O.D. (Duncan) Macrae-Gibson
The Natural Poetry of English

2. Rhythms and their Uses

In my first article I showed how Englisc poetry took the natural tendency of the language to fall into two-stressed phrases, imposed greater regularity on this requiring the two stressed elements to be balanced by two unstressed elements, and added a larger structure by linking these phrases into pairs with alliteration, each pair of phrases constituting what we can treat as one poetic 'line', but that the natural rhythmic variety possible among two-stressed phrases was not regularized into any repetitive uniformity. The commonest rhythm, as we saw, was /x/x (an acute accent, as before, marks a stressed element; in schematic representation a cross stands for an unstressed element). We also met the contrasted x/x/, which is the second commonest rhythm. The simple labeling of these two as 'type A' and 'type B', by the great scholar Sievers, has been generally adopted.

It needs no subtle mathematics to work out that there are four more possible combinations of two stressed and two unstressed elements. Continuing in descending order of freqency, we have next type C, x//x, as in Byrhtwold's declaration, near the end of the poem about the battle of Maldon, '*ic eom fréondes féores*', 'I am old in life'. Notice that there are no silent letters in Englisc; the '*-es*' is a syllable and supplies the necessary second unstressed element. That's a 'first half-line'; it must of course be continued with an alliteration on *f*, but with no rule as to what rhythm; the second half-line is in fact type A, '*frám ic ne wílle*'; 'away ("from") I will not' (implying 'I will not disgrace myself now'). Again, the final '*-le*' of '*wille*' is a syllable.

Of the two adjoining stresses in type C the first is always the heavier (clearly 'old' is more important than 'life'). Remember that the alliterative linkage usually looks back to the first stress of the line; if the first half-line is in C-rhythm, 'usually' becomes 'always' – the second stress often joins in the alliteration, but never displaces the first from it. In a language in which stressing was normally highest at the beginning of a word, and fell towards the end, this falling rather than rising rhythm would be natural – for one thing, a single word can some-times provide both the stresses. Here is an example from *Beowulf* where it provides both the unstressed elements too: under the threat of the monster Grendel the Danes desert their hall and find what the poet ironically calls '*gerúmlicór*', 'more room-like' quarters in the out-buildings – meaning not that they were roomier in themselves but that they gave more room between the men who skulked there and the monster.

After type C, unsurprisingly, will come type D. But though it would be logically tidy to go on here and analyse all the types in order, I'll postpone examin-ation of the others until the next article and look first at the more important question of what the poets did with their rhythms. This will often mean quoting extended passages, and you may find it difficult, if you're not familiar with the old language, to respond fluently to the swing of the verse even when you've sorted out the sense with the help of the close translation that follows. To help, if so, I add in footnote another modern version, as near as I can get to what the poet was about. I've had to make rather free with the sense sometimes, and any translation must lose some of the quality of an original poem, so if you can follow from the originals it will still be better.

Now one thing the poets were about was to establish different tones in different passages by the proportions of different rhythms they used. The commonest type being A, a passage with a higher than normal proportion of A will tend to an impression of even advance – firm and confident or heavy and dull depending on detail and context. The poet celebrating the great English victory of Brunanburh ends with a sequence increasingly A-dominated, as he declares this to have been the greatest triumph since our ancestors came to this land (from now on, I will print them as editors usually do, with the half lines separated by extra spaces – the manuscripts sometimes indicate line

and half-line divisions by points, sometimes not):

... siþþan eastan hider
Éngle and Séaxe úp becómon
ofer brád brímu Brýtene sóhton
wlánce wígsmiþas Wéalas ofercómon
éorlas árhwate éard begéaton

['since hither from the east the Angles and Saxons came ashore ("up"), over broad sea sought out Britain, proud war-smiths, overcame the natives ('Wealas' gives our Wales'), honour-famed lords ("earls"), got for themselves a dwelling.][1]

You'll see that the first complete line there has A-rhythms in both halves, then there is a change that puts a certain emphasis on the "broad sea" (the poet wants you to compare the ancient triumphant crossing of the sea by the English race with the disastrous sea-crossing, against the English race, of the Norsemen from Ireland who formed a large part of the enemy at Brunanburh), and then we settle down into a steady, confident A-sequence to the end.

I haven't marked stresses in the opening half-line. It illustrates a special point about Englisc rhythms. You might think it's an example of the pattern unusual in poetry, with unstressed matter before, between, and after the stresses: '*siþþan éastan híder*'. But it wouldn't have been spoken with the last word split into 'hí-der'. Two short syllables like that would be pronounced closely together, virtually as one, and the rhythm is B-type:
'*siþþan éastan híder*'. You have to know the language to know when that would be possible (it wouldn't be, for instance, in '-cómon' because the vowel in 'com' is long), and at times even if its possible one can't be sure if the poets intended it, but it's quite clear that they sometimes did. To get back, though, to more important things, here's an A sequence giving a very different effect, the opening of a poem lamenting the lost glories of a city which the poet imagines as he looks at the ruins of – probably – Roman Bath. Scholars just call it "Ruin", the notion that a poem must have a title is a modern one, and Englisc poems aren't titled in the manuscripts.

Wrætlic is þes wéalstan wýrde gebræ̆can
búrgstede burston brósnað énta geweorc

['splendid are these stone walls ("this wall-stone"), (but) fates broke (it); the places of the city shattered; (still) is collapsing the work of mighty men'][2]

The original had no equivalent of my 'but' or 'still', just separate statements which in themselves would seem contrasted, but in the confident tread of the metre leads us on as though the natural continuation of a statement about splendid walls would be that they have been broken down by fate, the natural continuation of destruction in the past would be destruction still proceeding in the present.

Against such passages, here is part of a description of the overwhelming of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, from "Exodus". The poet is moved by the great events, by the doom of the Egyptians and the

---

[1] In 'original metre':
... since they landed hither
Angles and Saxons, eastern sailors,
over broad billows Britainward riding,
worthy warfaring waging on the peoples,
hardy, honourful, homeland taking.

[2] In 'original metre':
Stately is this stonework, stricken all by fortune;
town-wall is trampled; tumbled masterpieces.

miraculous escape of the Israelites, and he uses constantly varying rhythms, with an exceptionally high proportion of the rarer types we haven't yet looked at in detail, whose stresses press upon the ear because although the rhythms open with a stress like a type A they don't go on in even tread, but instead either bring up another stress at once before falling away, or drop only to come back with a sharp emphatic rise at the end.

Wæas se hæwene lýft héolfre geblámden;
brím bérstende blódegesan hwéop
sæmanna síö oðþæt sóð Métod
þurh Móyses hánd mód gerýmde
wíde wæðde, wælfænden swéop,
flód fámgode …

['the blue sky was mingled ('blended') with blood. The bursting sea (had) threatened with blood-terror the seamen's (the Israelites, who safely crossed the sea, are poetically so seen) journey, until the true ('sooth') Lord through Moses had declared his will ('mood') – then it widely hunted and with death-embraces rushed on the Egyptians; the flood foamed …'][3]

It's not that the metre is completely different from the other passages – there are some A-rhythms, for insance; a change in the proportions of the different types is all that's needed. A reader or hearer unless specifically on the lookout may not notice it's there, but he will respond to its effects all the same.

Here, combined with the confident advance of the A-rhythm with the excitement of the rarer and less smooth types, in a rather special effect, is another passage from "The Battle of Brunanburh". The poet exults over the defeated enemy leaders:

mid heora hérelafum hléhhan ne þörfton
þæt hio béaduwéorca béteran wúrdon
on cámpstéde, cúmbolgehnástes,
gármíttinge, gúmenagemótes,
wæpengewríxles, þaes hi on wælfélda
wiþ Éadwéardes áfaran plégoden

['with their battle-remnants laugh (they) needed not that they in fighting works better were on the battle-place ('-stead'), in standard-clash, in spear-meeting, in encounter of men, in weapon exchange, in that they on the death-field with Edward's kinsmen were playing']

[3] In original metre:
And the blue of the sky bloodily mingled
walls watery, woes presaging, made
menace still to men. Then, the Most Holy
through Moses' hand might revealing
darkly drove them, death-kissing played,
foamed fearfully …

[4] In 'original metre':
With their hammered remnants how could they boast then
that in battle-doings better they showed them,
in fight-making fronting of standard
spear-showering, spoiling of foemen,
weapon-exchanging, as in the war-places
with free peoples folly they ventured?

Notice that all the second half-lines are in A-rhythms but none of the first, except in the fifth line, where this is reversed. At that point, the two successive A-rhythms produce a momentary easing of tension, but then come a climactic pair of the contrasted surging C-rhythms, stressing that it was against the race of our own great king Edward that the enemy were fighting (so how could they expect to have anything to laugh about?), before we return to A-rhythm for a confident close to the section.

I set off to speak of proportions of different rhythms as setting the tones of passages, but I've fond myself looking at individual effects of particular rhythmic choices too. We can find many more such effects. If instead of closing a phrase with an easy and confident A-rhythm, a poet chooses a type B, just as balanced but with rises instead of falls, it tends to seem a positively asserted close, not just an easily accepted one.[5] Beowulf is resolved on a dangerous fight, knows he may die, gives instructions about the disposal of his armour if he does, and ends '*gǽo a wýrd swa heo scél*'; 'ever goes fate (our "weird" has changed its sense) as it shall'. Had the poet made him say '*wýrd a bið selfwéald*', 'fate is ever its own master ("is self-wielding"), the tone would have been one of resignation to the chances of battle; as it is, it is one of determined acceptance of them. A close that similarly ends with a rise but not in a balanced structure is just as emphatic but leaves the ear unsatisfied and expecting something more. The monster Grendel, coming stealthily from the moors, approaches the hall where Beowulf, thus resolved, is waiting for him, and the poet predicts no success for Grendel this time:

nǽfre he on áldordagum ǽr ne siþðan
héardran hǽle héaldegnas fánd

['never he in all (his) life-days, before ("ere") or since, with harder fortune found retainers ("thanes") in hall].[6]

There is clearly more of the story to come, of wha happened when he found those hall-hanes. Had the passage been a summing-up, after the event, then a different verb might have been appropriate, giving with the A-rhythm of '*héaldegnas métte*', "encountered ('met') with retainers ... " a tone of easy assurance – of course that was the outcome with such hall-thanes (an equivalent adjustment to my 'original metre' version might be 'hall-fighters gave him'). Or with rephrasing to B-rhythm a more positive declaration: '*on héalle féaht*'; 'in any hall fought' – in my version, 'in hall he got'.

Another instance in which a single instance of a rhythm can be significant is when there is a change of subject matter, and the change is pointed by making a change of rhythm too. One of the most famous of Englisc poems, "The Wanderer" opens with a notable use of this device. In three easy, assured A-rhythms the poet tells us that his protagonist may hope in the end for the mercy of God:

Óft him anhága áre bebídeþ,
métodes miltse ...

['often for himself the man alone lives to experience ("gets by abiding") grace, the Lord's mercy.']

He goes on, "although for a long time he may have had to wander in exile". Syntactically this is a mere

---

I had to change the last line completely. The short first syllable of modern 'Edward' simply won't bear the force of the long 'Ead' of the name in Englisc, and I couldn't find any king's name that would do. So I've used a word that might now attract as much emotional feeling as the great king Alfred's son did in the original.

[5] For these suggestions about non-A rhythm in closes, and for the two illusrations from Beowulf, I am indebted to Barbara Raw, in an excellent book *The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* (Edward Arnold, 1978). The suggested alternatives that the poet might have chosen are my own.

[6] In original metre:

Never in his life-passage, late or sooner,
harder handling hall-men gave him.

(Read it with voice rising onto 'gave')

subordinate clause, but rhythmically it is set up as a sharp contrast to the harshness of the exile, so that the promise of life of the opening, though grammat-ically principal, becomes emotionally subordinate:

Óft him anhága áre bebídeþ,
métodes miltse, heah þe he módcéarig
geond lágulade lónge scéolde
hréran mid hándum hrímcealde sǽ ...

['although he, troubled in heart ("mood-care-y"), along watery ways for long had to ("should") stir with (his) hands the rime-cold sea ...']7

Anything written in the natural poetry of English will make some of its effects by the use of varied rhythms; the more responsive we are, the more we will see. The details will be different if we write in modern English, because as we noticed in the previous article, modern stress-patterns will produce different proportions of the different rhythms, with type A no longer necessarily the norm; my 'original metre' versons have had to be in this respect (among others) artificial rather than natural modern English. Not enough modern poetry has been written in "natural" metre for me to be sure just how things would turn out, but to show that Englisc types of rhythmic sequence are still possible, here is another bit from Auden's *Age of Anxiety*:

Hásten éarthward, Héavenly Vénus,
Místress of mótion, Móther of loves,
A sígnal from whóm excítes time to
Confúsed óutburst, fílling spáces with
líght and léaves.

The appeal to the goddess opens in smooth A-rhythms, the sequence is clearly ended with a contrast in "Mother of loves", and the next few rhythms are much more jagged, going with the notions of "excitement" and "confusion", before returning to smoothness at the end with one clear A-rhythm and then one which would not be regular Englisc at all but represents at any rate the first three elements of A.

The difficulty of this sort of illustration, in Englisc or English, is of course that it's so easy if one has a subjective impression of what the rhythms ought to do to choose passages which support it, ignoring thousands of other lines from which, perhaps, passages could be chosen to support another view. In Englisc, certainly a very simple "other view" is taken by some critics, who deny that the poets had any feeling for the different rhythmic types (which are, after all, only abstractions worked out by modern scholars). If I agreed with them, I wouldn't have wasted our time on the "types", but these critics are not being silly in arguing as they do, and the "types" are not the only things of importance in Englisc verse structures. In my next article I shall look at some of the others, as well as saying more about the "types".

This second part of Duncan Macrae-Gibson's article series was first published in *Wíðowinde* 62, pp. 10-16.

Copyright © O.D. Macrae-Gibson, 1981
Published with the permission of his family//

7 In 'original metre':
Lost and lone-going, love he may find him,
heavenly helping, although he, harsh-minded
all water-weary, wander sadly
rowing at random rime-frozen sea ...