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The Natural Poetry of English

3. Rhythms and Structures

I ended my previous article by pointing out that some scholars doubted whether the rhythmic 'types' were really important to Englisc poets, whether the sort of illustrations that I used are not just chance cases as will inevitably occur in any large amount of material. This sort of doubt can only be resolved by the use of that suspect science, statistics. If the poets had no significant feeling for the dfferent effects of different rhythms, the proportions of these throughout a poem, or throughout the works of a poet, will simply be a matter of random chance. Statistics can, within limits, tell us reliably whether they are indeed random. They aren't. In 'Exodus', for example, passages of direct speech contain fewer than normal of those special rhythms that I drew attention to in connection with the 'Red Sea' passage (article 2, above), and more than normal of the bouncier B- and C-rhythms (x/x/ and x//x), to an extent well beyond what could be due to chance. Once it's clear that in some particulars poets did respond to differences between the 'types', it would be silly not to attend to other ways in which these differences seem to enhance poetic effect, even though one can't produce similar cast-iron evidence that it isn't all a matter of chance. What, after all, *is* chance in such a matter? The lines concerned were not drawn out of some great lottery drum; they were assembled by a poet in one way when he might have assembled them in another. *Something* prompted his choice.

Certainly, it may not have been conscious awareness of different shapes of rhythm. A classical poet must have some concept of metre in his mind as an abstract pattern before words to fill it come to him, bt an Englisc poet would not first have in mind the concept of an A-type rhythm and then look for words to create it. He could have in his mind numerous phrases and types of phrase from his poetic vocabulary. We can label the rhythms of many of them 'type A', many others (not quite so many) 'type B', and so on, and the distinction does seem to pick out differences, which were in some way real to the poet. But not only may they be differences of which he was unconscious, they may not even be the most important differences to be found among his phrases, and they are certainly not the only important differences.

Another, to some extent cutting across the 'types', is between normal patterns with the regular two stressed and two unstressed elements, and on the one hand 'heavy' rhythms in which one of the unstressed elements has in fact some degree of stress, on the other 'light' ones in which one of the 'stressed' elements is of rather low emphasis (to the extent sometimes that there can be doubt which it is, or even if it's there at all). As illustration of 'heavy' rhythm take the passage we have already looked at from the opening of 'Ruin' (article 2, above). I marked the first phrase '*Wrætlic is þes wealstan*' as a simple A-rhythm, but clearly the 'stan' ('stone'), normally an independent noun, will be much more strongly pronounced than an ordinary unstressed element would be, and we can mark the rhythm /x/\, the final grave accent indicating 'subsidiary stress'. If the poet had just written '*... sind þas weallas*' ('are these walls') the effect would have been much less striking, though the 'type' would have been unchanged as A (in fact he couldn't have done that because it would have put the grammar wrong elsewhere, but he could have rearranged things quite easily.) The passage continues with a good deal of 'heavy' rhythm – in '*burgstede burston*' the '*stede*' will carry subsidiary stress; in '*brosnað enta geweorc*' the '*enta geweorc*' is so much heavier than a simple 'stress plus unstress' that the rhythm can be held to have escaped from the category A altogether. I noted in article 2 one reason why this passage makes a different effect from one at the end of 'The Battle of Brunanburh', though both use predominantly A-rhythms; the combined force of these 'heavy' elements is another, though the

'Brunanburh' passage is not without subsidiary stresses itself. For an example of a 'light' rhythm, look at the opening of the sentence that brings the monster Grendel onto the scene in 'Beowulf': '*Ða com of more*' (then came from the moor'). There's an obvious stress on '*móre*', but is the first one on '*Ða*' or '*com*' or absent altogether? Probably on '*Ða*', but it isn't a fully weighted stress; the line slides into being just as Grendel slips into man's awareness as he makes his stealthy way to attack the joyful hall. The alliteration naturally continues from the full stress: '*under místhléothum*' ('under mist-slope').

This now seems the proper place to look at the remaining rhythmic 'types', for there is a special feature about them which is not present in A, B, or C, namely, that they *must* contain some degree of subsidiary stress. First, type D, //xx. As in type C, of the two adjoining stresses, the first will be the heavier, but consider the unstressed parts. We've seen that more than one syllable can run together into a single 'unstressed element', so if two such elements adjoin, how will the ear know there are two? And if it doesn't, what becomes of the balanced 'two plus two' structure of the half-line? We find that in a rhythm like this a poet never uses wholly unstressed syllables for both 'unstressed' elements; there is always enough difference between them to keep them separate to the ear. Most often this is provided by the naturally falling-stress pattern within words. A warrior in 'The Battle of Maldon' '*féaht fæstlìce*' ('fought strongly ("fast-like")'). The '*-lic-*', though not really stressed, has markedly more prominence than the final '*-e*' that provides the last unstressed element. The rings of a mail-shirt in *Beowulf* are '*heard hond-locen*' ('hard, lockd together by hand'). The '*loc-*' clearly has more prominence than the mere grammatical ending '*-en*' of the past participle. A different way of separating the unstressed elements is to make the second noticeably heavier, giving the line an extra turn up of emphasis at the end; it can be called type Db where the more usual one is Da. Again in *Beowulf*, a well-trimmed ship has its sail properly made fast by its rope (*sal*): '*ségle sále fæ\st*'. The '*-e*' of '*sale*' is a syllable, but it is again a mere grammatical ending, so it has less prominence than the '*fæst*', an adjective which would often stand as an independent and fully stressed word. In some rhythms of this type, indeed, one s in doubt if the final syllable should be reckoned as one of the principal stresses, shifing our perception of the rhythm to the next type. But there are not many such cases; if there were, the distinction between the two types would cease to be of much use.

Normally type E, /xx/, is quite distinct, but there's the same point about the unstressed elements. Again, it is often the natural stress pattern of words that provides the necessary distinction. The mourning heart with which his men lament king Scyld's death (*Beowulf* again) is '*múrnende mód*' ('*mod*' is our 'mood', but the sense has changed), with the '*-end-*' more prominent than the final '*-e*'. This time the alternative of making the second unstressed element the heaver is not avalable. In '*sale fæas sægl*' the ear would I think take the '*fæst*' as the second stress and would not then know what to make of '*sægl*' following it; at all events, the Englisc poets do not use such structures.

Finally, one might expect 'type F', xx//.But if you try to work out, on the principles we've been looking at, what sort of phrases could give this rhythm, you'll find it hard to do, and in fact 'type F' is never found, or so rarely, and in lines otherwise so dubious, as to make one think they are errors, not just exceptions. Types D and E, however, we have met, in effective poetic use. Their extra, subsidiary, stress certainly contributes to the great force of the 'Red Sea' passage. I doubt if it is an mportant feature in the special effect of the single E-rhythm concluding a passage (article 2, above), but we shall never reduce to rule all the sensitivities that caused poets to choose phrases having this rhythm or that in this sitation or that. All we can do – but this we should do – is to train our ears to be sensitive to how we respond to varieties of rhythm and

allow them to make their contribution to how we respond to the poems.

I was careful to say 'choose phrases having this rhythm or that', not 'choose this or that rhythm', for remember that this poetry grows out of the natural phrasings of the language; it is not that special phrasings have to be constructed to fit its requirements. However, poets will of course lean to those phrasings that most neatly provide the "two stress, two unstress" pattern. One common sort of phrase, for instance, which readily gives this pattern, is simply an adjective and noun in agreement. Both these types of words are regularly stressed in normal speech, so there's the two stresses., and the full system of endings in Englisc means that even if the words are themselves monosyllables their endings will often supply the unstressed elements. More *Beowulf*: in the introductory section, the Danes have suffered without a king 'for a long while', and '*lánge hwíle*' slips easily into the metre of the poem (the endings '*-e*' make it accusative case, and one of the functions of the case is to give the sense 'for (a period of time)'. The poet wants no special emphasis; the rhythm is simple A-type. The monster Grendel devours thirty retainers ("thanes"): '*þrítig þegna*' is slightly more emphatic than '*lange hwile*', because numeral and noun both alliterate, but the basic structure is the same. Grendel is described as a 'dark death-shadow', '*déorc déaþ scúa*', in a line still more emphatic, a D-rhythm, two main stresses in close conjnction and a subsidiary one too, but again the phrase is simply adjective plus noun; and similarly in many other cases. There are a good number of other natural grammatical structures which conveniently produce two-stress phrases, and of course poets do create some new structures especially for poetic effect.

This fact that regular types of phrase naturally create suitable poetic rhythms has important consequences. One of these will soon strike anyone who has read a good deal of Englisc poetry; he will begin to get a distinct feeling of familiarity about certain structures that keep coming up. Hardly about the 'adjective plus noun' one, because it comes in so many guises, but consider a variant of it. The hall that Grendel attacked was '*húsa sélest*' ('of houses the best'). Later Beowulf's war-gear is '*hrægla sélest*' ('*hrægl*' = 'armour'), and later still, a sword is '*bílla sélest*'. This is a special favorite of he *Beowulf* poet, but there are examples in other poems too: '*fólca sélest*' ('the best of peoples'), '*cwéna sélest*' ('the best of queens'), and more. There is absolutely no feeling among Englisc poets that they should avoid such 'repetition' – how would there be? Their poetry is a natural emergence from their language. What is natural in the language will of course demonstrate that fact by occurring repeatedly. Even when the repetition is exact (and '*húsa sélest*' occurs three more times in *Beowulf*) there is still no feeling against it; provided '*húsa sélest*' is the natural term of praise for the context it does not cease to be so merely because it was natural also on a previous occasion. Now it follows that a poor poet, with nothing new to say, may use nothing but such established phrases. He would not be any the better poet if he tricked out his nothing new in merely new words. A good poet *will* have new things to say, and these will generate new phrases, but no Englisc poet will search for new phrases as if they had merit in themselves. This is an aspect of Englisc poetry not always understood by critics.

Another consequence of this generation of suitable rhythms by self-contained grammatical structures is to encourage a poetic progression which clusters phrases around a subject of treatment for a line or two before moving on. Another passage from 'Ruin' now:

Béorht wæron búrgrèced, búrnsèle mónige
héah hórngestrèon, héreswèg mícel
méodohèall mónig, móndrèama fúll

['Bright were the halls of the city ("burgh"), many watered dwellings ("burn" = stream), high array of gables ("horns"), great ("mickle") sound of warriors, many a mead-hall, full of men's joy']

Six descriptive phrases, the rhythms mostly easy-pacing A-type, though '*heah horngestreon*' as a contrasted type D draws emphatic attention to the image of the curving gables clustering together like the antlers of a herd of deer, but '*mondreama full*' is type E, dropping away only to rise sharply at the end, raising expectations of something important to follow. What does follow, however, is a 'light' line, creeping in insidiously as Grendel did, '*oþþæt þæt onwénde*'. '*Oþþæt*' is 'until' and '*onwende*' is 'changed', but not in 'intransitive' sense; it can't mean just that 'that changed', we must have the first part of a statement that something *changed it*, so *this* structure necessarily leads out of the set of self-contained phrases in which the poet has dwelt comfortably on the apparently settled splendors of the place, and into what follows, the destructive agent of change, 'wýrd seo swíðe' ('fate the mighty').[1] Once more, a poor poet will pile up phrases; a good poet will pilie up phrases each of which flashes our attention on a different aspect of the thing described.

The poetic progression is not always as simple as in this 'Ruin' case. A poet may move on a step and then glance back to add another descriptive phrase; he may expand upon one particular phrase before going on to a new one (in our case, he might, for instance, have expanded 'heresweg' by inserting a line 'hearpes swinsung, hleahtor wera', defining the 'sweg' as including both the melody of the harp and the laughter of men, before going on with another aspect of this hall). All sorts of variants are possible. They do not make for an incisive sort of poetry, rather one, as the Englisc would say, 'geglenged' ('adorned'). The style can sometimes seem merely rambling but when well done it is rich, as an ornamented page of a manuscript is visually rich. Such richness can be cultivated with but little regard for the overall shape of the poem, to the extent that the very concept of 'a poem' becomes of doubtful validity. In several cases scholars are unsure where they should see one poem as ending and the next as beginning in the great manuscript collections. It bothers them – but why *should* a stretch of poetry necessarily break down into clearly delimited 'poems', any more than a continuous artistic frieze necessarily break down into separate 'paintings'? There are, however, plenty of Englisc poems that have clear structural unity as well as rich working, and it is these that have chiefly ppealed to modern readers. In my next article, I want to look at some of them, as well perhaps at some of the sequences that do not so obviouslyl form single 'poems', to see how the various features we have been discussing go together to make Englisc poetic art, though the amount I shall be able to deal with will of course be fairly limited.

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[1] The whole passage in 'original metre', though I've had to twist the sense more than I like to get it, and then not precisely:

High were the house-places, halls by the waters,
gay gable-throng, gather of heroes,
merry with music, mead-joyful all,
up until there felled it fate the mighty.