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The Natural Poetry of English

6. Filling in and Rounding Off (ii)

In my fifth article, I presented the poem 'Wolf and Eadwacer', ending by pointing out that among other things it could be used to introduce some variants of Englisc poetic pracctices. Consider the wailing three-syllable line, 'Wulf, min Wulf'. It's quite different from the normal balanced structure of two stressed and two unstressed elements; it seizzes the attention. When a poet deliberaely does that he's no longer writing pure 'natural poetry', and such effects are rare in Englisc. My next is a notable example, though, in a poem deliberately crafted in another way, too, by the addition of rhyme to the normal pattern. The concentrated intensity thus given to the lines, no longer free to flow on forwards since the rhyme links the end back, is sustained successfully right through the poem (elsewere the device is limited to occasional short sequences). It is known simply as the 'Rhyming Poem'. In the passage I give the poet grimly concludes that in the whole of his younger life, when he thought himself assured in joyful good fortune, this had been but a sham; all the time a mocking spectre of death had been waiting, he had been digging his own grave. Now his joy has collapsed about him, death is flying towards him, soon all his earlier feasting will come to this, that the worms will feast on him, until … A plain prose translation here does almost as much outrage to the poetry as it would to Wolf and Eadwacer (article 5), but I have no choice. I could not keep botah rhyme and alliteration, and to leave out either would hopelessly diffuse the intensity. Look particularly, in the original, at what happens to the last line, as well as the rhythms throughout.

Me þæt wýrd gewæf ond gewýrht forgéaf
þæt ic grófe græf , ond þæt grímme scræf
fléan flæsce ne mæ\g þonne flánhrèd dæg
nýdgràpum nímeþ, þonne seo néaht becýmeð
seo me éðles ofónn ond me her éardes oncónn
þonne líchoma lígeð, líma wýrm fríteþ,
ac him wénne gewígeð ond þa wíst geþýgeó,
oþ þæt beoþ þa bán án.

['For me fate wove this, and this deed gave, that I should dig a grave; and the grim cave flee in my flesh I cannot. When the arrow-swift day with compellilng grips shall seize me, when the night shall come which grudges my homeland, accuses me for dwelling here, then the body shall lie, its parts the worm devours – for him he measres out joy and takes the feast – until there be the bones alone.']

Not a single instance of uncomplicated progressions in A-rhythms (I have marked the second half of the fourth line, for instance, as an A-type, but it's really nearer B, with the introductory '*þonne seo*' acting as the first unstressed element, and the final '*cymeó*' taken together), and the whole force of the last line concentrated at the end. A 'light' first half, with the only real stress on '*ban*', 'bones' – the *one* thing left after what had seemed a splendid life, bare bone, and the second half line reduced to one syllable to reflect it. (The poet doesn't leave us in such despair, by the way; he turns the whole poem round again and offers us real joy in heaven instead of deceitfull joy on earth.)

Beside this rare use of an exceptionally short line there was among English poets a more frequent (though still not common) use of an exceptionally long one. This has quite a different effect, not concentrating attention on one pregnant fact but rather laing out for the reader an explanation. Such lines tend to be used in short groups, to sum up what has been presented. We

looked in my second article at the beginning of the poem known as 'The Wanderer', offering hope of divine mercy at last but meanwhile turning attention to the fate-oppressed sorrows of the protagonist's exile-life. Now at the end this protagonist, thinking deeply in his lonely existence, has come to wisdom:

swa cwæð snóttor on móde getsæt him súndor æt rúne

['so spoke the wise man in his heart, sitting solitary in private thought']

Already the line is rhythmically unusual. The rhythms are more-or-less A-type, but before the A=patterns '*snóttor on móde*' and '*súndor æt rúne*' are unusually extended introductions (this time the rhythms can't be seen as approaching B-type, for '*mode*' and '*rune*' can't be taken as single elements since the *o* and *u* are long.) Now we are to be reminded that although worthy living in this transitory world is itself good, there exists also a greater blessedness, a stability outside this world, a mending of human woe beyond what the codes of honourable life can provide. Look at the rhythmic structures in which this 'moral' is presented (my translation preserves them as far as p ossible):

Tíl biþ se þe his tréowe gehéaldeþ
ne sceal næfre his tórn to rýcene
béorn of his bréostum acýþan,
nemþe he ær þa bóte cúnne
éorl mid élne gefrémman
well bió þam þe him áre séceð,
frófre to fæder on héofenum,
þær us eal seo fæstnung stóndeð.

Góod is he who can guárd his intégrity,
nor shall never his gríef too réadily
mán from his mínd come to útter
if he have not the ménding thóught on,
héart or hánd for the dóing:
well for him who in héaven séeketh
fríend in the Fáther, and mércy
where is all our fórtress, súrely.

These are quite different rhythms from any we have seen before. In each first half-line, there are not two but three stresses, in each second half-line only two full ones, but a very long low-stressed sequence before the first of them. Carefully stated, formal lines, in contrast to the 'natural' rhythms of the main verse, they stand in a sense outside the whole poetic approach we have been looking at – comment on, rather than part of, the expressions of the natural poetry. Very effective, too, in their limited function, but not an essential part of the Englisc tradition; only some poets, and sometimes, use them at all.

And that completes as much as I can say about Englisc manifestations of 'the natural poetry of English'. I hope I've given enough to show what a range of effects are possible wthin it, and how readly it accommodates all sorts of variant structures. For remember always, even its basic 'rule', that its rhythms are composed of different arrangements of two stressed and two unstressed elements, is not a rule imposed on poets, simply a principle that we infer from observing their practice. If in a special situation a poet does something else, the effect is striking, certainly, because the ear is expecting the normal, but resonse is not complicated by any feeling the poet is 'breaking

the rules', and perhaps ought not to have done it. Such variants must of course be used with discretion; if so often that the ear's expectation of the normal is weakened, the effect will be lost, but for Englisc poets there was no temptaton to over-use because no merit was seen in surprising one's audience with novel effects for their own sake.

Had the English language continued to develop on its own lines, some version of this sort of poetry would be our regular poetic form today. What happened instead was that generations of Norman dominance superimposed on English the poetic forms proper to French and broke the tradition of composiing in the 'natural' mode. 'Natural' poetry persisted, all the same, but in altered guise. For one thing, with the bonds of an established tradition gone, poets were no longer at pains to keep their rhythms uncluttered, so that their lines tended to sprawl, not to keep the last stress clear of alliteration (by which means, you'll remember, Englisc poets ensured free forward flow of the verse unless they positively wanted it otherwise.) For another, rhyme, which by French influence had come to seem a normality of poetry, often casually added itself to, or displaced alliteration; and in this uncertainty lines sometimes got written without any evident linking. Here is Layamon, about the year 1200, describing how Hengest, invited to Britain as a friend, orders his men to fall treacherosly on the Britons at a supposedly weaponless meeting, with the cry 'draw your daggers' – which the Britons, not speaking his language, did not understand until too late.

Þa cléopede Héngest, cníhtene swíkelæst
'Nímeó eoure séxes, séle mine bérnes,
and óhtlice eou stúrieð and nǽnne ne spárieð!'
Brúttes þer weoren ríche, ah ne cuðe heo nóht þa spéche,
whæt þa Sáxisce mén séiden heom bitwéoenen;
heo bréoden ut þa sǽxes alle bihalues ...

['Then cried Hengest, most deceitful of warriors "Draw your daggers, my good men, and bestir yourselves boldly, and spare none!" The Britons there were excellent men, but they did not understand that speech, what the Saxon men said between themselves. They drew out the daaggers everywhere ...']

Some of these lines are good natural poetry in the old style, but in the third the linking is certainly on the last stress, whether one sees it as alliteration on *s* or a sort of rhyme '*-urieð*': '*-arieð*', while the fourth is clearly using the rhyme '*riche: speche*'. The fourth also rambles on rhythmically in the opening of its second half, with no justification that I can see. It is not clear what the structure of the fnal half-line is meant to be; should be see alliteration as throwing stress on the normally unaccented prefix '*bi-*'?

In this sitation, when more careful poets adopted the old practices, they could not simply adhere careully to the old traditions, since these were no longer alive. New forms developed. Some poets seized on the possibililty of rhythms of three and built them into their structures in a way that the natural tendencies of the language would not have prompted. Admirable poetry resulted, even if not quite 'natural' in the old way, especially in the work of the anonymous master, a contemporary of Chaucer, who gave us that celebrated Arthurian adventure known as 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. He points out that he is composing in the old tradition of England,

with lel lettres loken, in lond so has been long

['with faithful ('loyal') letters linked, as has been long (the pracice) in (this) land.]

And yet the structure here, with three alliterating stresses in the first half and two more in the second is by no means that of the 'natural poetry'. This particular structure the poet saw as *two* lines (or at least, the scribe certainly did; 'lines' of verse were now written out as lines); it occurs in one of the quatrains of short lines which he uses to conclude sections of more normal metre.

Within these sections, while he often uses the rhythm of three in the first half-line he nearly always retains the free last stress in the second, so that the forward movement of the verse is unimpeded, like this (describing the mighty axe of the strange challenger who bursts in on Arthur's feast):

the bít búrnished bríght with a bróad édge,
as wéll shápen to shéar as shárp razóres,
the stéle of a stíff stáff – the stérn it by grípped –
that was wóunden with íron to the wándes énde.

I have chosen a passage which with a little modern-ization of spellings I could present withot translation; it is near enough modern English (you have to allow for 'razors' as a three-syllable word stressed on the middle one, '*stele*' = 'shaft', '*the stern*' meaning the man of stern appearances' and '*wand*' of a great thick handle, not a slender rod – '*wandes*' of course has in modern English a syllable and become 'wand's'). Clearly from the work of such poets as this the 'natural poetry' could have developed effective and vigorous natural forms.

It didn't happen. The 'Gawain' master wrote in the North-West of England. To the courtly poets of the South-East his verse was provincial; the French-formed poetry of the London area won the day and set the course for English poets in the centuries that followed. Yet, of course, the language remained English, its tendencies remained those which had produced the 'natural poetry', and even when poets thought they were writing in metres derived from French (or Latin) what emerged was sometimes quite different from what a French poet could have written. A short sequence of lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: The Archangel Uriel has seen Satan, in angelic form, entering the Garden of Eden, though Gabriel has charge that

No evil thing approach or enter in.
This day at height of noon came to my sphere
A spirit zealous, as he seemed, to know
More of th'Almight's work, and chiefly Man.

The metre is in principle that commonest of all classical forms, the 'iambic pentameter'. That is, the line has ten syllables, divided into five 'feet', each of which contains one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed. Well, the lines here all have ten syllables, and the first line can be pronounced with the stresses where the theoretical metre places them. But not the second, unless you unstress 'came' and stress 'to' instead, which would sound absurd; the effect here is much more a group of three stresses, 'this dáy at héight of nóon', and then a group of two, 'cáme to my sphére'. The third line has only four real stresses, and is very like Englisc 'natural verse' – the first half-line 'a spírit zéalous', the second 'as he séemed, to knów'; C-rhythm followed by B-rhythm, with an alliterative linking on *s*. The fourth line, rather like the second, gives a three/two structure, this time with *m*-alliteration linking the 'halves'. The same sort of thing applies to surprisingly much of the classical poetry of English, as well as a good many modern poets (as my first article pointed out.)

So what should an English poet do? I am a scholar, not a poet; I can't tell him. But it must surely enrich his poetic resource if he is aware of the poetic forms that the cadences of his language naturally lead to; effective modern forms of the 'natural poetry' are certainly there to be found.

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