book describes the effect of him and of his failure on those whom he meets; the second book is his own account; and the last some personal reflections on the question of leadership in our time.¹¹

Parts of *The Orators* remain obscure, despite the thesis of the revolutionary hero. This article intends to show how Auden's use of Old English, and of its textual instability, feeds into the debate on leadership and public instruction, which is at least a major theme, if not the whole explication.

Book I, ('The Initiates') is divided into four parts, parts two and three of which are further divided into three subsections each. These two central parts of 'The Initiates' draw on Old English poetry, part II in an incidental manner and part III more centrally. Aware of its opacity, Auden offered Naomi Mitchison the following outline of Book I:

The four parts, corresponding if you like to the four seasons and the four stages of man (Boyhood, Sturm und Drang, Middleage, Oldage), are stages in the development of the influence of the Hero (who never appears at all).

Thus Part 1. Introduction to influence.

Part 2. Personally involved with hero. Crisis

Part 3. Intellectual reconstruction of Hero's teaching. The cerebral life.

Part 4. The effect of Hero's failure on the emotional life.¹²

The introduction to influence is executed with, 'Address for a Prize-day', a spoof, prose monologue delivered at a school prize-day by a returning old boy. The speaker offers the boys moral instruction, partly based on the account in Dante's *Divine Comedy* of those sinners guilty of excessive love.

However, the speaker's cliché-ridden speech and reversion to schoolboy bullying at the end of his address reveal him to be completely inadequate as a moral instructor. According to Auden's scheme, part II, 'Argument', deals with the sense of personal attachment that young men and women feel to the hero's public image. Parody of Anglican hymn makes up the second section of 'Argument',

¹¹ From the same discarded prefatory note. Ibid..

complete with antiphonal responses in which the congregation ask to be delivered by various fictional detectives and heard by jocularly-named public houses.¹³ This hymn is sandwiched between two prose sections, each of which makes minor use of Old English mannerisms.¹⁴

However, the specific focus of the present article is on part III of ‘The Initiates’. Itself divided into three, un-named sub-sections, Auden titled part III ‘Statement’, and described it as the re-fabrication of the hero’s wisdom after he has departed, providing a kind of sacred text for the hero’s disciples. Having been initiated into his following, they require a textual construct to guide them in his absence. Direct parallels may be intended with the New Testament, another sacred text reconstructed from first and second hand accounts of a departed leader. Fuller suggests that the three parts of ‘Statement’ are based respectively on *The Gifts of Men*, *The Fortunes of Men* and *Maxims I*: three poems from *The Exeter Book*.¹⁵ While I agree with Fuller that these three poems are major sources for ‘Statement’, a fourth, not found in *The Exeter Book*, is needed to complete them.

¹² From a letter dated 12 August 1931, now in the Berg collection. Cited in Fuller, *Commentary*, 90.

¹³ Fuller notes: ‘private detectives and public houses is, I think, the thematic joke’. *Commentary*, 95.

¹⁴ The first section includes a number of alliterating phrases of two stressed syllables (superficially similar to many *a*-verses of Old English): ‘lanterns for lambing’, ‘a call to our clearing’, ‘wounds among wheat-fields’, ‘screaming for scraps’ etc. The inversion of the opening sentence of the third section is imitative of an inflected language: ‘came one after a ruined harvest’. *The English Auden*, 64-8.

¹⁵ Fuller actually calls the third poem ‘Maxims’, remarking that ‘these three poems appear in different parts of the Exeter Book, but are printed together in R. K. Gordon’s *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (1926), which Auden had probably used’ (Fuller, *Commentary*, 96). Fuller therefore means *Maxims I*, and not the separate poem *Maxims II*, which is preserved in a different manuscript, MS. Cotton Tiberius B.I. Strictly speaking, Gordon does not print them together, but next to each other under separate headings; ‘Gnomic Poetry’, ‘The Arts of Men’ and ‘The Fate of Men’ in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. R. K. Gordon, 2nd ed. (London: Dent, 1926, 1954), 309-19. This is not mere pedantry, for the order is different to that both of *The Exeter Book* and ‘Statement’. While Auden probably did use Gordon, it seems likely that he also accessed the poems from one or more other sources. *Maxims I* and *Maxims II* were published in *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*, ed. Blanche Williams (New York: Columbia UP, 1914; repr. New York: AMS Press, 1966). A text and translation for *The Gifts of Men* had been available since 1895, when it was included (as ‘The Endowments of Men’) in *The Exeter Book: Part I*, ed. and trans. Israel Gollancz (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), 292-9. Henry Sweet had included *Maxims II* (but not the Exeter *Maxims I*) under the title ‘Gnomic Poetry’ in his *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1876, 1894), 168-70. All three of *The Exeter Book* poems in question had been edited and translated by Benjamin Thorpe in his *Codex Exoniensis* of 1842 (which does not include all the *Exeter Book* poems).

Moreover, acknowledging these Old English sources implies more than recognition of a straightforward influence from university, and serves to underline the instability of ‘Statement’ as a text of wisdom and instruction.¹⁶

This textual instability is made manifest in several ways. Firstly, Auden selects certain *Exeter Book* material for preservation and transcription, while discarding much more. Sequentially, his reinterpretations of *The Gifts of Men*, *The Fortunes of Men* and *Maxims I* follow the order in which they are recorded in *The Exeter Book* (although only the latter two are actually adjacent in the codex). ‘Statement’, therefore, constructs a gnomic narrative, based on a similar narrative present, but buried, in *The Exeter Book*. Common to the three poems is a mixture of moralizing and proverbial folk-wisdom.¹⁷ Auden deliberately misrepresents and simplifies his source, even before one considers the specific distortions and parodies of the Old English catalogues in ‘Statement’, for many similar poems have been left out of this summation of tribal wisdom. In *The Exeter Book*, the immediate, sequential context is as follows; *The Wanderer*, *The Gifts of Men*, *Precepts*, *The Seafarer*, *Vainglory*, *Widsith*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *Maxims I*, *The Order of the World*. All of them may be said to be gnomic or to embody communal wisdom of some sort (be that ancient tribal

¹⁶ *Gifts*, *Fortunes* and *Maxims I* have not suffered the same physical damage as other parts of *The Exeter Book*, but like many Old English texts there are a number of (what seem to be) scribal errors and parts of the text require emendation to make good sense. Krapp and Dobbie make fifteen such emendations to *Gifts* (a poem of 114 lines), eight to *Fortunes* (98 lines) and nineteen to *Maxims I* (204 lines).

¹⁷ Introducing the ‘Gnomic Poetry’ (*Maxims I* and *Maxims II* often went by the alternative titles of the ‘Exeter Gnomes’ and the ‘Cotton Gnomes’, after their manuscripts), Gordon writes: ‘they show no great beauty [...] but they are interesting as illustrating an early stage in poetic development.’ Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 309. That these poems are very early and ‘primitive’ had been commonly accepted for a number of years. Sweet remarks: ‘the so-called gnomic verses show poetry in its earliest form, and are no doubt of great antiquity, although they may have been altered in later times.’ Sweet, *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 7th ed., 168. See also Frederick Metcalfe, *The Englishman and the Scandinavian; or a comparison of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Literature* (London: Trübner, 1880), 147 and *An Anglo-Saxon Reader*, ed. Alfred J. Wyatt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1919), 259.

wisdom, Christian teaching, or plain common sense), but *The Orators'* version of this shared wisdom is offered only in précis. If the poems which share the immediate *Exeter Book* sequence with *Gifts*, *Fortunes* and *Maxims* were ever conceived as having a thematic or narrative unity, that has been violated in selecting and re-ordering the material for 'Statement'. A kind of metaphorical *compilatio* and *ordinatio* is being performed here. Auden's re-making of 'Statement' out of *The Exeter Book* parallels (deliberately I suggest), the initiates' reconstruction of their hero's teaching: both are the product of distortion, re-wording (translation) and the stitching together of non-proximate parts. In both there is much that is left out, missing knowledge.

Furthermore, Auden sets his re-worked original on the page in blocks of justified prose, running from the far left- to right-hand margins, and not as lineated poetry, which one might expect of a young poet imitating a favourite part of his undergraduate syllabus. This is analogous to the way the poems were set down in *The Exeter Book*, as was the convention in the Anglo-Saxon period, presumably to maximize the use of the page. For this reason it was not always immediately apparent to early scholars of Old English that the texts they were looking at were poetic. Many years of study were necessary to discover a system of prosody that best described these poems, allowing them to be lineated accordingly in modern editions. Dividing the poems into neat lines, as seen in Krapp and Dobbie's standard reference edition *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, is a luxury afforded by the advances of over two centuries of scholarship. Auden undoes these advances, resetting the poems into prose blocks ('Statement' is mostly constructed from discrete phrases of two and three stressed syllables, i.e. Old English half-lines or half-hyper-metric lines). What had appeared to be prose in manuscript, until antiquarians realised otherwise and set about scanning and lineating, has now been

parodied, distorted and re-presented once again as prose.¹⁸ How many of the initiates, following the editorially re-tinkered teaching of ‘Statement’, will realise they are trying to live by the ghost of forgotten poetry? In the first part of ‘Statement’ we are told that ‘one can emend a mutilated text’. It is unclear whether this ability is to be taken at face value, as a useful gift, or whether the very process of composition in ‘Statement’, and the blind faith put in such emended texts, casts doubt upon the desirability of such a service (although it does give the reader a clue to Auden’s methods).¹⁹

This confusion over identity is increased by Auden’s rejection of another modern convention, the use of titles. *The Exeter Book* material is divided into discrete poems, or sometimes sections of longer poems, by the use only of different sizes of initial capitals. As previously footnoted, when Wanley attempted to describe the contents of *The Exeter Book* in 1705, it was sometimes not at all clear to him where one poem stopped and another started. Even today, there is room for scholarly disagreement about whether one riddle is really two or vice versa. Auden separates the three parts of ‘Statement’ only with small roman numeral capitals (line-breaks indicate sectional divisions rather than divisions between poems), and I will shortly argue that what looks like one poem is in fact an amalgamation of two.

¹⁸ Auden puts the first and second sections of ‘Statement’ into paragraphs in order to emphasize the essentially tripartite structure of both *Gifts* and *Fortunes* (not shared with *Maxims*, Auden’s version of which is paragraphed according to a different principle). This structural awareness argues for a source additional to Gordon’s prose translation, which does not make any paragraph divisions in its version of *Gifts*.

¹⁹ Three of the questions set in Auden’s final examination papers ask candidates to confront the state of texts found in medieval manuscripts: paper II, question 14, ‘give the forms of the letters of the alphabet as commonly found in Anglo-Saxon MSS., and indicate how these occasion confusion and error in transcription’; paper V(a), question 5, ‘what do you know of any differences between the first and second hand in the *Beowulf* MS. in respect of forms and spellings used, liability to error, and general characteristics?’; paper V(b), question 10, ‘how have *each* of the following been preserved: - *The Laws of Ine*, *The Fall of the Angels* (Genesis B), *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *Judith*? Describe in some detail *one* of these.’ It is therefore likely that Auden was aware of the potential for corruption and instability in medieval texts, and the blurring of authorial, scribal and editorial roles in the transmission of medieval texts.

Like *The Gifts of Men*, the first section of ‘Statement’ consists of a central listing passage, fronted and ended by smaller passages relating the gifts to their provenance.²⁰ Comparing Auden’s piece with its *Exeter Book* source,²¹ Fuller points out that a substantial change has been made at the start of the piece by redefining the ascription of human talents.²² In *The Gifts of Men* all gifts are granted by God,²³ in ‘Statement’ the attributes of men are instead determined by the kind of material factors Marx and Darwin analyzed: ‘to each an award, suitable to his sex, his class and the power’.²⁴ This lack of acknowledgement and gratitude to God the Father is reinforced by the closing lines of ‘Statement’, section I. We are informed: ‘And there passed such cursing his father, and the curse was given him.’ Abilities are hereditary, but the progenitor is cursed, rather than praised, for bestowing them.

Syntactically, the parallels between *Gifts* and ‘Statement I’ are extremely close. In their enumeration of human talents, both constantly reiterate the third person, impersonal pronoun (*sum*: ‘one’), in each case governing a new complement. However, there are many more specific relationships between the two texts than this. Both poems deploy three main grammatical patterns in their central list-passage: *sum* / ‘one’ followed by a finite verb; *sum* / ‘one’ followed by a copula; and *sum* / ‘one’ with a modal verb of ability (*mæg* or ‘can’). The first two structures are commonplace in language and their presence in both poems is not, in itself, indicative of a shared structure, but Auden’s frequent

²⁰ On extended lists, see Auden’s inaugural lecture as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, 11 June 1956, where he cites a liking for ‘long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*’ as one of the benchmarks of a critic’s good taste. ‘Making Knowing and Judging’, in *The Dyer’s Hand*, 31-60 (47).

²¹ *The Exeter Book*, 137-40.

²² Fuller, *Commentary*, 96.

use of the third pattern is more revealing. Furthermore, *Gifts* will occasionally add a second phrase, in apposition to a *sum*-clause, which does not re-state the subject. *Sum bið deormod deofles gewinnes, / bið a wið firenum in gefeoht gearo* ('one is courageous in the struggle with the devil, is always ready in the fight against sins'),²⁵ is essentially constructed in the same manner employed by 'one has prominent eyes, is bold at accosting'. Auden uses this structure infrequently, but definingly throughout his list.

Thematic parallels are also more widespread than Fuller's account suggests, although they are by no means precise. Lines 34-5 of *Gifts* inform us that *sum freolic bið / wlitig on wæstmum* ('one is charming, beautiful of figure').²⁶ This is the third example from the Old English catalogue, but Auden has moved it to the opening of his passage and expanded the remark into a prominent homo-erotic celebration of beauty: 'one charms by thickness of wrist; one by variety of positions; one has a beautiful skin, one a fascinating smell. One has prominent eyes, is bold at accosting.'²⁷ Where we had one beautiful figure, we now have five, appealing in different ways and for different reasons, not in their (nameless) whole selves, but as dismembered parts.

Next in Auden's account is that 'one has water sense; he can dive like a swallow without using his hands', clearly an elaboration on the rather bare, *sum bið syndig* ('one is skilful at swimming').²⁸

²³ See lines 4-6. *The Exeter Book*, 137.

²⁴ *The English Auden*, 69.

²⁵ Lines 89-90. *The Exeter Book*, 139 (all translations my own).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁷ *The English Auden*, 69. See also 'Letter to Lord Byron'; 'I like to see the various types of boys' (192).

²⁸ Line 58. *The Exeter Book*, 139.

Where *Gifts* depicts a hunter,²⁹ ‘Statement’ remarks that ‘one is obeyed by dogs, one can bring down snipe on the wing.’ Auden’s passage notes that ‘one is eloquent, persuades committees of the value of spending’, and public oratory plays as prominent a role in *Gifts* as it does in *The Orators*.³⁰ Both pieces also contain architects, musicians and metal-smiths.³¹ It must be emphasized that Auden is not translating specific phrases from *Gifts*, but neither is he merely filling the form which that poem has suggested to him with new material of his own devising. Rather, he is performing variations on some of its themes and motifs, altering and distorting them according to his whim. Sometimes, the variations carry him a long way from the original, with comic effect. Lines 82-4 of *Gifts* tell us that *sum bið swiðsnel, hafað searolic gomen, / gleodæda gife for gumpegnum, / leoht ond leopuwac* (‘one is very agile and has artistic tricks, a gift for amusing deeds in front of people, light and supple’),³² while in ‘Statement’ we read that ‘one can do cart wheels before theatre queues’, and later that ‘one amuses by pursing his lips’. Perhaps the most significant variation Auden makes in his pursuit of comedy is the introduction of gifts which are so banal as to be hardly worth mentioning: ‘one is clumsy but amazes by his knowledge of time-tables’. *The Gifts of Men* is meant in earnest and presumably the initiates of *The Orators* take ‘Statement’ in earnest, but ‘one delivers buns in a van, halting at houses’, and ‘one has an extraordinary capacity for organizing study circles’ indicate to the reader that this ‘wisdom poetry’ should not be taken seriously. At face value, the last entry in Auden’s list seems to endorse idleness: ‘one does nothing at all but is good’. The aim is not,

²⁹ Lines 37-8. Ibid., 138.

³⁰ See line 36: *sum biþ gearuwyrdig* (‘one is ready with words’); lines 41-3: *sum in mæðle mæg modsnottera / folcrædenne forð gehycgan, / þær witena biþ worn ætsomne* (‘one can determine for the public benefit in a council of wise-men, where a crowd of elders are together’); lines 72-3: *sum domas con, þær dryhtguman / ræd eahtiað* (‘one knows laws, where men deliberate council’); and lines 84-5: *sum bið leofwende, / hafað mod ond word monnum geþwære* (‘one is gracious, has spirit and words pleasant to men’). Teaching book-wisdom is also mentioned at lines 94-5. *The Exeter Book*, 138-40.

³¹ Lines 44-50 & 61-6. Ibid., 138-9.

however, to establish a body of immoral maxims, but to satirize and undermine the kind of ‘common sense’ values which can be cynically manipulated in order to support a leader’s cult of personality.

Gifts catalogues the ways in which individuals may be socially useful to the tribe and the orators must intend ‘Statement’ to do the same, but somewhere in the transmission of the list of talents that intention has been perverted. Here we see the poet as prankster, ‘emending’ mutilated texts. It is possible to read ‘Statement’ as a private joke at the expense of his erstwhile teachers and examiners of Old English, who think they can emend mutilated texts, while the poet further mutilates them for creative reasons, adding to the labour of scholars.

Section II of ‘Statement’³³ has a similar relationship to *The Fortunes of Men*.³⁴ The central list-passage of *Fortunes*, enumerating the fates which men suffer, is sandwiched between an introduction and conclusion which emphasize that the destiny of each individual is decided by God’s grace. Auden preserves this tripartite structure, and its approximate proportions, again removing all reference to God.³⁵ He also adheres to an important structural division within the central list: the catalogue of potential misfortunes ends at line 58 of *Fortunes*, after which the poem deals with happier destinies (reverting to a pattern reminiscent of the catalogue of talents in *Gifts*). Auden breaks his central list (which again deploys the *sum* / ‘one’ formula) with the remark: ‘always think of the others’. Thereafter we read examples like ‘one is saved from drowning by a submerged stake’, to

³² Ibid., 139.

³³ *The English Auden*, 70.

³⁴ *The Exeter Book*, 154-6.

³⁵ Auden may have been influenced here by Blanche Williams. She states that the opening of *Gifts* is ‘obviously the composition of a monk’, as is ‘the homiletic close’. The bulk of the remainder has ‘a heathen ring’. *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*, 53. Her view of *Fortunes* is similar (57-8). However, the general principle of looking for Christian ‘additions’ to cut from ‘original’ poems was common in scholarship of the time and Auden may simply be following the general prejudice.

counter the earlier ‘one gets cramp in the bay, sinks like a stone near crowded tea-shops’. Specific parallels with *Fortunes* are fewer than with *Gifts*: ‘one drinks alone in another country’ may be based on the Old English *sum* who *sceal on feþe on feorwegas nyde gongan*, friendless and in hostile territory (‘he must, of necessity, go on foot along distant roads’).³⁶ In other respects it is the refashioning of the catalogue which is more important than adhering to it. In ‘Statement’ men are less likely to suffer the fate of blindness, becoming lame, or of famine, than they are to suffer from afflictions diagnosed by modern psychiatry; ‘one believes himself to be two persons, is restrained with straps. One cannot remember the day of the week. One is impotent from fear of the judgement.’

The third section of ‘Statement’,³⁷ has the most ambiguous relationship to an *Exeter Book* analogue of all three. *Maxims I*, which Fuller identifies as the main source, begins with an account of how all life is granted by God.³⁸ Like its companion pieces, ‘Statement III’ dispenses with the homiletic material, instead replacing it with a strictly biological account of the origin of life:

An old one is beginning to be two new ones. Two new ones are beginning to be two old ones. Two old ones are beginning to be one new one. A new one is beginning to be an old one.

Single-cell, self-dividing life slowly morphs into the mating union of two creatures to bring forth a third. Fuller invites comparison between this passage and lines 23-5 of *Maxims I*,³⁹ which state that:

tu beoð gemæccan; / sceal wif ond wer in woruld cennan / bearn mid gebyrdum (‘two are mates;

³⁶ Lines 27-32. *The Exeter Book*, 154.

³⁷ *The English Auden*, 70-1.

³⁸ *The Exeter Book*, 156-63.

³⁹ Fuller, *Commentary*, 98. He quotes in translation from Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, 309.

woman and man must bring forth children in birth into the world’).⁴⁰ Likewise, the opening line of the second paragraph: ‘life is many’, may have been suggested by the affirmation of fecundity in *Maxims I*: *feorhcynna fela fæþmef wide / eglond monig* (‘many an island broadly embraces many kinds of life’, lines 14-15). ‘Statement III’ explicates this variety with a list of animals and their attributes. However, such a passage is much closer to *Maxims II*, a different poem preserved in an entirely separate manuscript,⁴¹ in which a catalogue of animals is also found.⁴² *Maxims II* also uses the formula ‘[noun] is [superlative adjective]’ to refer to seasons and weather; a structure not characteristic of *Maxims I*. Auden combines this syntactic pattern with the material of the animal catalogue to give us lines like, ‘Eagle is proudest. Bull is stupidest, oppressed by blood.’

After this abundance of life, Auden’s next paragraph enumerates the roles or responsibilities of people according to their station and occupation. The entire passage is structured on the pattern ‘the [noun] shall [verb/verb+object]’ and is clearly based on the Old English formula using *sceal* (normally translated with the force of ‘must’, although in *Maxims II* a good argument can often be made for ‘belongs to/in’). This formula is found throughout both the poems called *Maxims*, where it is predominantly used to describe the properties of inanimate objects. In contrast, Auden’s passage is concerned solely with what various people ‘shall’ do. It is not possible to identify specific echoes

⁴⁰ *The Exeter Book*, 157.

⁴¹ MS. Cotton Tiberius B.I. *Maxims II* is the only example of wisdom-literature contained in Sweet, and so is likely to have had a wider early dissemination to students of Old English, than the *Exeter Book* poems. Sweet, *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 7th ed., 168-70. Text also in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York: Columbia UP, 1942), 55-7.

⁴² Compare Auden’s ‘in the salmon an arrow leaping in the ladder’ with *fisc sceal on wætere / cynren cennan* (‘fish must spawn offspring in the water’), lines 27-8 of *Maxims II*, and *leax sceal on wæle / mid sceote scriðan* (‘salmon must glide with trout in the pool’), lines 39-40, Sweet, *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 7th ed., 169.

from one rather than the other,⁴³ and it seems likely that Auden has simply pilfered both poems on a whim to create ‘Statement III’. Analogously, the poet-scribe of the Old English poetic Genesis once joined two, originally separate, versions of the creation together into a single composite poem, preserved in the late tenth-, early eleventh-century codex now known as *The Junius Manuscript*. Whether this poetic merger took place at the same time the codex was being formed, or had been completed previously, is unknown, but the composite nature of the poem was not noticed again until 1875 when, on the base of internal linguistic evidence, the scholar Eduard Sievers hypothesized that the central section was an interpolation, translated from a German original. Few supported this thesis until 1894 when a fragment of the original, Old Saxon *Genesis*, anticipated by Sievers, was discovered in the Vatican library. What had been supposed one work was revealed to be two, sewn together by a scribe, but now differentiated as *Genesis A* and *Genesis B*. Reversing this process, and mirroring the medieval practice of *compilatio*, Auden collapses two independent poems into one work.⁴⁴ The stitching is professional enough for Auden scholars not to have noticed,⁴⁵ and two old poems have begun to be one new one, waiting to be unstitched again, as the *Junius* Genesis poems once were.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Maxims I* contains slightly more people-centred lines, while a thief is mentioned in both Auden’s piece and in *Maxims II*.

⁴⁴ Gordon silently, and confusingly, appends his translation of the Cotton Manuscript *Maxims II* to his version of *Maxims I*, giving it the section numeral IV of something called ‘Gnomic Poetry’ (the Exeter Book *Maxims* seems to be marked into three sub-sections by small capitals in the manuscript, something Williams’ edition acknowledges by the letters A, B and C). Gordon of course knew they were not parts of one poem, but Auden’s complete intermingling of the two poems is quite different to Gordon’s placing them side-by-side as discrete sections.

⁴⁵ Fuller is not alone in ascribing these Old English imitations solely to an *Exeter Book* source. Mendelson also incorrectly notes that ‘all the lists in this section are parodied from the Old English *Exeter Book*’. *Early Auden*, 100.

⁴⁶ As previously noted (in footnote 19), paper V(b), question 10 of Auden’s Old English final examination invited an account of how ‘*The Fall of the Angels* (Genesis B’) had been preserved. Auden’s examiners expected him to know the history of this text’s transmission. *The Junius Manuscript* is one of the jewels of the Bodleian library collection and it is hard to imagine that the Old English scholars at Oxford did not describe the work with some pride to their students.

To conclude, many examples of textual instability are manifest in ‘Statement’: the reduction of two poems into one; the presentation of poetry as prose; the editing out of poems and sections of poems which do not fit the present purpose; quite free improvisation on the wording and material of the source. This intertextual game, in many ways like the assemblages of the modernist avant-garde, is part of the purpose of ‘Statement’. Auden has cut up, added to, edited, re-written and re-made his *Exeter Book* to produce ‘Statement’ in a manner which might be thought analogous to that of the codex’s maker or makers. These methods are at least as important as the material itself, for they cast into doubt the authority and singularity of the author. Is textual transmission an act of preservation or corruption, collaborative creation or disintegration, fidelity or re-imagination? In the fictional world of *The Orators*, if ‘Statement’ is the sacred text of the initiates, it implies the existence of one or more editor-compilers, of whom *The Orators* makes no mention. These nameless figures parallel both the anonymous poets and scribes behind *The Exeter Book*, and Auden himself. With what liberties have the fictional makers of ‘Statement’ reconstructed their leader’s teachings? In re-making this text have they also been silently re-marking and remarking upon it? Are the initiates right to place their faith in this text and if not what questions should Auden’s readers ask of *The Orators* as a whole?

Each generation flatters itself to believe it is in a better position to divine the original intention behind certain documents, be they poetic, scriptural, or historical. While the advances of scholarship can bring such a goal closer, the corruption of texts over time and the greater cultural remove at which we find ourselves from the world of a text’s production mean that gains and losses sometimes cancel each other out. In truth, each generation reinterprets the text for itself. Realisation of this is a

liberating act of creativity if the reader's aim is engagement with poetry. But if one is trying to construct a moral code from knowledge transmitted under such circumstances, as the initiates in Auden's *Orators* seem to be attempting, it is an almost heretical proposition, the truth of which must be denied. The title, 'Statement', suggests the unambiguous setting out of a point of view to be adhered to: the dramatic irony experienced by a reader literate in Old English poetry is that 'His' followers are trying to adhere to enigmatic texts which have been emended, not for their edification and best interest, but according to the whim of a scribe/translator with a particularly camp sense of humour. Small wonder that for one of the fictional textual critics of the poem the attempt ends, in the final part of 'The Initiates', with a 'Letter to a Wound', the admission of a profound self-inflicted psychological illness: perhaps a lesson Auden wishes to teach all textual critics.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Michael Alexander for help, advice and encouragement during the research for this article, and also the readers for *TEXT*, whose reports were extremely helpful in finishing it.